



Education for Societal Transformation: Alternatives for a Just Future

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NORRAG Special issue (NSI) is an open-source periodical. It seeks to give prominence to authors from different countries and with diverse perspectives. Each issue is dedicated to a special topic of global education policy and international cooperation in education. NSI includes a number of concise articles from diverse perspectives and actors with the aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice as well as advocacy and policy in international education development. The content and perspectives presented in the articles are those of the individual authors and do not represent views of any of these organizations. In addition, note that throughout the issue, the style of English (British, American), may vary to respect the original language of the submitted articles.

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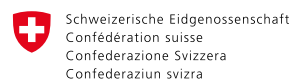
Chemin Eugène-Rigot, 2
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
+41 (0) 22 908 45 47
norrag@graduateinstitute.ch

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Anouk Pasquier Di Dio

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Alexandru Crețu

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Guest editors

Frank Adamson, Associate Professor of Education Leadership and Policy Studies, California State University, Sacramento, USA

Rezan Benatar, Sociologist, Engaged Scholar, Istanbul, Turkey

Michael Gibbons, Scholar in Residence, School of Education, American University, USA

Mark Ginsburg, Visiting Scholar, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, USA

Steven J. Klees, Distinguished Scholar-Teacher and Professor, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, USA

Giuseppe Lipari, PhD Student, Political Science and Sociology, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy

Carol Anne Spreen, Associate Professor, International Education, New York University, New York, USA

Deepa Srikantaiah, Affiliate Faculty, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, USA

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Steven J. Klees, Distinguished Scholar-Teacher and Professor, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, USA	
Giuseppe Lipari, PhD Student, Political Science and Sociology, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy	
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Mark Canavera, Former Co-director, Care and Protection of Children (CPC) Learning Network, Columbia University's Program on Forced Migration and Health, USA	
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Max Frieder, Ed.D., Co-Founder and Chief Creative Officer, Artolution, USA	
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Yana Mayevskaya, Associate Director, Care and Protection of Children (CPC) Learning Network, Columbia University's Program on Forced Migration and Health, USA	
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Frank Adamson, Associate Professor of Education Leadership and Policy Studies, California State University, Sacramento, USA
adamson@csus.edu

Rezan Benatar, Sociologist, Engaged Scholar, Istanbul, Turkey
rebenatar@yahoo.com

Michael Gibbons, Scholar in Residence, School of Education, American University, USA
gibbons@emercian.edu

Mark Ginsburg, Visiting Scholar, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, USA
mginsbur@umd.edu

Steven J. Klees, Distinguished Scholar-Teacher and Professor, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, USA
sklees@umd.edu

Giuseppe Lipari, PhD Student, Political Science and Sociology, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy
giuseppe.lipari@sns.it

Carol Anne Spreen, Associate Professor, International Education, New York University, New York, USA
spreen@nyu.edu

Deepa Srikantaiah, Affiliate Faculty, International Education Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, USA
dsrikant@umd.edu

At a critical time when our world teeters on the brink of disaster, this NORRAG Special Issue fosters hope. We face crises on multiple fronts—a polycrisis—and we urgently need economic, social, political, and, of particular relevance here, educational alternatives to current dominant thinking and practices. That is what this special issue is about!

The special issue is an undertaking of [The Alternatives Project](#) (TAP), a diverse, transnational collective of progressive academics, union members, civil society activists, and social movement participants concerned with building a global collective critical voice focused on education and societal transformation. TAP envisions and works toward a foundational rethinking of education and society globally. Through TAP, we seek to support building a movement that offers a collective challenge to hegemonic ideas and policies on education and “development.” We use our research and writings, grassroots action, advocacy campaigns, and efforts to connect with those building alternatives.

Formed in 2019, TAP first developed a Statement—a manifesto, if you will—entitled “Education Justice for Societal Transformation: A Framework for Action” (see immediately below). We translated the statement into 12 languages, garnering over 500 individual and 35 organizational signatures to date from around the world. A slightly updated version serves as a fitting beginning to this special issue.

Please feel free to go to our website and sign the original TAP statement!

The Alternatives Project Statement

We, the undersigned, believe that current social, economic, political, and educational arrangements reproduce relations of power that engineer profound inequities and will ultimately threaten life on the planet. We stand for alternative pedagogies and for just, regenerative education systems that will support the social transformations we need to create a richer, more equitable, and sustainable world.

Co-existing and inter-related global crises are pushing humanity and the living planet towards political, social, economic, and ecological collapse. These crises—seen in the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, structural inequalities, police brutality and racism, entrenched patriarchy, accelerating climate chaos, and the constant threat of wars—are driven globally by capitalism and militarism. We must seize this unique historical moment to reconceive and radically change public education as an entry point for deeper transformations that will build human solidarity and cooperation bringing an end to racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. We reject the notion that education’s priority is to build “human capital”; we assert that education’s priorities should include regenerative ecosystems and further social justice for current and future generations. This requires the creation of just education systems, which we can only achieve as a part of a broader struggle for social transformation in all other spheres, especially the economy and in politics.

Progressive struggles are necessary to form new social contracts that serve the collective interests of the many rather than the self-interests of the few. Human history reflects a series of complex and interlinked social transitions shaped by power relations: from agrarianism to industrialization, through colonial conquest, authoritarian dictatorships, post colonialism, neoliberal globalization, and the digital revolutions and collusion between surveillance capitalism and the national security state we see today. Each new dominant class produces an ideology that perpetuates its domination, justifies the inequalities it invariably creates, and fosters pessimism that change is possible at all. These ideological hegemonies almost always involve adherence to, and create education systems that reinforce, hierarchical assumptions and rigid binary conceptions—human/non-human, male/female, mind/body, secular/spiritual, superior/inferior, urban/rural, us/them—that assume the right of conquest and to exploit the natural world and all living species. The contemporary authoritarian, nativist, patriarchal, and settler-colonial populisms emerging worldwide in the wake of globalization and the increased migrations due to conflict and climate change sharpen these binary oppositions and provoke social insecurities to tighten their grip.

Today, education systems around the world are forged in the mindset of neoliberal capitalism and ideas of efficiency, rate of return, choice, competition, and economic growth. This ideology affords wealthy supranational corporations’ and billionaires’ unbridled power to reshape the global economy and national political systems, perpetuating extractive, carbon-based, economic activity and resulting in unconstrained consumption and the critical degradation of ecosystems. Organized in this way, education systems serve to reinforce and legitimize social inequality, segregation, and

stratification within and across nations. Yet, as much as it reflects the prevailing hegemonies, education is also a pivotal site of contestation. Authoritarian states, knowing full well that education can be a force for transformation, move swiftly to wield it as a tool for ensuring compliance and control.

Consequently, for many children and young people, this world is bleak. The quality of education that they receive is increasingly segmented by the socio-economic status and geographic location of their families. Education is increasingly organized in competitive markets that create and entrench race, class, and gender inequities where private providers and contractors, as well as teachers and students compete by, and are ranked on, cost efficiency and standardized tests: a commodified education model delivered via constrained public budgets, focusing on outcome benchmarks, human capital formation, and economic rate of return and value-for-money. This model reinforces human exceptionalism, racial prejudice and white supremacy, denigration of difference, legitimization of economic and political inequalities, hyper-individualism, unbridled economic growth, an uncritical reception of advertising rhetoric and compliance with authoritarian rule. One consequence is the bizarre contradiction that the most widely educated population in human history is collectively triggering the eco-collapse of the living planet’s systems, an act of collective suicide and ecocide.

Over the past 30 years, sustained advocacy by civil society and education unions moved the world to embrace the right to education and aspiration of education for all: Compulsory schooling has expanded to unprecedented levels of scale, engaging nearly two billion children each day. Most families now assume that completing 8 to 12 years of schooling is essential for the future of their children and most governments assume that providing free public education to all children and youth is sound public policy. But we are nowhere near achieving this. In part, wider structural injustices caused by the past four decades of market fundamentalism have driven sustained social-sector underspending and disparaged all government activity as “ineffectual” and “wasteful.” Consequently, the financing of education has been woefully inadequate, and much more funding is required and is possible, from national governments as well as bilateral and multilateral international organizations.

It’s not that there is no money; governments always find money to spend on the military, the police, security and surveillance, and corporate welfare. To confront this ideology, we must expose scarcity as a myth and austerity as a deliberate policy choice to drive the agenda for neoliberal privatization.

While spending targets on education reflect a global consensus, most governments do not even meet the target of spending 20% of their budgets and 6% of their GDP on education. The international community has promised for decades to spend 0.7% of their GDP on Official Development Assistance yet allocates only a fraction of this. And all these targets greatly underestimate the need.

We need to win these arguments in the public sphere. The problem goes beyond funding. International financial institutions—such as the IMF and the World Bank—are neocolonial institutions promoting neoliberal, so-called Washington Consensus policies throughout the world. The IMF and the World Bank have had a key role in influencing education (and other social) policy. Instead of supporting education, the IMF restricts country spending on hiring teachers and other public sector workers. The World Bank pretends to be a research-based source of objective advice, but for the last four decades, it has based its recommendations on its neoliberal ideology. It is high time for a new Bretton Woods conference to consider a major overhaul of the IMF and the Bank.

We call for radical change. All governments must establish free public education from early childhood through higher education that will enable a critical, participatory, democratic re-evaluation of how we think and act together in the world. To deliver education as a human right requires fully funded public systems, sustainably financed through national and global progressive, redistributive tax systems, with unconditional assistance from the international community. The curriculum should actively reject the docile consumer complicity that feeds global warming and climate catastrophe. Rooted in the community, education must be culturally relevant and promote humanistic values of anti-racism, anti-sexism, solidarity, social cohesion, empathy, imagination, creativity, personal fulfilment, peace, eco-minded stewardship, and strengthening of democracy. Teachers need professional autonomy, quality working conditions, and, through unions and other organizations, a major voice in policymaking. Likewise, students and their representative organizations must also have a voice in political and pedagogical decision making, having their right to participation fully acknowledged.

The world needs a radical revisioning of education that will help transform and create regenerative societies. This will require a new social contract that values social spending above military and security spending and goes beyond the narrow interests of the business sector, edtech firms, private school chains, and other edu-business actors. We call for reversing the movement towards the privatization of education and other social services and keeping business logic out of education and social policymaking.

We instead draw on struggles and lessons from organised students and teachers, the trade union movement,

democratic community-based organisations, including associations of minorities, migrants, and refugees—as well as independent media, organisations, and professionals that share our commitment to advancing justice in the flawed, real societies in which we live. These groups have already developed alternatives for educational justice, including schools and non-formal education programs that support twenty-first-century socialist, indigenous, and black sovereignty, decolonialism, Black Lives Matter, abolitionist, and critical pedagogies.

Justice in education depends on advancing justice-related goals in four areas:

1. Social justice—Building education for equity, transformation, and regenerative living

Education systems need to reorient towards addressing the inequalities and injustices in their societies, fostering racial, gender, and disability justice, and models of inclusion that will teach how to work collectively and drive the transformation of education and society.

2. Climate justice—Learning how we can live regeneratively on the planet

We need public education systems that teach human ecology and stewardship values that will facilitate this transformation both now and in the future.

3. Economic justice—Financing education and other public services in a transformed economy

The economic system must satisfy the real needs of all people by focusing on equity and opportunity, not profit. This polycrisis must mark a fundamental shift away from capitalism and towards workplace democracy and a radically redistributive economy that prioritizes progressive tax and progressive spending on public services for all, both nationally and globally.

4. Political justice—Reframing political engagement at all levels

We need to move away from authoritarianism and xenophobic nationalism. We must energize global solidarity, cultivate international cooperation, and strengthen global intersectional grassroots movements. We need to develop more inclusive and participatory democracies at local, national, and global levels.

These initial ideas do not point to a distant, utopian mirage; rather they build upon the thoughts and actions of many progressive groups and organizations around the world. We, the undersigned, see these ideas for a radical re-envisioning of education and society as necessary directions to counter and overcome the severe crises our planet is facing.

What We Mean by Alternatives

Our statement and the name we have chosen for our organization make clear the urgent need for alternatives. Margaret Thatcher's TINA—There is No Alternative to (neoliberal) capitalism—was wrong from the beginning. David Bollier's TAPAS—There are Plenty of Alternatives—is clearly more accurate.

However, what really constitutes education and societal “alternatives?” Andre Gorz (1967) coined the term “nonreformist reforms” to refer to reforms that go beyond palliative “reformist” measures that do not challenge oppressive structures. This stance immediately leads to asking, “What alternatives really challenge fundamental structures and ideologies?”

This question has no easy answer. When operating within the dominant political and economic paradigms, reforms are easy, yet they almost always reproduce dominant Global North perspectives. The reforms are framed within the dominant ideologies and constrained by existing power relations. One can simply define objectives, generate options, do an impact assessment or cost-benefit analysis, and select the best choice. However, challenging capitalism, patriarchy, racism—or their educational manifestations—has no simple impact assessment, no single answer without participatory dialogue. Entrenched interests can and will co-opt reforms. Furthermore, current structures and institutions often resist change.

Our call for contributions to this special issue explained and signalled that stance. Therefore, we declined to include paper proposals that appeared reformist without challenging existing structures of power and injustice. However, what is reformist is a judgment call. The progressive left, of which we consider ourselves to be a part, often agrees on the nature of the problems faced but often disagrees about the tactics and strategies for addressing these problems. Thus, we can and should debate what constitutes truly transformative alternatives. We acknowledge that some even believe that education alternatives cannot be transformative (see the paper by Le Goliard, this volume). However, we disagree. In our view, the papers that follow get at education and other alternatives that can contribute to societal transformation. Below, we offer our perspectives on some of the fundamental values and characteristics of such alternatives.

Characteristics of Alternatives

This special issue is about reimagining our world—and these alternatives provide powerful prospects for our imagination. In a world governed by neoliberal hegemony, examples showing different visions of society can inspire change both for individuals and communities. When related to education and, more broadly, to learning, these prospects grow

exponentially. We cannot change a system without imagining alternatives, and even the more practical ones can contribute to radical shifts in paradigms and to broader transformations, putting the existing world order under scrutiny. What we clearly see in each of these alternatives is the power of new approaches in action, challenging injustice in its many forms.

Although creating a complete list of characteristics is not feasible, we present some that the coeditors and authors recognize as important.

Participation

An essential element of alternatives is a participatory approach along with a conscious critique of hierarchical “expert”-driven approaches.

Cooperation

Cooperation, not competition, is the hallmark of most alternatives.

Solidarity

Beyond cooperation, the idea of community solidarity underpins human relationships.

Ecologically Minded

Justice necessitates respect for the environment and for life in all its forms. A concern for nature and the ongoing climate crisis is an integral part of alternatives.

Arts Integrated

A full integration of the arts, which is fundamental to the act of imagination, is essential to all forms of progressive activism.

Well-Being

This means full commitment to community well-being (or *buen vivir*), with the idea that true individual happiness cannot be attainable without the well-being of everyone else in the community.

Not all these characteristics may be present in all alternatives, and other characteristics and values are important as well. We live in a pluriverse where alternatives may take different forms. The world we want is described in the Zapatista saying about the need for “a world within which many worlds fit.”

Education and Individual Transformation

We are innately spiritual beings, and our spirituality plays a critical role in our connection to the interdependence of life. Yet we have created economic, political, and, at times, even religious systems that ignore or counter our interconnectedness, thus threatening the very existence of life on earth. We recognize that transformative education and societal alternatives inextricably link to our transformation

as individuals and that societal transformation necessitates both inner and outer change (Nolan & Posner, 2024).

For millennia, spirituality, here not necessarily as a religious adherence, has served as part of the foundation for a holistic way of life that cultivates mental exercise, emotional regulation, and inner peace and emphasizes our internal journey reflected in everyday conduct. Eastern traditions and Indigenous Knowledges, among others, have long woven a rich tapestry of spirituality that transcends the individual. They showcase a deep connection between humans and the natural world, fostering a sense of interdependence.

Spiritual practices should not diminish the pressing realities of structural inequality, systemic racism, patriarchy, and other injustices. Instead, they can offer a path towards personal transformation, leading individuals to adapt and use sustainable practices and ensure resources are shared equitably and utilized responsibly for the collective good. Within each of us is a seed of transformation, waiting to connect us to the greater tapestry. This transformation can empower individuals and reduce barriers and conflicts between people to further strengthen the fabric of society and ultimately safeguard our planet. The threat of a dystopian future demands societal alternatives with individual transformation.

What Is in the Special Issue

The special issue is divided into nine parts. **Part 1** does not address education per se but offers five essays that consider a plethora of alternatives to political, economic, and social arrangements that have heretofore governed our world and organized our thoughts. We invited four papers by leaders in the field of alternatives in addition to one by a coeditor. This first section is quite pivotal because thinking about alternative educational futures necessitates that we also think about the changed context within which such futures would exist and operate.

Parts 2–9 consist of 33 essays by 66 authors from around the world focusing on education alternatives that expand our epistemic horizons and potentially contribute to a just, equitable, and regenerative future. In organizing these sections, we faced the challenge of how to best situate and categorize familiar topics (TK-12 education) while keeping a critical perspective on the very institutional frames we seek to challenge, deconstruct, and ultimately change. **Part 2**, *Reimagining Schooling*, includes papers focusing primarily on a critical approach to schooling, including revolutionary reforms and initiatives seeking a just future. The papers in **Part 3**, *Rethinking Postsecondary Education*, focus on new ways of approaching education throughout the life course. **Part 4**, *Centering Nonformal Education*, offers papers that expand well beyond traditional conceptions and sites of “schooling.”

The next four parts include papers focused on specific areas. (Un)learning from Decolonial and Indigenous Knowledges (**Part 5**) turns our attention to ways of living, being, and learning that we might already know but often overlook in Western/northern-based education systems. The papers in **Part 6**, *Responding to the Climate Crisis*, offer directions and examples for education to help us navigate and mitigate this pressing existential crisis. In *Highlighting Education in Conflict and Emergencies* (**Part 7**), the authors detail different modalities of education in particularly challenging situations. **Part 8**, *Amplifying Education for Liberation*, discusses the myriad ways in which social movements inform education systems and engage in educational processes.

Our Conclusions

We conclude this Special Issue with **Part 9**, *Advancing a Way Forward*, which features Michael Apple’s paper on the “tasks for the critical scholar/activist,” updated from his 2013 book, *Can Education Change Society?* Among other things, Apple argues for the need to do the following:

- Document exploitation, marginalization, reproduction;
- Document progressive struggles;
- Help identify spaces and possibilities for counter-hegemonic action;
- Speak to nonacademic audiences;
- Work in concert with critical activists and social movements in education and across sectors; and
- Confront the intersection of oppressive structures.

Like Apple, we also believe that education can change society. Clearly, this task falls not just on critical scholars/activists but on all progressive educators. Although the alternatives in this special issue help point the way, they represent merely a fraction of all the attempts at transformative education alternatives found in so many communities around the world. Yet education transformation must be accompanied by many other efforts to change society, as emphasized in **Part 1** of this volume. We strongly believe that the need for societal transformation is urgent and immediate, especially given the impending climate catastrophe. We cannot postpone this transformation to the next generation!

We have a theory of change for this urgent transformation. We see education change as part of a cross-sector, cross-issue, and cross-national mobilization. The title of the article by Ashish Kothari (2020), one of our contributors, highlights this point: “Lives Matter: Can Black, Indigenous, Worker, Farmer, Ecological, Women, Queer Uprisings, Come Together?” Add

to this list education uprisings! They can and they must come together! This special issue is but a prelude to what we envisage as a series of engaged, generative, and empowering dialogues and actions leading to new epistemic and social systems that offer alternative ways of being and engaging with the world. It is a hopeful and pressing call for action.

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