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A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR EDUCATION:

Advancing a paradigm of relational interconnectedness

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at recent calls for “a new social contract for education” through the lens of a relational ontology for humanity and a living planet. Through a critical view of social contract theory, the paper looks at how this call can be an entry point to a deeper paradigmatic shift in framing questions of justice, social organization, and education itself. It proposes a shift from a rules-based transactional model to a relationship-based model grounded in understanding and appreciation of interdependence and interconnectedness. In order to shape more just and sustainable futures for humanity and the planet, a new social contract for education will need to transcend atomistic, transactional, and adversarial social dynamics and instead be organized around relational interconnectedness.

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INTRODUCTION

Launched in November 2021, the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education titled *Reimagining our Futures Together: A new social contract for education* calls for the co-construction of a new social contract for education². Two months prior, in September 2021, the report of the United Nations' Secretary-General Antonio Guterres titled *Our Common Agenda* placed at its heart a "renewed social contract". This concept was defined as "the understanding within a society of how people solve shared problems, manage risks and pool resources to deliver public goods, as well as how their collective institutions and norms operate" (United Nations, 2021, p. 22). The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) responded to *Our Common Agenda* with a further call for a "new eco-social contract" for sustainable development (UNRISD, 2022).

The UN and its various agencies are by no means alone in their invocation of this idea. The 2021 World Economic Forum's conference in Davos chose "Advancing a New Social Contract" as a key theme (World Economic Forum, 2021). Grassroots movements concerned with issues ranging from racial justice to climate change have all found resonance in this idea (e.g. Anku et al., 2020; John-Williams, 2020). This particular historical juncture seems for many to be an opportune moment to re-examine the ideas, assumptions, and norms that underlie collective existence.

What is so alluring about the idea of the "social contract" that we see being invoked across different sectors, institutions, and movements? The concept, after all, is a contested and somewhat obscure philosophical heuristic for conceptualizing the constitutional and legalistic arrangements of a polity's individual-state interests. Initial reactions to UNESCO's report have ranged from excitement for a bold call, to perplexity as to what and to whom this proposition is directed, or even to deep concern for perhaps invoking an oppressive, Eurocentric, and human-centric tradition of thought (e.g. Elfert and Morris, 2022; Klees, 2022; Locatelli, 2022).

The recent, wide circulation of the concept of social contract speaks to a discursive use quite different than its classical roots suggest. Renewed interest in the social contract reflects a near-existential exploration about what it means to be part of an interconnected, world-spanning community that transcends the familiar boundaries of nation-state sovereignty.

The recent, wide circulation of the concept of social contract, however, speaks to a discursive use quite different than its classical roots suggest. Renewed interest in the social contract reflects a near-existential exploration about what it means to be part of an interconnected, world-spanning community that transcends the familiar boundaries of nation-state sovereignty. It is a response to uncharted disruptions, economic and ecological imbalances, as well as new regimes of ideological, corporate, and technocratic control.

Amidst significant paradigm shifts, the logic of "ordinary" times (whether real or imagined) no longer adequately applies. Nancy Fraser (2010) argues this point in her discussion of justice, proposing that the post-Westphalian logic of national sovereignty as the primary mechanism through which justice can be assured is no longer (if it was ever) sufficient for the assurance of human rights, dignity, and wellbeing. Certainly, the accelerating forces of change and mobility, together with social, environmental, and technological disruptions, have pushed to the limit many of the assumptions that underlie humanity's social organization, institutions, agreements, and rules. This is evident in education: more of the world has greater access to formal educational opportunity than ever before, yet many of the individual and collective benefits education promises are falling further and further out of reach.

This paper first seeks to examine the ideas and assumptions underlying the notion of a "social contract" both historically and in the present. It then assesses the extent to which the concept of the social contract allows us to meaningfully reframe the connections of human beings to one another and to the living planet. What is compelling about this idea? What collective needs – in education and beyond – might the social contract address? The paper also looks ahead to examine the pitfalls, limitations, and appropriations of the social contract that might be foreseen and avoided. Recognizing its limitations, it explores how UNESCO's call for a new social contract for education can open more possible avenues of participation and shared benefit.

2 The International Commission on the Futures of Education was chaired by H.E. Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The full report can be found here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707>.

At the heart of this paper is the argument that a mode of contractual social exchange cannot possibly meet contemporary global challenges as it is incommensurate with the interconnected nature of humanity and the planet. The paper therefore begins by historically examining what the concept of social contract has offered Western political thought (Boucher and Kelly, 1994; Mills, 2022; Weale, 2020) and explores the extent to which this inheritance is reflected in the call to reimagine possible futures around a new social contract for education.

Looking beyond the familiar claims of the European Enlightenment and its renaissance in modernity, it is important to recall that distinct relational paradigms exist across a variety of cultures, epistemologies, worldviews, spiritual traditions, and genealogies of thought. Ontological relationality is expressed in diverse philosophies, including in the harmony and the “oneness” hypothesis linked to Chinese philosophy (Li, 2006; Ivanhoe, 2017); in African relational conceptions of ubuntu (Assié-Lumumba, 2020; Wiredu, 1996); and in Indigenous worldviews and cosmivision about relationships with the human and more-than-human world (LaDuke, 1999; McCarty and Lee, 2014; McGregor, 2005; Romero, 1994). Such rich heritages help lay the groundwork for reimagining social agreement in education as going beyond finite transactions, atomistic individualism, and adversarial contractual thinking.

The measure of success for reimagining a new social contract in education, as in other domains, lies in the extent to which this notion can transcend the contractual nature of individual-state transactions and instead reflect humanity’s inescapable and inherent interdependence and interconnectedness.

UNPACKING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT PARADIGM

Ambivalence about how social contract theory can be pragmatically applied (Boucher and Kelly, 1994) can lead to contradictory conclusions. The idea of the social contract is part of a wider family of ideas with roots in the European Enlightenment, expanded through a global liberal order, which carry powerful assumptions about human nature and ontology – what it means to “be” in the world. If the notion of social contract is to be reframed in order to help reimagine the future of education, it is important to understand the foundational conceptions being carried forward in present usage. What notions of the individual are implicit? What visions of society are mobilized in a social contract paradigm? Who has been excluded from these definitions? What kinds of “agreements” can be voluntarily undertaken, and on whom might they be imposed?

The “contract” is a metaphor – a hypothetical thought experiment that imagines individuals coming together as rational and self-interested parties who can agree on the rules and terms through which to design a legitimate social and political order (Boucher and Kelly, 1994). Revolutionary movements sweeping Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries demanded a new framework for social order that eschewed the authoritarianism of monarchic rule and subjugation. Social contract theory put forward a liberating proposal: social arrangements can be just and legitimate if and when they are subject to agreement of the individuals who live under them (Rawls, 1971/2020). The “contract” metaphor rests on the idea that before politics “begin”, all parties are able to enter an agreement freely and independently. All are thought of as able to negotiate and consent to the terms and conditions of the contract and, consequently, to be willing to be bound to its terms for the good of a legitimate governing order. The contract is framed in terms of an exchange: by surrendering some degree of individual liberty in abiding by specific governance arrangements, laws, norms and institutions, significant moral and social benefits accrue. These benefits ideally outweigh the benefits of breaking the contract, and individual autonomy is thus ultimately preserved (Boucher and Kelly, 1994; Mills, 2000).

The importance of the individual at the heart of the social contract tradition emerging from the Enlightenment is progressive in contrast to conceptions of inherited feudal servitude and absolute authoritarian rule. It is nevertheless important to recall that, in this theoretical construct of the social contract, the notion of this individual is specific to the time and place of a Eurocentric patriarchal society.

Who, then, is the individual in the classical social contract? According to Hobbes and Locke, the individual “man” is a rational, sovereign subject, positioned as the organizing unit of society. Concern for one’s relations with others was here seen as necessarily self-interested. To be “rational” was understood to be motivated by the pursuit of one’s own interests by the most efficient means possible (Boucher and Kelly, 1994). Seen from this angle, the terms, formulations, and safeguards of social contract theory are, in fact, highly *asocial*. Society was viewed as a machine organized around

universalized predictions of rational human nature governed by materialistic self-interest and efficiency. Cooperation and social agreement were justified insofar as they advance self-interest but are not particularly valued in their own right. Individualism in this framework further led to adversarial, transactional, and utilitarian modes of interaction as a matter of course, producing a society assumed to be composed of “atomistic” separate entities (Taylor, 2002).

Through modernity, this atomistic vision of the individual has arguably been the core organizational unit of democratic governance and liberal economics, as well as wide-scale social institutions such as education. Charles Taylor describes atomistic ontology as creating a vision of society “constituted by individuals for the fulfillment of ends which were primarily individual” (qtd. in Redhead, 2002, p. 84). Under such an atomistic vision, all things – society, the environment,

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knowledge, and so on – are considered simply as means to individual ends. Collective visions of society centre on preserving individual autonomy and enabling individually motivated pursuits. While both are important goals, they are inadequate when taken to extremes and disregard shared exigencies. Moreover, the human-centered worldview of the atomistic individual also implied dominance over nature, justifying environmental exploitation and destruction in the pursuit of economic commodification and consumption imagined to be limitless.

Critiques of social contract

Classical social contract theory - and much of its modernist revitalization in the 1970s - assumed the “success” of democratic and capitalistic societies came in large part because of the agreement of individuals to be subjugated to a legitimate government for their mutual and consensual benefit (Weale, 2017). However, narratives of western success have proven to be willfully ignorant of entire populations, peoples, and segments of society who have not benefitted equally, or who have been harmed through these arrangements. Indeed, in the context of the European Enlightenment and the centuries that followed, Hobbes’ treatises on sovereignty by acquisition advanced a moral justification for war, slavery, and even genocide. Locke’s notions on legal property ownership within the social contract provided justification for the colonization of Indigenous land (particularly in the North American continent) and the willful violation of Indigenous sovereignty (e.g. see Ward and Lott, 2002).

Scholars of race, gender, colonialism, totalitarianism, and inequality have drawn attention to the false premise of a pre-social, pre-political condition of agreement among those of equal standing for the forging of a just set of social agreements. They have pointed to the multiple dynamics of subjugation that have resulted from the justifications of contractarian thinking (e.g. Mills, 2022; Pateman, 1988). A contradiction appears in the application of this contractual metaphor, Mills (2000) point out, arguing that a kind of pre-social human “pure” state of nature is fictitious:

the idea of a contract is misleadingly asocial, predicated on a methodological starting point of ‘pre-social’ individuals whose putatively innate (but actually socially created) characteristics are taken to generate patterns of human interrelation which are then, reversing things, read back into the natural. Moreover, the atomic individualism characteristic of liberalism finds here its clearest statement, in that society is represented as being brought into existence by, and composed of, an aggregate of equi-powerful individual decision-makers. (Mills, 2000, p. 441)

Many different perspectives reject the notion that individual existence precedes community or collective life. Human beings have always been living collaboratively, and are thus socially mediated beings (Arendt, 1951; Mills, 2000). It is simply impossible to ignore the inequalities and difference of position, power, and perspective that would inform the terms of a contract – even despite Rawls’ (1971/2020) famous thought experiment of arriving at acceptable social principles from behind a “veil of ignorance” of one’s social position in a world of differences.

In contrast to normative uses of the social contract in the spirit of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Rawls who aim to design and improve the foundations for establishing an ideal social organization, other scholars have made excellent critical and descriptive use of the social contract as an analytic tool to describe the failures and defects of a non-ideal reality. Through this analysis, many argue that the engineering of the social contract – tacit or otherwise – has led to logical outcomes

of domination, rule, and exploitation akin to that which Enlightenment thinkers sought to escape in the first place (Mills, 2000).

In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman (1988) argues that the institutionalized patriarchal subjugation of women as subservient to men, and objectified as property and labour, did not emerge through a truly consensual agreement between equal parties. Rather, it derived from historical and structural domination that has been woven into the hierarchical governance of public and private life. This example complicates the claim that a contract might arise from an agreement of equals, as opposed to being a coercive means of subjugating those deprived of its positions of power. For Pateman, the social contract, along with its subsidiary contracts (the employment contract and the marriage contract, in particular), is a modern mechanism by which relationships of domination and subordination can be distorted to take on the guise of freedom and choice (Pateman, 1988; Pateman and Mills, 2007).

When we extend Pateman's critical social contract lens to education, we can see how education can, in fact, potentially condition people to be ruled rather than liberate them. This has been argued by many critical pedagogy thinkers in the tradition of Paulo Freire's examination of "banking-model" educational practice and its role in wider oppression (Freire, 1972/2000). Pateman's social contract critique invites us to examine how education potentially creates coercive structures, desires, and conditions to submit to the status quo.

In *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills (1999/2022) similarly uses the social contract as a descriptive heuristic - rather than a normative one - to interpret the underlying assumptions that led to the massive enslavement of African peoples and the colonization of Indigenous peoples in the creation of Western capitalism across Europe, North America, and around the world. Mills hearkens to Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (Rousseau, 1913) which, in Mills' reading, used the social contract descriptively to illustrate the perpetuation of economic and class inequalities *through* the hypothetical contract's premise, rather than in spite of it.

Keating (2011, p. 6) points out that for critical social contract theorists such as Pateman and Mills, "women and people of color, respectively, do not agree to be ruled, because they are in fact excluded from the contract—they are subject to it

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but not subjects of it." This is precisely where the ontological premise of *who* is subject to the social contract - namely, the assumed atomistic individual - meets a paradox. For how can individual autonomy be exercised when a contractarian arrangement results in exploitation and domination? In fact, Pateman and Keating both ultimately suggest that we find other terms to describe a voluntary mutual undertaking and move away from the associations and assumptions of contractualism.

The challenge that proceeds from UNESCO's call for a "new social contract for education" is how to move towards more participatory, epistemologically inclusive - and ultimately, more emancipatory - modes of social organization,

trust, and shared endeavors. While the challenge holds for all domains, it is here particularly salient in the domain of education. Education is fully implicated in the transmission of hierarchical value systems, norms of ownership, power and exploitation. In their examination of educational practice among North American Indigenous peoples, for example, Teresa McCarty and Tiffany Lee (2014) write:

Indigenous peoples' desires for tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification ... are interlaced with ongoing legacies of colonization, ethnicide, and linguicide. Western schooling has been the crucible in which these contested desires have been molded, impacting Native peoples in ways that have separated their identities from their languages, lands, and worldviews. (p. 102)

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Paradigmatic relationality and change

Nancy Fraser (2010) called for “a new kind of justice theorizing” that embraces the “abnormality of justice” when dominating paradigms are in transition, as the hegemony of one is being dislodged by the assumptions of another. We are presently facing a transitional moment in collective human history that is reflected in contrasting paradigms that lack shared grammars. This section uses Fraser’s approach of “misframing” (2010) – a reflexive idea that “permits us to interrogate the mapping of political space from the standpoint of justice” (p. 286) – to juxtapose an adversarial from a relational approach to social organization.

The European Enlightenment conception of human nature as essentially atomistic and individualistic, and the belief that social organization can be derived from a pre-political contractual social machine, is a “frame” that can be read in multiple ways. From one perspective, it can be seen as an outlier among a wider range of human experiences, views, and philosophies that see individuality as implicitly relational. This view encourages us to challenge the paradigm of

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individualism, and perhaps even to reject it. However, it also risks an adversarial view among “competing” ideas, rooted in a transactional approach to dialogue and the pursuit of truth. This adversarial framing translates, for example, into the ideological domination implied in terms such as “the battle for hearts and minds,” and the competition-governed “marketplace of ideas.”

From another perspective, Western traditions of atomistic individualism can be seen as having partial-yet-incomplete insight into certain aspects of human identity, nature, and relationships. The importance given to individuality has historically carved out space for many people and groups. It helped to open the door for articulations of human rights, the valuing of subjectivities and perspectives, as well as the appreciation of individual initiatives and pursuits. Yet, as has been noted, the emancipatory promises of these traditions are cut short by a limited analysis of shared concerns and responsibilities, as well as by the power dynamics of coloniality and oppression that have exalted the individual autonomy and liberation of some individuals while excluding and suppressing others (Maldonado-Torres, 2003; Mills, 2022; Pateman, 1988).

Taking up the concept of paradigmatic relationality allows us to recognize connections among and between distinct worldviews and perspectives. It also helps us develop a different stance towards the incomplete and the partial. There can be grievous consequences when incomplete and partial concepts are extended as universal, when they may in fact be highly particular or even erroneous (Wiredu, 1996). This is as true for the extremes of individualism as it is for forms of oppressive collectivism that negate and stifle individual expression, initiative, and identity ostensibly for the good of the whole. However, the ability to perceive connections, reframe evidence, and bring partial insights into more fulsome maturity in relation to a wider epistemological spectrum can be an open-hearted and constructive expression of relationality. It can also help us define new social arrangements.

Whatever the approach, a high degree of epistemic humility is imperative (Srivastava, 2022) when examining the “contents” of a new social contract or the core relationships that govern and animate it. Such a posture further recognizes the incompleteness and ever-changing nature of current understandings. This is not to negate the value of extant knowledge, which Srivastava argues should be brought forth from the margins of recognition and empiricism. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the application of knowledge in new times, places, and perspectives is always ongoing. There is no reason to assume that the central human activity of acquiring, applying and generating knowledge would reach its end.

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There is growing public awareness that the “rules” of a social contract premised on fairness and equality have either been broken or were stacked unjustly from the start. Trust and distrust are the key barometers here. The very rules underlying much of modern social organization – from economics to environmental interactions, education, social institutions, and so on – have permitted our world’s trajectories towards environmental collapse, ideological polarization, extreme inequality, exclusion, exploitation, and oppression.

We will not find solutions to these crises merely by recommitting to the tenets of a social contract that both centers atomistic individualism and simultaneously narrowly circumscribes individual participation in matters of human importance. As Mills (2000) explains,

insofar as the contract classically emphasises the centrality of individual will and consent, it voluntarises and represents as the result of free and universal consensual agreement relations and structures of domination about which most people have no real choice, and which actually oppress the majority of the population. (p. 441)

The conceptual framework of the “contract” – implicated as it is by the bounds of rules, fixed parties, adversarial power interests, and competing individualistic intents – thus makes it difficult to reimagine institutions that are not formed, reformed, and negotiated transactionally.

If we rely on these same modes of contest and methods of deliberation-by-self-interest, why would we assume that the outcomes of “a new social contract” would be markedly different than the “broken” one we seek to fix? Fortunately, there are other metaphors, frameworks, and assumptions that could animate a reimagination of collective social organization. The next section examines what can be mobilized in debates about a new social contract, or in other potential forms of agreement. It explores the different times, places, agencies, and contexts that make certain concepts or metaphors more, or less, useful.

RELATIONAL PARADIGMS BEYOND THE CONTRACT

In one of the background documents to *Our Common Agenda*, the UN argues for the familiarity of the concept of the social contract throughout human societies and cultures: “while it may be termed differently, the idea of a social contract is common to all societies and throughout history... At its simplest it’s about how people cooperate to deliver public goods, manage collective risks, and solve shared problems” (United Nations, 2021, p. 5). This suggestion that the social contract is common to all delinks the concept from the exclusive association with European cultural and intellectual traditions

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discussed above. It invites diverse peoples and cultures to reflect on their own distinct approaches to social organization and trust. In so doing, it broadens the possibilities of invoking the social contract beyond transactional terms.

We should take up these varied calls for a new social contract as an invitation to broaden the basis of social agreement beyond a narrow transactional frame. An alternative framework to atomization is relationality. A contract generally represents a finite exchange or negotiation constrained to particular rules, which,

after serving their utility, come to an end. A relationship, however, encompasses a much broader spectrum of connection across time, place, and context. Instead of taking disparate individuals as the fundamental unit of social analysis, relationality recognizes that properties of dynamism, change, and differentiation are continuously unfolding through interactions and immersion in a wider world. This ever-shifting characteristic of experience is well described by Sharon Todd (2020), who writes:

we are never in a static ‘relation to’ something, but in a constant flow of relation, an immersion with a world which is itself vibrant and subject to alteration, differentiation and endless variation. In this sense, our encounters are not merely *with* the world, but are *of* the world: moments of contact in the present that open up to the unfolding and shifting reality of the things and lives we meet. (p. 1116).

A broad definition of “relational ontology” is proposed here as a contrast and counterpoint to atomistic ontology. Introducing this lens includes a broader spectrum of connection across time, place, and context than a contract approach allows. While relationality dislodges an atomistic view of ontology as the cornerstone of social analysis, individual subjectivity remains crucial in the perspective advanced here. After all, what it means to be an individual human being cannot be fully comprehended in the absence of relationships.

What follows here are but a few examples of diverse philosophical threads that might be considered within a rethinking of the social contract’s reliance on atomistic individualism in both its classical and modern traditions.

Numerous Indigenous philosophies convey distinct relational perspectives, reflective of each people's specific relationships in the world over time and space. In numerous North American Indigenous traditions, for example, the concept of "kinship" has significant implications for social organization and governance. The familial model has been used literally to build relations through partnership and childrearing as part of the sacred ceremonial processes of intertribal unity and connection. It has also been used metaphorically as a heuristic for understanding the interconnected and inseparable bonds between human and non-human worlds (Gould, Pai, Muraca and Chan, 2019). In Anishnaabe teaching, for instance, the spiritual dimensions of relationships – not only between people, but also to land, creation, and spirit – are essential to a people's purpose. Winona LaDuke (1999) describes the *Minobimaatisiwin*, meaning "the good life," as the "lifeway" that has sustained Anishnaabe nations for thousands of years, describing it as "culturally and spiritually based way in which Indigenous peoples relate to their ecosystem" (p. 127).

Many African worldviews also have deep relational ontological roots. The Bantu conception of *ubuntu* translates at times as "acting with humanity", but also carries the more literal meaning of "I am because you are." In other instances, *ubuntu* is used to refer to an entire ethical system of "relatedness and interrelatedness" Murobe (2000). Indeed, Assié-Lumumba (2016) writes:

... the philosophical foundation of human relation is profoundly communal as captured in ubuntu. As Valentin-Yves Mudimbe argues, "to be is necessarily to be in relation" to others and the "center is a human being who should be free and at the same time highly dependent upon others, on the memory of the past, and on emphasizing the balance between nature and culture" (Mudimbe 1988, p. 4). In the African ethos and practical life, this connection with others is essential. (Assié-Lumumba, 2016, p. 23)

It is important to note that here, as in many other worldviews, the learning process that a person engages in for their development as a human being is inseparable from the life of the community.

Looking at East Asia, Ho and Barton (2020) suggest that, while much attention has been paid to social and civic goals premised on Western traditions of individual rights and responsibilities, much less has been paid to relational social goals and interconnections. They argue that the latter is a common and pervasive aim in most societies worldwide,

In many societies around the world, a central social and political goal has long been not only justice but also *harmony*. In these settings, public participation is not just about rights and equality—or even justice—but about something more relational: *living together* in ways that recognize the value and necessity of connections with other people, as well as with the environment. (p. 276) [emphasis in original]

Harmony is a relational social goal in many Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist societies, among others. Here, harmony is not a static accomplishment, but rather a process of striving dependent on human activity and interactions (Li, 2013). There are philosophical and conceptual frameworks across Asia that recognize ontological relationality in human identity and social organization. Drawing on strands of East Asian philosophy, Ivanhoe (2017) depicts "the oneness hypothesis" as not a single theory, but rather a family of moral views which see human existence and welfare as inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things in the wider world. There are religious traditions across East Asia – and worldwide, in fact – that emphasize the transcendental nature of these interconnections. Exceeding its utility as means to an end, relationality can be a profoundly spiritual statement of the interconnectedness of all created existence.

Repositioning the individual in a relational framework for education

Moving away from a transactional model of social exchange requires unpacking the assumptions about the individual and society embedded in classical social contract thinking. Exposing the limitations of seeing individuals as "atomistic", however, does not undermine the importance of individuality and autonomy. Rather, it questions its validity as the central unit of analysis in education and society.

To describe something as "atomized" is to consider its properties in complete isolation from its relations to other units. What, then, are the properties and expressions of individuality we miss when basing analysis on the atomized individual, outside of its relationships to others? What properties would we be unable to observe or express? How might such a view of the individual human being skew understandings of motivation, rationality, power, interdependence, and care in educational practice?

In contemporary education, a tendency to isolate, atomize, and compare individual learners drives processes of competition and selection. Such approaches have generally not led to systems that empower the majority of students to have ownership as protagonists in their own learning. Rather, a key transaction involves the exchange of complicit behavior and task completion for good marks and promotion. It fuels a linear system in which there is little room for the wide range of interests, talents, and excellence that students and teachers may express. Yet, societies demand a wide diversity of human capacities and perspectives to be developed and deployed if shared goals are to unfold.

One interesting illustration of this is the notion of “giftedness” in education in the Keres Pueblo Indigenous community. In her study of Keresian Pueblo society, Romero (1994) finds that “[g]iftedness is viewed as a global human quality encompassed by all individuals and manifested through one’s contribution to the well-being of the community.” While the examples of the individual abilities, traits, and talents described in this study are very diverse, they generally fall within four domains: Humanistic or affective abilities of giving from the heart (e.g. compassion, empathy, generosity); linguistic abilities (e.g. communication and mastery over intricate oral linguistic patterns); the abilities of knowledge acquisition and application at appropriate times (a reflection of ingenuity); and psychomotor abilities (e.g. creativity, creating with one’s hands). These are recognized as “gifts” and talents that individuals express. The community takes great care to nurture these diverse capacities and talents, all considered to be vital contributions to Pueblo society (Romero 1994).

Regarding education and the global environmental crisis, Sharon Todd (2020) highlights the importance of enabling students “to build a living relationship to the natural environment” (p. 1113). The complexity of challenges such as climate change and ecological devastation elicits deep wells of emotion such as fear, protectiveness, sadness, anger, loss, and uncertainty—as well as the qualities of resoluteness, creativity, and inquiry. Mere consumption of information and fact is inadequate to shape the dynamic relationships that human beings have with both the effects and consequences of environmental devastation. Appropriate pedagogy allows youth not to stay with difficult feelings about the future by enabling them to develop a living relationship to the more-than-human world in the present. This approach resonates with Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor’s (2005) approach to traditional ecological knowledge in the context of Minobimaatisiwin, “the good life”. McGregor (2005) critiques conventional scholarly modes of compartmentalizing and consuming knowledge about ecological systems without deeper changes in the relationships to that knowledge, to life, and to the world.

The diversity of views, shared goals, visions of the “good life”, and educational practices that exist in different contexts and times in humanity broaden the narrow horizon defined by the hegemonic principles of competition, control, and consumption that shape the traditional social contract for education.

The potential of education to transform our relationships to others and to the world around us can be short-circuited through the atomization of individuals and knowledge that positions them as fragmented, compartmentalized, and static. In education, atomistic characterizations of individuality are ultimately counter-productive to individuals’ autonomy and differences when questioning, sharing answers, care, and cooperation are devalued. Individual performance and credentialism has remained the central currency that facilitates the conventional educational social contract in exchange for ostensible social standing and worth.

The diversity of views, shared goals, visions of the “good life”, and educational practices that exist in different contexts and times in humanity broaden the narrow horizon defined by the hegemonic principles of competition, control, and consumption that shape the traditional social contract for education. Translating these relational principles into just and equitable futures of education in the contemporary world must consider their implications for how individuality and subjectivity can be positioned and enriched by a relational understanding of being, doing, and learning.

TOWARDS EDUCATION AS A SHARED UNDERTAKING

As assumptions about human nature shift from atomistic to relational conceptions, how can the nature of social agreement itself be reimagined? How appropriate and effective is the construct of “a new social contract” as a universal mechanism for the realization of the vision outlined in the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education? For

Relational interdependence is an ontological imperative, reflective of a mutually connected world. It can translate into a wide range of intentional, shared mutual undertakings at every scale and in every sector. What such actions and agreements may look like in education could vary considerably in each context.

what has been central in the social contract tradition is not the matter of norms and values on their own, but rather the acceptability of such norms and values to those in power (Taylor, 2002). Is it possible to navigate the tension inherent to the International Commission report’s invocation of a contractual model, while at the same time appealing to radical solidarity and interconnectedness with humanity and the planet?

A new vision of education’s future in greater harmony and balance with humanity and a wider planetary world is in fact not a contract through which parties can opt in or out on others’ behalf. Relational interdependence is an ontological imperative, reflective of a mutually connected world. It can translate into a wide range of intentional, shared mutual undertakings at every scale and in every sector. What such actions and agreements may

look like in education could vary considerably in each context. The proposal to probe, unpack, and reimagine a new social contract for education in diverse contexts is therefore a promising one at this critical stage in global consciousness. A discussion on the social contract for education is an especially welcome shift from the narrow and myopic focus on goals, targets and benchmarks that characterize much of international education development discourse.

A relational response to reimagine the social contract

Calling for a new social contract for education is a powerful device to provoke reaction, response, and engagement with the analysis and proposals of the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, grounded as it is in a new humanism (see Bokova, 2010) with reference points to decolonial and more-than-human relational perspectives. Responding to the call for a new social contract for education must, however, embrace a shift from an atomistic ontology to a relational understanding of the social contract. For only such a shift can allow for reimagining our world through an education that is more reflective of the shared challenges and possibilities of an interconnected past, present and future.

In a subtle yet strategic manner, the report subverts the traditional use of the concept of “social contract” to invite a wider range of ecologies of thought. It implicitly critical of the assumed “old” social contract associated with the mass institutional schooling model that features in modern society. As such, the report opens space to reimagine educational processes and systems that are more reflective of our essential relationships with humanity and the planet.

In its call to reimagine the social contract for education, the report refrains from proposing a technocratic roadmap of how this should be done. Its broad call and invitation to co-creation in lieu of targeted recommendations is a refreshingly humble one, opening room for the kind of reflexivity and reimagining of norms needed for a more substantive paradigmatic shift. The call is more than a mere search for new “rules of the game” for a renewed social contract for education that circumscribe and define a fixed scope of action for individuals, states, and international players. This suggests a number of possible strategies to build on the call for a new social contract in education.

Responding to the call for a new social contract for education must embrace a shift from an atomistic ontology to a relational understanding of the social contract (...) reimagining our world through an education that is more reflective of the shared challenges and possibilities of an interconnected past, present and future.

From a research perspective, the theoretical tradition of social contract theory can be used to deepen understanding of the limited norms and frames that underpin social and economic organization. As seen in the work of Charles W. Mills, Carole Pateman, and others, using the social contract as an analytic heuristic can be a powerful tool to examine assumptions about human identity, human nature, and the nature of society. Parsing and examining the contractual and adversarial

thinking in social organization can make explicit the taken-for-granted and tacit notions that perpetuate oppression, exclusion, and inequality.

From a governance perspective, clear principles are needed to dismantle and “unlearn” the frames and norms that are incommensurate with a relational paradigm. This is a call both to explicitly articulate those principles which are consistent and coherent with a relational ontological perspective, as well as to learn about their potential applications in diverse contexts and conditions. Educators, authorities, and administrators might well consider: what are the implications of adopting a relational approach, moving away from transactional modes towards broader social interconnectedness in a given context? How might the purpose of education be recast beyond a narrow instrumental vision towards a more fulsome view of individual and shared purposes? How might new understandings of teachers, students, families, community members and schools connect to conceptions of knowledge, achievement, excellence, and wellbeing within a relational frame?

From a practitioner perspective, recognizing relationality in educational practices, processes, and methods is to reimagine social agreement in ways that break down the fragmentations of silos, hierarchies, times, and places in search of deeper solidarity and interconnectedness. Modern social contract theory centered human rationalism and the scientific method as the sole means by which to arrive at a code of fixed, and ostensibly universal, social norms (Weale, 2017). Relationality, on the other hand, proposes a process-oriented approach requiring profound participation, consultation, dialogue, collective action, and shared reflection. Relationality works against the grain of fragmentation and atomization, and it is not sustainable when siloed. Consequently, there is need for multi-scalar approaches, characterized by solidarity within and between times, contexts, and spaces. Solidarity implies justice as a characteristic and prerequisite for harmony and oneness, but also justice that is reflective of our essential human oneness and harmony with the natural world (Ho and Barton, 2020; Ivanhoe, 2017). The relationship between justice and harmony is vital, each mutually informing the another. Justice also applies within a relational framework beyond human beings in our relationships to the non-human world, to the planet, and to the cosmos.

CONCLUSION

Early into the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous slogans circulated in response to the mood of the hour. While expressions such as “we are all in this together” and “build back better” garnered initial enthusiasm, their sentiments soon soured as it became clear that fundamental imbalances had only been further exploited, even accelerated. The richest doubled or even tripled their wealth; women and caregivers were excluded from public and economic participation en masse; a generation of children and youth were shuttered from schooling while corporate economic agendas were given priority; and ecosystems have been pushed closer to the brink of irreversible collapse. It is clear we have not been in this together, at least not in the same way, many decry – and why would we want to build “back” that which has given rise to such imbalances and crises?

Where slogans have waned, a longing for sustained inquiry, solidarity, and meaningful change has persisted and deepened. The notion of a new social contract, and its implications for the reimagination of education, must move away from its contractarian, adversarial, individualist, and transactional origins.

But where slogans have waned, a longing for sustained inquiry, solidarity, and meaningful change has persisted and deepened. The notion of a new social contract, and its implications for the reimagination of education, must move away from its contractarian, adversarial, individualist, and transactional origins. The call for a new social contract for education is an entry point to paradigmatic questions of justice and trust in social organization. The classical conception of the social contract has limited potential for collective wellbeing. Assumptions about the nature of individuals and society on which it is based require reexamination, both in education and more broadly. We need a paradigmatic shift to renew the social contract – moving from an

atomistic ontology to a relational one. The call for a new social contract for education must necessarily be part of a broader transition to a new paradigm for human development, within which education is interwoven. Teaching, learning, and pedagogy – being themselves deeply relational – are potentially an ideal place to start.

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