THE COFFEES OF
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Bringing New Perspectives to the OECD

Secretary-General’s Speech Writing and Intelligence Outreach Unit
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Professor Reimers is an expert in the field of Global Education. His research and teaching focus on understanding how to educate children and youth so they can thrive in the 21st century. He studies how education policy and leadership foster educational innovation and quality improvement.

As part of the work of the Global Education Innovation Initiative which he leads, he and his colleagues have just completed a comparative study of the goals of education as reflected in the curriculum in Chile, China, India, Mexico, Singapore and the United States, published as ‘Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century’ by Harvard Education Press. Another recent book, titled ‘Fifteen Letters on Education in Singapore’, examines the lessons that can be learned from Singapore’s efforts building a robust teaching profession. In addition, his book ‘Empowering Global Citizens’ discusses why global citizenship education, aligned with helping students advance human rights and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals is an imperative of our times.

His writings have conceptualised and defined the profile of a globally competent graduate in the 21st century. He chairs an annual Think Tank that brings to Harvard University leaders of thought and practice in global education around the world.

His interests include the design and promotion of innovations in Higher Education. He teaches a course on educational innovation and social entrepreneurship at the Harvard Innovation Lab, where students learn to develop innovative education organisations, and a course on educational policy analysis and research in comparative perspective which examines the core education policy challenges faced by governments around the world.

He is also active advising governments, international development organisations, universities, public and independent schools and other educational institutions to improve their quality and relevance. He is a member of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education where he chairs the Strategic Planning Committee which works with all Universities in the State aligning their strategic plans with the State’s Vision Project. He is a member of the US Commission for UNESCO and of the Steering Group of Education in Conflict and Crisis of the United States Agency for International Development and works with policy makers in the United States, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. He is a Fellow of the International Academy of Education and a member of the Council of Foreign Relations.

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Thank you very much for this invitation. My goal is for us to have a dialogue about what it means to educate citizens in a world in which the political philosophy of liberalism, which has oriented much of the work of governments and of global institutions created after World War II, is increasingly challenged by nationalist populist movements.

The idea that all people should be educated is relatively recent in the history of humanity. It is primarily a product of the Enlightenment and as such, a product of liberal political thought. As part of the ideology of liberalism, public education promotes freedom and equality and is designed to educate citizens for a liberal political order.

By liberalism, I refer to the political philosophy founded by John Locke that gave pre-eminence to the ideas of liberty and equality. It is the foundation of the freedoms in which democratic societies are founded. Freedom of speech, of press, of religion, free markets, civil rights, democracy, secular governments, gender equality and international co-operation. It is precisely these ideas that are being challenged by the rise of populist nationalist movements.

Globally, access to public education expanded significantly with the consolidation of nation states and the expansion of liberalism in the 1800s, and again after World War II, as a result of the creation of a global architecture to promote the values of freedom and equality. The data in slide 1 is generated by Our World In Data. It shows access to basic education by population around the world. It is remarkable that 200 years ago, less than 1 in 5 people completed a basic education and now most people do. To me this is one of the most significant silent revolutions that humanity has achieved.

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1 The original transcript of the presentation by Fernando Reimers has undergone minor editing to ensure that the text published in this brochure is presented in a reader-friendly format.
Globally, access to public education expanded significantly with the consolidation of nation states and the expansion of liberalism. Under liberalism, it was assumed that public education could serve democratic political and economic goals with limited trade-offs between them. Additional goals, such as advancing human rights and modernisation, were also seen as convergent with political and economic goals and for these reasons most governments advancing education as part of liberalism, saw limited trade-offs between the various goals of education.

The challenges to liberalism, from communism and fascism, created alternative goals for public education. These challenged the notion that individuals could be free to choose which education to pursue and emphasised political and economic goals while downplaying human rights and modernisation goals.

The tensions between the Soviet bloc and the liberal world caused some challenges to global institutions with respect to their education work. That may be the reason why the tacit education consensus of many of these institutions was, for a long time, focused on getting children in schools, rather than what children should be learning, or how their learning should align with their vision of a good life and a good society.

Consensus on these topics is difficult to reach in international institutions and in societies in which there is much political contestation. That may be the reason why PISA studies have so far focused on the domains of literacy, mathematics and science, and not on domains such as civics or global leadership. It is perhaps also the reason why organisations like UNESCO have found it difficult to advance human rights education around the world, even though they were created to do precisely that.

In contrast, nations with limited political competition, such as Singapore or China, have been able to develop coherent and ambitious visions on how their education systems should be aligned with economic and political development goals. They have been able to align several key components of their education systems, such as teacher selection, preparation and support with those visions in mind. Whereas countries such as the US and Mexico, where
there is more political competition, have found it difficult to reach consensus on a vision of what education should prepare students to do in ways that enable a vision of a good society.

The overall rationale of a such consensus was that there were limited trade-offs between alternative education purposes. That the same skills that help people become productive, also help them engage as citizens and advance human rights. The underlying assumption was that economic, political, social and cultural development converged and policies that foster economic development resulted in the development of cultural values. Those values would in-turn support development and foster more social inclusion.

It was also assumed that globalisation would be mutually reinforcing through these processes and it was expected that globally, the world would be moving towards convergence in an ever-going cycle towards greater freedom, equality, and happiness. But this did not happen. We see that economically, there are resilient inequalities and groups which are left behind; there are also important cultural divides with respect to globalisation within nations.

So given those difficulties, the next best thing left for governments to do is to focus on particular competencies as their goals, without attempting an integrated view of what the sum of these competencies produces. Most countries focus on the basic literacies of language, mathematics and science. Increasingly the competencies under consideration are expanding, not only to other cognitive domains but also to social and emotional domains.

Governments and educators today are also interested in character, self-regulation, self-awareness, grit, tolerance and leadership. But for the most part those interests are not framed as part of a discussion of how the integration of those capacities will enable people to individually and collectively advance social or economic goals. This is a difficult conversation to have in settings where there is no consensus among elites on which place their country should occupy in a global economy.

In spite of these challenges, the dominance of liberalism as the organising principle of the post war order fuelled a set of education purposes more or less aligned with the ideals of freedom and equality. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the acceleration of globalisation in the last two decades, made these education aims of liberalism the dominant consensus in most of the world. The Delors Report is a very good example of this consensus.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the main political challenge to these liberal views came from populism. Populism
posits that ordinary people are exploited by elites and challenges the notion of representative democracy with direct action by the masses. Since direct action by large numbers is impractical, too often populism results in autocratic rule by a leader, communicating directly with the masses, unobstructed from intermediary institutions and from the normal division of power and checks and balances of democratic government. Some recent populist leaders include Hugo Chavez, in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and more recently Donald Trump in the United States. Historically, some political scientists have argued that populism can give rise to fascism.

Modern populists are exploiting the idea that globalisation, and liberal policies, do not benefit all, and there are important groups of the population who are left behind and without hope of seeing their conditions improve. They attribute this to elites that are not accountable to those groups, and to a model of development that fails to envision a role for these groups which are left behind.

Populists also exploit cultural divides among the population, deep differences in values and world views. In the recent presidential election in the US, these divisions surfaced between the political establishment, advancing Hamiltonian and Wilsonian views, and the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian views. Hamiltonians advanced the idea of the US playing a global leadership role in creating a global liberal order to contain the Soviet Union and advance US interests. Wilsonians also advanced a global liberal order in terms of values that would reduce global conflict and violence. They promoted human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law. Jeffersonians believed that minimising the global role of the United States would reduce costs and risks, while Jacksonian populist nationalists, in contrast, focused on advancing equality and dignity of American citizens, and distanced themselves from cosmopolitan Enlightenment ideals and the global liberal order.

We are therefore witnessing serious challenges to the liberal world order. They come in the form of challenges to the ideas of freedom, equality, globalisation, human rights as a universal project and the ideas of representative democracy.
What will this mean to education? More power to local groups to define the goals of education, and a smaller role for government and for inter-governmental institutions. Replacing global and national politics with local politics of course does not mean more consensus, it may mean more conflict, perhaps with fewer rules of arbitration. The divisions between cosmopolitans and populists also exist in local communities. One question is how these differences will be resolved? Will the rule of law and expertise continue to play a role? We could, for example, expect less trust in public education institutions, resulting from less trust in governments, in experts and in elites. It is also possible that we will see a renewed emphasis on identity politics and culture wars in education.

There are some risks we can expect to emerge from this state of affairs. The first is a risk to the idea of human rights. If nationalism is the new organising force, the notion of in group and outgroup is now defined not by membership in the same species, but by nationality. Because one of the consequences of globalisation has been migration, non-citizens will be the first target for exclusion. If cultural wars define the politics of education we should expect to see battles over the rights of cultural and ethnic minorities.

A second risk concerns global challenges. The prospects for collective action diminish as the world moves towards national populism, and the goals of education move away from preparing students to understand global interconnectedness and globalisation.

A third risk of course is that populism might evolve into fascism and the ensuing breakdown of the institutions that were created to protect freedom, democracy, the rule of law, public education and basic freedoms.
The final risk is disorder. A lack of trust in institutions, elites and governments, will make the challenge of resolving conflict greater.

So the question that arises is: can the institutions created to advance a liberal world order, save it?

I think that any individual or institution interested in a global liberal order should consider a new focus on education for democratic citizenship which includes global citizenship. This means supporting educators so that schools can advance human rights, educate about shared global challenges, educate for engaged citizenship, focus on dispositions and values as much as skills, and attend to the conditions that make it possible for schools to be effective in achieving these goals.

A new focus on education, on democratic and global citizenship, could mean that the world may in fact be moving in a direction that is the opposite to the direction that advances these basic liberal ideas. The World Values Survey asks what do you think are important attributes that should be cultivated in young people? Slide 2 shows data collected from a number of countries where adults have responded ‘tolerance and respect for other people’.

The good news is that in the countries depicted, the majority of the population agrees that this is an important value, but not everybody. In Australia, one of the countries with the highest value for tolerance, 85% of the population thinks this is a good thing, which means that 15% do not see it as an important value. In the US, one in three persons do not see this as an important value and this number has risen in recent years. There is therefore something happening in terms of change in those societies where, even though materially the conditions of life develop, culturally they seem to be going backwards.
For example, in China 10-15 years ago, 70% of the population viewed tolerance as a value, whereas now, it is 50%. In the same vein, in South Korea it used to be 65% and now it is 40%, in Singapore it has fallen from 70% to 50% and in the US from 80% to 70% and so on.

The same survey asks the question “would you trust someone who has a different religious faith?” What we see is that in most countries the percentage of people who would trust someone of a different faith ‘completely’ is very small (slide 3). But if we extend the definition from ‘trusting completely’ to ‘trusting somewhat’ the numbers rise but it is still not everybody; it is 70% of the population in the US, which is to say that 30% would not. Another question posed is ‘To what extent do you agree with the following statement? The only acceptable religion is yours.’ What we see, once again, is that the percentage of those who strongly agree is small; in the US it is 10% of the population. But if we extend the statement to those who simply agree, the number rises to 20% in the US. As we know from the last breakdown of a major democracy in Germany, organised minorities can highjack the democratic process and impose their rules on everybody else. We should therefore all worry about people who are extremely bigoted in their views, whether religious or otherwise.

In addition, the BBC has been conducting a survey in the past 15 years in 15 OECD countries where people are asked ‘to what extent do you consider yourself a global citizen?’ The percentage of people who see themselves as global citizens has been rising in all countries, however the populations are also completely divided. This is true in the UK, in the US and in Italy. About half of the population are cosmopolitans who identify with the rest of humanity and half who do not see themselves in that way. The challenge for modern democracy is reconciling those two very different cultural views. To some extent, I believe that the non-cosmopolitan views are behind the rise of populism.
What would it mean for education to engage in developing citizenship? Let me share some findings which are the result of work by a collaborative consortium of colleagues in a small number of countries: China, India, Singapore, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico and the US. We are trying to understand to what extent are public education systems providing opportunities to educate children holistically. Meaning, to help them develop, not only cognitively but also ethically. To help them develop the capacity to know and to manage themselves, but also to relate to others in respectful ways.

Our work focuses upon three areas: research, social dialogue and the development of instruments to help translate these ideas into tools that can help educators implement practices that are aligned with a holistic education. On the research side we have done two things. Firstly, we produced a book which is a summary of what some of these competencies are; and secondly, an analysis of the national curriculum standards in these countries, helping us to understand to what extent it is possible to develop children holistically without the existing standards.

The good news is that the goals of the curriculum have expanded in all the countries that we studied in ways that should make it possible to educate children to embrace values. I do not believe we have to spend a lot of time convincing governments of this. Of course we will have to see whether populist-nationalist regimes emerge and whether they will renege on those standards. But to my knowledge this has not happened. So this is good news, it means that there is a policy environment which is supportive to providing education opportunities to students and will prepare them to understand how to live in a way that advances freedom and equality.

The challenge that emerges is how to prepare teachers, to teach in a way that reflects those values. That is a topic of a second book which will be published this year and which looks at exemplary programmes of in-service teacher preparation in the aforementioned countries.

I would like to share with you some of the highlights of that work. There are programmes around the world that can support teachers so that they can implement education that develops both character and cognitive skills. These programmes are rather different from the way most governments think about in-service teacher training. The standard ideas of in-service teacher training are short courses where teachers are pulled from school and learn a rather limited set of pedagogical skills. The new programmes engage the entire school over several years and involve work not only at the school level but also through an organisation that has a better capacity than the school such as an NGO, a district or a university.
Those programmes help teachers develop technical skills along with a vision that is capacious and inspires those teachers. They contain a narrative about what it means to educate a person well. This comes in the form of an integrated view of what a graduate that can reflect good character and competency looks like. In turn, that vision provides direction for this multi-year work and involves the participation in learning of everyone in the school.

These programmes use multiple forms of assessment, not only of outcomes but also of the processes of formative improvement. They also involve the creation of multiple learning communities in the schools. People are learning all the time and have the incentive to experiment. Lastly, they focus on rethinking and redefining traditional roles such as, what does it mean to be a principal or a teacher?

I want to conclude by saying that rather than taking for granted the basic ethical framework, we should bring to the fore the conversation about what that ethical framework is. We should promote the development of a moral compass for people. It was difficult during the Cold War to engage in a conversation about what that ethical compass should be and it was perhaps unnecessary to do that during the past three decades because there was an implicit ethical framework that was assumed to be shared. That framework is currently being challenged and what I draw from that is that the solution is not to avoid the conversation but to make focus it on what development means.

We will have to rethink some assumptions. The assumption that economic, political, social and cultural developments work in tandem and the world is moving towards convergence is not supported by the evidence collected. I believe this also has important implications in terms of what educational institutions should do if they are going to try to close those divides so that governance and inclusive growth are possible.

To conclude, we need to pay more attention to the work that schools do, not only to their goals, but also to their pedagogy. The good news is that there are many good examples of how this is being done around the world, we should learn from those examples and try to bring that knowledge to the conversation about what it means to educate students for a 21st Century where human rights are going to be rights that everyone can have access to.
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION:

Where do you think the OECD as an organisation could make the biggest effort in supporting not only governments but also education development at the frontline?

Fernando Reimers: I would distinguish between work that is important in the medium and in the long-term. For example, the work of PISA, which has focused on the competencies that matter on the cognitive side has been very valuable. I remember the world before PISA existed and I believe the world is a better place because we have those metrics. The work that you have done which documents innovative learning environments has been, and continues to be, very helpful.

It is important to continue deepening that work. For example, I think that we have to look beyond knowledge and skills. We have to look at ethics and dispositions; I think this is very important for the world in which we live in right now. I can imagine the reasons why it has been challenging to do that in the past but I think this task cannot be avoided any longer in a world in which we are seeing conflicting views about who belongs and who has rights in society.

I also raise the question whether the OECD has the capacity to possess rapid response mechanisms to tackle emerging crises, such as the refugee crisis, for example. The question is can an organisation like the OECD be part of the solution? I think it can but it is going to require a different type of thinking because in some context the challenge may be governments themselves and you are largely an inter-governmental organisation. Would it be possible for this type of organisation to diversify its work and engage with the full range of actors that make democracy work? I think that a lot of the work of the OECD has been like that of a university, generating evidence and knowledge, and appealing to the rational mind of governments. I don’t know whether the OECD has the mandate or the capacity to engage more directly in the work of rethinking ‘what does effective teacher preparation for whole-child education mean?’ It may mean going beyond governments, because it is not only governments who do this work.
In terms of the OECD’s long-term work on development, this could be broadened and tweaked. You may, for example, help connect the dots between the work that happens in education and social protection. As we think about these issues of exclusion, you may imagine work that helps define what it means to include people in cities. Should you connect institutional silos where the work of different entities could help develop a vision of what inclusive development looks like?

I would like to challenge you a little. I think that the worst thing we can do is to stand firm behind what we perceive as the liberal consensus and to take a defensive mode of action. When comparing what happened in 2008 and 2016 – 2008 was about financial economy and 2016 it was about politics and culture. Today, we should ask the question that this organisation asked after 2008, ‘Why didn’t we see it coming? What is wrong with our analytical framework?’ The question for me is therefore how can we further improve our analytical concepts?

Maybe the idea of the liberal consensus is just an illusion that we thought was characterising the modern world. I don’t think it is. A lot of nationalism and populism comes from multi-layered identities of people. We have always looked at peoples’ identities in a normative way, as moving from the local to the global, but that has not happened with a lot of people even for those people whom we perceive as enlightened. We must first begin asking really deep questions about our own analytical concepts and then see how we can improve our actions.
**Fernando Reimers**: I think the 2016 shift is deeper than the one of 2008. I think it would be a mistake to underestimate it and perceive it is a blip on the radar. I agree that we need to better understand why some people are willing to trade freedom for security. To some extent it should not be that surprising because looking at the data from the World Values Survey, a lot of people are going in that direction. I fully agree with you that we need to rethink our work and what development means.

Fundamentally what has become unhinged is the notion that development is an integrated element and that the cultural, political, economic and social, more or less, reinforce each other. We will have to do a lot of theoretical and empirical work to understand why we see economic development not accompanied by a corresponding change in values from some segments of the population. The question of whether one gives up on liberal values is a normative one not an empirical one, so I would much rather live in a world committed to the idea of freedom and equality. But of course not everyone feels that way.

I believe that the current situation is not just a response to globalisation. It would be easy to say there are no jobs for the low-skilled, they feel excluded and therefore they need someone to take care of them. I believe that identity is important, what is threatened for some people is the very sense of who they are. In the US, for example, part of the democratic development process expanded the notion of who belongs and authorised the conversation for a number of different ethnic groups except for whites. For many this has become unsettling; about half of the population has a hyphenated identity.

I do hope our rethinking happens along the terms of ‘how do we construct a world where liberal values, the values of John Locke, still have hope?’ It is quite possible that five centuries from now, if anyone is still around, people will look back and say ‘those were good ideas that emerged in the 1800s, they lasted for two centuries but they created an impractical utopia. Societies are better managed by autocrats.’ I hope that is not where we end up and I hope that these ideas last more than two centuries. This is why we must address the development of ethics. No one is born with a code of ethics, people need to
engage in conversation and to have experiences that can help them think through the consequences of a world in which only some are included and have rights, versus a world of universal rights.

You talk about global education, values and competencies, how important is the word ‘global’ and how do these things differ from simple civics, morals and ethics? In many OECD countries we are already seeing an increase in cultural and religious diversities. Related to that, we here in this room live in a very internationalised context, but when I look back home, the lives of the people there are largely local, centred around their jobs and their families, so how relevant is the word ‘global’?

Fernando Reimers: I am beginning to think that the word ‘global’ is going to be a liability in some settings. To some extent, by the word global I mean cosmopolitan. Democracy and enlightenment are cosmopolitan projects where you can build a world order in which every human being has basic rights and where you can balance freedom and justice. I read that as a global project for humanity.

To me this global project actually precedes the Enlightenment. It began when the Medicis brought into Florence artists and scientists who created humanism and the Italian renaissance. They moved us away from the dark ages and helped us question the very conservative order in which birth was destiny. That process developed over several centuries and, in my view, has become a global process. Universities are some of the most global and cosmopolitan institutions today. But calling them ‘global’ can be a liability at a time in which there are so many in the population who do not trust expertise and institutions like universities.

By global I mean two very simple things, firstly: human rights, which is a great invention and has only been around since the end of World War II; and secondly the recognition that there are challenges and opportunities that we share as members of the same species that require cross-border collaboration and they have local ramifications. Think about our carbon footprint, it is not a problem that can be solved by one nation alone. The way to solve it is not
solely through conversation through these bodies and institutions, it is by helping people do their share in their daily lives.

To come back to the issues of how we rethink institutions, the big discovery in the US today is how separate two parts of the country have become; it is almost like two parallel universes. One believes in evidence and the other does not understand the same things through evidence. It is complicated to have a representative democracy function when the basic understanding of what the facts are is so divergent.

To me, therefore, what universities should do is to engage a lot more with people who do not go to university. Universities, as a product of the Enlightenment were created to do three things: to cultivate reason so that people could think for themselves; to advance knowledge based on science; and to educate the public, so that it could hold the authoritarian state at bay.

My sense is that modern universities have taken two of those functions and perfected them: education and research. But most forgot about the extension function, maybe because in a democratic world we did not have to worry too much about authoritarian states. Universities should therefore be engaging much more with people, not with the 1% or solely those who are able to attend them.

What you are suggesting has a lot to do with how the world is evolving in societal terms. There is an old distinction made by the British political scientists, Butler and Stokes in the late 1950’s, about how societies have both valence issues (issues in which society agrees) and position issues (issues in which society disagrees). At this time, valence is declining, and position is rising and this is the basis for the polarisation we are witnessing, for the mistrust in institutions, and for this distinction between the people and the elites which obviously breeds populism. How does the education system fit in this?
I think that we should not lose sight of the fact that the cognitive dimensions add a lot to the non-cognitive ones. When a given political operator in the UK says “we have had enough experts in this country”, it is a sort of misplacement of knowledge and evidence. I think that the cognitive elements of education do a lot for the non-cognitive and it is difficult to get a consensus on these non-cognitive dimensions.

So I can understand the importance of initiatives to integrate those non-cognitive elements and to try to make good citizens, but I find it extremely difficult under the present circumstances.

Fernando Reimers: I completely agree. One of the things we have to make sure we teach young people today is to think the way scientists do, to have respect for evidence, to work with others, and to understand truth as the result of a provisional consensus that is continuously being reshaped as we learn more. Clearly there is a lot of work to be done in getting to that point. Living in a post-factual world where leaders can change and deny reality is very dangerous.

But I am not convinced that, through scientific reasoning, we get to ethical reasoning. I think those are separate notions. Accepting the idea that people are fundamentally equal is a normative proposition. For my values it is a better proposition than others, and I understand that there may be some people who question that. But I think we can have a conversation on this issue. I agree with you that it is very difficult in polarised societies to get that consensus.

Let’s look, for example, at countries that are making notable progress in education, such as Singapore.

Singapore is a country with limited political competition. But it is a country that managed to go from being essentially a swamp 50 years ago, whose natural resource was malaria and mosquitos, a country of largely illiterate people, to a country with one of the lowest unemployment rates and highest rates of per-capita income in the world, with a very high functioning education system. They have pivoted the goals of that system only four times in that 50-year history. The last pivot produced this set of aspirations (Slide 4).
What you see at the centre is not science or mathematics, it is ethical values. Because their assumption is that if they do not address that, they may not survive. They remember that 40 years ago the main ethnic and religious groups got along with each other so badly that they almost burned the city down. The people who have lived through that experience are still alive today, and they know where intolerance leads. They said, ‘we never want to go there again. We need to teach everyone to value and appreciate and respect those who have different identities, because it is better to be alive than to burn the city down’.

I think that there are times in the history of nations where crises open an opportunity to do that. A country that I think has taken similar goals very seriously is Colombia. It has taken Colombia five decades to end a very long conflict and as part of that, it is one of the few countries that to my knowledge makes citizenship education. It has standards for citizenship that include information on sustainability and building a city culture in ways that most of the countries do not. The US, for example, does not.

You might say ‘do we need a five decade civil war to recognise the importance of this thing?’ I don’t know the answer to that, I grant how very difficult it is to do this work. But in times like the ones in which we live in I think it is unavoidable to have these conversations. Because if we do not have these conversations in the schools, they will happen elsewhere and they may not be very civil. So the question is, if not the schools, what mechanisms do we have for people to work out who belongs and what rights they have?
I want to focus on the perspective of the practitioner. In running a school for example, one of the challenges we face every time we ask a school to do more is we must consider what it might do less of at the same time. We can only teach a subset of knowledge and skills.

At the moment we are very focused on the fact that giving our students an opportunity to take an active part in an increasingly highly skilled economy requires the imparting of ever more detailed and deep skills and knowledge.

I wonder how you would marry that challenge at a time when the curriculum is getting more and more heavily loaded, in the space of STEM subjects for example. You were talking about giving time to the discussion of ethics and values, and I can imagine how that can be received by some commentators in the UK.

Secondly, I do agree that it is important to bring these ethical and cultural values to the fore, but I would question the implication that they are not there already. Certainly, in my experience, the best place to learn the dispositions and values of society: self-awareness, relationship management, self-management, is often in the classroom, where you are negotiating a highly social space with your social peers, who are assuming the degree of representation in the school is representative of your society. A classroom that is well-managed could impart some of that awareness without the need to externalise and thus sterilise the discussion and have it on its own.

The centrality of literature and history, in all of our curricula, I think shows the fact that these things have always been there. I would argue as an English literature graduate that you can learn as much about how to manage racism or anti-Semitism from Shakespeare, as you can from a fairly dry discussion led by a teacher.
And then just to come back on the Spanish Ambassador’s allusion, which I have heard many times in the last few months, the statement that we have had enough of experts is in some way an erroneous one. You have talked a lot about the Enlightenment, surely at the heart of the Enlightenment was the rejection of the unquestioning respect for authority and faith. Really what we are talking about here is, as you said earlier, the inculcation of critical skills and empiricism, and that is again something that has been central to our curricula for a long time. I am saying that these elements are already there.

Fernando Reimers: Thank you for those good questions. I think that this stuff is already there in some schools, for some children but it is not there for all the children. Regarding your first question, how do you risk not overcrowding the curriculum? I am not proposing that we create a new subject; I am proposing that we organise schools differently, where you begin providing those who work in the school with an opportunity to become very clear about what it is that they are trying to produce. The kinds of things that independent schools do already, but it is not true for most public schools. Develop that clarity, and then use that to audit everything that happens in the school and to create activities in ways that can help integrate, learning of science and character.

Let me give you two examples of what that looks like in practice. One of the organisations we have studied in this book on professional development is an organisation that has been around for 25 years in the US called Expeditionary Learning (EL). EL was based on the philosophy that it is important to help people develop character along with academic excellence.
EL teaches people that producing their best work is a function of trying multiple times. That’s a character trade. They also learn to do their best work receiving feedback from peers. It teaches people not to be satisfied with their first attempt. But instead to use that attempt to get honest feedback from others, and on that basis they improve.

That has implications for how much you try to cover in the school. The emphasis is not to stuff the children with content, but to give them the opportunity to achieve mastery in fewer subjects, because in achieving that mastery you are not only learning some content and some cognitive skills, you are also learning some of the other skills we were talking about.

Another programme we are studying teaches science to very poor children in Chile. It was started by some of the best scientists in that country who concluded that it is impossible to be a citizen in a democratic society if you can’t think the way scientists do. So what this programme tries to teach children are not facts, not content; it teaches them to conduct experiments, to begin with a problem and translate it into a researchable question, and to engage in an experiment that teaches them how to generate evidence and to analyse it in order to reach certain conclusions.
So both of these experiments require reorganising the work of the school. Both are at odds with existing accountability structures in our societies which to some extent put a premium on covering more as opposed to achieving depth in understanding.

You mentioned that there was an expected convergence in economic, political, cultural and societal terms, but it did not happen. Perhaps one of the reasons for that is because there has recently been a huge focus on economic outcomes in the society and perhaps that was a trade-off with other societal outcomes. Could we accomplish this convergence if economic, political, cultural and societal outcomes were in balance? How could we change the current incentives? Who should do it and how could it be done?

Fernando Reimers: There are two ways in which historically we rethink development. One is some kind of a world shock, a war or a depression. Those kinds of events cause people to rethink the fundamentals about what a good life is and how to organise it. There is always a possibility that we will have one of those shocks that will cause us to rethink development.

In the absence of a world shock we can look at the evidence and see that there is no convergence. My reading is that important as preparing people for work and for productivity is, all production is founded on some kind of social contract, and when you don’t have a social contract, it doesn’t really matter whether you are preparing people for the skills to get jobs or not. To put it crudely, there are places in this world where a person would kill another person to steal a pair of shoes. I don’t think a society where too many people make that choice is viable for long. We have to focus on teaching people values.

We have all kinds of good evidence around the world in terms of the dysfunctions of societies, in terms of the challenges of societies that should cause us to think about individuals beyond productive beings and economic beings. Individuals have multiple important identities, and if education is to help the person develop, it should address a range of those identities and not only the skills that help a person get a job, particularly as we know the world of work is becoming less and less predictable, as machines are going to do more of the work we used to do.

The importance of a good education and good educators is widely understood by schools. I imagine many of you in this room are the product of such schools: your teachers did not feel that they had to choose between helping you develop your character and develop skills. What we are talking about is the education system that is available to the majority of the population and that’s where we have a challenge.

Perhaps we have tried to improve education systems using a theory of improvement that was just a little bit too limited. Out of necessity we said let’s focus on a few outcomes, because we are going to have to start somewhere. That is fine for a while, but if you stay focused on a few outcomes for very long, then the outcomes you are focused on become the only outcomes. Then you have a problem.

I would like to talk about the use of information technology as a device for making skills. Recently a newspaper ran a series of essays on this topic, one of which focused on an app which teaches children to code games and programmes. It gave me the idea that the world of play is the only world of equality.

I would also like to focus on your diagnosis, I believe we are in an age of profound decline. A poet once said the decline is when the ‘part overshadows the whole’. You very neatly separated the economic crisis of 2008 from the current politico-social crisis. The differentia specifica of this particular decline of consensus is where people do not question fundamentals. Political correctness is the test of being in the
consensus. Because if you were not politically correct, you would challenge fundamentals, you would therefore not be in the consensus and thus ‘spoil the game’. So you have to be fake knowledge knowingly in order to be part of a whole, otherwise you would be out of the silo. In a way you have to pay tribute to the silo in order to be admitted and be part of the whole.

On liberté, égalité, fraternité, what is the dominant freedom today? It is the use of money. It is not violence, as violence can be pretty expensive. But anyone who controls money can do anything. Égalité is a false part of the trinity, it is so demonstrably vacuous that it must be refined in order to be made true – equality before the law for example. Locke would have been on the side of money, rather than freedom and freedom of speech; there are trade-offs within that which are acceptable.

What we can perhaps strengthen is fraternité – which is the play – and in a way it is a half lie (brotherhood, colour, creed) but it may still work more powerfully on a deeper level than the fake consensus.

**Fernando Reimers**: I agree that teaching children to create something such as a computer programme and to do that in teams is part of the empowerment goal of education. The beauty of coding is that it requires less resources than a laboratory. It could be quite accessible for children. I think of it as learning Latin or a new language, it develops a whole set of capacities.

On your second point on the trinity and fraternité, I believe it was Locke who put forth the notion of the legitimacy of a social contract and it depends on whether the people accept it. The challenge of not accepting equality, or some forms of equality, is that at some point people may say they have had enough and this contract does not work for them, as we are seeing today.

To come back to public education, it was a way for states to deliver symbolically to people the notion of equality, the notion that you may not all be equal but your children will be better off than you are.

Unfortunately in many places this is not evident today. Even though in certain places there has been a lot of educational mobility, we still do not see a great rise in equality. Part of the dysfunction is how visible those inequalities have become today, and that makes the willingness of people to accept the social contract more challenging.

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The Coffees of the Secretary-General is delighted to present:

Fernando Reimers
Ford Foundation Professor of the Practice in International Education

“Educating citizens in uncertain times”