

What is education for in the polycrisis?

Peter Moss

Abstract

The article argues that the purposes of education, not confined only to schooling, must be relevant to the conditions of the times, which can be summed up as a polycrisis, a combination of complex, interconnected and existential crises that are more than the sum of their parts. Yet despite the warning provided by the recent pandemic, there is still an absence of democratic discussion about the purposes of education, which under neoliberalism have been reduced primarily to a narrow economic rationale. The article considers some of the implications of the polycrisis for education, and concludes with the need to rethink the school given the conditions of the times and the need to repurpose education.

Keywords: purpose of education; polycrisis; neoliberalism; sustainability; care

What we find both shocking and depressing about this dominant discourse on education – with its endless talk of choice and competition, standards and assessments, businesses and privatisation – is its lack of interest in and reflection about its implication in the economic and environmental crises confronting us; about the part that education can and should play in averting future disaster and creating a good life founded on sustainability, equity and respect for diversity and complexity; and about education's responsibility for the condition of democracy, both here and now and in the future. As the doomsday clock ticks, educational systems seem stuck in a time warp, suffering both historical amnesia and future myopia, displaying an unwillingness or inability to engage with either new thinking or the state we are in – and worse, the state we are heading towards.¹

The new conditions of the times

The polycrisis

It was about 15 years ago that I first began to think seriously about the theme of this issue of *FORUM*: the purposes of education, given the conditions of the times. Writing a book with Michael Fielding, published later as *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative*, an excerpt from which starts this piece, I came across an article by Richard Aldrich, a historian of education. The article was titled 'Education for survival: an historical perspective', in which Aldrich confronted the current situation in which humankind finds itself: '[o]ur first concern should no longer be as it was for much

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the origin, but rather the death of species – especially our own’.²

Education, he argued, must take this situation very seriously. It must be relevant to its world. A similar point was made by the Italian educator Loris Malaguzzi in a speech to the municipal schools in the Northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia, which I came across 10 years ago while editing a selection of his speeches and writings: ‘Either pedagogy – like all the human sciences – is remade, reconstructed and updated based on the new conditions of the times, or it loses its nature, its function, its proper capacity to correspond to the times it lives in, and above all to foresee, anticipate and prepare the days of tomorrow’.³

Malaguzzi spoke these words in the 1960s, a time of some optimism and a belief in progress and democracy, expressed in the opening of democratic, innovative public schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, his home town, which were eventually to become a network of some 50 schools.

Sixty years on and the ‘new conditions of the times’ are very different, best expressed in one word: polycrisis, described by historian Adam Tooze as entangled economic and non-economic shocks that ‘interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts ...it no longer seems plausible to point to a single cause and, by implication, a single fix’.⁴ It is not just the number or complexity of the crises confronting us that is daunting, but their lethal nature too, putting (as Richard Aldrich recognised) humankind’s future on the line. To leave no one in any doubt, earlier this year the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, created in 1947 to warn ‘the public about how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making’, was set at 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to midnight.⁵

Education’s response

Faced by the profound threat posed by the polycrisis, how has education responded? Has it ‘remade, reconstructed and updated [itself] based on the new conditions of the times’? Has it repurposed itself? Clearly not, at least in England (but probably not only in England). That ‘lack of interest in and reflection about [education’s] implication in the economic and environmental crises confronting us’ continues, at least amongst the powers that be. Instead, as the world has sunk into polycrisis, education has been tasked with a narrow, primarily economic purpose, the production of so-called ‘human capital’, supposedly the secret to success and growth in an increasingly competitive world. As David Labaree bluntly puts it: ‘From the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) to its policy apparatus in the OECD and its policy police in the PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] testing program, we have seen one goal trump the others. Nowadays the uniform message is human capital uber [sic] alles’.⁶

Some thought the Covid pandemic might bring a change of course, a turn away from a narrowing curriculum, the tyranny of high-stakes public testing and the economic rationale of education pre-Covid. That proved a false hope. As Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball write: '[t]he economic relations and "benefits" of schooling are reasserted. Education has been relaunched as before with little thought as to how it currently contributes to our extinction or how it might possibly contribute to our continuation'.⁷ In short, business as usual, 'stuck in a time warp'.

This 'little thought' is symptomatic of a political climate in many Western countries that Gerd Biesta argues 'has made it increasingly difficult to have a democratic discussion about the purposes of education'. A political climate lacking democratic vitality, since 'a democratic society is precisely one in which the purpose of education is not given but is a constant topic for discussion and deliberation'.⁸ Of course, some do valiantly strive to stimulate discussion and deliberation about education and its purposes, putting forward and in some cases practising alternatives. But they are ignored, by politicians, policymakers, media and public alike, while political questions (what are the purposes of education?) give way to technical questions (what works?)

In this inhospitable climate, I proffer some reflections on the purposes of education that, along with other articles in this issue, aim to stimulate discussion about political questions and choices. But to be clear: I don't claim to offer a comprehensive proposal on the purposes of education. I focus on those purposes that are called for by the polycrisis, a necessary but not sufficient subset of a larger whole.

I am also addressing the purposes of *education*, not just the purposes of school education. Suspicion hangs over the institution of the school among those committed to a democratic, emancipatory and sustainable education. For example, in two recent articles, Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball, driven by the urgency of the climate crisis, argue strongly that the modern school is 'a block, an obstacle, an inhibition to freedom, to "learning", to the move to a different sort of sustainable society. We take the school to be ... irreparable'. There is, they continue, an 'urgent need to think education without the school, to dispense with the institutional form and its baggage and to start somewhere else'.⁹

For that 'somewhere else', in place of school, Collet-Sabé and Ball look to:

Open and 'unplanned' commoning activities [taking] place within the social infrastructures of cities, towns, villages, and rural areas in locations like libraries; museums; health centres; religious places; parks, gardens, and forests; bakeries; civic associations; cooperatives; third spaces; squares; sports centres; artistic, music, drama centres; etc.¹⁰

Their stance is provocative, and not to be lightly dismissed. Schools do have a strong tradition of standardisation and conformity, transmission and control. Not all schools

though: there have been and still are many exceptions, schools that have offered a democratic, emancipatory and sustainable alternative, the exemplary system of municipal schools in Reggio Emilia being just one contemporary example. Schools, too, remain a universal service, available (at least in most countries) to all children and young people; by contrast, such ‘locations’ as Collet-Sabé and Ball list are unevenly (and often unequally) distributed, and many have fallen victim, at least in England, to years of austerity and cuts.

With political will and much hard work, I think it possible to reclaim the school as a democratic, emancipatory and sustainable public institution – the ‘common school’ and ‘democratic alternative’ that Michael Fielding and I wrote about some years ago. But even if possible, this school does not and should not have a monopoly of education. Rather, it is one strand in a web of educational spaces, available to children and adults of all ages, and that together form the social infrastructure that Collet-Sabé and Ball identify: the school as a constituent element in an ‘educating society’.

What should education respond to in the polycrisis?

Crises for the Doomsday Clock

In setting their Doomsday Clock so close to midnight, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* highlights four crisis areas: the modernisation, increase and proliferation of nuclear weapons; climate change and its many impacts; biological threats, including emerging and reemerging infectious diseases; and an array of potentially disruptive technologies, all made worse by the spread of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories that ‘degrade the communication ecosystem and increasingly blur the line between truth and falsehood’. Two of these – nuclear weapons and infectious diseases – may not be crises that education can directly mitigate, its role limited to the secondary (though still important) task of increasing understanding of the dangers they pose. But education can directly seek to ameliorate the other two.

In contrast to past purposes of education, including what he terms education for salvation, education for the state and education for progress, Aldrich argues that it is ‘essential to review the nature and aims of education, both formal and informal, in the light of the unprecedented situation in which the human race is placed, and to give priority to education for survival’ (emphasis added), in the present and future, and directed at adults as much as at children.¹¹ This education for survival should aim to ‘prevent or reduce the incidence of major catastrophes that threaten human and other species and the Earth itself’. Such catastrophes include climate change, but also other crises contributing to the wider environmental crisis: loss of biodiversity, depletion of essential resources, and pollution of earth, sea and sky. Even more broadly, education for survival can be extended further to encompass sustainability-in-its-broadest-sense,

covering environmental, economic and social sustainability, treating them as entangled and inseparable.

Collet-Sabe and Ball, in their exploration of education beyond and without the school, also see the predominant purpose of today's education in broad environmental terms, '[fostering] a direct pedagogical engagement with the environment and its problems – our world “in common” ... an education for commonwealth, an education that is undertaken through practices rather than through the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake'.¹² For them, therefore, education serves its purposes by the lived experience it offers rather than by direct teaching, being an: 'education that is healthy, and that enables flourishing and well-being, rather than just “about” health and wellness. An education that is sustainable, rather than just “about” sustainability ... practicing ethics rather than studying them; politicising and troubling common issues rather than knowing or memorising them'.

The *Bulletin's* reference to potentially disruptive technologies, and accompanying mis- and dis-information, highlights the importance of education that enables people to question, understand and resist the dangers posed by new technologies. Without a population so educated, we will continue to cede technology to entrepreneurs and corporations unable and unwilling to think through the consequences of new developments, beyond vast profits and power, and to regulate them in the public interest.

Care and neoliberalism: two other crises

I would add two further crises to the *Bulletin's* list: the crisis of care and the crisis of neoliberalism. There is a crisis of care that, as American philosopher Nancy Fraser comments, 'is every bit as serious and systemic as the current ecological crisis, with which it is, in any case, intertwined', and yet 'is often neglected in current discussions'. She describes this crisis of care as 'the pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities: the capacities available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally'. As British sociologist Emma Dowling describes in her book *The Care Crisis: What caused it and how can we end it?*, this squeezing of social capacities creates 'the growing gap between care needs and the resources made available to meet them' and 'means that those who provide care to others are unable to do so satisfactorily and under dignified conditions'.¹³

But it can also be argued that another crisis of care pervades the whole polycrisis. For the environmental and other crises mentioned above can be understood, in part at least, as the consequence of a persistent and widespread failure of humankind to commit to and apply an 'ethics of care' – to each other, to the environment, to technology and science, and to so much else besides. Instead, humankind has proved persistently care-less, being too hurried and thoughtless for care-full reflection and

sustainable care-taking.

By an ethics of care I refer to how we should relate, not only to others but to ourselves and to the world we live in, the environment in its broadest sense. As such, care is ‘a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible’ – a ‘world [that] includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web’.¹⁴ It involves both particular acts of caring and a general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life, and which includes the attributes of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness.

Given the crises of care that we face, education should engage with care, both in the way it conducts itself, the lived experience it provides, but also providing an understanding of the meaning and value of care as a relational ethic and the importance, in Joan Tronto’s words, ‘of making care – both receiving and giving care – equally and widely available to all’.¹⁵ I am suggesting, therefore, that care is acknowledged and fostered as an indispensable quality and purpose of education and of educational institutions.

The second crisis I would add to the roll call of the polycrisis is neoliberalism, described as the ‘[t]he dominant ideology of our times’ and which, in the words of Stephen Ball, ‘configures great swathes of our daily lives and structures our experience of the world – how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and others, and how we relate to ourselves and others ... We are produced by it’.¹⁶ Neoliberalism has been described as the economisation of every aspect of life, transforming ‘non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones and inserting economic rationality into every nook and cranny of life’ – the concept of ‘human capital’, so closely allied to today’s education, is an example of how children and adults alike have themselves been economised under neoliberalism. In this way of thinking and talking, everything can be and is commodified, converted into ‘private and tradeable property, that makes possible the reduction of everything to a calculus’: everything not only economised but also marketised.

The crisis of neoliberalism resides in its widespread, profound and malign effects – on individuals, families, communities and whole societies. Education has not escaped, through the influence of what has been termed the Global Education Reform Movement, ‘adopted as an educational reform orthodoxy within many education systems throughout the world’.¹⁷ GERM’s main symptoms, readily apparent in England, are market logic, standardisation, focusing on core subjects, business management methods and high-stakes testing. The consequences have not been good.

In their recent book on neoliberalism, George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison offer a more extensive indictment, also highlighting neoliberalism’s complicity with other crises:

[Neoliberalism] has caused or contributed to most of the crises that now confront us: rising inequality; rampant child poverty; epidemic diseases of despair; off-shoring and erosion of the tax base; the slow degradation of health-care, education and other public services; the crumbling of infrastructure; democratic backsliding; the 2008 financial crash; the rise of modern-day demagogues ... our ecological crises and environmental disasters.¹⁸

Some argue that we have passed peak neoliberalism and that the project is in decline – though decline is not the same as disappearance. Its institutions and ideology remain embedded and virulent, including in education.

A critical purpose of education, I would argue, is to contribute to ‘dismantling neoliberal ideology, because it is at the heart of the problems we are facing’,¹⁹ and more positively to help build a new order based on a new narrative. Education can play an important role in renewing democracy, rebuilding solidarity and promoting sustainability, all qualities insouciantly undermined by the neoliberal order, all qualities essential to the creation of a new order. As Keri Facer says, the school

as a physical space and a local organization ... may be one of the most important institutions we have to help us build a democratic conversation about the future. A physical, local school where community members are encouraged to encounter each other and learn from each other is one of the last public spaces in which we can begin *to build the intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability* needed to ensure fairness in the context of sociotechnical change.²⁰ (emphasis added)

The same, too, could be said of other educational spaces in the community.

Facer also raises the prospect of education as a site for ‘future-building’, its purpose being to help participants imagine, discuss and research what future they might want, for themselves but also for their communities and wider societies. This contrasts with the idea, widely trailed today, that the purpose of education is ‘future proofing’, readying children, young people and adults for a predetermined and inevitable future and for conforming to the ever-changing demands of the market. Vasco d’Agnese in his book *Reclaiming Education in the Age of PISA*, offers a more nuanced account, arguing that if schools are not to be just ‘the place of repetition’, they must have two purposes:

[The first] is learning given contents, methods, skills, habits, ways of behaving and diverse modes of conceptualising, reasoning and interpreting ... the place where new generations enter “the old order”... However, schooling also has to do with overcoming/displacing the boundaries of the given, with finding/creating new means and aims. Such a creative work takes place when the given form is suspended

and new forms are allowed to enter the students' experience.²¹

This is education as a place for (thoughtful and critical) reproduction, but also as a place for generating new ideas and understandings, for research and experimenting, and for valuing unpredictability and wonder.

Rethinking the school

In pursuing their roles in mitigating the polycrisis, schools and other educational spaces can be places that help to develop certain capacities among members, young and old, of the local communities they serve. These include capacities for critical thinking and to imagine alternatives, contesting the neoliberal motto, 'There is no alternative' (readers of a certain age will recall Margaret Thatcher intoning these words). To inculcate such democratic qualities was an important motivation for the city of Reggio Emilia to develop its network of schools for young children, as reported by a couple of visitors.

We asked what prompted the people of Reggio Emilia to design an early childhood education system founded on the perspective of the child. He [Bonacci, Mayor of Reggio Emilia in the 1960s] replied that the fascist experience had taught them that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to safeguard and communicate that lesson and nurture and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves.²²

Another set of capacities is being able to work with uncertainty, complexity and interconnectedness, essential to understanding the polycrisis and requirements for a sustainable world. Loris Malaguzzi, speaking at an education event in 1989, emphasised the importance of:

interconnecting, the great verb of the present and the future. A great verb we must be capable of understanding deep down, and of conjugating as part of our hard work; bearing in mind that we live in a world no longer made of islands, but in a world made of webs ... in which interference, interaction, inter-disciplinarity is the constant, even when we cannot see it, even when we think it doesn't exist, or that it isn't there. Interdependence is there.²³

These ideas about education were echoed by Edgar Morin, the sociologist of complexity, who wrote of the need to replace 'our compartmentalised, piecemeal, disjointed learning [which] is deeply, drastically inadequate',²⁴ with 'a thinking capable of relinking disjointed notions and compartmentalised areas of knowledge'.²⁵

The need for nurturing such capacities to address the polycrisis will have widespread

implications for the curriculum, for pedagogy and for the education and professional development of teachers. It will also have widespread implications for the school, not least for the image of the school, our understanding of what the school is and could be. Today's dominant image is of the school as a business selling a commodity to parent-consumers and a factory delivering predetermined and standardised outcomes. To meet the challenge of the polycrisis that image will need transforming: to the school as a public space or 'a forum in civil society where children and adults meet and participate together in projects of cultural, social, political and economic significance, and as such to be a community institution of social solidarity bearing cultural and symbolic significance'.²⁶

This is the image of a democratic, inclusive and 'future-building' school, one that is fully open to its community and an integral part of that wider network of other educational institutions: an 'extended' school that is in every sense a truly comprehensive and public school.

What is to be done?

Addressing these purposes of education in the conditions of the times is a tall order. On the plus side, we are not starting from scratch. GERM is not given free rein; there are resistance movements. We can look to the past, too, remembering the ideas and work of many giants in the educational world who have argued for and worked with, for example, democratic education; neoliberalism has sought to consign them to historical amnesia, but they are not forgotten. While in the present, there are people, organisations and education systems working not only to develop democratic education but also education for sustainability. Schools and their teachers often work with an ethics of care, as seen by the role many played in supporting families during Covid.

On the minus side, though, we are running out of time, so close to midnight. Decades have been wasted under the influence of GERM and its neoliberal ideology, and vast resources squandered on creating GERM-laden education totally unsuited to the challenges posed by the polycrisis. The idiom of fiddling while Rome burns springs to mind.

Do we have the time to dismantle GERM and its neoliberal ideology, and to construct an alternative education based on 'creating a good life founded on sustainability, equity and respect for diversity and complexity'? Can we build up quickly enough the conditions needed to enable such an education? Surely, it is imperative that we at least try.

Peter Moss is Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Provision at Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education.

peter.moss@ucl.ac.uk

Notes

1. Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, p33.
2. Richard Aldrich, 'Education for survival: an historical perspective', *History of Education*, 39 (1), 2010, pp1-14.
3. Paola Cagliari, Marina Castagnetti, Claudia Giudici, Carlina Rinaldi, Vea Vecchi and Peter Moss (eds), *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: a selection of his writings and speeches, 1945-1993*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p143.
4. AdamTooze, 'Welcome to the world of the polycrisis', *Financial Times*, 28 October 2022: <https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33>.
5. 'It is now 89 seconds to midnight', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 28 January 2025: Doomsday Clock - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
6. David Labaree, 'Futures of the field of education', in Geoff Whitty and John Furlong (eds), *Knowledge and the Study of Education: An international exploration*, Oxford, Symposium Books, 2017, pp277-283, p281.
7. Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball, 'Beyond school: The challenge of co-producing and commoning a different episteme for education', *Journal of Education Policy*, 38 (6), 2023, pp895-910.
8. Gerd Biesta, 'Why "What works" won't work: evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research', *Educational Theory*, 57 (1), 2007, pp1-22.
9. Collet-Sabé and Ball, 2023, *op.cit.*
10. Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball, 'Without School: Education as common(ing) activities in local social infrastructures – an escape from extinction ethics', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 72 (4), 2024, pp441-456.
11. Aldrich, 2010, *op.cit.*
12. Collet-Sabé and Ball, 2023, *op.cit.*
13. Emma Dowling, *The Care Crisis: What caused it and how can we end it?*, London, Verso, 2021.
14. Berenice Fisher, Joan Tronto, Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson, 'Toward a feminist theory of caring', in Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (eds), *Circles of Care, Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, New York NY, State University of New York Press, 1990, pp35-62.
15. Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: markets, equality, and justice*, New York NY, NYU Press, p182.
16. Stephen J. Ball, 'Preface', in Guy Roberts-Holmes and Peter Moss (eds), *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: markets, imaginaries and governance*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020, ppxv-xviii.

17. Pasi Sahlberg, 'Global Educational Reform Movement is here!', blog at PasiSahlberg.com, 2012: <https://pasisahlberg.com/global-educational-reform-movement-is-here/>.
18. George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison, *The Invisible Doctrine: the secret history of neoliberalism*, London, Allen Lane, 2024.
19. Ingrid Robeyns, *Limitarianism: the case against extreme wealth*, London, Allen Lane, 2024, p216.
20. Keri Facer, *Learning Futures*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, p28.
21. Vasco d'Agnese, *Reclaiming Education in the Age of PISA: challenging OECD's educational order*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, pp160-161.
22. Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: languages of evaluation* (3rd edn), Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, p12.
23. Cagliari et al., 2016, *op.cit.*
24. Edgar Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, Paris, UNESCO, 2001, p29.
25. Edgar Morin, Anne Brigitte Kern, Sean M. Kelly and Roger LaPointe, *Homeland Earth: a manifesto for the new millennium*, Cresskill, NJ, Hampton Press, 1999, pp129-130.
26. Robeyns, 2024, *op.cit.*