

Research Article

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Technocracy, Instrumentalism, and Ethics: Rethinking Educational Scholarship in an Age of Fracture

Abstract

This article considers some consequences of the dominance of a technocratic, neoliberal conception of the purposes of educational scholarship. Drawing on the author's own experience, it considers challenges to critical scholarship on education, comparing the situation in contemporary Britain, Japan, and India. Common themes that emerge include: an economicistic focus on "human capital" generation; a pervasive neglect of political context in educational debate; and the mirage of meritocracy. The salience of these themes in the case of China is then given more extended consideration. Finally, it is argued that calls for "transformation" through education, widespread today in international education policymaking, tend to have repressive rather than emancipatory consequences. Despite a rhetoric of "empowerment," visions of "transformation" often distract attention from societal or structural causes of injustice. The existing social and political order is treated as a given, so that the individual "learner" must adapt to it as best they can. The article emphasises that our mission as scholars should be to revive political and philosophical debate and to refocus public attention on the ways in which our societies as well as our schools need to transform if we are to realise a more emancipatory and humane vision of education.

Keywords: Politics, education, transformation, China, social justice

Pervasive Insecurity and Mistrust of "Experts"

In this article¹, I discuss the role not so much of education itself, but of research and scholarship *on* education. In other words, I address the question of what it is that those of us who work in

¹ This paper emerges from the keynote address that was delivered at the Annual International Conference of the Comparative Education Society of India (CESI), held at Panjab University in November 2024.

university faculties or departments of education should be doing. What is our professional identity, not just as university teachers or teacher trainers, but as scholars of education?

The issue of our identity as scholars relates to wider questions regarding the nature and purpose of education. These questions were central to a study conducted in 2016–17 for UNESCO’s Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) in New Delhi, which analysed “the state of education for peace, sustainable development and global citizenship” across Asia. The resulting report, which I co-authored, titled, *Rethinking Schooling for the 21st Century*, argued that challenges of “instrumentalism and ethics” lay at the heart of a general failure to fulfil the sort of humanistic vision for education set out in various UNESCO documents as well as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 4.7) (MGIEP, 2017). We criticised the dominance of a narrowly instrumentalist conception of education, envisaged exclusively as a tool for enhancing national competitiveness through generating “human capital”. The danger of such a reductive instrumentalism lay, we contended, not just in threats to environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and international peace, but in a neglect of education’s intrinsic value in enabling us, as individuals and communities, to realise more expansive and humane visions of “the good life”.

However, while that report lamented the dominance of a narrow instrumentalism in education policy, it only touched upon the related narrowness of conceptions of educational “expertise”. Academic specialists in education are today typically expected to confine themselves to technocratic questions of efficiency, effectiveness, and “improvement”. That expectation is reflected in the steady erosion of public support for study of the history, philosophy, and politics of education, whether in Japan, India, Britain, or the USA. Policymakers and mainstream media demand that scholars simply identify “what works” in education, without stopping to consider the ultimate ends towards which it should be “working”. A vicious cycle has developed, whereby impoverishment of public debate, reflected in decisions over the management and funding of university education faculties, is reinforced by an ever-narrower, more technocratic focus in the scholarship they produce.

The rise of technocracy is associated with increasing skepticism of claims to “expertise” of any kind, especially when it comes to complex social and ethical issues that do not permit clear, final, definitive answers. The reasons for this are complicated, but crucial is the dominance of

a narrow outcomes-focused approach to public policy rooted in neoliberalism. Neoliberalism effectively removes ethical or political considerations from debate over public policy, substituting the remorseless logic of the market and metrics of “productivity”. At the same time, ordinary people’s everyday experience is marked by chronic insecurity and enormous inequalities of wealth and opportunity. The glaring disjunction between claims for the power of technocratic solutions to make our institutions effectively serve the common good, and their pervasive failure to do so, fuels distrust in “experts” and their claims to special knowledge capable of improving our lives. However, while many often lament neoliberalism’s rise, few really understand why it has happened. I will have more to say below about the origins of neoliberalism and its connections to debates over education, first in the USA, and later in India and elsewhere.

Neoliberalism’s central tenet is that the iron law governing human societies is competitive selfishness. As George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison put it in a recent book, neoliberalism “casts us as consumers rather than citizens. It seeks to persuade us that our well-being is best realised not through political choice, but through economic choice... It promises us that by buying and selling we can discover a natural, meritocratic hierarchy of winners and losers” (2024, p. 3).

That promise, or illusion of meritocracy, is crucial to understanding the role of education within the neoliberal order. When learners are cast essentially as (prospective) producers and consumers, buyers and sellers, rather than as citizens with political agency, or fellow human beings with intrinsic dignity, then education becomes little more than a mechanism for priming us to participate in a brutally competitive market for “talent”. In the words of Daniel Markovits, we are all reduced to “entrepreneurs of our own human capital” (2019).

This article considers some consequences of the dominance of a technocratic conception of educational scholarship and the neoliberal assumptions that underpin it. Drawing on my own experience, I reflect on challenges to critical scholarship on education in several national contexts. Beginning with a brief consideration of the situation in Britain (where I was educated and worked as an academic), I move on to Japan (where I have spent most of my academic career), and India. I then analyse several themes characteristic of educational debates in these and other societies: an economic focus on “human capital” generation; a pervasive neglect of political context; and the mirage of meritocracy.

I then discuss how some of the resultant tensions have played out in the case of China. Turning to widespread calls for “transformation” through education, I show how inflated expectations of education’s transformative potential are repressive rather than emancipatory. Despite a rhetoric of “empowerment,” visions of “transformation” often distract from the societal or structural causes of injustice, concentrating instead on rendering individuals more “resilient,” “adaptable,” or “pro-social”. This approach, I emphasise, is anything but empowering. The existing social and political order is treated as given, so that its criticism is out of bounds. It thus behooves the individual “learner” not to criticise the societal status quo, but to adapt to it as best they can. I conclude that our mission as scholars should be to revive political and philosophical debate, to refocus public attention on the ways in which our societies as well as our schools need to transform if we are to realise a more emancipatory and humane vision of education.

The Technocratic Vision of Educational Scholarship: Supporting an Unsustainable Economic Model

Across the contemporary world, research into education is widely assumed to be a technocratic matter of identifying “what works” in preparing individuals for a Darwinian struggle for the “survival of the fittest”. If we assume that the market-driven status quo is the natural order of things, and that education’s relationship with social justice consists merely of preparing students for meritocratic competition, then critical reflection on the social or political context becomes unnecessary. The job of educational researchers is then not to criticise government policy or reflect on education’s fundamental aims. Their responsibility is reduced to find more efficient ways to achieve the education system’s fixed, predetermined goals.

However, ever more intense competition in the “marketplace” for talent and jobs inevitably leads to intense stress, underlining the unsustainability of the prevalent economic model and the forms of education associated with it. However, since it is assumed to be unchallengeable, political and corporate elites see no point in educational research that challenges the model itself. Rather, from the perspective of government and business, the job of educational researchers is to find ways of helping learners manage the stresses and strains of inevitable competition. This is why, in the public debate over education, we see an increasing focus on psychology and non-cognitive “competencies”, that is, on identifying ways of enhancing young people’s psychological “resilience”, mental well-being, and social and emotional

“competencies”. Psychological readjustment, rather than active citizenship fostered by a liberal vision of education, has become the name of the game. The historical and philosophical roots of this trend are explored by William Davies in his book, *The Happiness Industry* (2016).

Challenges to Critical Scholarship on Education

The political and ideological climate in which we all operate today to varying extents poses acute challenges for serious and meaningful educational scholarship. I will illustrate these challenges with several anecdotes drawn from my own experience.

England: Commercialisation and “Decoloniality” in Higher Education

I started my academic career more than 20 years ago at the Institute of Education (IOE) of the University of London, now part of University College London, where for several years, I ran the MA programme in comparative education. The IOE, along with Teachers College at Columbia University, is one of the oldest, largest, and most prestigious global centres for educational research; it was founded in 1902. Over recent decades, in line with Western academic institutions, the IOE has undergone significant changes. One relates to the commercialisation of universities that has occurred in most English-speaking countries, reflecting the pervasiveness of market-oriented approaches to public policy. Most postgraduate students at the IOE today are wealthy foreigners, while British students (practising teachers and others) are deterred from enrolling by the prohibitively expensive fees. Another key trend, not obviously related to commercialisation, but serving partly to distract from its consequences, is the growing fashion in Western academia for “decolonisation”. The history of the IOE in London certainly has connections to the history of British colonialism; for a period during the mid-twentieth century, it boasted a “Colonial Department” dedicated to primarily to training teachers and supporting the Colonial Office’s educational work in tropical Africa (Unterhalter & Kadiwal, 2022). Such histories and their legacies at the IOE and elsewhere have fueled calls in the early twenty-first century for thoroughgoing efforts at “decolonisation”.

In so far as it promotes critical reflection on colonialism and the questioning of assumptions of cultural or “civilisational” hierarchy, a “decolonial” turn in educational scholarship is all for the good. However, calls for “decolonisation” and “decolonial” perspectives in Anglophone academia have increasingly morphed into a rigid orthodoxy, premised upon an essentialist binary of “East” versus “West” (or “North” versus “South”). By privileging ascribed identity (often racially defined) over rational argument and lending supreme importance to notions of

“authenticity” and “positionality,” dogmatic decolonial scholarship ironically tends to deny “native agency”. As the African scholar, Olúfémí Táíwò, argues (echoing Amartya Sen, among others) that demands that non-Western people adhere to their “authentic” cultures and values reproduce a “colonial” mindset that treats non-Europeans as “children” lacking reason or agency (Táíwò, 2022; Sen, 2009). Such demands also play into the hands of non-Western authoritarians who insist that notions such as human rights, democracy, or civil liberties are intrinsically “Western” ideas, unavailable to those from other cultures. I return to the implications of this trend for educational scholarship.

Japan: Patriotism, Psychology, and the Drive to Depoliticise Educational Scholarship

From the IOE, I moved to Japan in 2011 to take up my current position at Kyushu University’s Department of Education. The history of educational scholarship in Japanese universities reflects a pattern of heavy state influence over the educational agenda, something that remains the norm across most Asian societies today. Before 1945, Japan’s prestigious “imperial universities,” of which Kyushu University was one, did not have departments of education at all. The role of these elite institutions was primarily to borrow, adapt, and assimilate Western science and other forms of knowledge deemed useful to the task of building a strong Japanese state. Education was seen not as a field for critical scholarship, but as a matter of training teachers to implement the state’s agenda for moulding loyal imperial subjects and forging a strong, modern, industrialised economy (Gluck, 1985). There was no question of promoting ideals of active, liberal-democratic citizenship: thinking about politics was strictly for the elite; unthinking, submissive loyalty was the duty of the masses. Teacher training institutions had a strongly militarised atmosphere, because they were designed to prepare teachers to educate a regimented, obedient population.

In the post-war years, under the American Occupation between 1945 and 1952, the former imperial universities, now renamed “national universities,” all acquired departments of education. This was related to the attempt to transform Japan into an egalitarian liberal democracy, something that many Japanese educators strongly supported (Dower, 1999). However, legacies of the pre-war imperial regime have remained. Japan’s national universities are still tied closely to the state, and critical research on history, politics, and social issues has always been marginal to their work. Since World War Two, as before, Japanese public investment in higher education has remained overwhelmingly skewed towards science, technology, medicine, and other areas seen as contributing directly to economic development

and national strength. Post-war schooling was no longer designed to produce soldiers for a project of Asian conquest, but it remained strongly regimented, nurturing loyal workers for “Japan Inc”. Japanese state schooling boasts many strengths, not least, its strongly public character, but promoting critical thinking and active citizenship are not among them.

Nevertheless, in the late twentieth century, as Japan rapidly became more prosperous, confident, and outward-looking, independent-minded scholars made their voices heard, for example, in criticising Japan’s highly censored history curriculum. That era of national confidence and prosperity also saw a revival of more idealistic forms of Pan-Asianism, not least in my home city of Fukuoka. This was the background to the establishment, 30 years ago, of the Comparative Education Society of Asia,² in which my predecessors at Kyushu University played a key role.

However, since the 1990s, economic stagnation and growing fears of competition from China have fueled an intensification of Japanese nationalism and an even narrower, more instrumentalist vision of education. Former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, was unapologetically nostalgic for pre-war, imperial Japan. In pursuit of his declared aims of economic revival and fostering pride in “the beautiful country, Japan,” Abe’s Education Minister voiced open hostility to public investment in the arts, humanities, and social sciences (Vickers, 2020a, p. 194). National universities, he insisted, should intensify their investment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, above all. A particular target of this agenda has been academic research on education. Education departments at many smaller national universities have been closed or merged. At Kyushu University, there was an attempt around 2017 to merge our Education Department into a new “Department of Psychology and Education”. That failed, but like others across Japan, our department has been relentlessly squeezed, forcing us to focus more of our resources on teacher training. Senior management, dominated by engineers and medics, have no conception of educational research as more than a technical exercise in enhancing “effectiveness” and training educational personnel. This is a typical situation in Japan’s national universities today.

² The Comparative Education Society of Asia’s website can be viewed here: www.cesa.jp

That attempt at my university to create a new “Department of Psychology and Education” reflects a wider enthusiasm for psychology amongst Japanese elites. This is far from exclusive to Japan. The attraction of psychology, especially clinical psychology, lies partly in its “scientific” aura; it fits a paradigm of depoliticised, “objective” research conducted by white-coated men (and a few women) in antiseptic “laboratories”. In Japan, psychology holds out the promise of conveniently apolitical explanations for youth problems that have fueled growing public anxiety, such as bullying, depression, and suicide (Arai, 2016). It locates the source of these problems not in social or economic arrangements, but in individual “brains”. That fits the agenda of conservative politicians determined to discourage any self-critical reflection on Japan’s social or political institutions. Enthusiasm for psychology has thus been accompanied by a drive to reinvigorate patriotic education. The solution to disaffection among young people, in other words, is to attend to their psychological deficiencies and instil in them enhanced moral fibre and national pride. Over the past decade, the Japanese government has intensified its censorship of history textbooks and enhanced the emphasis on moral education within the school curriculum. Students are more than ever discouraged from critically debating politics or the meaning of “Japaneseness”. And this climate extends to universities, even the supposedly “elite” institutions, where most colleagues appear unwilling publicly to criticise government policy.

India: “Common-sense” Neoliberalism and the De-professionalisation of Educators

What, then, of educational debate and the role of scholarship on education here in India? Many readers will know far more about this than me, but an outsider’s perspective may be of some interest. One feature of Indian debate that has struck me is the widespread credence given to arguments for educational privatisation. In 2006, the *Financial Times* in London launched a new essay competition, and its very first winner was the British educational researcher, James Tooley. Tooley’s essay argued that low-cost private schooling was the most effective means of delivering good-quality fundamental education to the poor, especially in regions such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (2006). On reading this, I wrote a rebuttal, which the *Financial Times* published. I pointed out that Tooley’s evidence was highly selective and unconvincing, and that history supplies no examples of any country anywhere in the world that has ever succeeded in universalising reasonably equitable access to fundamental education through any means other than state provision.

Soon after my letter was published, I received an email from two young reporters at the newspaper *Mint*, then newly established as an Indian offshoot of the *Wall Street Journal*. They seemed genuinely amazed that anyone could seriously doubt that the market was the most efficient means of delivering fundamental education, and they asked me to write an op-ed explaining why. They were aware that Krishna Kumar, who was then the Director of NCERT, held similar views to mine, but they seemed to give greater credence to the views of a young Western researcher published in the *Financial Times* (Vickers, 2007) than to a home-grown expert. In any event, warnings, from wherever they come, about the dangers of educational privatisation have apparently gone unheeded (Rampal, 2020). India's *National Education Policy 2020* gave a further boost to educational privatisation, precisely at the time that the COVID-19 pandemic starkly illustrated the unreliability of low-cost private schooling. Thousands of schools were forced to close and went bust, leaving millions of children without any access to education at all (Vickers, 2020b).

Education policy in India, then, appears to exhibit a form of “neoliberalism on steroids”. At the same time, educational scholars, especially those with expertise on history, politics, and sociology, who have tried to sound the alarm, have been ignored or sidelined. Far more than in Japan, university departments of education in India tend to be required to focus ever more narrowly on teacher training and “effectiveness,” and steer clear of criticism of government policy.

Neoliberalism, Education, and Inter-Communal Division: The Denial of Shared Identity and Responsibility

The reasons why neoliberal, pro-market ideologies appeal strongly to political and corporate elites are perhaps too obvious to need restating. However, some aspects of the history of neoliberalism's rise to orthodox status remain little understood and are worth highlighting. The American historian Nancy MacLean, in her book, *Democracy in Chains* (2017) traces this process back to the era of America's Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Education was one of the main battlegrounds of that struggle, with African Americans demanding equal access to public schools and colleges. The success of those demands provoked a vicious backlash from powerful interests that had supported racial segregation in America (MacLean, 2017). Essentially, many influential white Americans decided that, if they had to share the benefits of state provision of education and other services with the Black population, then maybe state provision itself was the problem. MacLean shows how the Nobel Prize-winning

economist, James Buchanan, exploited that white backlash against the Civil Rights movement to gain funding and support for research institutes that promoted a strongly pro-market, anti-state ideology. That racist backlash against Civil Rights and school desegregation was only part of the story, but it helped to stimulate support among many Americans for an organised campaign by corporate elites to delegitimise the state provision of education and other public goods. Generous funding has come from wealthy right-wing donors to support endowments and donations to universities that employ neoliberal economists, and to support think tanks such as the Cato Institute that promote tax cuts for the rich and “private schooling for the poor” (p. 140).

One of the key successes of this drive to promote market fundamentalism has been the recasting of economics as a depoliticised “science” in a way that prefigures the attempt today to demand that educational studies also become more “scientific”. History, ethics, politics, and sociology used to form an essential part of the study of economics. Back in the nineteenth century, the discipline was originally described as “political economy”. However, contemporary economists and university economics programmes focus overwhelmingly on statistical modelling and econometrics. Critical consideration of the ethical, political, and sociological foundations of our economic order has been effectively excluded from the scope of “scientific” economic analysis (Whaples, 2010). This is very clear if we look at the recipients of the Nobel Prize for Economics over the recent decades. Almost all of them are quantitative economists, or number crunchers. One exception is the Indian scholar Amartya Sen, whose work is deeply humane and historically informed. However, the dominant economic orthodoxy is deeply ahistorical and dehumanising in its vision of individuals as atomised “consumers” exercising rational choice in a competitive market for goods and services.

Tracing the origins of today’s neoliberal economics to the racist backlash against desegregation in the USA during the 1960s illuminates the enthusiasm with which market fundamentalism has been embraced by many Indian elites. In Japan, despite the problems discussed above, a strong sense of common identity underpins mutual regard and a willingness to pay taxes to fund public services shared by all citizens. While the USA and India differ profoundly in many ways, in both societies, shared identity and mutual regard are relatively weak (or becoming weaker). In the USA, divisions of race, culture, and class are to blame, while in India, intersecting divisions of caste, class, and religion mean that many simply do not recognise themselves in their fellow citizens. An ideology that argues that standardised state provision of

education is not just inefficient but “immoral” because it reduces individual freedom, responsibility, and “choice” appeals to those unwilling to share schools with their “lower-class” neighbours, or even to pay for those schools in the first place.

Meritocracy and the False Promise of “Transformation” Through Education

Universal access to education is something that market fundamentalists generally support, even if many are sceptical of the state’s role in providing it. This is because of the crucial relationship between market fundamentalism and meritocracy. The rise of neoliberal orthodoxy has created a widening divide between “winners” and “losers” in many societies, including India. If individuals can be portrayed as responsible for their own success or failure, then the resulting inequality may be accepted as legitimate. The availability of education, at least in some form, is seen as vital to justifying the unequal social consequences of meritocratic competition. It allows the rich to portray their wealth as deserved, as the just reward for study and hard work. As we all know, the factors determining educational success are complex and relate largely to circumstances beyond the control of teachers or schools. However, a story of education as the guarantor of meritocratic justice allows society’s most privileged members to claim that their success is “earned,” and that the poor have only themselves to blame for their poverty (Markovits, 2019).

In this way, education has come to assume the overwhelming burden for promoting “opportunity” and achieving “social justice”. From the UN to the OECD to national policymakers, we hear incessant talk of the potential for education to “transform” society.³ What this also means, though, is that education gets blamed for all manner of social ills (that is, everything that needs “transforming”). If societies are unequal, if children are depressed, if testing shows they lack key “competencies”, then it must be the fault of schools and teachers. Social crisis gets reframed as “educational crisis”, demanding a radical response. Schools must be re-organised, teachers retrained and rendered “accountable”, and science and technology deployed to revolutionary effect. The possibility that solving social crises might require reforms to social policy, labour markets, welfare provision, and taxation is largely ignored. Such reforms are difficult to enact and might threaten powerful vested interests. We therefore seldom hear discussions of how society should be transformed to improve education; it is

³ A case in point being the Transforming Education Summit convened by the United Nations in September 2022.

always the other way around. Put simply, it is more convenient to blame education, schools, and teachers for social dysfunction.

A key aspect of contemporary public discourse on education and its “transformative” potential is celebration of science and technology. In the age of AI, pervasive “connectivity,” and the “Internet of Things,” leading policymakers and corporate leaders are easily persuaded that technology and science offer almost magical potential to boost education’s capacity to solve all social ills. (It probably helps that many of them are rather old and struggle to understand this technology themselves.) We recently saw India’s head of Pratham argue that “free smartphones with internet access” were the silver bullet that would help solve all sorts of educational problems, such as the disadvantages in access experienced by rural girls (Chavan, 2024).

Science, Psychology, and the “Responsibilisation” of Individual “Learners”: The Case of China

Magical thinking is not confined to educational technology or edtech; it also applies to the growing enthusiasm amongst policymakers for psychology, neuroscience, and “social and emotional learning”. I have already alluded to this in the context of Japan, but China constitutes an even starker example. Chinese society is riven by huge inequalities between social classes, urban and rural residents, Han Chinese, and various “ethnic minorities”. The resulting tensions and resentments have been exacerbated in recent years by an economic slowdown. China combines very weak provision of public welfare (especially for rural residents) with a brutally competitive education system. As the economic situation has worsened, the intensity of competition has risen, with young people and their families desperately vying for a dwindling number of secure, high-status jobs.

The Chinese government has tried to respond to the growing discontent and anxiety among ordinary people by redirecting blame. One tactic has been to accuse the private tutorial industry of causing rampant credentialism and shutting down big tutorial school chains. However, this addresses a symptom of competitive intensity, not the cause. Shutting down tutorial schools in fact only worsens inequality, because families with enough resources will find other ways of getting extra support for their children’s examination preparation.

Another important strategy involves what the Communist Party calls “thought reform”. One example is “gratitude education,” directed especially at disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, migrant children, and their families (Wan & Vickers, 2024). Even though the standard of educational provision that these groups receive is typically far lower than that enjoyed by urban Chinese, they are exhorted to be “grateful” for the care and attention they receive from the Communist Party and various Party-sponsored charitable organisations.

At the same time, China’s school curriculum preaches the importance of “self-confidence”, grounded in patriotic pride in the achievements of the Chinese nation under Communist Party leadership (Chen, 2023). In other words, rather than complaining about inequality, underprivileged groups are told they should be grateful for the benefits bestowed on them and take responsibility for improving their own lives in the spirit of confidence and patriotic optimism. In Chinese discourse on education’s role in fostering “gratitude,” “confidence,” or other so-called social-emotional “competencies,” psychology and neuroscience are often invoked alongside “excellent traditional Chinese culture”. Showing gratitude to the government, one’s teachers, parents, and the “society” is related to the ethical teachings of Confucianism.

Although the political and ideological contexts are different, I think comparisons can be drawn between “gratitude education” in China and policies and programmes in India, such as the “happiness curriculum” promoted by the Delhi government (OECD, 2018). Of course, terms such as “gratitude” and “happiness” immediately conjure up positive feelings; we are all inclined to agree that it is desirable to feel “happy” or “grateful”. But is it? On reflection, problems quickly emerge with the treatment of happiness or gratitude as largely decontextualised, abstract qualities, detached from consideration of reasons for feeling “happy” or “grateful”. When we consider the situation of poorer children and their parents in a city such as Delhi, is exhorting them to feel “happy” appropriate, or morally or politically justified? Or might it be better to acknowledge their legitimate reasons for feeling unhappy or discontented, and see schools as vehicles for empowering them to act together to transform their situation? Equally, do rural children in China, left behind by their migrant parents, have any obligation to be “grateful” to a state that neglects their educational and welfare needs? In both cases, how far does talk of “happiness” or “gratitude” education imply emotional and psychological manipulation designed to pacify populations that have good reasons for feeling discontented and ungrateful?

Such questions are, of course, deeply political and disturbing to powerful vested interests. This is precisely why the fashion for educational neuroscience, psychology, and social and emotional learning has been enthusiastically taken up by defenders of the political and economic status quo. The “psychologisation” of educational discourse is a convenient way of taking politics out of educational debate and portraying the readjustment of individuals’ mental states as the default response to social discontent or alienation. The OECD describes social and emotional learning as the missing ingredient in national education systems (2024). Adding extra psychological support, mindfulness and social and emotional “skills” to the educational “recipe” is portrayed as key to giving students the “resilience” they will need to adapt successfully to a future of increasingly insecure work due to the advance of AI (p. 24). Rather than considering the responsibility of states to tax tech corporations, strengthen social safety nets, and protect workers, psychology and socio-emotional learning are presented as the keys to enabling workers themselves to take responsibility for their own futures.

Marginalising Social Science in Educational Debate: Threats from Scientism and “Culture Wars”

Many of these trends—blind worship of science, fascination with psychology, and uncritical acceptance of the dominant neoliberal order—have converged in the work of the UNESCO–MGIEP, based in Delhi (Vickers, 2022). Gandhi was, of course, highly sceptical about the value of modern technology, and fearful of the alienating, dehumanising influence of “machines” on our cultural and spiritual lives. When it came to education, he believed that educational practices had to be informed by an ethical vision of a just and humane society; and ethical concerns, for him, often led necessarily to political action. However, despite its early commissioning of the *Rethinking Schooling* report referenced at the start of this article (MGIEP, 2017), critical reflection on the ethical, political, or economic contexts of education has been increasingly marginalised in MGIEP’s work. Instead, by the early 2020s, the Institute embraced an overwhelming focus on neuroscience, edtech, and AI. MGIEP’s website proclaimed a guiding vision of “building kinder brains” through harnessing insights from neuroscience. Its increasingly narrow obsession with neuroscience and “brains” eventually made it impossible for critical social scientists to work with MGIEP. From 2020 to 2022, I coordinated a working group on “The Contexts of Education” for a major MGIEP project called “The International Science and Evidence-based Education Assessment” (Vickers et al., 2022). However, rather than basing their recommendations on “evidence”, the Institute’s leadership

single-mindedly promoted the transformational potential of neuroscience. When social scientists presented evidence that contradicted this, their views were dismissed as mere “opinion”.

Where, then, can we look for robust, critical scholarship on the political, ethical, sociological, and economic dimensions of education? In Western universities today, there is a strong trend for a hyper-politicised approach to educational scholarship. Articles in major international journals of comparative education endlessly critique the evils of Western “coloniality” and “hegemony” and stress the need to learn from non-Western, “Indigenous” knowledge. Some of this work serves as a much-needed corrective to entrenched habits of arrogant eurocentrism. However, critical writing on culture, race, identity, and “coloniality” has increasingly eclipsed analysis of the economic and political roots of social injustice. Especially when it comes to writing about non-Western societies and their education systems, educational scholars based in the West are often unwilling to engage in critical analysis. For example, in writing on China or Japan, it is fashionable to muse on the wisdom of “Confucian” teaching on “interdependent selfhood”, and how this can help to counter the hegemony of the “colonial” West and its corrosive individualism (Silova, Rappleye, & You, 2020). However, there is little commentary on how such ideas are used by the Chinese Communist Party and other regimes to justify political oppression and deny human rights. Western scholars who see themselves as “progressives” often display little interest in real and present injustice in distant places like China or India. This has led liberals in China to speak contemptuously of “white leftists” who seem more concerned with using Asian ideas as fuel for the West’s own culture wars than in lending support to those resisting oppression in Asian societies themselves (Lin, 2020).

Indian scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty have been prominent contributors to postcolonial and decolonial debates, though more in fields such as history and anthropology than educational studies. How relevant, then, are these debates to the most pressing issues affecting Indian education today? I am hardly qualified to pronounce on this as far as India is concerned, but my experience suggests that educational scholars, wherever they are, would be well advised to steer clear both of apolitical “scientism” and the sort of hyper-politicised “culture wars” that bedevil Western academia today. Both these approaches distract from sustained and critical attention to the relationship between education systems and their social and political contexts. In effect, if not intent, even the ostensibly progressive scholarship on “decoloniality” tends to yield conservative social and political outcomes

(Vickers & Epstein, 2024). At the same time, the “decolonialists” are right about one thing: looking to the West or Western academics for inspiration or leadership is not necessarily a good idea, whether in educational scholarship or any other sphere.

Conclusion: Towards a More Sustainable Vision of Education—and Society?

Wherever we look for inspiration, as scholars of education, we confront significant challenges today. We operate in a climate that is exceptionally hostile to critical scholarship on the history, politics, and sociology of education. Politicians, business elites, the media, and much of the public expect educational “experts” simply to tell teachers and schools how to do the same things “better” or more effectively. We are regarded as technocrats or technicians, not really as scholars at all. Appointments, research funding, and promotions increasingly go to those who comply with this technocratic mindset. The hostility to critical scholarship is more severe in some societies than others but is becoming ever more widespread. At the same time, precisely because this work is increasingly difficult, unrewarding, and even risky, it is more important than ever.

We live in an age of unprecedented threats to our natural environment and security that could endanger our very survival. Young people growing up to confront these threats are also faced with a brutally competitive and insecure labour market, based on a winners-take-all model of capitalism, amid warnings that “AI is coming for our jobs” unless we all “shape up”. However, precisely because of advances in science and technology, our societies, in fact, have the wealth and resources to support a comfortable, dignified, and fulfilling life for everyone. As educational scholars, we should see it as our purpose not simply to search for ways of making education more “efficient” in delivering skilled and disciplined workers to fill jobs that machines cannot perform. We should be asking how our societies might change so as enable all citizens to live fulfilling lives and debating the place of education in a re-imagined social order. In other words, we should ask how social transformation might produce the conditions for educational transformation, not just the other way around.

Even if we must play the game of an increasingly monitored, measured, narrow, and “accountability”-driven academic culture, we need to keep reminding ourselves and our students that this is not an inevitable situation, and certainly not a desirable one. Comparative and historical perspectives are essential here, because they show that other ways of doing things have seemed natural or desirable in different places at different times. In other words, history

and comparison demonstrate that education systems are the outcomes of political and ethical choices, not universal scientific “laws”. As educational scholars, and especially as comparativists, we need to do what we can to hold up a critical lens to education’s complex relationship with the political, social, economic, and cultural context. As the unsustainability of prevalent social and economic arrangements becomes increasingly apparent, we can only hope that more and more of our fellow citizens will start to listen to what we have to say.

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