'Bearing witness to negativity': towards just futures of education

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EDITORIAL

'Bearing witness to negativity': towards just futures of education

Imagined futures, precarious presents

Contemporary educational discourse is filled with references to 'the future' and 'the futures of education.' In September 2024, the United Nations (UN) will host a *Summit of the Future*, billed as a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance' (United Nations 2024, n.p.). This event is happening on the heels of a number of major education-focused futures-oriented initiatives, including the UN 2022 *Transforming Education Summit* (United Nations 2023), which took place at UN Headquarters in September 2022, the publication of a landmark UNESCO report on the futures of education in 2021 (ICFE 2021) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project (OECD 2019). Whereas futures-thinking is not a novel feature of global educational governance, the scale and unprecedented nature of recent technological, political, and socio-ecological change has heightened the urgency for radical reimaginings of education. Numerous megatrends, crises and developments – including the evolution of artificial intelligence and digital technologies, the acceleration of the climate crisis, the growth of authoritarian populism and civil unrest, the outbreak or intensification of war in many parts of the world and the mass displacement of people – are having a profound effect on education systems at local, national and global levels.

Against this backdrop, and amidst growing ontological concern about the future of education, the new editorial team of *Irish Educational Studies* (IES) has been reflecting on our collective values and joint vision for the editorship of the journal. Central to that vision is our commitment to advancing understanding of education's role in enhancing prospects for peace, social and ecological justice and equality. This necessitates what Michael Apple (2016, 511) refers to as 'bear[ing] witness to negativity,' that is, is of illuminating 'the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to relations of exploitation and domination – and struggles against such relations – in the larger society'. Bearing witness to negativity challenges us as an educational community to excavate the hidden inequalities embedded within supposedly egalitarian discourses, practices and reforms and to reaffirm education spaces as political (Delahunty 2024; Kitching 2024). In what follows, we invoke these principles while identifying a number of cross-cutting themes and overlapping priorities for the future of educational research and IES.

Enduring inequalities in education

As the societal conditions of 'crisis ordinariness' become more widespread (Berlant 2011, 101), the largely mythical yet widely held view of education as a route to upward mobility, job security, relative wealth and life satisfaction is waning. As Robertson and Beech (2023, 5) remark: 'More than three decades of competition, spurred on by large-scale assessments and the

global ranking of nation[al] education systems, policies to legitimise outsourcing jobs to cheaper parts of the world, and promises that if you invested in education (buoyed by the knowledge economy and human capital justifications) you would secure a well-paid job, [have been] called into question.' In Ireland, as is the case internationally, the promise that higher education will 'level the playing field' in an unequal society remains unfulfilled (Baum and McPherson 2022). Whereas the number of poor and working-class students availing of tertiary education has increased in absolute terms, their more socio-economically advantaged peers manage to stay ahead of them by getting more education, and crucially, more of the credentials that are most valued or valuable in the labour market (Bryan 2017). Meanwhile, despite comparatively high levels of educational performance and relative socio-economic fairness overall, at primary and post-primary levels, significant differences in educational outcomes persist for students from poor and working-class backgrounds and among certain ethnic minority students (OECD 2024a).

Historically speaking, even highly ambitious and somewhat radical reform initiatives premised on egalitarian principles, such as the abolition of post-primary tuition in the late 1960s, failed to alter class-based patterns of inequality in Irish education. While casting the net wider so that more students could avail of second-level education, the Free Scheme, as it became known, did nothing to combat *qualitative* inequalities within the system, thereby ensuring that inequality was 'effectively maintained' (Bryan 2017; Byrne and McCoy 2017; Lucas 2001; Raftery and Hout 1993). Sociological research consistently highlights the impossibility of equalising educational outcomes in the absence of more fundamental re-distributive measures which tackle unequal opportunities at their source (e.g., Lynch 2000). Contemporary reform initiatives focus on school-centred solutions which target 'designated disadvantaged' schools, rather than the wider dynamics of the political-economic system which produce 'disadvantage' (e.g., Fleming and Harford 2021). In other words, they devote little emphasis to wider structural and material constraints, or to the political-economic or historical factors that help to produce these dynamics in the first place.

Building on a recent Special Issue of IES devoted to 'Rethinking Educational Disadvantage' edited by Harford, Hyland, and Fleming (2022), we have identified the persistence of educational inequalities along, *inter alia,* social class, gender and sexuality, racial-ethnic and ability lines as an ongoing research and policy priority deserving of further attention in IES. In so doing, we hope to advance the dialogue initiated in Karl Kitching's keynote address at the 2023 *Educational Studies Association of Ireland* (ESAI) conference which stressed the need to ' … utterly reject the concepts of meritocracy and equality of opportunity as effective ways to bring about social change and call for the factors outside of education which impact so heavily on education outcomes: housing, employment, income and health … ' (Kitching 2024, 10). This necessitates going beyond conventional approaches to 'doing' educational policy by foregrounding the wider conditions of social injustice as well as the material, symbolic, pedagogic, relational and epistemic injustices within educational settings themselves (Sriprakash 2022). In an Irish context, as elsewhere, there is an urgent practical need to address teacher shortages, which are particularly acute in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (OECD 2024a). Additionally, the significant barriers that student teachers from under-represented groups encounter in the context of initial teacher education need to be addressed (Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2023). Moreover, the prevalence of a 'grinds culture' – which enables already privileged pupils to maintain their competitive advantage – raises fundamental questions about the efficacy of the presence of large-scale for-profit shadow education providers in Ireland and elsewhere (McCoy and Byrne 2024).

The rise of authoritarianism and its implications for education

In his ESAI keynote address, Kitching (2024) highlights educators' responsibility to uphold democratic values and protect collective solidarity across different social groups. As Judith Butler (2024, 267) cogently argues, contemporary anti-LGBTQI and anti-migrant movements are 'clearly responding to economic formations that have left many people radically insecure about their futures, sensing that the conditions of their lives are deteriorating.' These fears are being exploited by right-wing authoritarians who deploy inflammatory rhetoric to incite culture wars which demonise transgender people, refugees etc. as a threat to women, families, local communities and civilisation, in order to deflect from legitimate anxieties about precarity, climate destruction, environmental pollution, police violence etc. As recent anti-critical race theory campaigns in the US have demonstrated, these developments have profound implications for education as a democratic institution and as a pillar of political engagement. While these are complex and thorny issues, as educational researchers, we have a responsibility to advance our understanding of how these wider movements and trends are affecting students, teachers, schools and communities and how educational institutions can best support, affirm and forge solidarity with marginalised and minoritised groups (Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2023).

A shifting global educational governance landscape

The contemporary historical moment is characterised by a major shift in the global governance of education from a democratically-controlled system to one heavily influenced by corporate actors, philanthropic foundations and think tanks with powerful vested economic interests (e.g., Bryan and Mochizuki 2023; Elfert and Ydesen 2024; Yliniva, Bryan, and Brunila 2024). The UN 2022 *Transforming Education Summit* represented a turning point in global education governance by enabling 'education philanthropy to speak louder together as a committed and credible voice towards a common, broader but shared goal to transform education' (Missika and Savage 2022, n.p.). Driven by philanthropic funders identifying as 'the education philanthropy community', sixty educational philanthropies – including, *inter alia*, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Mastercard Foundation, The LEGO Foundation and The Aga Khan Foundation – issued a joint statement to the Summit, representing 'the first moment … of joined-up education philanthropy to a UN summit' (Missika and Savage 2022, n.p.). The statement was welcomed by the UN as a 'strong signal that private foundations are eager to leverage their influence, resources, and tools for transforming education' (United Nations 2023, 11). These powerful actors have the potential to fundamentally alter education by redefining its essence, thereby detaching it from its foundational principles and intrinsic value and reorienting it towards commercial ends, externally defined purposes, rates of return, testing, performance indicators etc. (Elfert and Ydesen 2024).

Education's neuro-affective turn

This wider shift in the global governance of education coincides with a neuro-affective turn in education, with profound implications for schools and society. Enabled by medical and technological advancements in, *inter alia*, genetics, brain imaging and the neurosciences, the 'big data' revolution, digital tools and artificial intelligence, the so-called 'learning sciences' and allied approaches have become increasingly salient in educational research, practice and policy in education (Williamson 2023). Internationally, there is mounting evidence that this neuro-affective turn is altering the landscape of teacher education. In Australia, for

example, the publication of the Australian Government's *Strong Beginnings* report (Australian Government 2023) marked a significant turning point for teacher education reform in that it mandated, for the first time, the teaching of neuroscience and 'brain-based' approaches within initial teacher education nation-wide (Skourdoumbis and Rowe 2024). Widespread enthusiasm and uncritical uptake of the learning sciences amongst education policymakers, international organisations and think tanks persist, despite mounting concern about the reductionism and depoliticisation of brain-based approaches, the undermining of educators, the bolstering of private interests and oppressive technologies and the perpetuation of eugenicist tropes and deficit framings of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., Busso and Pollack 2014; Mochizuki, Vickers, and Bryan 2022; Skourdoumbis and Rowe 2024).

Education's neuro-affective turn is also evident at the curricular and classroom levels. A growing preoccupation with 'robot-proofing' human beings by equipping them with 'human-centric' or 'social-emotional skills' (Williamson 2019), combined with growing concerns about declining levels of mental health among children and young people (Gray, Lancy, and Bjorklund 2023) are resulting in much greater emphasis on the non-cognitive or social-emotional dimensions of learning. The neuro-affective turn further coincides with the proliferation of technologies, digital devices and platforms that can measure and monitor students' well-being and happiness and with the wider datafication of children's lives, which positions them as objects of digital surveillance (Lupton and Williamson 2017). Capturing the imagination of global corporations, 'knowledge brokers', policymakers and practitioners alike, social-emotional learning (SEL) has achieved the status of a 'zeitgeist' (Humphrey 2013, 1). Advocates of SEL stress the learnability and malleability of non-cognitive skills such as 'achievement motivation', 'well-being', 'curiosity' 'empathy', 'compassion', 'self-regulation', 'grit' and 'resilience'. Whereas some view SEL as a magic bullet that has the potential to improve academic performance, mental health and prospects for peace and non-violence, the more pernicious effects of this zeitgeist remain under-explored.

Ideologies of (un)deservingness

The OECD's Survey of Social and Emotional Skills (SESS) is an instrument administered to 10- and 15-year-olds to assess their social-emotional skills in the domains of task performance, emotional regulation, engaging with others, open-mindedness and collaboration (OECD 2024b). A recent report of the most recent survey's findings documented lower levels of social-emotional skills among socio-economically disadvantaged students compared to their more advantaged peers, especially in relation to their open-mindedness (creativity, tolerance and curious) and engaging with others (assertiveness, sociability and empathy) (OECD 2024b). While enabling the OECD to expand the scope of its measurement and bolster its moral legitimacy (Auld and Morris 2019; Kim 2024), the production of 'evidence' and 'facts' about the character traits of particular population sub-groups has material consequences for people's lives. In other words, accounts of student performance and characteristics are not merely descriptive; rather '[t]hey embody desires as normative inscriptions of who students are, should be, and the dangerous populations threatening the imagined future' (Popkewitz 2023, 1). The use of evidence which frames an entire sub-group as substantially less creative, less empathetic, less tolerant etc. reinforces a problematic dichotomy between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' populations and normalises ideologies of '(un)deservingness' where access to resources, rights, and entitlements are concerned (Tošić and Streinzer 2022, 2). Against the backdrop of a logic which presupposes that all learners can acquire the requisite social-emotional skills needed to thrive in the 21st century, findings of this

nature arguably implicitly position those from lower socio-economic backgrounds as undeserving of care, rights, or justice. The wider implications of education's neuro-affective turn – including how the increasing prioritisation of the non-cognitive aspects of learning is reconfiguring teacher-student and parent-child relations and self-understandings while simultaneously reinforcing eugenicist tropes and deficit framings of students from low socio-economic backgrounds – is ripe for interrogation.

The OECD as a 'master of persuasion'

In an Irish context, as elsewhere, the educational reform landscape continues to be heavily shaped by the OECD (e.g., Conway 2012; Kirwan and Hall 2015). A recent headline in the *Irish Times* provocatively named Andreas Schleicher, Director of the OECD's *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project as 'the most influential figure in Irish education' (O'Brien 2024, n.p.). The hyperbole of this statement notwithstanding, Schleicher's employer, the OECD, is a 'master of persuasion' (Elfert and Ydesen 2023, 25), not least because of its unrivalled capacity to articulate key policy concepts, produce 'policy-relevant' knowledge, and promote standards and compliance via peer review and international assessments. Speaking about recent OECD-inspired policy discourses in the Irish context, Delahunty (2024, 15) warns of the dangers posed by 'scientific' claims with surreptitious motives that 'refigure neoliberal secularised visions of childhood/adolescence school subjectivities.' The new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education 2023) is imbued with the language of 'agency', 'action' 'wellbeing' and 'competencies'. These concepts mirror the policy vernacular of the OECD's *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project, an initiative designed to help countries 'prepare their education systems for the future' (OECD 2019, 5). While ostensibly progressive concepts, these discourses can have depoliticising and responsibilising effects. For example, primary school children's agency is defined in the new primary curriculum framework document as 'the capacity to act independently and to make choices about and in their learning' (Department of Education 2023, 7). This is almost identical to the OECD's definition of agency as ' … the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices' (OECD 2022, 85), but is even more restrictive, limiting choice to students' learning. As Robertson and Beech (2023) explain, this represents an ethico-political, rather than a sociological take on agency, thereby occluding the relational and dynamic relationships between agency (people), structure (things), and culture (parts). Assigning greater (ethico-political) agency to the student in turn stitches 'neoliberal meritocracy more firmly into the education ideational landscape, so that getting ahead is viewed as the outcome of one's own (failed or successful) individual agentic efforts' (Robertson and Beech 2023, 14). While not dismissing an emphasis on individual agency, alternative frameworks, such as those premised on the principle of reparative justice – 'maintain that we cannot explain disparities in the outcomes of schooling without attending fully to the constitutive mechanisms of injustice in educational systems' (Sriprakash 2022, 785).

The new junior cycle wellbeing programme seeks to produce learners who are 'confident and skilled participant[s] in physical activity'; who make 'healthy eating choices'; who know when their 'safety is at risk' and who 'make right choices'; who possess the right 'coping skills to deal with life's challenges' etc. (DES 2018, 10). Casting well-being as the effect of certain abilities and life choices (e.g., being physically active and eating 'healthily' or being able to cope with adversity) renders certain forms of personhood more desirable and more valuable than others (Ahmed 2010). Moreover, as with the neuro-affective turn in education more broadly, it produces individualised, atomised ways of thinking about the self, based on a 'technology of looking inward' (Howell and Veronka 2012, 4) that detract from the actual social

and material determinants of well-being and repudiate collective solutions. Gleeson (2021) reminds us that historically, curriculum reform efforts in Ireland have been characterised by centralised control and a paucity of research, debate, and school-based curriculum development. As neuro-affective ideologies and technologies become more entrenched within and beyond education, there is an urgent need for critically-oriented research on how its curricular and non-curricular manifestations are being interpreted, understood and experienced by teachers, students, and parents, and what this zeitgeist means for the futures of education in an increasingly precarious and crisis-prone world.

The climate and nature emergency: 'An existential crisis of and for education'

The final major cross-cutting theme we wish to highlight concerns the worsening climate and nature emergency and the associated question of how to prepare children and young people for the realities of a radically climate-changed world. The year 2023 was officially the Earth's hottest year on record. Setting a dire precedent, average temperatures for 2023 came dangerously close to the 1.5C limit – the agreed level at which global warming must be restricted if climate change is to be kept from escalating to dangerously high levels (National Centres for Environmental Information 2024). The massive 'youthquake' of the *Fridays for Future* and *School Strikes for Climate* movements (Sloam, Pickard, and Henn 2022) – involving over eight million people globally in 2019 alone – signalled an existential crisis in and for education. As Verlie and Flynn (2022, n.p.) put it: '[t]he very notion that young people are driven to strike from school because of widespread climate inaction is a deep challenge to foundational assumptions about the purposes and values of education, including the idea that education has young people's best interests at heart and is helping prepare them to flourish in the future.' Climate change education has been characterised as a 'double bind', having to confront competing demands for ecological awareness and postmaterialism, on the one hand, while simultaneously preparing children and youth to be 'successful' and economically productive employees and consumers, on the other (McGimpsey, Rousell, and Howard 2023, 4). As the prospects for human, more-than-human and planetary survival dwindle, 'business as usual' approaches to schooling are no longer viable. Mainstream approaches to climate change education overemphasise scientific literacy at the expense of affective and aesthetic encounters that can move educators and students beyond polarised feelings of hope and despair (Todd 2024). Central to this is the need for alternative pedagogical and curricular approaches that allow for radical shifts in our understanding of self, including approaches that are immersive, experiential, de-colonial, recuperative, and ecologically attuned to the complex entanglements of human and more than human worlds (e.g., Machado De Oliveira 2021; Rappleye, Komatsu, and Silova 2024). We hope that IES will comprise an important space for ongoing critical dialogue about the planetary crisis and the ways that education can be re-imagined to prepare children and young people for the realities of a climate-changed world.

Conclusion: Towards just futures of education

Rather than merely reflecting material reality or a future that exists 'out there', future-focused educational discourses structure and shape how we think about, and act upon, education in the here and now (Nelson, Geltzer, and Hilgartner 2008). Similarly, attending to past and present injustices in education plays an important role in configuring possible futures of education (Sriprakash 2022). As Sriprakash (2022, 786), in her manifesto on the 'reparative futures of education' so eloquently puts it: 'Education's present cannot be cleaved from its

past, not from its possible futures.' Sriprakash posits that in reimagining just futures for education, we must move beyond binaristic logics which position education either as a force of social reproduction or as a track to upward social mobility. Rather, foregrounding the question of what do we 'owe' tomorrow's children?, Sriprakash considers forms of reparative redress that are needed to make future systems of schooling just. While these are challenging philosophical questions, models of how to effectively foreground social justice across the curriculum are plentiful (e.g., Baker et al. 2023; Ní Chróinín et al. 2024) and can serve as a useful starting point to consider what types of futures of education can emerge when we take seriously the righting of past and present educational wrongs (Sriprakash 2022).

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