Corporate education reform goes global

Business interests have captured the United Nations education agenda
January 26, 2016 2:00AM ET
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From its inception in 1945, the United Nations has been involved with education on a global scale. The U.N. views education as crucial to eradicating poverty, building peace and fostering intercultural dialogue, and it remains committed to “a holistic and humanistic vision of quality education worldwide.”

Yet there has been a dramatic shift in the U.N.’s educational mission from supporting a well-rounded, humanistic conception of education to one that focuses on teaching children the “hard skills” necessary to participate in the global economy. This turn began with the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and has intensified with the Sustainable Development Goals that launch this month. One of the new targets, for instance, is to “increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship” by 2030.

The U.N. has thrown its weight behind what Finnish scholar Pasi Sahlberg calls the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). According to Sahlberg, there is a “global unified agenda” to rebuild educational systems to benefit multinational corporations. GERM began in the U.S. and United Kingdom, and has spread throughout the world. GERM is committed to educational standardization, a focus on literacy and numeracy, high-stakes testing and centralized control of the schools.
According to Sahlberg, this movement “limits the role of national policy development” and “paralyzes teachers’ and schools’ attempts to learn from the past and also to learn from each other.” In other words, GERM disempowers communities and educators and forces them to teach a narrow set of skills measured by standardized tests.

The U.N.’s sustainable development goals articulate many admirable ideals, including eradicating poverty, combating HIV/AIDS, reducing inequality and ensuring environmental sustainability. According to Sahlberg, preparing students to tackle global problems requires encouraging creativity and experimentation among schools and teachers. While several recent U.N. reports mention teaching critical thinking and protecting human rights, the focus is on helping multinational corporations control, for their own benefit, education systems around the globe. For those who think that this is a problem, the time to protest is now.

**Private sector partners**

Last fall, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg spoke about the Sustainable Development Goals at the United Nations Private Sector Forum. He supports the U.N.’s goal of universal Internet access because it creates new jobs, lifts people out of poverty and gives millions of children “access to affordable learning tools.” For Zuckerberg, there is a confluence between the U.N.’s education agenda and Facebook’s development of personalized learning platforms.

The U.N. maintains that the business community should view the U.N.’s education agenda as a chance to pilot technologies, enter markets, train workers and increase profits. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon makes this pitch in a report entitled “The Smartest Investment: A Framework for Business Engagement in Education.” According to Ban, the business world needs a “skilled, innovative workforce,” and “investing in education creates a generation of skilled people who will have rising incomes and demands for products and services.” The U.N. promises to help corporations “think about how their business policies and practices can impact education priorities.”
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First, the report advises business leaders to convince peers to commit to education reform. The report mentions building sustainable societies and saving lives, but the main theme is that the U.N.'s education agenda promotes economic growth and expands business opportunities for companies. For instance, corporations may want to work with the U.N. because “consumers have indicated a willingness to buy — and reward — socially conscious brands.”

Next, according to the report, corporations may improve education by funding organizations with a record of social impact, supporting business schools to train education leaders or piloting technology to improve delivery outcomes in remote communities. The report makes little mention of education being an end in itself or a means to transform the world’s economic or political structure.

Finally, the report suggests that corporations should work with like-minded businesses, governments, the World Economic Forum and the Global Partnership for Education, “a multilateral public-private partnership focused on delivering a quality education to all girls and boys.” The report provides examples of how the U.N. has profitably worked alongside corporations such as Hess, Discovery Communication, Sumitomo Chemical and ING Bank.

In the words of one functionary, the “U.N. considers working with the private sector as a necessity not an option.” The U.N. leadership does not seem concerned that the organization should have different priorities than multinational corporations or that the private sector may prefer to train workers rather than educate citizens to think for themselves.

The skills agenda

To further understand the problems with the U.N.’s education agenda, it is worth examining its partnership with the British publishing corporation, Pearson.
In “The Smartest Investment,” the U.N. explains how Pearson drives learning outcomes in Nigeria. Pearson has a $95 million contract with the Lagos State Ministry of Education and the World Bank to develop “measurable solutions” and promote “strong learning outcomes.”

To decode this passage, it is useful to turn to a report from the Global Partnership for Education, “Planning for Impact: Measuring Business Investments in Education.” According to this document, businesses want to invest in educational projects with measurable outcomes, such as literacy and numeracy rates and scores on “national and international standardized exams,” including the Program For International Student Assessments (PISA) administered by Pearson.

In short, the U.N. collaborates with Pearson to help Nigeria improve “learning outcomes” as measured by PISA, a Pearson standardized test. Furthermore, the economists Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessman have recently argued that the U.N.’s education agenda should lead to linking foreign aid to PISA performance. If the U.N. joins the World Bank in pushing test-based education reform around the world, this idea could come to fruition.

The U.N. education agenda should not promote the skills agenda, serve multinational corporations or greenwash investment opportunities. Instead, the U.N. should recommit to the ideal of humanistic education that recognizes many diverse ways for human beings to learn and to flourish.

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