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The 'New' Norms of Education Policy in the 21st Century: Polemics, Pandemics, and 'Cloaking' Persistent Inequality in Education Worldwide

Las «nuevas» normas de la política educativa en el siglo XXI: polémicas, pandemias y «encubrimiento» de la desigualdad persistente en la educación en todo el mundo

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Abstract

The 21st century has brought policy change to education at levels rivaling the paradigm-shifting global educational reform efforts of the 20th, but the same problems (in different forms) seem to be repeating nonetheless. 21st century education policy, especially at the global and national levels is forced to recognize and address the effects of a pandemic, polemical and populist politics, and both institutionalized sexism and racism. And, there have been and will continue to be significant changes in 21st century education policy and practice in response to these crises, but amid the change there is remarkable permanence in the 20th century ideas, structures, content, and pedagogy embedded in education as well. This paper examines the promise of 20th century advances in education policy and practice against the challenges and pitfalls of 21st century education as evidenced by national and international educational developments.

Keywords: education policy; comparative education; inequality; globalization

Resumen

El siglo XXI ha traído consigo un cambio de política en la educación a niveles que rivalizan con los esfuerzos de reforma educativa global del siglo XX, que cambiaron el paradigma, pero los mismos problemas (en diferentes formas) parecen repetirse, no obstante. La política educativa del siglo XXI, especialmente a nivel mundial y nacional, se ve obligada a reconocer y abordar los efectos de una política pandémica, polémica y populista, y del sexismo y el racismo institucionalizados. Y ha habido y seguirán existiendo cambios significativos en la política y la práctica educativa del siglo XXI en respuesta a estas crisis, pero en medio del cambio hay una notable permanencia en las ideas, las estructuras, los contenidos y la pedagogía del siglo XX incrustados también en la educación. Este artículo examina la promesa de los avances del siglo XX en la política y la práctica educativa frente a los retos y escollos de la educación del siglo XXI, tal y como se desprende de los avances educativos nacionales e internacionales..

Palabras clave: política educativa; educación comparada; desigualdad; globalización

1. Introducción

There is a stark contrast between the promises of 20th century advances in education policy and practice and the challenges and pitfalls of 21st century education. In the 20th century there was paradigm-shifting global educational reform related to educational access, opportunity, and outcomes (Baker, 2014; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; McCulloch, 2018; Pepper, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). But, these advances are accompanied in the 21st century by persistent problems in the form of inequality, decoupling, and cloaking (Gamoran, 2001; Zadja *et al.*, 2008; Wiseman & Davidson, 2021; Wolhuter & Wet, 2015). In the early 21st century, these inequalities and other problems were revealed by a global pandemic, political polemics, an international refugee crisis, and persistent sexism and racism. The questions remain then: Why do these problems persist? And, why does education not solve them as expected? The answer is that there is significant permanence in educational ideas, structures, content, and pedagogy across social, economic, and political systems worldwide and across time (Tilly, 1998). 21st century educational expectations are built on 20th century educational promises that have led in turn to 21st century pitfalls. These pitfalls collectively reflect conflict among the norms, values, and practices of education in both eras.

2. 20th Century Shifts

The 20th century was an era of global educational expansion (Meyer *et al.*, 1977; Schofer & Meyer, 2005), datafication (Jarke & Breiter, 2019), algorithmization (Wiseman & Davidson, 2018), and accommodation (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000), while the early 21st century was more about the realization of the problems and inequalities that persisted through the 20th century's developments than about a new direction or advance in the new era. Still, there were many paradigm shifts in education throughout the 20th century, which led to the development and institutionalization of new norms for education worldwide. Three shifts are particularly relevant to the pitfalls experienced in the 21st century. Those 20th century educational shifts include (1) the massification of education worldwide, (2) the establishment of national education systems and their comparison, and (3) the development of education as a human right.

Mass Education. Although formal education has been a consistent facet of elite life and preparation for centuries, it was not until the 19th and, especially, 20th centuries that formal education (i.e., schooling) became available to the public. Yet, throughout much of the early history of formal education, it's "massification" had more to do with the purposes of the state from a policy and resources perspective even though individual development and productivity became important expectations for mass education systems soon after (Boli *et al.*, 1985; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). In fact, as nation-states began establishing mass education systems for all eligible youth, the focus on building systems for the development of "productive citizenship" became increasingly balanced with the expectations of individual advantage and social mobility (Hoffman, 2010; McGrath, 2005). In other words, mass education serves both the purposes of national social, cultural, and political incorporation of individuals (Wiseman *et al.*, 2010) and the expectations of individual development and return on investment (Blundell *et al.*, 1999; Psacharopoulos, 1972).

The massification of education also reflects the worldwide establishment and development of national education systems, which are either open to or compulsory for all school-aged children (e.g., ages 6-18) in most, but not all educational systems (Ahmadi & Laei, 2012; Kingdon, 2007). There are many advantages to an educated and 'incorporated' national populace, which in part explains why national education systems arose and both governments and individuals alike continue to invest in education for themselves and their children (Kumar, 2005). But, the explanations for the further development and expansion of mass education are less focused on the functional outcomes of mass education for nation-states and more aligned with the symbolic and taken-for-granted expectations and culture that assume education as an individual human right (Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Boli *et al.*, 1985). For example, in the mid-20th century as more and more nations were becoming independent from former colonial empires, national education systems were often seen as the key for transforming newly-independent populations from servants of a colonial state to independent and free agents in the broader social and economic market (Carnoy, 1985; Lewis, 1961; Meyer *et al.*, 1992). Shifts in the expectations around education, which resulted from the establishment, perpetuation, and eventual ubiquity of mass education systems, created a norm for education rooted in the assumption of education as a human right, the expectation that education for all is natural, and the belief that educational performance and attainment are indicators of both individual and national value (Meyer *et al.*, 1992; Suárez & Ramirez, 2007).

International Comparisons. As the experience and taken-for-granted value of education became an increasingly universal experience, the comparison of educational outcomes as a form of both intra- and inter-national competition also became ubiquitous (Wiseman, 2010). Early comparisons looked at 'best practices' in national education systems seen as either beneficial or uniquely successful and attempted to establish generalizations about education across systems (Brickman, 1960; Epstein, 2017). Many of these early comparativists were interested in the content and structure of education more than direct comparisons of outcomes. Often the motivation for comparison was when a 'foreign' education system was performing well or was representative of a national economy, political system, or culture that was admired, respected, or feared by those doing the comparison (Rust *et al.*, 2009). But these comparisons were often driven by historically-embedded stereotypes, discrimination, and idealized Western values and culture (Kazamias, 2009; Sobe, 2017). Although international comparisons may still be driven by these types of stereotypes, discrimination, values, and culture, the development of mass education worldwide has expanded the potential and the practice of educational comparison to a global scale (Furuta, 2020).

National and international educational performance data also became increasingly available over the course of the 20th century (Smith & Baker, 2001), and culminated in the latter part of the 20th century with the establishment of two widely recognized and increasingly referenced international assessments known as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Wiseman, 2010). The history and development of these international assessments and the organizations that both spawned and continue to administer them has been amply addressed in the research literature (Hastedt & Rocher, 2020; Ydesen, 2019; Wiseman & Taylor, 2017). And, for an understanding of the development of norms in comparative education, the importance of the existence and availability of international achievement data cannot be understated. Whether these assessments and

the resulting uses of the data they produce are critiqued for their over-generalization and functional simplicity (Forestier & Adamson, 2017), engagement in an overtly politicized process of educational evaluation and reform (Niemann *et al.*, 2017), omission of key student or stakeholder groups during data collection (Schuelka, 2013), or decontextualized influence beyond what local or national systems are able to produce themselves (Zhao, 2020), the existence of international comparisons of education is a norm of education policy that developed and became institutionalized in educational research, governance, and practice during the 20th century (Baker & Wiseman, 2005). Comparative and international education in the 21st century not only must recognize this legacy, but also build out from it.

Education as a Human Right. Mass education has, therefore, made a significant impact on the development of nation-states, intra- and international educational comparison, and also on the development and recognition of individuals as citizens, workers, and members of society. Illich (1971) critiqued mass education as creating a system of haves and have nots centered on individuals' participation in schooling, and called for the "deschooling of society" in order to eliminate what he argued was a humanitarian evil. Most others have gone a different direction. Instead of looking to eliminate education as a tool of differentiation, discrimination, and dehumanizing segregation, the global community instead looks more at education (i.e., schooling) as a human right and public good as plainly stated by the United Nation's 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, article 26, which begins, "Everyone has the right to education".

Furthermore, the perceived value and ability of education to institute both individual and broader socio-cultural change developed throughout the 20th century to reflect the now widespread assumption that education is a panacea for most of the problems faced either by individuals or society (Rothstein, 1998; Wiseman *et al*, 2016). For example, when civic values may be waning or changing course from what the political elite either prefer or idealize, then education is seen as a way of instilling preferred or appropriate civic values into the population (Swalwell, 2015). When social problems related to morality or crime seem to be on the rise, then education is seen as a way to both address those problems and provide alternative outcomes for youth so that the problems may be resolved (Preston & Green, 2003). Politically, when there are challenges to a nation's technological or military authority, education is seen as a way to improve technology and re-establish dominance in the world society (Apple, 2009). And, when economic downturns happen in a community or nation as a whole, education's role in the development of productive, hard-working, ready-for-work youth is emphasized far beyond what is feasible or practical (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016).

Education as a human right also is accompanied by ideals related to expectations about equity and opportunity. Although the grade-based model for educational mobility does not necessarily reflect ability or readiness as much as biological age, there is an expectation that everyone at a particular grade or level will or should be learning and performing at least above certain normed basic levels of competency. There is also a universal expectation that mass schooling means that access to education is open to all school-aged youth regardless of background, ability, or, frankly, need and interest. The idea that education is a human right often, therefore, confounds equity with obligation to be in school, even when schooling is not compulsory in a given system (e.g., India). Equity expectations also address opportunities to learn, although these are not emphasized as much as access and performance outcome equity. Opportunities to learn

typically include the curriculum, facilities, human resources (e.g., teacher preparation and quality), and intersect with issues of access since the absence or lower quality of an opportunity to learn is similar in some ways to not having access to education at all.

Therefore, the shifts in 20th century education, although plentiful, may be distilled into three major changes including mass education, international comparisons, and education as a human right. The norms that these shifts institutionalized in both educational as well as social, cultural, and political systems are that (1) education is for all and should be equitably implemented by every nation-state; (2) the value of education may be empirically measured and compared in order to determine which individuals as well as which educational systems are the "best" or better than others (and which are worse); and (3) the ubiquity of education and the institutionalized assumptions that education (any education) is better than none suggests that education is an individual human right. These shifts in education in the 20th century led to (1) sustainable, institutionalized national education systems, (2) a hyper-digitalization and measurement of educational outcomes, especially through big or large-scale data, and (3) both global and more local efforts to promote and implement "learning for all".

The sustainability of national educational systems is largely due to the socio-cultural institutionalization of formal education worldwide, but also due to individual educational expectations. In other words, the expectations that individuals, communities, and nation-states have regarding the purpose, outcomes, organization, and delivery of education are often more important to the sustainability of education than the implemented versions and functional outcomes of education seen worldwide. Although many different versions of how mass education became a global phenomenon exist, a standard explanation framed by neo-institutional theory is useful. For purposes related to the establishment, expansion, or maintenance of nation-states' economic, social, cultural, and political power, mass education systems were developed in dominant nation-states in the 19th century, often based on Western, militaristic models of organization (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). These early national systems were mutually legitimized through a combination of both national standing and functional output of the systems, which may or may not have been the result of education itself (Meyer *et al.*, 2017).

As new nation-states formed or sought to legitimize their place in the international community, the legitimized global model or script for mass education was adopted, often with a recognition that the model itself was not entirely adaptable to specific national and local conditions or needs (Fiala & Lanford, 1987). Nation-states borrowed the legitimized script for education and implemented it in terms of mission, values, and structures even though implementation often varied or even contradicted the methods used in the nation-states from which the model was borrowed (e.g. Fuller, 2010). Even when education systems are largely decoupled from the local implementation, the system itself is legitimized and expectations for schooling disseminated among the population. This broad expectation about the value, importance, and availability of mass education has ensured that in the 20th century national educational systems worldwide were both institutionalized and sustainable due to their ubiquity and taken-for-granted role in societies around the world.

As assumed elements of individuals' life courses and nation-states legitimacy, education itself became increasingly important to measure, track, and compare in order to give value to education itself and to the individuals and systems it reflected as well. As a result, data collection and use of that data to examine, compare, and evaluate educational

practice and performance steadily grew during the 20th century. As more data became available for evaluation and comparison, even more data was deemed necessary to understand and assess individuals, educators, schools, systems, and the role of education the economy, society, politics, and communities as a whole (Hartong, 2016). As a result, the collection of data grew, in many cases faster than the use of the data itself. By the end of the 20th century, most nation-states had a system of data collection and assessment of students either within country or as part of an arrangement with an international development organization (Wiseman & Baker, 2005). Likewise, the development of organizations in the 20th century dedicated to the collection and distribution of educational data worldwide became both useful and assumed.

As educational systems either developed new functions or reformed their pedagogies and administrative models, the collection of data was increasingly built into the developments and reforms. For example, automation of basic administrative functions like taking attendance became automated in some systems and the annual collection of performance data along with the centralization and standardization of data collection meant that large (i.e., big) datasets were created far beyond the uses of data by educators, administrators, or researchers themselves (Salajan & Jules, 2019; Selwyn *et al.*, 2021). Many national education systems collect and make publicly available the anonymized data from their students and schools so that the public and researchers outside of the educational system itself have the opportunity to analyze the data (Arzberger *et al*, 2004). Likewise, international assessments implemented by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (i.e., IEA) and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (i.e., OECD) have grown both in cycles of data, participating national education systems, and overall sample size. And, even though these datasets are publicly available (and used by many researchers), the available data is always growing faster than the uses by educators, administrators, and researchers.

The hyper-digitalization of education also poses both promises and challenges for educational systems and stakeholders related to the difference between data-based decision-making and data-driven decision-making (Wiseman & Davidson, 2018). Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably by educators and other stakeholders, basing decisions on data still requires that educators, administrators, or other stakeholders interpret the data and make informed decisions using that data as a guide; whereas driving decisions based on data does not. Data-driven decision-making may occur without the judgement or human perspective on caveats, exceptions, or other 'softer' pieces of information that often supplement human judgement. When educational policy, practice, or evaluation is 'driven' by data it is often automated based on strict criteria rather than judged or perceived within the broader context. When educational policy, practice, or evaluation is 'driven' by data the decisions that come from the data are more likely to be determined by algorithm than by the values and understanding of the whole process, individual, or situation. While this hyper-digitalization of education is often highly efficient and includes large amounts of data as evidence for the decisions or outcomes resulting from a particular test, performance, or other summative event, it is also assumed to be accurate simply by the size of the data available and its legitimacy rather than because of the purpose or meaningfulness of the decisions and outcomes themselves.

As a result of the institutionalization of education as a human right and the widespread ubiquity of big data on education, incorporating all youth into formal schooling is seen as the foundation for equity in communities worldwide (Perry, 2009). This

means that both global and local efforts to provide learning "for all" exist and persist even though the changes at the societal or cultural level that are often needed for change to occur are never considered viable solutions to providing learning "for all". For example, in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, an international gathering of nations from around the world developed the global declaration called, Education for All (EFA) (Buchert, 1995). EFA was a declaration of six major goals considered necessary for educational development to occur and benefit individuals and nations worldwide. 10 years later in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed through a cooperative effort by several multilateral organizations (Hulme, 2009). Although these goals did not all exclusively address education, they did recognize its importance to achieving each of the eight MDG goals, with specific focus on education in Goal 2 on universal primary education. Then, in 2016, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were declared to be a meaningful update to the MDGs that reflected the developments that had been achieved and those yet to be achieved (Bruns *et al.*, 2019). Again, although education was not the only goal declared as part of the SDGs, Goal 4 focuses on quality education, specifically.

Throughout the EFA, MDG, and SDG eras, the focus on education and learning for all was a recurring theme, and as a result of these three global agendas, universal enrollment of school-aged children, especially girls, is a recognized achievement or goal of all countries worldwide in the 21st century. But, a darker history belies the promise of each of these global agendas. In short, few if any of the goals stated as part of any of these declarations have been (or will ever be) fully achieved worldwide (Griffiths, 2021). Progress has been made, and monitoring of the goals is ongoing around the world, which are both significant achievements. But, the shortcomings in education and learning for all persist, largely because inequalities persist both within and across nations related to race, ethnicity, class, and gender. These social, cultural, and economic differences have been identified as obstacles to equitable education and the EFA, MDGs, and SDGs show that there is widespread agreement among nations that these differences should be eliminated, but the willingness to agree that inequality exists and should be addressed is apparently different from eliminating it.

2.1. 20th Century Promises and 21st Century Pitfalls

Although the 20th century was an era of educational expansion, datafication, and accommodation, the 21st century has been more about the realization of the problems and inequalities that persisted through the 20th century's developments more than about a new direction or advance in the new era. The 21st century's pitfalls are not unique to the 21st century, but they are increasingly visible in contrast to 20th century advances. The 20th century in educational reform and development may be known for many things (i.e., mass education, international comparison, and education as a human right), but chief among them is equity, and specifically equitable educational access, opportunity, and outcomes. The 21st century pitfalls examined here include inequality, decoupling, and cloaking, which have all hindered or highlighted the 20th century's focus on equity in education.

Educational Equity vs. Institutionalized Sexism and Racism. As discussed above, the 20th century's massification of formal education worldwide led to universal enrollment, or at least the shared understanding across national education systems that universal enrollment was and is a chief goal of education worldwide. But, as is also pointed about above, universal enrollment is difficult or impossible to achieve in many educational

systems because of persistent inequalities that both contextualize and permeate formal education (Clemens, 2004; Clemens *et al.*, 2007). The goal and expectations of educational access, opportunity, and achievement for all school-aged youth were institutionalized in every nation worldwide at the beginning of the 21st century, but the implementation of universal education is often hindered by institutionalized sexism and racism worldwide as well (Psaki *et al.*, 2018). And, in spite of the idealized vision of education as a panacea for problems like these, widespread and historically-institutionalized sexism and racism seem difficult or impossible to change through formal education alone (Sriprakash *et al.*, 2020; Wiseman *et al*, 2016).

One way institutionalized sexism and racism is demonstrated is by conflicting equity expectations in school versus out of school. In other words, the equitable expectations related to education and the idea of education as a right of all school-aged youth regardless of background means that within educational systems, equity across genders and races is often more achievable within the educational system (i.e., formal schooling) than out of the system in the broader society. One example of this is the differences in access, opportunity, and achievement within educational systems versus social and economic access, opportunity, and outcomes in mainstream society.

Research on education and gender in Saudi Arabia, for example, has shown that girls and boys have relatively equal opportunities within the educational system compared to outside of the system (Baki, 2004), and that even when girls seem to have an advantage in education it is often because boys are either leaving the educational system early or lack motivation to achieve in school because their social and economic opportunities outside of school are greater than inside the system. For girls, the opposite is true. Girls persist longer in formal education, often into higher education in Saudi Arabia, and outperform boys at higher levels of education (Alsuwaida, 2016; Wiseman, 2010). But, in the social, economic, and political systems in Saudi Arabia, girls and women have fewer rights and economic opportunities, cannot often be social mobile, and find it difficult to find employment or hold political office without the agreement or permission of male relatives and their family's influence (Al-Bakr *et al*, 2017; Young, 2017).

In other nations and communities, the persistence of institutionalized sexism and racism is demonstrated in education through the rise of parallel systems of education. In South Africa, for example, apartheid and separate educational systems by race were replaced by schools segregated by neighborhood community and school fees (Ndimande, 2016; Wiseman & Davidson, 2021). While there is no national law preventing youth from any community going to school in others, often across racialized neighborhood boundaries, the informal segregation demonstrated by variations in school fees (required for attendance) are significant (Fiske & Ladd, 2006). Sometimes black South Africans attend predominantly white South African schools because they are recruited for their academic abilities or athletic skills, but rarely if ever do white South Africans attend predominantly black or mixed-race schools.

These sorts of parallel systems are seen in developed, Western nations as well. For example, the US has a system of magnet and charter schools within school districts nationwide that serve local communities in the school's neighborhood attendance zone, but also attract qualified students from across the school district for special, often advanced, academic programs. In many of these schools, the magnet or charter-focused program at a school is almost exclusively comprised of youth from largely white, middle income or above communities, while those academic tracks that prepare youth for

vocational programs or general education are comprised predominantly of students from the school's traditional attendance zone (i.e., low income, racial or ethnic minority) (Ayscue *et al.*, 2018).

Education for All vs. Politics of Education. The 20th century's developments in education made expectations of education and learning for all the norm across communities around the world regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. But, in the 21st century we see that those traditional segregation lines did not fade as much as expected or planned. Education throughout the 20th century has been discussed as an institution serving the public good (Grace, 1989). The idea was that everyone should, could, and would participate and likewise everyone should, could, and would benefit. This is also where the economics-oriented human capital approach was especially influential. The promise was that as investment in education rose, so would the returns on that investment (Woodhall, 1987). This theoretically would lead to a meritocratic system where those who invested their time, energy, and financial resources in education would receive the rewards of education in equal measure (Mijs, 2016). Over time, the rationale was that this system would level the playing field among all school-aged youth and their families because everyone would have access to education, and with that access the expectation was that the benefits would be as great as the effort and abilities that were invested in education.

Yet, the 21st century has seen the meritocratic ideal collapse under the weight of polemical politics and politicized governance of education in a way that is not necessarily new, but rather builds on 20th century polemics and politics of education (Westheimer, 2019). As the massification of education was justified by nation-states as a way to develop productive citizens of a particular government, there has also been a persistent focus on nationalism over citizenship (Jackson, 2019). This has meant that while productive citizenship may be interpreted to mean that schooling is intended to create youth who consider themselves a part of the social, cultural, and political community of a particular government, their incorporation into the civic community may be geared less towards creating members of the community who are employable, and more toward creating servile rather than fully-empowered citizens. In many nation-states, the meaning of citizenship and the full rights of citizenship are reserved for national citizens rather than for immigrants, refugees, forced migrants, or others who are not racially, culturally, ethnically, linguistically, or politically affiliated with the government and mainstream society (Wiseman *et al.*, 2016).

In some nations, the distinction between national citizen and non-national student is stark. In countries where a significant proportion of the labor force, especially those working in the service industry, are not native-born citizens of that nation, participation in formal education may be hindered, not encouraged, or even in some cases made illegal (Wiseman *et al.*, 2013). Even when non-national youth participate in education, they are often not fully incorporated into the society of the nation-state through their participation in education. This can and has been documented in the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that national versus non-national youth have about their opportunities beyond schooling in higher education or the labor market (Wiseman *et al.*, 2016; Wiseman *et al.*, 2013).

The early 21st century saw some of the largest movements of refugee and forced migration worldwide since World War II, yet education systems are neither prepared to accept refugee and forced migrant youth nor equipped to address the unique needs

of these students (Wiseman *et al.*, 2019). As youth whose identities and citizenships are confounded with language and political, economic, or natural disaster, refugee and forced migrant youth are often caught in between the equity norm of education and the entrenched biases, stigmas, and legal limitations resulting from institutionalized racism. One example of this is the experience of unaccompanied immigrant children crossing into nations like the US as part of their forced migration journey only to be arrested and detained (Wiseman *et al.*, 2020). Their non-national status is further exacerbated by the fact that they are often not citizens of any community, and mass education, which can incorporate individuals into the nation-state, is unavailable to them.

The privatization of education has also been a way for those with greater influence, power, resources, or other advantages to separate their children from those who are poor, from racial or ethnic minorities, or immigrants (Bonal & Belleï, 2018). Privatization of education often comes in the form of private tutoring, school vouchers or other choice systems, and non-governmental or "private" schooling (Levin, 2018). Each option moves students out of the governance of the dominant political system or provides a focus on specific ideological, moral, political, or other politicized educational missions, visions, curricula, or teaching (Verger *et al.*, 2016). In some ways, the privatization of education is a way to deregulate an institution that often formally is acknowledged as a public good and shared investment, but privately is used as an individual investment for gaining social, economic, or political advantage over others (Martin & Solo'Rzano, 2003).

Yet, even though education has become increasingly politicized and the polemics of politics have reached into education worldwide, there are significant developments in educational outcomes demonstrated worldwide. For example, there is rising academic achievement worldwide, although the socioeconomic achievement gap is increasing as well (Chmielewski, 2019). Global testing regimes may shift the focus of learning in schools towards summative assessment skills (Phelps, 2019), but the expansion of education during the 20th century coupled with a focus on academic outcomes has resulted in significant achievement gains since the mid-20th century and into the 21st.

There are also improvements in applying school content to life context. The factory-like model of mass education that dominated many public schools worldwide throughout the 20th century often focused more on processing school-aged youth through the system rather than providing them content and context for applying the knowledge and skills they acquired in school to their lives outside of and beyond schooling. Yet, in the early 20th century, John Dewey was a proponent of formal education being an extension of children's everyday lives and experience, and proposed a child-centered curriculum that would place life application at the center of schooling (Cremin, 1959). Dewey's legacy is that the 21st century sees more differentiated instruction, more school transition programs, and more integration of education and the labor market than ever before.

2.2. 21st Century Pitfalls & Enduring Promises

The 21st century began with several global tragedies and crises, including global terrorism, a worldwide refugee crisis, the #MeToo movement bringing an awareness and response to institutionalized sexism to communities all over the world, the rise of populist politics and politicians that have become as polemical worldwide as at any time since World War II, racial discrimination culminating in the tragic and symbolic killing of George Floyd by police in the US, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which literally shut the world down and in so doing exposed all of the inequalities and fractures in the social,

economic, and political fabric of every nation worldwide. Unfortunately, these crises are not unique products of the 21st century, but are instead the culmination of decades and centuries of segregation, oppression, and inequalities that are institutionalized in law, society, the economy, and in educational systems, too.

Although the 21st century may not have created these crises exclusively, it has hosted their surprisingly simultaneous and extraordinarily public occurrences. Many of those who are not or refuse to admit that they are affected by the institutionalized problems contributing to these 21st century crisis have pointed to laws that outlawed gender or racial discrimination, proclaimed evidence and examples of marginalized community members who have attained positions of power or have achieved extraordinary accomplishments in science, medicine, law, politics, and business, and have pointed to the progressive politics and diversity of organizations and industry alike. Education is an institution that has experienced an especially severe critique during the early 21st century for embodying the duality of equitable opportunities and idealistically meritocratic ideologies but ignoring many of the obligations of education as a social institution (Baker, 2014). And, as such, the experience of formal education has all of the problems, discriminations, assumptions, and divisions embedded in it that the wider society, economy, culture, or political system demonstrates.

The traditional indicators of inequality (race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status) have always played an outsized role in both the development and practice of education, but the defining moment of the early 21st century is the pandemic. With the rare exception of world war, no other event has had as much impact on contemporary society in either the 20th or 21st centuries as the COVID-19 pandemic because it removed the 20th century assumptions and expectations about educational equity to show that formal schooling is still as unequal and discriminatory as other social, economic, or political institutions despite equity-based education charters, structures, policies, and curricula (Soudien, 2020). The norms of education developed and supported throughout the 20th century concealed or 'cloaked' widespread, institutionalized inequalities, which these crises of the 21st century and the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, revealed.

Specifically, the pandemic changed widely-held assumptions based firmly on two basic 20th century educational norms: (1) access to formal education and (2) the opportunity to learn provided by schooling. This occurred because of the temporary shift in education delivery, the importance of individual educational resources during home learning, and the family and community circumstances (i.e., responsibilities) of diverse students, which affected their ability to access, commit to, focus on, or experience the effects of teaching and learning otherwise provided by formal schooling.

3. Conclusion: The Cloak of Equality & 'New' Norms

Official educational policy and curriculum in the 21st century largely reflect the 20th century norms of (1) equitable access, opportunity, and outcomes; (2) human rights and justice-oriented values; and (3) standards that reflect these equity values. But, the de facto implementation of these policies and curricula reflects (1) resource allocation differentiation; (2) the reproduction of racial, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic dominance; and (3) the propagation of parallel yet unequal systems of education around subjectively 'acceptable' standards.

The contrasts between the official policies and curricula and the de facto policies and curricula show what the "cloak of equality" has and continues to conceal (Author, 2021). Although the norms and expectations for education worldwide often reflect expectations

for educational excellence and equity, the policy and practice of education remains embedded in fundamental and institutionalized inequalities. Therefore, education policy and practice in the 21st century needs a new set of norms. Three 'new' norms for education policy worldwide are possible given the 21st century context and evidence discussed above. They address (1) education for all, (2) international comparisons of education, and (3) education as a human right.

The first new norm of education policy comes from the recognition that education and learning for all is a policy slogan, but not necessarily an implemented practice. This speaks to the suspension of disbelief that most educational policymakers and educators themselves engage in daily. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that even when educational improvement occurs, it occurs within a broader context of inequality and increasing gaps. Education policymakers in the 21st century, therefore, should begin with the assumption that education and society are fundamentally unequal if they base their decisions on the evidence. And, a demonstrated way to accomplish this is by situating themselves in and becoming explicitly aware of the system of privilege that exists within their nation, government, organization, and community. For example, equity audits are one way that policymakers can proactively examine the contrasts between education as an individual right and public good and education as a tool for the reproduction of inequality (Skrla *et al.*, 2004). Audits of this sort, therefore, are one fundamental tool to identify one's own place in the landscape of education and equity and make education policy from that position of self-awareness.

The second new norm is that international comparisons are valuable and useful only to the degree they are contextualized. The emphasis on international comparative education and, in particular, big data and large-scale assessment is a firmly institutionalized component of 21st century educational policymaking and practice (Wiseman & Popov, 2015). In other words, using data to compare is natural and assumed, and the use of big data to do so will realistically continue throughout the 21st century. But, using big data does not preclude the contextualization of that data, even when results are generalized across schools or systems. Policymakers often want to know that the overall effect is or which inputs produce which outputs so that they can provide 'evidence-based' policies to their communities and constituents. But, contextualization of international comparisons means that value-added measures and ranking of systems by average student achievement are often not useful in understanding what is happening in a particular educational community. Therefore, contextualization is more likely to be accomplished when accompanied by the disaggregation of or ability to disaggregate big data. They new norm of international comparison, therefore, is that contextualization through disaggregation is the way to bring equity to education.

Finally, the third new norm of education policy in the 21st century is that individual human rights are be embedded in the public good. The evidence presented above suggests that individual human rights have usurped the rights of communities worldwide. This focus on individual rights is what justifies the unequal outcomes of educational privatization, polemics, and even institutionalized sexism and racism to some degree. The new norm is, therefore, not one of haves and have nots, although those communities do genuinely exist. It is instead a recognition that there is a continuum from individual to public rights related to education, and that the most equitable and advantageous position on that continuum for both individuals and communities is not at the extremes, but is somewhere in between. This does not suggest that all situations are equal or that

every individual and community must be perfectly balanced, but it does begin with the recognition that the norms of educational equity and human rights are reasonable and appropriate, and that they also are not exclusively individual.

Like any shift in values, culture, traditions, and expectations, these 'new' norms cannot be simply declared and implemented. Shifts in paradigms occur as educational needs and opportunities develop, and so in the 21st century, the idea that new norms guide how to implement the 'old' 20 century norms may seem naïve. Perhaps that is true, but evidence plainly shows that a cloak of equality has existed for most of the 20th century and has fed off of the norm of educational equity and all of its antecedents; therefore, to recognize this evidence and the resulting rise of new norms that recognize the 'cloak' and overtly encourage behaviors and activities related to self-awareness through equity audits, the contextualization of internationally-comparative data, and the situation of human rights along a public-to-private continuum is worth considering.

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