

Keynote Address

A Fresh Look at the World Educational Crisis

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This conference on the economics of education falls in the tenth anniversary year of another memorable educational happening, the Williamsburg International Conference on the World Crisis in Education. This seems a particularly appropriate time and place, therefore, to take a fresh look at the World Educational Crisis — to ask what has happened to it over the past ten years, where it may be heading over the next ten years, and what measures are needed to alleviate it.

The Crisis Ten Years Ago

It will help our perspective to review briefly how the World Educational Crisis looked in 1967. It resulted from a combination of powerful forces, some external and some internal to educational systems. The initiating force, starting right after World War II, had been the explosive increase in world-wide educational demand inspired by sweeping political, economic, and demographic changes and by a “revolution of rising expectations”.

National leaders everywhere responded to this explosive demand with a strategy of linear expansion whose simple aim was to expand their existing educational system in its old image as rapidly as possible so as to increase the number and proportion of each age group enrolled at each level of the system. This strategy culminated in the quantitative targets adopted by the historic UNESCO regional conferences at Karachi, Addis Ababa and Santiago-de-Chile at the start of the 1960s. Measured by its own simple criterion of success, the strategy of linear expansion appeared to be succeeding brilliantly by 1967. In the 15 years from 1950 to 1965 world-wide enrolments had roughly doubled — a truly remarkable accomplishment.

But the picture was by no means as rosy as the mounting enrolment figures suggested. Educational systems everywhere were besieged by shortages of qualified teachers, classrooms and textbooks that could not be quickly overcome simply by spending more money. As they spread their limited resources thinner over more and more pupils, educators and the general public complained increasingly about the erosion of educational “quality”. At the same time evidence accumulated of shocking internal inefficiencies hidden by the optimistic enrolment figures. In the rural areas of many developing countries (where the great majority of children lived) primary school drop-out rates reached 75 per cent, and since many children — particularly girls — never even entered school this often meant that no more than ten per cent of the whole age group

actually completed the primary cycle. And many of these had “repeated” grades, thus taking seven to nine years to complete a six year cycle. This combination of high drop-out and high repeater rates meant that the actual cost of putting one pupil all the way through primary school was several times greater than the “nominal” cost (based on dividing the total school budget by the number enrolled).

It was also clear by 1967 that educational systems everywhere were caught in a serious financial squeeze — between rising unit costs and tightening budgetary ceilings — that promised to get steadily worse. To finance the great expansion, national educational budgets had grown dramatically between 1950 and 1965, generally two to four times as fast as the G.N.P. and overall public revenues. In other words, education had been winning a steadily increasing percentage share of available national resources — a trend that obviously could not continue indefinitely without seriously crippling other important public services. The handwriting was already on the wall by 1967; the rise of educational budgets was already slowing down or even flattening out in a number of countries. The outlook was that in all countries sooner or later education’s share of the national budget would stabilize, bringing annual increases into line with the growth rate of the economy and overall public revenues.

This might not have been so bad if educational systems were improving their efficiency and holding down or even reducing their unit costs, but the evidence suggested that quite the opposite was happening. After accounting for inflation, the real costs per pupil at every level were rising, mainly because teacher salaries were rising and no serious steps were being taken to increase the productivity of teachers or of capital resources used by education.

Two other clouds were on the horizon that threatened to grow into a storm. One was the increasing uneasiness about the old curriculum and the relevance of what was being taught to the real needs of students and their life prospects. The other was a growing imbalance between the rapidly expanding “output” of educational systems and the capacity of employment markets to provide appropriate jobs for the newcomers. The politically lethal problem of the “educated unemployed” had already shown up in such countries as India, the Philippines and Egypt and was just around the corner in many others — including Western industrialized countries.

In addition to all these worrying pedagogical and economic issues, the more profound issue of equality and social justice was shaping up. The theory had been, in keeping with the new democratic spirit of the times, that universal primary schooling and widened opportunities for secondary and higher education would erode existing social and economic inequalities and give every youngster, regardless of family background, an equal opportunity in life. But evidence was mounting, particularly in developing countries that were still far from the goal of universal primary schooling, that their urban-oriented and elitist-oriented educational systems were inadvertently serving as a powerful engine of discrimination. The children of educated parents, especially in urban areas, who brought a good vocabulary and a higher measure of motivation to school, were far more likely to climb successfully up the academic ladder than the children of the poor and uneducated who comprised the great majority in rural areas. There was also serious discrimination against girls in many areas, not as a matter of educational

policy but because of deep-rooted cultural patterns. It did not require a crystal ball in 1967 to see that these festering inequalities and injustices would eventually lead to serious trouble for educational systems.

All the factors mentioned above had contributed importantly to the World Educational Crisis as it stood in the late 1960s. But the most fundamental cause of all was the inflexibility and inertia of educational systems themselves — their overpowering tendency to cling to the familiar, and to perpetuate the inherited curriculum, teaching methods and all the other paraphernalia of the traditional system in the face of great changes in the composition, needs and life prospects of their expanding clientele. The crisis, in a nutshell, was a crisis of growing maladjustment between tradition-bound educational systems and the rapidly changing world around them.

This being the case, the crisis was bound to worsen in the absence of strenuous counter-measures, starting with a new and more creative strategy aimed not simply at *expanding* the existing educational system but at *changing* it to fit the new circumstances. What was needed, in effect, was a far-reaching “educational revolution” that would catch up and keep pace with the vast social and political changes going on and with the simultaneous scientific and technological revolutions taking place in agriculture, industry, communication, transportation, health and other fields, and with the explosion of knowledge itself.

To be fair, it should be said that the hard-pressed educational administrators and teachers can hardly be faulted (though they often are) for not having pushed such an educational revolution. They had their hands more than full just trying to hold the old system together under very trying conditions. Moreover, educational systems had historically never been equipped or inclined to re-examine themselves critically and to apply to their own affairs the methods of modern research and development they had taught so well to others; thus, conventional educational practices were based largely on folklore and tradition, not on scientific enquiry. Finally it should be noted that the general public, and parents particularly, were often more resistant to educational innovations than the administrators and teachers themselves.

The Crisis Today

Turning from the past to the present, what can be said about the state of the World Educational Crisis today?

It must be said straightaway that there are no clear-cut answers to this question for there has been no recent systematic effort to assemble, analyse and interpret the relevant information such as was done in preparation for the Williamsburg Conference. Nevertheless, in the hope of stimulating discussion, I shall venture a few personal and impressionistic observations and hypotheses based on recent visits to a number of countries and discussions with a variety of educational leaders and analysts as well as casual reading of numerous reports that cross my desk. Needless to say, I will have to deal in crude generalizations that will not precisely fit the widely varying circumstances of many individual countries.

With these caveats in mind, let me present the first whopping generalization. Many far-reaching educational, economic, and social changes and new developments have occurred over the past ten years that have in some cases moderated and in others further aggravated the various crisis factors outlined earlier. On the whole, these pluses and minuses appear to have balanced out more favorably for educational systems in the industrialized countries than in the developing world and widened the differences between their respective situations. Here are some of the specific changes that lead me to this conclusion.

Shortages and Pressures for Expansion

In most of the industrialized world, the pressures to expand educational systems and enrolments have slackened dramatically in recent years and the former shortages of classrooms and qualified teachers have now turned into surpluses (especially at the primary level). There are two main reasons. First, the post-war bumper crop of babies has now passed through all levels of the educational system, and as young adults they are disinclined to produce a bumper crop of their own. The birth rate has fallen sharply, close to the point of Zero Population Growth in many instances. Second, with universal primary education having long existed in these countries, and with the greatly increased participation rates in secondary and post-secondary education having now been achieved, there is an inevitable and natural slackening of demand.

In most developing countries, though to a lesser extent, shortages of qualified teachers and facilities have abated considerably. However, the pressures for further educational expansion are still very strong and are likely to remain so for some years to come. The continuing high birth rate, coupled with declining child mortality, requires the schools in most developing countries to increase their intake by two to three per cent each year before they can even begin to increase their participation ratio. This rapid demographic growth, plus the further demographic fact that the school age population in these countries is a much higher proportion of the total population than in the developed countries, makes it extremely difficult to boost educational participation rates, especially in the lowest income countries.

Despite these difficulties, however, a sizeable number of developing countries according to UNESCO statistical reports have somehow managed to increase their participation rates over the past ten years (though generally at a slower pace than earlier). Even more surprising in light of the earlier heavy emphasis on achieving universal primary schooling, the rate of expansion has been considerably greater in secondary and higher education (where the costs-per-student are far greater) than in primary education. I strongly suspect that this curious phenomenon is linked to the widening social-economic gap between urban and rural areas and to the proliferation of rural poverty in many developing countries.

Efficiency and Productivity

The facts here are sparse and murky, but judging from the fragmentary evidence available there is no reason to believe that there has been any substantial and widespread improvement in the internal efficiency of

educational systems over the past ten years, in either the developing or developed world. The same old indicators of low efficiency can still be found in abundance: rising unit costs unmatched by corresponding improvements in learning results; perpetuation of curriculum irrelevancies; underutilization of costly facilities and equipment; heavy absorption of valuable teacher time on non-professional chores that could be done by others; incredibly high drop-out and repeater rates (especially in the rural areas of many developing countries); and under-expenditure on learning materials with adverse effects on teacher productivity.

This is not to suggest that there have been no efforts to improve efficiency. One finds a substantial number of such efforts in both developing and developed countries, usually tied to significant innovations. But at this stage such innovations are generally isolated and small scale. The secret of spreading well proven innovations on a large scale still remains to be discovered.

The Financial Squeeze

Here again the facts are scarce and tricky to interpret. There seems little doubt, however, that the continuing pressure of rising costs against stiffening budgetary constraints remains a major problem for virtually all educational systems.

The levelling off of educational demand in industrialized countries has somewhat alleviated the pressure for large annual budgetary increases, but it has certainly not eliminated it or significantly reduced the difficulties faced by educational administrators in the annual "Battle of the Budget". The public and legislative resistance to higher educational expenditures seems to have stiffened considerably over the past ten years. At the same time the pressures of inflation and the demands of greatly strengthened teachers' unions are giving sleepless nights to educational managers.

Most developing countries, of course, other than those with large oil revenues, are far worse off financially. They not only face the pressures of inflation and of strong public demand for further expansion, but in many cases their educational budgets have now reached 25 to 30 per cent of total public revenues, making further increases very doubtful. According to published UNESCO statistics a good many developing countries have somehow managed to expand their educational budgets and education's share of the total public budget over the past ten years. The latest UNESCO statistics available, however, stop at 1974. There is some independent evidence that suggests a substantial slowing down since then — due in part to the world-wide recession and the adverse impact of increased oil costs on national budgets, but also raising the possibility that education ministries in many developing countries are now bumping against immovable budget ceilings.

Education and Employment

The small cloud on the horizon ten years ago has by now enlarged considerably. The imbalance between educational output and job openings has worsened considerably in both the developing and developed

world and has become a prime concern of educational and political leaders. The problem is already sizeable, but the fear is that it will continue to grow, not only exacerbating the educational crisis but fueling a serious economic, social, and political crisis. The unexpected eruption of student protests all across Europe and North America in the spring of 1968 have subsided for the moment, but few would wager that it couldn't happen again.

Unemployment of the relatively highly educated, though it gets the lion's share of attention because of its political volatility, is actually only the tip of a much larger iceberg. In developing countries it is the less educated and uneducated out-of-school youth who bear the main brunt of high unemployment, and their numbers have swelled considerably in the past ten years despite increased educational enrolments. Chronic and sizeable unemployment, of course, is not a problem that can be solved by the schools alone, or even primarily by education, even though the schools and universities are often incorrectly made the whipping boy. This problem can only be solved by straightening out the dislocations within and between economic systems, and this is likely to require also some rather extensive political and social changes. But societies do have a right to expect their educational systems to provide relevant educational offerings and experiences that will facilitate national development in the broadest sense and prepare young people to participate productively in the affairs of the society and its economy. There is little doubt that educational systems still have a sizeable distance to go in living up to this reasonable expectation.

Educational Innovations and Adaptation

The brightest and most promising aspect of the current picture, in my view, is the broader and more realistic perceptions of education that have gained currency in the last ten years and the new spirit of self-criticism and innovation that has permeated the world educational community.

The conception of education as *learning* and not simply as schooling, and the view of learning as a life-long process that not only can but must take place through many different channels and in a great variety of environments — some highly institutionalized but most of them much less formal — have gained wide acceptance in recent years and have set educators and others to thinking in fresh directions. This is a very hopeful fact.

To be sure, there is a tendency in the educational circles for jugular ideas to degenerate into hollow slogans and eventually give way to the next new fashion to come along without ever getting far beyond the talk stage. This could become the fate of the present popular rhetoric about life-long learning, non-formal education, distance learning, and similar stimulating concepts. But there is encouraging evidence that these current ideas — actually very old ones in a new context — are beginning to be translated into action and will have a more enduring impact. Compared to most educational fashions of the past they are much more fundamental and much more radical, in the true sense of that term. Moreover, the educational crisis itself has helped to create the pressure and the necessity to break out of the old moulds and strike out in new directions.

If there were a world index of significant educational innovations, I feel sure it would show that the volume of such innovations in the last ten

years has been considerably greater than in any comparable previous period. One can only hope that these years will be looked back on by future educational historians as a critical period of incubation in which important new ideas were hatched, tested out, and acquired a momentum that accelerated greatly in the years that followed. Meantime, we'll just have to wait and see.

Whether the World Educational Crisis is still with us today and whether it is better or worse than in 1967 becomes largely a matter of how one defines the crisis and weighs the various favourable and unfavourable changes referred to above. For my own part, I believe that the crisis is still a very live and large reality and that we would be ill-advised to take it lightly just because we have learned to live with it. I say this not so much because of what has or has not transpired over the past ten years but because of the enormity of the challenges that lie ahead in the next ten years — challenges that most societies and education systems are presently ill-prepared to cope with.

The Outlook

In looking into the future, I propose to narrow my focus to the developing countries and in particular to their rural areas. In so doing I do not mean to suggest that their urban areas are not also filled with important challenges that must be dealt with, or that the industrialized nations will suddenly run out of educational problems of crisis proportions.

My reason for choosing this focus is because there is today, at long last, a wide and growing consensus that the dominant challenge facing the majority of developing nations in the immediate future, and for a long time to come, is to develop their vast rural areas and to bring the long neglected, poverty-stricken mass of their rural people into the mainstream of the national development process, as both contributors and beneficiaries. To accomplish this, the developing countries will clearly require much more material help than they have had in the past from the more developed nations — not as a matter of welfare but because the whole world has a major stake in meeting this mammoth challenge.

Rural development in its full sense involves much more than expanding the output of commercial agriculture to supply urban customers and the export trade (which has been the main orientation of rural development projects up to now). It means helping the poorest of the rural poor, who have been largely by-passed by earlier rural programmes, to produce enough nutritious food to meet the needs of their own families. It means improving their basic health conditions and encouraging them to pursue their own enlightened policy of responsible parenthood. It means opening up new employment opportunities, raising the low productivity of rural workers, and diversifying rural economies to make these things possible. Not least of all it means achieving a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development, and building more equitable rural societies. This is a long-term task that will require a large and persistent effort, above all by the rural people themselves but with strong encouragement and essential help from others.

Education — broadly defined as *learning* — clearly has a crucial and ubiquitous role to play in this transformation, in close conjunction with other essential inputs. Rural people of every age, status and occupation

will have to acquire new insights, knowledge and skills of many kinds, along with new attitudes and new hope, in order to lift themselves above the level of absolute poverty and sheer day-to-day survival.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that the existing urban-oriented elitist-oriented schools inherited from the past are not the answer to these rural learning needs. It is true that they have helped many bright and ambitious young people (mostly boys) to get to the city and better themselves. But what about the great majority who are left behind to live out their lives in rural settings? What have the schools done to equip them for a brighter future? In many rural areas that my ICED colleagues and I have visited in the past half dozen years, a high proportion of those who stay behind — particularly those from the poorest families — never even get to school, or else drop out before even learning to read. Some of the most frustrated ones are those who, though they finish primary school, cannot go further up the academic ladder. As an eminent educator in Bangladesh observed recently, “These schools have nothing to do with improving rural life. Parents view them as a railroad station to which they take their children to be transported to the city.”

Even if the present schools could be transformed into serving rural children and youth much more effectively — and I agree with those who believe they can — the sheer problem of numbers is staggering. According to UNESCO projections, the total of *out-of-school* children and youths from six to 17 years of age in developing countries (largely in rural areas) will increase from 264 million in 1975 to 405 million by 1985. This estimate is based on the relatively optimistic assumption that national school enrolments will continue to increase at the rate of the past ten years.

If there is to be real rural development in the future, today's great out-of-school majority of rural children and youth are going to have to create it. How can they best be prepared for this responsibility?

There are obviously no quick and easy answers. Part of the answer certainly lies in a drastic reorientation and recasting of the existing schools, involving not only a new curriculum but a breaking loose from traditional age-grade ties, enabling young people to pursue their learning interests on a part-time basis at their own convenience, and using as teachers anyone in the village who has something relevant and useful to teach.

An even larger part of the answer lies in the great and flexible potentialities of non-formal education. By this I do not simply mean substitute ways to teach what is taught in schools, such as literacy and numeracy, but a great variety of essential things that are not taught in schools and probably should not be attempted.

By non-formal education I mean, very simply, any organized learning activity outside the structure of the formal educational system that is consciously aimed at meeting specific learning needs of particular sub-groups in the community — be they children, youth, or adults. Non-formal education, thus defined, includes a vast assortment of activities, such as agricultural extension, skill training, health and family planning programmes, youth clubs and women's organizations with educational objectives, functional literacy programmes, and so forth.

Non-formal education can be a substitute for formal schooling when there is not enough to go around, but primarily it is complementary and supplementary to formal schooling. It follows up on formal education and tackles learning tasks for which schools are not well adapted. It serves audiences that are beyond school age. Its greatest virtue is its flexibility and potential for serving virtually any kind of learning need, at any time of day or night. And it *can* be low cost, especially if it takes advantage of locally available resources and does not try to emulate the expensive methods of formal education.

There are many more non-formal educational activities already going on in developing countries — and in industrialized countries — than is realized, especially by professional educators who think of education exclusively in terms of schools. Ironically, other ministries (such as agriculture, health, manpower and social welfare) are much more involved in these learning activities than education ministries. But such activities now need more attention. They need to be broadened and strengthened and to be better integrated with other development efforts. For non-formal education is not a “system” unto itself. Rather it is — or should be — an integral component of all different types of rural development programmes, a kind of lubricant that makes them work effectively.

The point I would stress is that both formal and non-formal education, if they are to be effective and productive, must be tailored to meet the real needs of rural people in their particular circumstances — not the presumed needs as perceived by distant experts. These needs vary from place to place and over time, and they differ among subgroups within the same community.

The cardinal rule, therefore, in planning rural educational provisions is to start with the learning needs themselves, not with a preconceived institutional solution (especially one imported from some industrialized country). Once the needs are clear, then the problem is to design a locally viable and low-cost way to meet them, after considering various possible alternatives.

My colleagues and I at the ICED, in connection with a study for UNICEF, attempted to illustrate some basic categories of “minimum essential learning needs” of children and youths growing up in poor rural areas, as a basis for considering alternative ways to meet them. Briefly, we came up with the following six categories (which are spelled out more fully in a little book called *New Paths to Learning — for Rural Children and Youth*):

1. Positive attitudes toward co-operation with one’s family and fellow-men, toward work and national development, and toward self-improvement through learning.
2. Functional literacy and numeracy, sufficient to read a newspaper or farm or health bulletin and to make locally useful measurements and calculations.
3. A scientific outlook and an elementary understanding of the processes of nature in the particular area.
4. Functional knowledge and skills for rearing a family and operating a household.

5. Functional knowledge and skills for earning a living.
6. Functional knowledge and skills for civic participation.

These are only illustrative; they are not a formula carved in stone to fit every situation. But they suggest how educational planners, working close to the local scene, might go about examining the real learning needs as the first step toward devising appropriate ways to meet them. They also suggest a way to check the relevance and adequacy of what is now being taught, whether within the schools or outside.

An interesting point about the above list of needs is that the rural school as it generally exists today is primarily addressed to only one out of the six; namely, literacy and numeracy (though it may contribute marginally to some of the others). This is not said to criticize the schools but simply to emphasize that the schools cannot be expected to do everything and shouldn't try.

Let me emphasize that non-formal education is not a panacea. *There are no educational panaceas for rural areas.* The solutions will not be simple or easy. They will require ingenuity, persistence, patience and a lot of hard work over a long time. They will also require overcoming stubborn bureaucratic complexities and rivalries and abandoning the comfortable but fallacious notion that all education for a nation can be planned in a central ministry in the capital.

But all this is what makes it challenging. If an able and spirited young man or woman were to ask my advice on an exciting frontier to work on for the next 30 to 40 years, I would urge them to try rural education. And unless a great many such young people do in fact move onto the frontiers of rural development, with great energy and dedication, tomorrow's educational crisis may be considerably more severe and ominous than yesterday's or today's.