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From Human Capital to Human Development: Transformation for a Knowledge Society

In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama talked of the need to “transform” America’s schools “to meet the challenges of a new age.” He did not mince words; he called for transformation, not improvement. Harvard University professor and former high school teacher, Tony Wagner, in his new book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, sheds light on why a transformation may be needed. Schools have not failed, he argues; they have become “dangerously obsolete.” Given that most young people a century ago were destined for manual work, it was considerably less important than today that they do intellectual work. In a nutshell, “schools were never designed to teach all children to think.”¹

Canada’s public education system, like those of all industrialized countries, was also designed for a time when schools were supposed to ‘sort’ young people according to their place in the economy (e.g. farm, factory, further education). But the world has changed. Compared to a generation ago, youth today are experiencing a world of greater complexity, diversity, and pluralism of values, more uncertain employment prospects, and less assurance of upward mobility. There is a world of technology, of expanded opportunities for social connectedness, of globalization and the dissolution of borders – a ‘multi-spatial’ world, in both a virtual and a civic sense.² Wagner’s list of skills needed to survive and compete in this 21st century job market is, by now, familiar: critical thinking and problem solving, curiosity and imagination, collaboration across networks, agility and adaptability, and assessing and analyzing information.

Public education systems all over the world are responding to these changes. Unfortunately, their responses are all too often framed in terms of the skills and learning needed for the knowledge economy (i.e. labour market) rather than those needed to live in, and contribute to, a knowledge society. Education’s aim should be to foster human *development* by nurturing young people’s talents, skills, and passions rather than to build human *capital*. Human development means cultivating the curiosity, imagination, and intellectual engagement of all students, regardless of where they end up in the labour market. This means the job of public education is more than giving young people survival skills; it is preparing them to live lives that they value by giving them the skills they need to *thrive* in the complex 21st century society.

Shifting from an economic to a social focus means looking at how the social content of education is equipping students to live in a globalized world. We need to recognize that young people today are facing new ethical challenges that require critical thinking and ethical reflection. Ethical reflection goes beyond what is sometimes called ‘ethical literacy’, the subject of which is ‘good character’ and inter-personal relationships. While values such as respect, tolerance, and treating people with kindness are clearly important and always have been, young people today also need to understand the causes of, and possible solutions to, complex domestic and global issues.

Ethical reflection contributes to that understanding by helping young people see that tolerance of others is not enough; that a global, interconnected world calls for solidarity with others whose fates and futures are intertwined; and that they need to be willing to act, not just personally, but also collectively and politically. As previous *Education Canada* authors Bruce Bearsto³ and Joel Westheimer⁴ have argued, schools have a role to play in preparing young people for the social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and ‘social justice’ citizenship that are the natural consequences of a deeper understanding of ethical issues.

In the heat of political rhetoric from south of the border, we should not overlook our significant differences. The analyses and prescriptions of American educators may resonate with Canadian audiences, but they are not always directly applicable to Canada. According to Paul Shaker, in a recent *Education Canada* article, Canada already ‘tilts’ more toward critical thinking and a more ‘communitarian’, less self-interested, vision than the U.S., thanks in part to our education system.⁵ And Canada’s students, as a whole, perform considerably better than American students on international achievement tests. While social and economic inequalities continue to be major challenges in this country, our schools do a much better job than American schools in minimizing their effects.

We cannot afford to be complacent, but as we respond to legitimate calls for transformation – especially in our secondary schools – we need to make sure that we recognize and draw on our system’s significant strengths, and that we build on those strengths to focus our schools on human development rather than human capital. It’s time to shift our focus from the knowledge economy to the knowledge society. |

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Notes

- 1 Tony Wagner, *The Global Achievement Gap (Why Even Our Best Schools Don’t Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need – And What Can We Do About It)* (Basic Books: New York, 2008).
- 2 The author acknowledges the work and discussions of the CEA work groups on the Youth Confidence Index and Rethinking Youth, Rethinking Learning.
- 3 Bruce Bearsto, “Saving Spaceship Earth,” *Education Canada* 49, no. 1 (2009): 4-7.
- 4 Joel Westheimer, “What Kind of Citizen?” *Education Canada* 48, no. 3 (2008): 6-10.
- 5 Paul Shaker, “Preserving Canadian Exceptionalism,” *Education Canada* 49, no. 1 (2009): 28-32.