Teaching and learning

transformative engagement

Education 2030

UNESCO Education Sector

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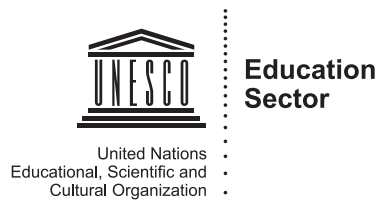
The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.

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1. Introduction

The context

In recent years, we have seen young learners taking action to influence local, national or global communities on a range of issues, from gun violence in school to climate change. At the same time, other young learners have expressed a wish to contribute to transformative processes but expressed their lack of knowledge and know-how to do so. This situation underlines the urgency of understanding different forms of transformative engagement undertaken by young learners, especially in relation to the role of education.

Advocacy

Building on Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on Education, UNESCO supports Member States in taking forward Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), to empower learners to assume active, responsible and effective roles to tackle challenges at local, national and global levels.

The question

While there is a large body of literature on citizenship and civic education, there is less clarity about the meaning of 'responsible transformative engagement' for young learners in relation to GCED and ESD – notably, the types of transformative engagement and the meaning of 'responsible'. Understanding better the connection between learners' engagement and education can clarify the knowledge, skills and competencies that schools may provide, as well as how the role of education can vary depending on context. In this light, this paper explores the meaning of 'responsible transformative engagement' with a view to clarifying the role of education in ways that may be reflected by UNESCO and other education stakeholders[1].

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1   The paper builds on an experts' meeting organized by UNESCO in partnership with the Asia-Pacific Center of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU) and the Ban Ki-moon Centre for Global Citizens on 16-17 February 2019 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The meeting convened experts from all regions, including policy-makers and government officials, educators, young activists and social entrepreneurs. Their contributions, together with a UNESCO-commissioned background paper on transformative engagement, provided the basis for this document. The background paper was written by E. Middaugh, entitled 'Transformative Engagement: Youth remaking their Worlds.'

2. Understanding 'responsible transformative engagement'

Types of transformative engagement

Defining 'transformation' – In standard definitions, transformation refers to a change, more or less radical and deep, in form, nature or appearance. For the purposes of this paper, transformation may refer to possible change at two levels: first, in the learner, regarding the process s/he undertakes towards meaningful engagement; and second, to the impact of a learner's engagement on established institutions and norms, which may produce more or less change depending on its nature, its objectives and its sustainability.

As a first step, it is useful to review different types of transformative engagement that may be undertaken by young learners. These types carry different implications in terms of the degree to which they challenge established norms and institutions (see Figure below). They can also overlap and change over time, even with the same individual.

- **Duty-based** – This type consists in engaging in the maintenance of existing institutions such as by individual voting and participating in civil society groups and political parties.

Such engagement is generally considered as the least challenging to existing institutions, but this can vary depending on context.

- **Participatory** – This type consists in active engagement in existing institutions to help shape them and their policies. Such engagement usually assumes the presence of a vibrant civil society, where citizens can work through government, as well as non-profit and informal networks, to address issues of public concern.

- **Justice-driven** – In this type, this engagement is guided by the pursuit of social justice, including human rights, welfare and equity, seeking to influence institutions to advance these goals. This may consist of working within the system or through external pressure, including contentious methods, such as civil disobedience, as well as more disruptive methods.

- **Liberatory** – Most challenging to existing institutions, this type of engagement seeks radical change, to break out of established/mainstream ways of doing things, through the creation of new

Figure. Types of transformative engagement[2]

LESS CHALLENGING			MORE CHALLENGING
Duty-based	Participatory	Justice-driven	Liberatory
→ **Electoral:** Individual vote	→ **Electoral:** Active discussion, expression and voting	→ **Electoral:** Mobilize voters on a specific issue	→ **Civil society:** Organizations support liberatory goals
→ **Civil society:** Obligatory participation in civic groups	→ **Civil society:** Work with civic organizations to influence public	→ **Civil society:** Issue-driven organizations	→ **Counter-public:** Creation of alternative institutions, norms
→ **Dissent:** Individual or group expressing publicly not to vote	→ **Dissent:** Public expression of views about issues	→ **Dissent:** Protest and activism	→ **Dissent:** Disruptive action to dismantle institutions, norms

2   Source: UNESCO Experts' Meeting on 'Teaching and learning responsible transformative engagement', Seoul (Republic of Korea), 16-17 February 2019.

ways of living together, by questioning social norms and creating counter-publics that explore different approaches to social, economic or political interaction. Such engagement may involve disruptive actions to dismantle existing institutions and norms.

The importance of context – The potential of engagement to challenge established norms and institutions will vary depending on a political system and culture, which may be more or less open to citizen influence. For example, public expression of views in countries where freedom of speech is limited may be more disruptive than in countries where this right is guaranteed.

Individual and collective – Engagement may be collective or remain at an individual level. Both forms are valid starting points to undertake a process of empowerment and transformation. However, unorganized individual action, no matter how well informed, may do little to accomplish transformational goals. Equally, when individuals join collective action without deepening their own personal commitment, they may have little transformative power.

The issue of 'responsibility'

What is the meaning of 'responsible' transformative engagement? Assessing the relative 'responsibility' of any form of engagement depends on the perspective chosen to grasp a particular context, the historical background and actions taken as a result. Such an assessment may be further complicated by new trends in transformative engagement, which include anonymous and delocalized action. Still, several factors can help to guide any such assessment.

- First, the intent/objective guiding any form of engagement is important, which should, at best, act for the defence of human rights, and the public good, including to promote a more sustainable, inclusive, just and peaceful world.

- Second, there are the means chosen, which should be respectful of human rights and fundamental freedoms and proportionate in adhering to the rule of law in light of a particular situation.

- Third, there are the consequences of an engagement, which, however difficult to foresee from the outset, should be taken into account. Again, the universal principles enshrined in international human rights law must remain the key reference.

Taken together, there should be significant harmony between these three factors, on the lines of the principle of 'do no harm'.

The question of violence – On the whole, violence is associated with *revolutionary acts making use of physical force*, whereas *transformative* engagement, promoted through GCED and ESD, works on a different register, where violence is not an option, and where action should be peaceful, proportionate, participatory, open and dialogue-driven. This being said, violence is sometimes a part of transformative engagement, and such acts lead to heated debates about their justification. At best, such acts should be seen in context, shaped by the specific features of a given situation.

New trends

Deep change – New trends in transformative engagement reflect changes that are taking place across the world. This includes globalisation, urbanisation, migration and mobility flows, new forms of populist politics[3] , changes in employment patterns and scarcity of employed labour, inequality and the deceleration of social mobility, along with the emergence of new challenges that pay no respect to borders.

The consequences of the digital revolution – The digital revolution has deeply transformed individual and social relations, information and communication, learning and understanding, civic participation, as well as interaction between citizens and governments. It has introduced new tools for engagement, reducing traditional hierarchies and widening opportunities for social and political entrepreneurship. At the same time, the digital revolution has produced new risks, including the emergence of echo chambers, algorithmic filter bubbles, misinformation and 'fake news', raising questions about surveillance and privacy as well as the exacerbation of old and new forms of exclusion.

Two broad trends – Taking different shapes in practice (see Box below), two broad trends in new transformative engagement may be highlighted:

1. **Leaderless, informal activities** – A first trend is the rise of activities without formal leadership or organizational structure. Large-scale action such as Occupy Wall Street is an example that has been echoed elsewhere, reflecting also the importance of user-generated and networked media. On a more day-to-day

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3   Cf. UNESCO, 2018, Global Citizenship Education and the rise of nationalist perspectives: Reflections and possible ways forward.

basis, we see young learners' engaging through a range of loosely organized activities, online and off. This trend should be seen against a general sense of disaffection for traditional political parties and voting, raising questions also about the sustainability and impact of individual engagement, which may be less effective than more collective and organized forms.

2. **Online and hashtag activism** – A second trend concerns the use of new technologies as the core means of engagement, including online campaigns and #slogans used by young leaners. These may be used in concert with protest, such as #blacklivesmatter in the United States, #YouStink in Lebanon and #PatriarchyMustFall in South Africa and grow into

organized movements. In other cases, such as #metoo and #timesup, they occur primarily on the internet, using media attention to exert pressure. Hashtag activism has drawn praise and criticism, notably for its tendency to create an 'echo chamber' among users. Being able to quickly organize with likeminded individuals can be a powerful tool. At the same time, lack of exposure to criticism or other perspectives can lead to polarization, an inability to compromise, and stigmatization. In addition, the rise of *online* forms of engagement raises the question of how significant engagement may be *offline*.

Box. Examples of new types of transformative engagement

Feminist digital activism – Social networks can improve the visibility of movements managed by women to claim their rights and influence policy discourses. One example is the work of Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan, victim of an armed attack for demanding the right to education for girls, in 2013. At the same time, such activism requires access to technology and skills that many girls and women – particularly those most at risk of exclusion – lack. Gender-based harassment and abuse is also prevalent online.

Consumer activism – Politically-motivated shopping (buying products from companies that are ethically aligned and boycotting unethical companies) has emerged as a common form of engagement undertaken by young learners, involving also the use of social media to pressure companies. For instance, the organization 'Sleeping Giants' mobilizes Twitter users to pressure companies to drop advertising with media companies they believe to be engaged in spreading misinformation or other unethical practices. In Morocco, in

2018, millions of citizens followed the online call for boycott against firms and industries belonging to certain political elites, as a public denunciation of collusion and social injustice.

Social entrepreneurship – Another example is the rise of social entrepreneurship — socially-responsible businesses designed to achieve a social good while making money. For example, the Moringa School started by Audrey Chang to teach coding skills in Kenya, is structured as a fee-based business designed to fill an important social need for the large youth population.

Informal citizenship initiatives – Aided in part by the internet, we see growing efforts by citizens to share resources, exchange services, or promote new forms of public governance. Using social media, people share interests and needs, sensitize on topics at the local level, raise funds, exchange experience, swap resources, ask for help, organize neighbourhood activities. Such initiatives can also target important changes in public

governance, as illustrated by the work of Bawsala in Tunisia, or Sim-Sim Participation Citoyenne in Morocco, both online platforms to push for members of parliament to share information and respond to enquiries.

Fan activism – In 2014, a group of activists sprung up in Bangkok flashing the three-fingered salute of *The Hunger Games* movie to protest against the government. This is an example of media activism where youth draw inspiration from popular culture, repurposing it to make political statements. In addition to using popular media to spread the word, online fan communities have served as springboards for organized charitable and political activity, such as the case of the Harry Potter Alliance, advocating for equality, human rights and literacy.

Trolling – Another example concerns trolling. Deliberately provocative and insulting behaviour, notably on the Internet and through social media, drawing on anonymity, has become a feature of online political discourse, including young learners.

3. The role of education

The process of
transformative engagement

A better understanding of how transformative engagement takes place can help to clarify the knowledge, skills and competencies that schools should promote, as well as effective pedagogies to deliver in school. The factors explored here are steps in the process leading to transformative engagement – in practice, they may not be all necessary nor strictly linear.

The perception of a gap – While there may be a diverse range of causes that spark an interest in learners on certain issues, transformative engagement often starts with their perception of the existence of a gap between what one believes or is led to believe and reality – this may take the shape of a gap between an ideal and the status quo, which may lead to an 'awakening' that can catalysed through an individual learning about facts, having direct experiences, and/or bearing witnesses to new experiences and realities.

Internalisation – Such moments of 'awakening' are often accompanied or followed by cognitive dissonances or emotional disturbances, which lead a learner into critical thinking or self-dialogue/reflection. This experience may lead also to confusion, rage and/or a deep sense of indignation. The internationalisation process can also be positive in nature, with a learner feeling a new sense of purpose and hope that change is needed and possible.

Towards action – Not all 'awakening' experiences and moments followed by internalisation result in the undertaking of action or behavioural change in learners. There are facilitating factors that may trigger action:

- *Empathy* is important to allow a learner to first engage with the reality of a situation or issue and then build a deeper emotional connection with it in ways that highlight its relevance to their own lives. Empathy, especially, enables a learner to place himself/herself in the situation of others, to understand more deeply the realities that others live from their perspective, intensifying an internalisation process on the need to act not only for the learner themselves and their needs, but also for others and their shared needs. Developing both cognitive and socio-emotional learning can amplify the emotional connection of a learner to a

new understanding of reality or those concerned by a situation, and, therefore, provide powerful triggers to action.

- *Issue-tisation*. While empathy can help intensify an internalisation process bringing a learner closer to action or behavioural change, it may not always be sufficient as a catalyst. Real change may occur as a result of what might be called 'issue-tisation' when an issue is internalised and understood by a learner as having manageable and actionable scale at their level. This moment may emerge or even erupt into the life of a learner without planning.

- *Tipping moments*. More importantly, there have to be tipping moments or opportunities for learners when they can translate all the cognitive, emotional and societal observations into a prompting action. In creating such moments, significant figures can play an influential and significant role such as peers, family members, or members of the community. Today, the media can be particularly influential in 'tipping' learners into action.

In sum – For transformative engagement to take place, there has to be a moment where the learner perceives a gap, is awakened to a new reality and to facts/situations that were formerly part of their lives and about which they were not aware. The learner may then undergo an internalisation process, working on an observed gap. When such processes combine with a learner's understanding of how the others are experiencing that gap and there is a connection made both cognitively and emotionally, a learner may be brought closer to undertaking action and/or behavioural change. In many cases, undertaking transformative action requires a tipping moment(s), when the learner sees the need for action to bridge a specific gap.

How to promote transformative engagement through education

Learning about facts/issues

Education can provide learners with knowledge to shape their own worldview and build critical thinking. In a 'post-truth' era, when hard facts are often challenged by misinformation and 'fake' news, providing open recognition of the existence of diverse perspectives can help learners develop new understandings of the world as the basis for new behaviours. At best, learners should become aware of the importance of the difference between 'fact' and 'opinion', especially in social media, where 'Like'/'Dislike' options take precedence over truth/ falsehood.

Media and information literacy (MIL)

MIL is vital in the digital age, including skills to use the internet as a learning resource – to encourage learners to develop critical perspectives on information, its creation and distribution, and their daily lives; to enhance learners' awareness about ethical issues including in relation to privacy and surveillance; and to develop their knowledge of online communication and computer programming.

Exposure to new/other realities

Cognitive learning or acquisition of information and knowledge can take place not only in the classroom, but also through exposure in practice to other/new realities. Such actual exposure is important to help a learner develop not only cognitive understanding but also empathic attachments to a new/other reality and the people affected by it. Experiential learning can be especially effective in this respect as it provides learners with new situations with which they can interact, research and test their thinking against, all the time developing deeper empathic concerns.

Project-based learning

Project-based learning can be helpful in encouraging learners to identify an issue of interest and relevance to their lives, condense it to actionable scale and, on this basis, undertake action and/or behavioural change. This may also provide a foundation for a learner to develop sympathetic connection. Such project-based learning can be facilitated through work with local communities, families or networks of the learners themselves, entailing a shift from the traditional delivery of cognitive knowledge in classrooms to learning involving real-life issues and people of direct relevance to learners.

Exposure to diverse views

While certain pedagogical approaches, like experiential and project-based learning, are important, sustainable transformative engagement should start with a learner's own 'awakening' moment(s) and their own perception of the existence of a gap between their vision/perception of an issue/situation and the reality. In this respect, nothing may be more important than opportunities for learners to experience diverse views on issues and realities. Student exchanges, events and camps can expose learners to different views and opinions held by their peers enabling them to develop a fresh understanding of other perspectives and also renew their understanding of themselves in interacting with new peers. Open-ended debate and discussion sessions where learners and facilitators do not know the outcome at the planning stage are of great help, in leaving room for learners to explore and exhaust multiple perspectives.

Non-violence

Most importantly, learners should learn non-violent ways of engaging for transformation. Teaching non-violent communication can help learners improve their understanding of others, enhance empathy, practice tolerance, respect, and teamwork, and teach them how to avoid escalation.

Guides for action

Opportunities to reflect on the life stories of others who have led transformative engagement themselves can provide learners with powerful role models. Stories of personal endeavour and inner struggles can help learners build their own values and principles. Reflective discussion in the classroom on the challenges and life choices shown in stories relevant to current issues can deepen learners' understanding and critical thinking. The potential identification with storytellers presented as 'role models' can also favour the inclusion of more marginalised learners.

Starting in schools

Learners can practise transformative engagement by experiencing democracy in school. Student councils and extracurricular activities can strengthen their understanding of procedures and policies, the importance of engaging institutions, the responsibilities of decision-making, as well as the changes that are possible through political processes. Being able to exert influence is a source of empowerment, encouraging learners to engage in wider society.

Frequently asked questions

Question 1
Is there a particularly useful subject through which students can learn about transformative engagement?

Civic/citizenship education is a good starter. It focuses on the responsibilities and duties for individual members of the community and society to perform and respect. It is also an action-oriented subject, emphasising the importance of a learner's own engagement. Social study subjects are also useful entry points in so far as they address issues and problems needing change at the societal level. Education for global citizenship and sustainable development are excellent areas for such teaching, as they require learners to challenge the status quo assumptions and undertake actions that will make the world a better place for all.

Question 2
Can transformative actions be encouraged within schools?

All transformative engagements can be potentially disruptive, in so far as they challenge the status quo and seek to establish new norms or ways of doing things. This potentially disruptive nature may be shunned by school authorities. However, prohibiting students from expressing their views, even if they run against the status quo ethos of the school, can be dangerous. A school can be the best and safest place for learners to learn and apply the principles of democracy and non-violence and undertake actions that respect these principles. Transformative engagement should be encouraged within the school boundary so that learners have the opportunity to undertake it in a responsible way before they engage in the world at large.

Question 3
How can a teacher answer the question of whether violence can be justified in transformative engagements?

UNESCO does not condone or promote violence, and its position is that non-violence should be respected as the essential principle in all transformative engagement. At the same time, the world has seen remarkable societal and historical transformations achieved at some point in ways that included violence, not to cause destruction as such but to advance what was perceived as a just cause.

In such cases, learners should be encouraged to use a critical approach to determine why violence was used in a particular scenario and why other means may not have been possible. Violence cannot be accepted in any circumstances but cases diverging from this principle need to be weighed and evaluated individually and contextually.

Question 4
Is an education concentrating on knowledge acquisition enough to encourage students to undertake transformative engagements?

Building on cognitive learning, the socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions of learning are more likely to generate transformative engagement by learners. At the same time, if the information and knowledge that the learner has about the cause of his/her action is not impartial or objective, there is a risk that s/he may be guided to taking the wrong action. This is why accessing impartial and objective facts and information is a pre-requisite to a responsible transformative engagement. In this respect, knowledge acquisition is no less important than the other experiences that stir the emotions of a learner and prompt them towards action.

Question 5
Should all transformative engagements be disruptive?

All transformative engagements seek to change the status quo in some way. While the end result may be 'disruptive' with regard to the status quo, the process does not have to be 'disruptive' or violent. Today, using social media, young learners can, indeed, launch many 'quiet' transformative actions, especially at the individual level, starting with their own behavioural change. Many actions taken by young learners for sustainable consumption and lifestyles fall into this category of transformative engagement, and they should be encouraged further.

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While there is a large body of literature on citizenship and civic education, there is less clarity about the meaning of 'responsible transformative engagement' for young learners in relation to Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

This document seeks to better understand the connection between learners' engagement and education by exploring the meaning of 'responsible transformative engagement' and its process. It also clarifies the role of education in ways that may be reflected by UNESCO and other education stakeholders.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable
Development
Goals