EDUCATIONAL FUTURES : INSIGHTS FROM OECD'S PAST AND PRESENT SCENARIOS

Almost two decades ago, in 2001, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) outlined six possible futures for our schools and students, helping us imagine what education might look like in the years ahead. Fast forward to 2020, and with the rapid advance of digitalisation and the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the picture has changed dramatically, urging the OECD to come up with updated scenarios. As we explore these scenarios, however, let's keep in mind that they don't fully account for growing challenges like inequalities in education, the socio-environmental crisis, or climate and political instability. So how have these futures evolved? Are we heading toward an inclusive, transformative education system, accompanying each and everyone's potential? Or are we still struggling with outdated (if not worsened) education models, threatening children's rights?

THE 2001 SCENARIOS

The 2001 OECD report presented six scenarios divided into three categories:

1. **Status Quo Extrapolated**
   a. **Robust Bureaucratic Systems**: Imagine a world where schools remain as they are — structured, bureaucratic, and resistant to change. This scenario involves institutions with set curriculums and rigid routines. Teachers follow strict guidelines, and there's little room for innovation or flexibility. While this system provides stability, it may struggle to adapt to the needs of students in a changing world.
   b. **Market-Driven Models**: In this scenario, schools start to resemble businesses. Private companies offer different types of education, each catering to specific needs, but at a cost. Picture students from wealthier backgrounds attending high-tech schools with cutting-edge resources, while others are left behind in underfunded institutions. This raises concerns about growing inequalities in education.
2. **Re-Schooling**
   a. **Schools as Core Social Centers**: Here schools serve not just as places for instruction but as the heartbeat of the community. They become social hubs where families, educators, and local leaders collaborate. Beyond academic lessons, learners receive social support, and the school is a place for strengthening community ties and dynamics.

b. **Flexible Learning Organisations**: Picture a school where the walls between classrooms and the outside world blur. In this scenario, learning is flexible and personalised, with a focus on teachers' professional development and motivation. Students work on projects that interest them, often in collaboration with their peers. Learning happens everywhere, not just in the classroom, and this flexibility helps create a dynamic environment where students and teachers thrive together.

3. **De-schooling**
   a. **Non-Formal Networks**: A scenario where learning doesn't happen in schools anymore. Instead, children and adults alike learn through informal networks facilitated by technology. Students might attend workshops, online forums, or community programs. The focus is on self-directed learning, where people learn what they need, when they need it, without being tied to a formal institution. The role of schools fades away, replaced by more fluid, informal networks of learning that span different spaces and communities.
   b. **Crisis and Meltdown**: This scenario paints a grim picture of education in crisis, where there aren't enough teachers to meet the needs of learners. Overwhelmed, underpaid, and burned out, teachers leave the profession in large numbers, leading to a collapse in traditional schooling systems. With no adequate replacement for formal education, the entire system starts to break down, leaving students without access to quality education. This scenario serves as a warning of what could happen if we fail to address the challenges facing educators today.

THE 2020 SCENARIOS

The 2020 report, "Back to the Future of Education: Four OECD Scenarios for Schooling," revisits these visions with a contemporary lens, presenting four updated scenarios:

1. **Schooling Extended**

This scenario envisions schools that never stop growing, both in size and in the technology they use. In this future, classrooms are filled with personalised learning tools like tablets and AI tutors. Each student follows a unique path, learning at their own pace with the help of advanced technology. It contrasts with the 2001 scenario of robust bureaucratic systems by emphasising technological integration and inclusive, lifelong learning opportunities supported by substantial investment in infrastructure and teacher development.

2. **Education Outsourced**

This scenario mirrors the 2001 market-driven models (scenario 1.b), moreover highlighting the modern challenges of equity and quality control due to increased customisation and privatisation. In other words, learners no longer confined to

traditional classrooms can access lessons from private digital platforms, learning from home or anywhere with an internet connection. While this offers great flexibility, it also raises questions about who gets access to the best resources and the likelihood of widening the gap between rich and poor.

3. **Schools as Learning Hubs**

This builds on the 2001 re-schooling scenarios, where schools were envisioned as core social centres, but with a greater emphasis on social innovation and civic engagement. Here, schools become vibrant, multi-purpose spaces that go far beyond just teaching academics, offering a range of services—healthcare, mental health support, civic engagement projects—creating a holistic environment where children's emotional, social, and academic needs are met.

4. **Learn-as-you-go**

In this future, education never really ends, and learning can happen at any time and any place. People continually learn throughout their lives, blending formal schooling with informal education. Whether it's through online courses, community programs, or hands-on experience, education becomes a lifelong journey. Thanks to technology, learners can access resources and opportunities on the go. This scenario aligns with the 2001 vision of non-formal learning networks, incorporating the idea of continuous, personalised learning pathways.

MOVING FORWARD: ARE WE HEADING THE RIGHT WAY ?

As we reflect on the future of education through the lens of the OECD scenarios, one crucial question emerges: *Are we moving toward a system that meets the needs of all children and prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century?* The answer isn't simple. While the OECD's scenarios highlight possible paths forward, the reality of whether we're on track depends heavily on the choices we make today—particularly regarding investments, community involvement, and lifelong learning.

First, adequate investment in education is crucial. According to another OECD report (2023), countries investing less than 3% of their GDP in education often struggle with quality and access, leading to inequality. Without proper funding, we risk moving toward privatised models (*Education Outsourced* scenario), where only the privileged benefit from transformative education. To realise more inclusive futures, such as *Schooling Extended* or *Schools as Learning Hubs*, substantial investment is necessary—not just in infrastructure but in pedagogies better able to meet the individual and collective needs of learners and teachers.

Next, schools must become more than just academic institutions. The concept of community-based education—as seen in the Schools as Learning Hubs scenario—

invites us to imagine schools that strive towards strengthening community ties and encouraging active participation, in an <u>open schooling</u> perspective. These schools can play a vital role in addressing not only academic needs but also the social and emotional well-being of students, fostering more connected and supportive environments.

Finally, the future of education must embrace *lifelong learning*. As the *Learn-as-you-go* scenario suggests, education shouldn't start with and end after school. Policies should encourage and facilitate lifelong learning opportunities, ensuring that individuals can adapt to changing professional, personal, political and socio-environmental landscapes. The 2023 report's focus on VET pathways to higher education goes in this direction.

CONCLUSION

Comparing the scenarios from 2001 and 2020 reveals a clear shift. In 2001, technology was only starting to play a role in education. Fast forward to 2020, and it has become central to nearly every scenario. The move towards digitalisation reflects the world we now live in, where learning must be flexible, open, inclusive, and lifelong. But with this shift comes new challenges. Are we creating an education system that is truly welcoming to all, or are we deepening the divides between those who can afford the best resources and settings and those who can't? As we move forward, it's crucial to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn and thrive, regardless of their circumstances. Only by addressing these inequalities can we truly prepare for an uncertain future.