



Futurology- Equity and Access to Education

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Predicting the future is fundamental in planning our preparedness for it, especially in a rapidly changing world. As a result, many studies have been conducted to analyze the main megatrends that will shape the future. PWC, for example, presented five megatrends at the World Economic Forum: demographic shifts, shift in economic power, accelerating urbanization, climate change and resource scarcity, and technological breakthroughs (PWC, 2013). The International Review of the Red Cross has developed a somewhat different list of six megatrends with a focus on humanitarian action: demographic, technology and science, economic, political power, climate change, and conflict (Ferris, 2011). Because the primary focus in this paper is access to education in conflict areas, this paper adapts the six megatrends discussed by Ferris. Therefore, any discussion about futurology and educational equity has to account for the people living in continued conflict and protracted conflict areas globally, the topic that is addressed by this paper.

Some of the current conflicts will continue in the coming decades, such as in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine and Somalia (Guehenno, 2017). These conflicts will leave millions of people in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis affecting all aspects of their lives, including education. In Syria and Iraq, it is estimated that 12 million people were displaced and 500,000 killed, while in the Sahel area more than 4.9 million people were uprooted (Lanzer, 2016) and the number continues to increase reaching 65.3 million forcibly displaced people globally (UNHCR, 2015a). The continuation of conflict leaves lost generations of children and youth in these areas, especially in the field of education

The horrendous conditions of displaced populations in refugee camps and shelters (for example, UNHCR, 2015b), push humanitarian organizations to focus on providing basic needs of food and shelter while ignoring education as one of their top priorities. As a person who grew up in a conflict area myself, I experienced firsthand how education can shape your access to opportunities and thus enable the individual to improve themselves economically, socially, and personally. Education is one of the fundamental factors that can open opportunities to tens of thousands of young people whose lives have been interrupted and displaced by hostilities.

Access to education in conflict and developing countries, especially where poverty is prevalent, has always been a challenge. Examining the condition of access to education in conflict areas,

UNESCO reported that in 2013 only, there were 124 million children and young adolescents living in conflict, who have never started school or have dropped out. Such numbers are an increase when compared to those in pre-conflict years. For example, the detrimental impact of conflict on students' access to education can be illustrated by the case of Syrian children where the number of out-of-school Syrians rose from 0.3 to 1.8 million in one year only 2013 (UNESCO 2015).

Access to education challenges involve not only the availability of schools, but also the safety of attending school: safety from harassment and bullying, safety from bombardment, lack of qualified teachers, limited learning spaces, curricula without educational underpinnings, distance from home to school and circumstances inside refugee camps (Global Citizen, 2014, UNICEF n.d.). Education in camps is often "disorganized, temporary, under-resourced, overcrowded and limited to primary education" (Ndegwa, 2016 p.13). Hence, access to education is about providing a safe space that is inclusive as well as providing psychological support for traumatized children to learn and grow.

English has been an integral part of the education package in conflict areas, which raises the question of whether English language provides or hinders access. One of the barriers to access cited in the case of Syrian refugees, especially in Lebanon, was language. Syrian students whose only language of learning in Syria was Arabic are struggling when enrolling in schools in Lebanon where classes are taught in English or French (UNHCR, n.d.). Furthermore, from my experience and observation in the Gaza Strip, knowing English enables access to educational opportunities such as pursuing a master's degree or professional development programs in the U.S. In such contexts and others, English was used beyond being a language to being an access tool; a door opener and facilitator to democratization.

The discussion during the Summit of the Future of the TESOL Profession, which took place in Athens, February 2017, shows how English can be used in different contexts to provide access and at the same time can prevent other, usually marginalized groups, from taking up opportunities. For example, in China, access to work, higher education and academia depends on the level of English which in itself depends on status and socio-economic conditions. This unfortunately leaves behind marginalized people who, due to economic, social or safety issues, are not able to access places to learn English or education in general.

International organizations are trying to work closely with refugees in providing access to education and fostering the learning of English language. However, the pressure of limited resources, funding, capacity, and training renders hundreds of millions students unable to access or pursue education; and in these circumstances technology proves to be a great enabler for access.

There are many projects that have started utilizing technology. For example the Xavier project (All Children Reading, 2016) in Dadaab camp uses sms services to access material about subjects such as English, mathematics, science, social studies, etc on their phone. Jesuit Worldwide Learning JWL is an example of how powerful global partnership can work with local

stakeholders, especially refugees, and universities to provide secondary education. JWL uses methods that are reflective of the culture of each refugee location and use a blended on-site and online approach. They also invest in the refugees by teaching them English, which is vital for them to understand the curriculum materials of higher education that are provided by Jesuit universities in the U.S. Through a laptop and local area servers, solar system with batteries, and IT support on-site and remote, JWL was able to provide access education to 1,900 students in Myanmar, Chad, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Jordan, Afghanistan, Syrian, Kenya, Malawi and Thailand. There are plenty of other examples where technology utilization enables international exchange and spaces for teachers, researchers, and policy makers to understand students' needs and how to deploy technology to access education.

The following recommendations try to address the challenge of access to education and the role of English language in future equity where the TESOL profession can be most influential:

- Map current efforts to provide access to education for displaced populations, including lessons learned and challenges through the network of TESOLers around the globe. This mapping can then be shared with the TESOL community as well as policy makers, NGOs, and teachers' associations to coordinate efforts in an effective and efficient manner. Such mapping can be a stepping point for future projects targeting the needs of the students as well as the teachers who serve these students, thus creating a tailored capacity building program to equip teachers with skills to deal with traumatized students and create a more inclusive environment.
- Implement more focused workshops on how English language can hinder access to education and other opportunities, drawing from the contextual examples shared during the discussion in Athens, February -2017.
- Pressure policy makers and associations providing education to be more inclusive and to consider marginalized groups. This can happen through encouraging the establishment of safe schools near remote areas, policies to address child labor, bringing technology to schools by replicating the successful work of NGOs.
- Create an awareness campaign that builds on the work of the "No Lost Generation" Campaign to inform conversations in TESOL and outside. Such a campaign can draw from the experience of English teachers around the world.
- Finally, engage different stakeholders in developing curriculum especially English language to be customized for each context and culture; this can be empowered through a global partnership model.

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