

A New Social Contract for Education: The Implications for Education Quality in Africa

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Abstract

The 2021 Futures of Education report advocated a new social contract for education grounded in principles of solidarity, inclusivity and shared responsibility. “Contract” is the chosen metaphor because it puts an obligation on renewed education quality. Meanwhile, Africa is moving towards Agenda 2063. Now, the global appeal for a new social contract raises a question about what specific educational quality offerings are being extended to the continent regarding curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education. Drawing on Heila Lotz-Sisitka’s conceptualisation of “learning as connection” as a theoretical framework, this article examines how the new social contract can adequately respond to Africa’s developmental, epistemic and economic realities. Learning as connection underscores sociocultural meaning-making as central to educational quality. The article uses this framework because the sociocultural meaning-making processes take into account Africa’s linguistic and cultural plurality. The framework contends that prevailing discourses on educational quality, focused on mastery and inclusivity, remain inadequate if they fail to address relevance as embodied and contextualised practice. Through a comparative policy analysis of the Futures of Education report with the Agenda 2063, the article interrogates the contradictions between the global framing of the social contract and the African economic pressures. I argue that the new social contract will prove fundamentally insufficient unless teaching for relevance is embedded at its core. The article articulates this relevance as different from the “relevance” already cited in existing African educational policies because it is specially conceptualised on sociocultural dimensions that take into account the educational realities of diverse African contexts.

Keywords: Africa Agenda 2063; education quality; epistemic justice; learning as connection; new social contract for education; teaching for relevance

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Introduction

Education is once again being asked to carry the weight of the future. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, amid accelerating ecological crises, widening inequalities, technological disruption and fragile democratic orders, global attention has returned to education not merely as a sector in need of reform, but as a foundational social institution through which societies imagine continuity, repair and transformation (Blondel 1998). It is in this moment of heightened expectation that UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (ICFE 2021) positioned itself as both diagnosis and proposition. It called for a reconfiguration of education's purposes, relationships and responsibilities. The report's ambition is unmistakable. Education is no longer framed as preparation for a known world, but as a collective endeavour oriented towards sustaining life on a planet under strain. However, moments of global consensus sometimes conceal as much as they reveal.

Although the language of futures, solidarity and shared responsibility resonates strongly across international policy spaces, it raises critical questions about whose futures are being imagined, whose knowledges are validated and what forms of education are deemed relevant in different contexts. Nowhere are these questions more urgent than in African contexts, where education systems are simultaneously tasked with redressing historical injustices, responding to immediate socio-economic pressures and contributing to long-term visions of transformation articulated in frameworks such as Agenda 2063 (Chitando and Kamaara 2025). For many African societies, education is not only a moral project but also a material one, intimately tied to livelihoods, social mobility and collective survival.

Over the past three decades, global education reform has been dominated by two powerful and at times competing imperatives (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013). The first has centred on access and inclusion, driven by a human-rights logic that seeks to ensure that no learner is excluded from schooling. The second has focused on mastery, measurement and efficiency, informed by economic theories that position education as an investment in human capital. Although these imperatives have generated important gains, particularly in enrolment and gender parity, they have also produced unintended consequences (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013). In many contexts, learners have been successfully included in systems that remain poorly aligned with their lived realities, cultural histories and future aspirations. Education, in such cases, becomes a space of participation without purpose. UNESCO's Futures of Education report sought to move beyond these limitations. It critiqued narrow instrumentalism and calls for education to be reclaimed as a public and common good, grounded in principles of care, cooperation and social justice.

However, as I argue in this article, the futures discourse remains conceptually underdeveloped in one crucial respect. It does not sufficiently theorise relevance as a dimension of educational quality. This relevance differs from the "relevance" already cited in existing African educational policies (for example, the Continental Education

Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 (AU 2016)). The existing relevance is more assumed than examined. As a result, it is taken as an emergent outcome of ethical intention and not as a pedagogical and epistemic challenge in its own right. This assumption is mostly problematic for diverse African contexts, in which the disjuncture between schooling and social life has long been a source of educational discontent.

This article proceeds from the premise that educational quality cannot be understood solely with regard to access, equity or performance. Although these dimensions are necessary, they are not sufficient (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013). Quality should also be interrogated in relation to how learning connects to the worlds learners inhabit, the knowledge traditions they inherit and the futures they seek to create. In African contexts, where education systems continue to bear the imprint of colonial histories and externally defined standards, the question of connection is not merely pedagogical but political. It speaks to whose knowledge counts, whose experiences matter and how education mediates between global imaginaries and local realities. To address these contestations, I draw on Heila Lotz-Sisitka's conception of learning as connection as a theoretical framework. Lotz-Sisitka has been slowly but carefully enriching the concept of learning as connection from sustained research engagement in southern Africa. In her 2012/2013 think piece, she argued for "learning as connection" as a way of rethinking educational quality that recognises sociocultural meaning-making without collapsing into narrow contextualism. The concept challenges the dominance of decontextualised curriculum and abstract performance measures. Lotz-Sisitka (2012/2013) argued instead that learning becomes meaningful when knowledge is connected to learners' lifeworlds, community values and historical experiences. Importantly, this conception does not reject mastery or inclusivity. Instead, it situates them in a wider understanding of how learning acquires significance and transformative potential.

This article interrogates what the new social contract for education is offering Africa at a time when the continent is positioned as central to global futures discourse. Africa's youthful population, its developmental aspirations and its vulnerability to global crises have rendered it both a concern and a possibility (Simbanegavi 2019). But, in my view, possibility cannot be realised through education systems that prioritise participation without relevance or mastery without meaning. There is a need to pay attention to the realities of the digital divide and infrastructure deficits alongside curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education. Lotz-Sisitka's conception of learning as connection framework handles these realities through sociocultural meaning-making processes. The framework entails that if education is to contribute to poverty reduction, economic growth and social cohesion (as envisioned in Agenda 2063), it should be capable of producing graduates who are not only included and competent, but also able to connect knowledge to practice in ways that are contextually and economically meaningful.

The argument that I advance in this article is therefore both critical and constructive. It does not dismiss the Futures of Education vision. On the contrary, it takes that vision seriously enough to interrogate its tensions. I place learning as connection in dialogue

with the futures discourse to extend the conceptual terrain of the new social contract. Also, I emphasise relevance as a condition for quality rather than a secondary concern. In doing so, I bring curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education into sharper focus, arguing that teachers are central to the pedagogical enactment of relevance and that their preparation should be understood as an epistemic, not merely technical, undertaking.

The article unfolds in four parts. It begins by situating the new social contract for education in contemporary global and African policy landscapes, highlighting the ethical ambitions and conceptual tensions of the futures discourse. It then develops “learning as connection” as a theoretical–analytical perspective for rethinking educational quality in African contexts. This is followed by a comparative policy analysis (CPA) of the Futures of Education report with Agenda 2063, looking at specific education quality offerings in curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education. Comparative policy analysis is a method that systematically compares policies across different contexts to understand how and why they differ in design, implementation and outcomes (Peters and Fontaine 2020). It uses defined criteria, such as policy goals, actors, governance structures and impacts, to identify patterns and explain variations. In this article, CPA is used to examine how the Futures of Education report and Agenda 2063 (as policy frameworks) can be interpreted and applied across different African settings, highlighting both global convergences and continental divergences. This structured comparison provides a clear analytical framework, ensuring that reflections are evidence-informed. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for Africa’s education futures. First, let us look at the call for a new social contract for education in detail.

Reimagining Education Futures and the Question of Relevance

The release of UNESCO’s *Reimagining Our Futures Together* in 2021 marked a significant moment in global education discourse, not simply because it proposed reform, but because it attempted a re-founding of education’s moral and social purposes. The report opened with a sober diagnosis of the contemporary condition: “Our humanity and planet Earth are under threat” (ICFE 2021, “Short Summary”). Education, in this framing, is no longer imagined as a sectoral intervention aimed at improving labour market outcomes or national competitiveness, but as a central social institution through which societies might repair historical injustices and orient themselves towards more just and sustainable futures. This repositioning is consequential, as it demands that education be understood relationally as a shared societal endeavour whose value exceeds instrumental returns. The report recognised that the call for a new social contract arises from the failure of existing arrangements to deliver on the promise of education as a universal right. Despite decades of global commitment to access, millions remain excluded from meaningful learning, and many who are formally included experience education that is alienating, irrelevant or disconnected from their lived realities. The report therefore insisted that “making good on the unfulfilled promise to ensure the right to quality education for every child, youth and adult [should occur

alongside] fully realizing the transformational potential of education as a route for sustainable collective futures” (ICFE 2021, “Short Summary”). Importantly, quality here is not reduced to performance metrics or efficiency indicators. Instead, it is framed as intimate to the questions of justice, dignity and social purpose.

Central to UNESCO’s argument is the idea that education should be reclaimed as a public and common good. The report stated that the new social contract “must strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good” (ICFE 2021, “Short Summary”). This claim resists the marketisation of education, which has come to dominate global policy discourse and challenges the narrowing of educational value to individual economic gain. The report situated learning in the wider ethical commitments to care, reciprocity and solidarity, principles it identified as foundational to the new contract. Still, while these principles are compelling, they remain abstract unless interrogated through the concrete realities of diverse educational contexts, especially those shaped by histories of colonialism, structural inequality and epistemic marginalisation such as many African countries. The report emphasised that the proposed social contract is not intended as a universal blueprint. It is described instead as “the opening up of a vital conversation” (ICFE 2021, “Short Summary”), which invites contextual interpretation and collective enactment. This openness is both a strength and a tension. On the one hand, it acknowledges that education systems are embedded in specific social, cultural and historical conditions. On the other hand, it raises questions about whose knowledge, priorities and aspirations are most likely to shape how this contract is interpreted and operationalised. The report called for translation and contextualisation, noting that “translating and contextualizing them is a collective effort” (ICFE 2021, “Short Summary”).

However, the report offered relatively limited guidance on how deeply contextual factors, such as local epistemologies, linguistic ecologies or socio-economic imperatives, should reshape dominant global framings of educational quality. This tension became acutely visible when the report turned to curriculum and pedagogy. ICFE (2021) argued for curricula that are interdisciplinary, ecological and oriented towards global challenges. The Futures of Education report (ICFE 2021, 64) asserted that

In a new social contract for education, curricula should grow out of the wealth of common knowledge and embrace ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning that helps students access and produce knowledge while building their capacity to critique and apply it.

While this vision gestures towards relevance, it largely assumes that relevance will emerge through exposure to global concerns and abstract principles of sustainability and justice. In my view, less explicit is how such curricula might engage with the immediate material, cultural and economic realities that shape learners’ lives, especially in contexts such as sub-Saharan African countries where education is expected to play a direct role in poverty reduction, livelihood formation and social transformation.

The report's designation of teachers further illustrates this ambivalence. Teachers are described as the heart of education and as central actors in the co-construction of the new social contract (ICFE 2021). The report called for teachers to be recognised as knowledge producers and pedagogical innovators, instead of mere implementers of externally designed curricula. This is a noteworthy departure from technocratic reform agendas that reduce teaching to delivery and compliance. Nonetheless, the report remains, in my view, relatively silent on how teachers are to navigate the competing demands placed upon them. These are demands to meet standardised benchmarks, respond to local community expectations and prepare learners for uncertain economic futures. The risk, here, is that teachers are burdened with moral and pedagogical responsibility without adequate attention to the structural and epistemic conditions that shape their practice. Nowhere are these questions more pressing than in many African countries, where education systems are simultaneously positioned as vehicles for social justice, economic development and postcolonial transformation. Although the Futures of Education report acknowledged that sub-Saharan Africa will be home to the vast majority of the world's youth by 2050 and therefore requires urgent attention (ICFE 2021), it did not fully engage with how African education systems have historically been shaped by externally imposed models of quality, relevance and success. The report called for renewed international solidarity and cooperation, especially through South–South collaboration, yet it fell short of interrogating how global education discourses themselves may reproduce forms of epistemic dependence if relevance is not explicitly theorised and foregrounded.

This shortfall is significant when read alongside continental policy frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which places education at the centre of Africa's long-term transformation. Agenda 2063 calls for a "skills revolution" to drive economic growth, industrialisation and poverty eradication (AU 2015). Education, in this vision, is intimate to the material conditions of people's lives and from the aspiration to build "a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development" (AU 2015, 2). The question that emerges, then, is whether the new social contract sufficiently accounts for such context-specific imperatives, or whether it risks re-inscribing a universalist conception of quality that privileges inclusivity and mastery while leaving relevance under-theorised. Indeed, the Futures of Education report emphasised inclusivity, participation and equity, all of which are essential. It affirmed that the new contract should be grounded in principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity (ICFE 2021). But inclusivity, if not coupled with relevance, can result in systems that successfully bring learners into classrooms without equipping them with knowledge and capabilities that speak to their social, cultural and economic contexts (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013). The report's aspirational tone can obscure this risk by assuming that expanded participation in reimagined curricula will naturally lead to meaningful outcomes for diverse learners.

What remains underdeveloped, therefore, is a sustained engagement with how education connects or fails to connect with learners' lived worlds. Although the report gestured

towards the importance of context and diversity, it did not offer a strong foundation for understanding how meaning-making occurs at the intersection of curriculum, pedagogy and sociocultural life. This absence is not merely theoretical. It has profound implications for how the new social contract will be enacted in African contexts where education has long been experienced as disconnected from local realities and aspirations. Therefore, while *Reimagining Our Futures Together* provides an authoritative, ethical and political call to rethink education globally, it also opens a critical space for questioning what kind of quality is being imagined, for whom and to what ends. With her “learning as connection” conception, Lotz-Sisitka would argue that if the new social contract is to be meaningful for diverse African contexts, it should be read not only as a global vision but as a proposition that requires careful interrogation through perspectives attuned to relevance, connection and contextual meaning. It is to this task, the theorisation of “relevance” as a core dimension of educational quality, that I turn in the next section.

Learning as Connection and the Re-Theorisation of Educational Quality

I start this section by saying that if the new social contract for education invites us to rethink education’s purposes beyond access and efficiency, then it also demands a more careful interrogation of how educational quality is understood, produced and lived. It is here that Heila Lotz-Sisitka’s theorisation of learning as connection (see figure 1) becomes analytically generative, especially for contexts in the global South where education has long been shaped by externally derived notions of what counts as knowledge, quality and success.

Drawing on sustained research engagement with southern African education systems, Lotz-Sisitka cautioned against uncritical acceptance of dominant global discourses on quality. She argued that educational quality is not an impartial or self-evident concept but an “order word that shapes the way people think and practise” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 25). Lotz-Sisitka’s argument emerged from a recognition that much of the global education debate has been dominated by two interrelated discourses. The first is an efficiency-oriented discourse that emphasises mastery of content, measurable outcomes and economic returns on educational investment. The second is a human-rights discourse that emphasises access, participation and inclusivity. Although both discourses have been important in addressing historical exclusions and systemic inequalities, Lotz-Sisitka argued that neither is sufficient for understanding what quality education means in diverse African contexts shaped by deep sociocultural diversity, economic precarity and colonial legacies. As she noted, “providing access to schooling is not a sufficient condition for achieving educational quality” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 25). Quality, in this sense, cannot be reduced to only who is included or how efficiently content is transmitted.

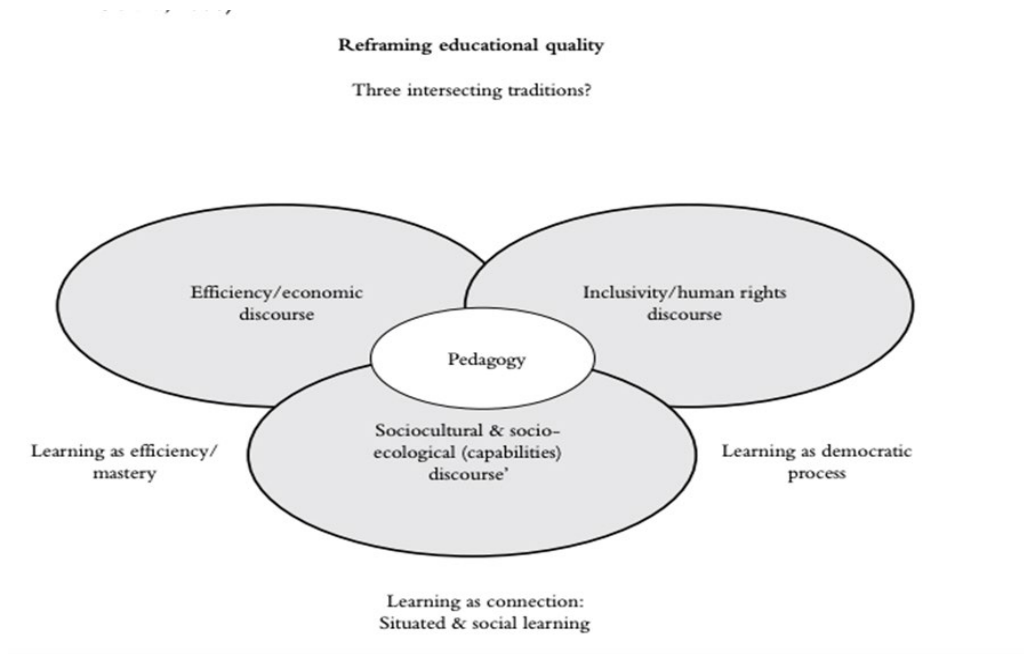


Figure 1: Three discourses on educational quality

Source: Lotz-Sisitka (2012/2013, 32)

Through empirical and theoretical work conducted under the Southern African Development Community Regional Environmental Education Programme (SADC REEP), Lotz-Sisitka and her colleagues identified the need for a third discourse on educational quality; one that takes into account the sociocultural processes of meaning-making. This discourse is captured in the notion of learning as connection, which she defined as learning that emerges through “connections to sociocultural, social-ecological, contextual and historical dynamics of learners’ life-worlds and experiences, and communities’ valued beings and doings” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 32). Importantly, learning as connection does not reject mastery or participation, as indicated earlier. Instead, it reframes them in a wider understanding of how knowledge becomes meaningful and usable in specific contexts. At the heart of this theoretical move is a Vygotskian understanding of learning as a socially and culturally mediated process. Lotz-Sisitka drew on Vygotsky’s (1978) insight that direct instruction in concepts is almost impossible and that teaching which prefers memorisation over meaning ends up in empty expression that arouses or reproduces the occurrence of concepts in the child. In African education systems such as South Africa, where most learners are taught in second or third languages and through culturally disembodied curriculum, this critique is particularly striking. Learning that is disconnected from learners’ lived experiences risks remaining abstract, inaccessible and irrelevant.

Learning as connection, then, is not a call for contextualism in the narrow sense of simply adding local examples to existing curriculum (Shumba 2012; Shumba and Kampamba 2012/2013, 2017). Here, it is important to acknowledge that the Zambian scholar Overson Shumba and his colleagues have been forefront applicants of the learning as connection framework in their research work. Lotz-Sisitka (2012/2013) was careful to warn against reducing relevance to “context only” models that may limit learners’ epistemological access to broader forms of knowledge. Instead, citing Vygotsky (1978), she framed learning as occurring at the “*interface between context and concept*” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 29, added emphasis), where everyday knowledge, cultural practices and historical experience are brought into productive dialogue with scientific and abstract forms of representation. This interface is pedagogically demanding as it requires teachers to navigate complexity and not just rely on scripted or standardised approaches. This theoretical framing has profound implications for how educational quality is understood. Instead of viewing quality as a fixed set of indicators (test scores, completion rates or curriculum coverage), learning as connection reframes quality as relational, situated and emergent. It asks whether education enables learners to make sense of the world they inhabit, to act meaningfully in it and to imagine alternative futures. In this sense, quality is intrinsic to relevance. As the SADC REEP revealed, conceptions of quality were “most often situated in community interests and issues and in local cultures” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 30) rather than in abstract performance measures.

Nevertheless, Lotz-Sisitka’s conception is not uncritical. She acknowledged that an unreflective emphasis on relevance, particularly when defined narrowly in economic terms, carries its own risks. She cautioned that education could become “an instrument of the market” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 28), thereby leading to a substantively narrowed experience of learning in which only certain forms of knowledge (often science, mathematics or immediately marketable skills) are valued. The rise of corporate universities and skills-only training models exemplifies this danger. This situation can produce teachers and learners with truncated understandings of education’s broader social and ethical purposes. To address this tension, Lotz-Sisitka insisted on a broadened conception of relevance, one that encompasses economic participation while also attending to citizenship, sustainability, cultural continuity and social justice. Learning as connection therefore resonates closely with capabilities-based approaches to education, especially those influenced by Sen’s notion of “valued beings and doings” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 33). From this perspective, relevance is not dictated solely by labour markets but emerges through dialogue about what communities do value, what futures they seek and what forms of knowledge enable those futures. This theorisation directly challenges dominant global education narratives, including those advanced in international monitoring and accountability frameworks.

Although organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank routinely measure quality through standardised indicators, Lotz-Sisitka’s work exposed the limitations of such approaches in capturing the lived realities of teaching and learning in (southern)

African contexts. She noted that many education systems continue to suffer from “colonial ‘hangovers’ such as structured and outdated syllabi, pedagogy offered in foreign languages, or content that is decontextualised and disembedded from local history, experience, culture and aspirations” (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 29). In such contexts, improving efficiency or expanding access without addressing relevance risks reproducing educational alienation.

Learning as connection (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013; Shumba and Kampamba 2017)), therefore, offers more than a pedagogical suggestion. It provides a theoretical–analytical perspective for interrogating global education reforms. It invites critical questions about whose knowledge is accepted, whose experiences are centred and how education mediates between global aspirations and local realities. When placed alongside UNESCO’s call for a new social contract, this perspective reveals a potential inadequacy that, while the futures discourse emphasises inclusivity, solidarity and cooperation, it does not sufficiently theorise how relevance is produced at the level of curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education, particularly in postcolonial African contexts. In this sense, learning as connection does not stand in opposition to the new social contract. Instead, it exposes the conditions under which that contract might become meaningful for specific African countries. For example, the post-conflict zones such as South Sudan would need a different kind of relevance within the educational quality from that of a post-apartheid South Africa. Within a country, the situation may also be complex. For example, northern parts of Nigeria where social life is more centred on Islamic values, the kind of relevance in the educational quality would be somehow different from that of much of the southern parts which embrace more liberal cultural norms and indigenous knowledge systems. This situation entails that Africa is not a monolith and the discourse on educational equality should take into account all sorts of variation, therefore the need for sustained attention to sociocultural meaning-making in order to avoid education reforms that risk remaining rhetorically progressive but practically disconnected.

As Africa moves towards Agenda 2063, the question is not only whether education systems are inclusive or efficient, but whether they are enabling learners to connect knowledge to life, aspiration and transformation. It is this question that should now be posed directly to UNESCO’s futures vision. I attempt this in the next section.

Implications of the New Social Contract on Curriculum and Pedagogy

An analysis of *Reimagining Our Futures Together* reveals a text that is at once expansive in ethical ambition and cautious in its engagement with the granular realities of curriculum and pedagogy. The report insisted that education should be reoriented towards “peaceful, just and sustainable futures” (ICFE 2021, 1), and that this reorientation requires a break from narrow instrumentalism. But, when examined through the perspective of learning as connection, what becomes visible is not an absence of concern for relevance, but rather a conceptual thinning of how relevance is

understood, produced and enacted in education systems, particularly those of African contexts. The Futures of Education report is unequivocal in its critique of economic framings of education. It warns against reducing learning to skills acquisition for volatile labour markets and argues instead for an education that cultivates cooperation, empathy and responsibility for the common good (ICFE 2021). This position resonates strongly with critical education discourse that has long challenged human capital theories for their failure to address structural inequality and social purpose. I am not alone in this analysis. Unterhalter (2019), for example, has argued that global education agendas mostly fluctuate between ethical aspiration and economic pragmatism, largely without resolving the tension between the two. UNESCO's report, to its credit, leaned decisively towards the ethical.

However, ethics alone do not guarantee relevance. While the report affirmed cultural diversity as a foundational principle of the new social contract (ICFE 2021), it framed relevance implicitly, assuming that education oriented towards global challenges, such as climate change, technological transformation and democratic renewal, will naturally resonate across contexts. Curricula are encouraged to become interdisciplinary and future-facing, enabling learners to “access and produce knowledge” (ICFE 2021, 64) in ways that support collective well-being. Still, the report remains largely silent on how such curricula intersect with learners' immediate socio-economic realities, linguistic environments and historically shaped aspirations. From an African perspective, this silence is consequential. Education systems across the continent are not only sites of learning but also arenas where long-standing questions of development, employment, identity and postcolonial transformation are negotiated.

The African Agenda 2063 designates education as a prerequisite for economic growth, industrialisation and poverty eradication (AU 2015). When analysed alongside this continental vision, the Futures of Education report appears to underplay the urgency with which relevance is demanded of education in contexts where schooling is mostly evaluated by its capacity to enable livelihood and social mobility. This is not to suggest that education should be reduced to labour market preparation, but rather that relevance, as lived and experienced, cannot be deferred to abstract global imaginaries. Lotz-Sisitka's theorisation of learning as connection exposes this gap with particular clarity. She reminds us that educational quality is experienced where learners can connect knowledge to their “life-worlds and experiences, and communities' valued beings and doings” (Lotz-Sisitka 2013, 32). From this standpoint, relevance is not an addendum to quality. It is the condition under which quality becomes meaningful. The Futures of Education report gestured towards this insight when it called for education systems to be grounded in an ethic of care and reciprocity, but it fell short of theorising how such grounding occurs pedagogically. I believe it is further work and research like this study that can enrich the implementation of the new social contract for education in specific national contexts.

The Role of Teacher Education in Advancing Relevance as a Dimension of Quality

Teacher education is the critical lever for this new social contract because it is the foundation of the pedagogical proficiency required to actualise the new social contract in schooling practices. The limitation noted in the last section becomes particularly visible in the report's designation of teachers. Teachers are positioned as central to the co-construction of the new social contract and described as key agents of transformation (ICFE 2021). The report called for strengthening teacher autonomy, professional collaboration and participation in knowledge production. These claims are significant and align with critical discourse that views teaching as an intellectual and ethical practice rather than a technical one. As Biesta (2017) has argued, education that seeks to contribute to democratic life should resist reducing teachers to implementers of predefined outcomes. UNESCO's framing reiterated this sentiment. However, the report did not sufficiently grapple with the specific forms of pedagogical knowledge teachers require to teach for relevance. The assumption appears to be that once teachers are empowered and trusted, relevance will emerge organically. The concept of learning as connection challenges this assumption. Lotz-Sisitka's work demonstrates that teaching for relevance is neither intuitive nor automatic. It is a complex pedagogical accomplishment that requires teachers to work deliberately at the interface between context and concept (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013). This involves a deep understanding of learners' sociocultural contexts, facility with disciplinary knowledge and the capacity to mediate between the two without collapsing one into the other.

Teacher education therefore emerges as a critical, though under-theorised, concern for advancing relevance as a dimension of quality. Lotz-Sisitka is explicit that exposing teachers in training to multiple discourses of educational quality enables them to "reflexively assess what kind of educational-quality practices they are favouring" (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013, 29). Without such reflexivity, teachers may default either to mastery-oriented pedagogies inherited from colonial education systems or to narrow market-driven notions of relevance that instrumentalise learning. The Futures of Education report, while emphasising teacher development, did not engage deeply with this epistemic challenge. This inadequacy matters because teacher education institutions in African contexts are themselves embedded in global knowledge hierarchies. Curricula, assessment practices and notions of professional competence are usually shaped by external models that privilege abstract and decontextualised knowledge. I am not alone in raising this concern. Tikly and Barrett (2011) have shown that teacher education reforms in sub-Saharan Africa commonly reproduce global standards of quality that fail to account for local pedagogical realities. Similarly, Schweisfurth (2013) argued that learner-centred pedagogies promoted globally can falter when transplanted without attention to contextual meaning-making. To all these, I add that *learner-centred* instruction without teacher agency is self-defeating because the point of focus becomes the *learner* instead of the *learning*.

From this perspective, the Futures of Education report's call for renewed international cooperation and knowledge exchange (ICFE 2021) should be read critically. Although South–South cooperation and regional collaboration are encouraged, the epistemic terms of engagement remain largely unexamined. Learning as connection insists that relevance cannot be imported. It should be cultivated through sustained engagement with local histories, languages and socio-economic conditions (Lotz-Sisitka 2012/2013). Teacher education programmes, therefore, need to do more than align with global visions. They have to prepare future teachers to interrogate those visions and translate them meaningfully into practice. This is not an argument against global frameworks such as the new social contract for education. But it is an argument for their contextual deepening. The Futures of Education report itself acknowledged that its proposals are merely a starting point to a bigger undertaking (ICFE 2021). Learning as connection offers one way of extending that starting point because, in my understanding, it provides an analytical perspective through which relevance can be practised without reducing education to economic functionality. It allows us to ask not only whether education is inclusive, but whether it enables learners to make sense of their worlds.

Teacher education is central to this endeavour because teachers mediate the relationship between policy and practice, between curriculum and lived experience. If teachers are trained primarily to deliver content or to meet externally defined standards, relevance remains incidental. If, however, they are prepared to work with sociocultural knowledge, to value indigenous and community-based ways of knowing, and to connect these to disciplinary concepts, relevance becomes a deliberate pedagogical orientation. As Lotz-Sisitka (2012/2013) warned, neglecting this dimension risks perpetuating education systems that are formally inclusive yet substantively disconnected. Therefore, the Futures of Education report and the “learning as connection” concept show both promise and tension. UNESCO's report offers a formidable ethical vision of education as a common good oriented towards shared futures. Lotz-Sisitka's conception provides the conceptual tools to ask whether and how that vision becomes meaningful in specific contexts. For African contexts, where education is expected to contribute simultaneously to human dignity, economic transformation and social cohesion, relevance cannot remain implicit. It should be theorised, taught and continuously questioned. Only then can the new social contract move from aspiration to lived educational practice.

Conclusion

The call for a new social contract for education emerges at a moment of necessity and contradiction. Although global frameworks such as the Futures of Education 2021 report promote an expansive vision of education as a public and common good essential to democracy, sustainability and planetary futures, education systems, especially in African contexts, continue to be evaluated through narrow indicators focused on access, efficiency and measurable learning outcomes. This tension frames the central argument

of this article that the promise of a new social contract should be critically examined through a deeper engagement with relevance.

Drawing on Lotz-Sisitka's conception of learning as connection, the article reframes educational quality as relational, situated and emergent. This perspective explains how knowledge becomes meaningful at the intersection of curriculum, pedagogy and sociocultural life. Such a reframing is especially significant for African countries as they move towards Agenda 2063. While the Futures of Education report offers an ethical vision, its realisation in African contexts requires an explicit theorisation of relevance that accounts for history, language, livelihoods and aspirations of pedagogical shifts. Relevance, as theorised in this article, bridges the gap between current schooling and the 2063 vision as it requires teachers to integrate disciplinary knowledge with sociocultural understanding and to reflect critically on the futures their teaching enables. I have argued that the new social contract cannot be realised through universal solutions, but through sustained and context-sensitive pedagogical practices. For Africa, the context-sensitivity acknowledges the vast differences in education between regions, for example, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, countries under undemocratic regimes and post-conflict zones. As global monitoring efforts intensify towards a new social contract for education, I warn that without equal attention to relevance, expanded access may continue to coexist with forms of educational disconnection.

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