

## Meaningful Education in a Disturbed World: Transforming Utopia into Reality

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**ABSTRACT:** *Thomas More's utopia could be interpreted as 'nowhere' or 'somewhere good.' It has been thought of as, "dreams or stories which reflect an ideal world with no pretence to reality," as 'speculative myth' that is positioned as a counterpart to the myth of the Golden Age which can be easily seen in various cultures," or as, "an ideal commonwealth in a work of fiction created with the aim of assessing, criticizing and satirizing existing society." Whatever it may be, it presents modern day educators with a dilemma that strikes deep into the concept of a just and equitable 'one world' understanding, where education is available to all without prejudice or contextual constraints. Considering this ideal, how can the educational revolution impact the lives of children, displaced by war, or living in the misery of Ebola/AIDS like epidemics, poverty and famine, religious or racial strife or in the crime ridden settlements in all countries (whether they be the ghettos, colonies or slums)? This paper makes the case for the creation of competent educational task forces comprising of paid and volunteer workers under the aegis of the United Nations through whom children would get the benefit of academic continuity that would enable them to restart and continue their education ASAP in a more settled environment. The aftermath of tragedies whether it be violence/war, natural calamities or epidemics or any debilitating event upsets the academic homeostasis and only a planned, consistent, supported program can deal with the resultant chaos and lacunae. This paper studies existing structures that deal with these tragedies and suggests methods to improve delivery such that educational justice becomes a reality rather than remaining a utopian dream.*

**Keywords:** *children, equitable education, tragedies, programs*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The world has never been a uniformly peaceful place in any time in known history. The hope of humanity that 'each person would live under his own fig tree' (Micah 4:4) peacefully and that the wolves would feed alongside the lambs (Isaiah 65:25) can be seen as a mirage after which we are chasing, a wild goose chase or rather in one interpretation of More as 'a utopian pipe dream.' This kind of thinking could be considered as a 'fatalistic ideation' of a 'schizophrenia suffering humanity' that forgets to look at the larger picture and movement forward of the 'collective unconscious' (Jung, 1953, p. 188) that Jung spoke about which is active in slow transformation towards a unified and sublime future. It is true that the scale of violence and aggression has reached humongous proportions. It is also true that the use of technology has increased the level of damage and destruction. However, there is also the truth that technology has only 'improved' the ability to destroy but not made humans any worse than say what we would have done in the first century AD. Hence, in the human journey of life we should not miss the efforts of collective humanity to neutralize evil of any kind especially the violence of the contemporary world. Of course, it is unthinkable to even imagine the large migration of population, the large scale decimation of innocents in Syria, Iraq, and surrounding areas in the last few years. In addition, the export of violence through clusters (small but with horrible potential) that could destroy the fabric of any society as a contagion is part of every news story. Unreported in news channels to a great degree and rightly so (as it would expose the strategy of the human efforts to countermand the evil and make it less effective), are the serious efforts by the United Nations to diffuse the effects on affected populations.

The human journey has been guided by the philosophers and thinkers whose wisdom charted out thoughts and ideas to give us a dream and vision for our future. It is these that have inspired the world to move towards a resolute and peaceful future. Thomas More is one such person who raised the bar on human psycho-social culture (mainly through education) Logan, Adams & Miller (1995). He lived in an age where such thoughts were unthinkable or did not merit popularity (the middle ages).

### II. MORE'S UTOPIA

The term Utopia as used by More was coined from two Greek words 'outopia' meaning 'nowhere' and 'eutopia' meaning 'somewhere good'. The term expresses the desire of living in a world that does not exist but where one wishes to be. A number of explanations have been given to the term utopia Ertugrul & Parlas., Online Retrived (2016)

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Kaufman (1879:v): ‘What is a Utopia? Strictly speaking, it means a ‘nowhere Land’, some happy island far away, where perfect social relations prevail, and human beings, living under an immaculate constitution and faultless governments, enjoy a simple and happy existence, free from the turmoil, the harassing cares, and endless worries of actual life.’

Davis (1981) sees utopia as a; method of envisioning social perfection in a way that distinguishes it from alternate ideal social structures.’ Berneri (1969:2) views utopia as ‘synonymous with a happy, desirable form of society.’ Utopia, therefore, simply represents mankind’s dreams of happiness, its secret yearning for the Golden Age, or, for its lost Paradise. Eurich (1967:vii) sees utopia as ‘man’s dreams of a better world.’ Utopia is reflective of the dreams or stories which reflect an ideal world with no pretence to reality.

Fry explains utopia as a ‘speculative myth’ that positioned as a counterpart to the myth of the Golden Age which can be easily seen in various cultures. (cited in Klaic 1991:37). Morton (1969), reflects that utopia is an ideal commonwealth in a work of fiction created with the aim of assessing, criticizing and satirizing existing society. Dragan Klaic (1991) agrees with various aspects of Morton’s belief that utopia is held up as a mirror reflecting the ideal against the insufficiencies, backwardness, and squalor of reality. Utopia then becomes a critical tool, which exposes and ridicules the real world through distancing and distortion. Thus, the purpose of utopia is not only to create an ideal world and a happy life but also to criticize the existing order in a state.

The book is written in two parts book 1 & 2: Ertugrul & Parlas., Online Retrived (2016). Book 1- describes an imaginary conversation between a fictitious voyager named Raphael Hythloday and a civil servant Peter Gilles and contains a diatribe on the social ills of England. Book 2- is a description by Hythloday of the various customs and institutions which make up this new island he has discovered.

The themes relevant to education are considered here. In the book Hythloday gives a detailed outline presenting the aims and principles of education in Utopia. The important aspect of the theme of education includes: Equal education to all, without class/gender discrimination. The purpose was to eliminate class differences. All citizens were considered equal and all socio-economic barriers were to be removed from society. Ertugrul & Parlas., Online Retrived (2016).

### **III. AIMS AND PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATION IN MORE’S UTOPIA**

A summary of the important elements of More’s Utopia is provided below:

The Philosophy of Education in Utopia is not reserved to a formal education but is an education continuing a life time rather than a traditional education delivered within the school system of the state on the island. In order to provide continuous education in Utopia, we see educational activities such as morning lectures which start in the early hours of the morning.

Education is not a means to obtain a higher status in society or to obtain material gains. The primary objectives of education in Utopia is both intellectual enlightenment as well as to give a deep understanding of virtue. Teaching a trade is an essential subject since it has paramount importance for the individual to strengthen character. Children need to have both knowledge and moral values The goal of education in Utopia is to prevent unwanted behaviours while teaching desired behaviours.

Ozmon (1969:15) states in his book ‘Utopias and Education’ discusses that More believed the importance of environmental factors and felt that the kind and quality of education which children receive is directly responsible for the ideas and actions which they hold as adults. Utopians have to internalize knowledge by means of practice. Knowledge of agriculture is considered mandatory. Ozmon (1969:15) states that ‘work’ is considered an educational experience in Utopia. Children first learn the knowledge needed at school. Later on, they are taken on field trips to farms to put into practice what they learned at school.

Teaching in the first language is a significant principal of Utopian education. All of their studies are conducted in the native language. Considering the ideal as envisaged by More, how can the educational revolution impact the lives of children, displaced by war, or living in the misery of Ebola/AIDS like epidemics, poverty and famine, religious or racial strife or in the crime ridden settlements in all countries (whether they be the ghettos, colonies or slums)? This can only happen if humanity can think in unison with a common goal, ideologies and politics apart and power struggles left in the dryer of exigency for drying up the greedy urges of power, as all of humankind will otherwise have ashes in their mouths. The apparatus is available as the generation previous to ours fought and killed and finally realized that this was going ‘nowhere’ (pun with the meaning of utopia unintentional), and came up the idea of a united world, respecting the diversities and accepting the strangeness of each other as they met and worked out the common agenda for the common good.

#### **Contextualizing Utopia to the modern context**

The need for contextualizing the understandings of our predecessors has never been more urgent as the inter/intra- actions of multiple distortions that are occurring in the world today could make the goal of the educationist, planner, administrator and leader a horrifying task. It could seem to be a pipe dream that may not materialize. However it has to be realized that the process of social reality does point towards a matrix of

changes that have occurred through the tumultuous chaos, as the juggernaut of history moved and continues to move forward. History teaches us that irrespective of the upheavals that occur in society homeostasis will occur to bring down the effects of the catastrophe and new visions of positivity will emerge. Hence, 'utopia' is not a dream that one hopes for but is a reality towards which we need to and can work. The greatest agent for change that is available to the human race today is the community of nations the United Nations. The fact that the United Nations has worked through the various agencies and is continuing to realize goals and objectives that is laid down through application of saner minds, makes the picture clearer that utopia not as More necessarily expressed it, but as relevant to the modern context and is a distinct possibility. The United Nations summit for children was a major step in this direction.

#### **United Nations: World Summit for Children (WSC) (1990) Online retrieved 2016**

The summit was a landmark in creating the apparatus for delivering the rights of children in various situations of deprivation. The goals of the summit were a progressive experience that have been itemized below:

Major goals for children by the year 2000

The World Summit for Children endorsed seven goals and 20 other supporting goals for implementation by all countries, although it was emphasized that they should be adapted to the specific situation of each country in terms of phasing, standards, priorities and availability of resources. The seven goals included:

Reduction of the infant and under-five child mortality rate by one third,

Reduction of the maternal mortality rate by half,

Universal access to safe drinking water

Provision of sanitary means of excreta disposal,

Universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary-school-age children,

Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to at least half its 1990 level, with emphasis on female literacy,

Protection of children in especially difficult circumstances, particularly in situations of armed conflict.

It was made the primary responsibility of the national Governments to implement the resulting plans of action. On 30 September 1996, the sixth anniversary of the World Summit for Children, the General Assembly received a comprehensive review of progress at mid-decade towards the goals for the year 2000 (Comprehensive review, 1996, Online retrieved 2016) . The Secretary-General's report points to impressive progress towards a number of the child-survival goals, including those for:

Immunization coverage, control of polio

Prevention of diarrhoea, guinea worm and iodine deficiency disorders

Access to safe drinking water,

Promotion of breast-feeding.

The mid-term review also revealed serious problems. While under-five mortality has been reduced in all regions, the pace of progress has been too slow to meet the end-decade goal, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, which together account for three fourths of all under-five deaths. There has also been limited progress towards achieving nutrition, maternal mortality, sanitation and girls' education goals.

In addition the UNICEF a United nations agency has worked closely with WHO, UNESCO and other international and national partners to develop indicators to monitor children's progress. It has also actively pursued universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the support of many NGOs and works with Governments to protect the entire spectrum of children's rights, including access to health care and basic education, as well as to protect abandoned children, children caught up in the violence of war, street children, children subject to special forms of abuse and discrimination and child victims of hazardous labour and sexual exploitation.

#### **The Millennium Project Millenium Project (2002) Online Retrieved 2016**

This is a project of the United Nations commissioned with recommending, by June 2005, operational strategies for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This includes reviewing current innovative practices, prioritizing policy reforms, identifying frameworks for policy implementation, and evaluating financing options. The Project's ultimate objective is to help ensure that all developing countries meet the MDGs. Education plays a prominent role in the MDGs. The goals include: achieve universal primary for all children by 2015, achieve gender equality to ensure gender parity in education at all levels.

The approach towards an egalitarian society is no longer a pipe dream but reflects the thought processes of great thinkers like More who among other have laid down the foundations however imperfect (More subscribed to slavery, which the modern mind cannot accept), but it is the very thought of equality that persons like More prescribed to that make us rejects slavery or any activity that destroys or denigrates human dignity.

All of these initiatives apart the years since 2010 have seen multiple areas of strife and conflicts in addition to those already existing, making the scene more complicated. The conflagration in the regions of Iraq, Syria and the spectre of ISIS that has lifted its head resulting in the huge numbers of refugees that have influxed into neighbouring countries calls for a fresh initiative by the community of nations to address the issues and build new outcomes. This calls for new outlooks that prioritize resources of all kinds based on options that are surgical and decisive.

The new outlook has to be based on developing permanent task forces to intervene and act in situations that disturb the homeostasis of children's lives. It is the strong opinion of the author of this article that the new outlook has to go far beyond the conference and project levels to the rapid intervention and action level to mitigate the proliferation of disaster and tragedy. Only the build up of such a culture could enable the advantage we have secured so far to be going forward to a meaningful conclusion.

#### **IV. SUGGESTIONS FOR MITIGATING THE CRISES ASAP**

Create a rapid action task force with strong budgetary support from all nations to structure and develop a country based and region based permanent manpower program for dealing with tragedies and disasters of any kind. Quarantine children from the after effects of disasters and tragedies through provision of neutral and safe areas with or without parents- based on factors of age (not merely tents where possible) where they can pursue education and life. Where children are infants and below ten make it possible for the mothers to accompany the children and for fathers to visit intermittently. Use digital technology for providing children to communicate with counsellors and teachers as also with agencies who can protect them against exploitation. Make the availability of tablets where the student can learn at all times through pre-recorded lessons and facility for interaction with volunteer teachers to clear doubts. Make education available through assessment of basic levels and through enablement to reach higher levels using scaffolding and structured progress and evaluation. Enable reflective thinking and reciprocal teaching in clusters where the children are stationed in groups with or without parents. Use peer mentoring to help needy students and also to reinforce those with scholastic abilities.

Teach a trade that would enable them to survive economically as they learn and educate themselves. Have group sessions for developing moral, values and appropriate behaviour and social skills. Create a 'learning environment' even in the midst of chaos. Teach agriculture (in small kitchen gardens if necessary) and tune them with nature as these not only provide a life-line for survival, but also incorporate tremendous therapeutic value for trauma survivors.

Teach them the native language and the cultural aspects of their homeland as these would help them to maintain a sense of identity. Create a UN registry of vulnerable children and have follow up on their progress from the 'camp' life to normal life as they come back on track wherever they may be. Create larger basket of paid staff and volunteers in education of children from vulnerable population, and have larger budget outlays to meet the financial needs. Review and monitor with weekly and monthly assessments of progress and feedback on needs and plan reviews

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

The philosophy of More and many like him have opened the doors of the mind of the 'collective unconscious' Jung, (1953). in the words of Jung, to approach human experiences with a common purpose. Humankind has to resist the temptation to swallow itself by its own tail. Any thought, religion, faith or ideology that would assume supremacy would be like this snake, as history has proved to us beyond doubt that emerging thoughts are always as prominent as the one already in vogue and change is inevitable. So why not be an inclusive community rather than exclusive nothing? This in the words of More, could be the 'somewhere good (as the meaning of utopia could be understood as) direction' that humanity should be headed towards. This direction could be by its own wisdom and the wisdom of the times.

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