As the range and pace of challenges increase in our rapidly globalised and globalising world, educators and educational institutions are called upon to address those challenges and invest in the opportunities they invariably provide. The success or otherwise of this endeavour will inevitably be reflected in the shape of our future world, which the learners of today will play a major part in shaping.

The vital importance of education in the building of individuals, communities, and nations was not lost on earlier thinkers and educators, whether ancient Greek, Chinese, medieval Arab, Renaissance Europeans, or others. While those sages were trying in the main to mould the minds of learners (along with the materials those learners were prompted to read) to serve the ideological and politico-economic systems they represented or were part of, others have also aspired for a universal concept of education in the service of all humanity without distinction.

Noble as such aspirations might have been, it will always be difficult, even disadvantageous and impractical, to cut off a system of education from the cultural or ethnic roots that have helped create it. Addressing such roots with the respect or the attention they require should figure as one priority among many. However, even in earlier times and progressively more in ours, no system of education could be “an island, entire of itself,” but has been and will continue to be “a piece of the continent, a part of the main,” though not a “piece” or a “part” meant to disappear into the dominant colour of the “continent” or the prevailing roar of the “main,” but one to add to and perhaps modify (hopefully to further enrich and empower) the colour and sound schemes of both.

This universalist vision is certainly one of the fundamental principles which contemporary educational systems may need to incorporate and share. League tables, which are published periodically to gauge and grade performances of schools and universities around the globe, work on the assumption that the criteria they adopt apply to the whole spectrum of educational activity wherever that activity might be. However, the role of a supportive and well-resourced environment needs to be factored in, while a degree of sensitivity to local cultures needs to be present, though in no patronising or self-seeking way, but in a spirit of partnership and celebration of innovation and diversity, wherever these may come from.
Rudyard Kipling (2008) is often quoted, condemned or praised, for saying that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” He, however, shrewdly notes in the lines immediately following that such barriers and obstructions fade away at times of special encounters. Nowadays, when schools in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore score more highly in international league tables than several of their Western counterparts, the occasion should be seized upon not to score points but to celebrate such special encounters in the field of education. For here, the benefits and the wide reach of modern education are much in evidence, testifying once again to the increasing interconnectedness of our global village/metropolis, without neglecting to pay tribute to individual countries’ takes on modern systems and on the very concepts of modernity, such takes often dictated by lofty visions and ambitions as well as pursuits of power, prosperity, or prestige.

There is no denying that such aspirations and pursuits are somewhat inevitable in our contemporary world, where nationalist priorities and materialist and consumerist values compete with universal, spiritual, and egalitarian ones. The blessings of modern science (and the scientific method) in creating a culture of critical inquiry, rigour, and evidence-based research in education and elsewhere cannot be denied and need to be tirelessly applauded. Sometimes one is so overcome with admiration and gratitude for modern education that one is tempted to say with Dewey (1893) that such education is not just a “preparation for life” but rather “life itself.”

However, since education can at least be an agent of life, and a most formidable one at that, it needs to be infused with a set of ethical guidelines and moral values. This is necessary not just in the context of competition with general materialist and consumerist values coursing through contemporary life but also in the face of a relentless commercialisation of education at more than one level and under various guises and pretences.

Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust (2013) has recently described “Knowledge” as “the currency of the twenty-first century.” Financial and budgeting issues no doubt pose daily challenges for her in her mission to look for additional resources for her university and the various communities she finds herself catering to. However, it is clear that the priority she highlights behind the issue of funding is the task of developing minds that can “solve society’s most urgent problems, fathom the universe, and understand who we are.” These are noble goals, for which primary and secondary education can certainly prepare the learners on the path towards university education. The road map to that end, which is also a beginning, is certainly a complex one. It involves a synergy between school, family, and society (the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child” is profoundly relevant here), effective and motivational curricula, highly qualified teachers, an ever-expanding and multifaceted concept of identity, and, among others, a relaxed and liberal school environment. William Blake’s (1953) verses in “The Schoolboy,” composed in the latter years of the eighteenth century, can still enlighten us in the early years of the twenty-first:
How can the bird that is born for joy
Sit in a cage and sing?
How can a child when fears annoy,
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring!

Einstein’s rating of “imagination” as higher than “knowledge,” and of “learning” as more intricate than “education” (Yeats’ “lighting of a fire” rather than the “filling of a pail”), has often proved its insightfulness and trenchancy to me during my many years of teaching, and learning. Dimnet’s insight about the need for children to educate themselves (the teacher’s role being merely to lead them, in Gibran’s [1997] words, to “the threshold” of their own minds) has also impinged constructively on my thoughts in the course of my “craft or [not so] sullen art.” At the London Academy of Diplomacy, I was able to see over the years that our successive international groups of students were greatly benefiting from a well designed programme incorporating theory and practice and taught by distinguished academics and career diplomats, but that they were also equally gaining from one another’s unique insights, perspectives, and experiences, and from applying and sharing these benefits through tutorials, individual assignments, class exchanges, simulation exercises, and workshops in highly disciplined but also imaginative, innovative, and humane ways.

The above reflections are offered with utter humility and with no intention other than to share a professional and personal experience of teaching (and learning from) a very wide spectrum of international students, an experience that is more humbling than self-congratulatory. But it is also a fund of an experience that allows me to celebrate this book for its academic rigour, original research, diversity of approaches, and thorough humaneness and ethicality, its merit and usefulness attested by the galaxy of young and forward-looking contributors who have focused on a range of truly pivotal concerns of modern education offering unique insights and projections. Though it deals with subjects of topical and pressing interest, its value is destined to endure beyond the present moment.

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