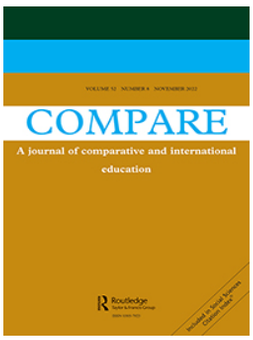

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Audrey Bryan

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From 'the conscience of humanity' to the conscious human brain: UNESCO's embrace of social-emotional learning as a flag of convenience

Audrey Bryan

School of Human Development, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article analyses UNESCO's advocacy of social-emotional learning (SEL) as key to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG target 4.7. It interrogates the agency's growing emphasis on digital SEL and conscious "whole brain" approaches as part of a wider *neuro*liberal turn towards the behavioural, psychological and neurological sciences and considers their implications for UNESCO's status as the "conscience of humanity." It argues that "SEL for SDGs" operates as a "flag of convenience" hoisted by UNESCO to garner legitimacy in a global governance landscape increasingly shaped by private/corporate interests, new (tech-based) philanthropy, and neoliberal policies and funding infrastructures. It demonstrates how the privileging of biological and neuropsychological explanations for complex global problems is reconfiguring UNESCO's global citizenship work towards a depoliticised, individualistic and neuroliberally-inflected "conscious human brain" response to complex societal challenges which forestalls political dialogue and undermines an appreciation of their material and economic determinants.

KEYWORDS

Global competencies; global citizenship; neuroliberalism; EdTech; social-emotional learning; UNESCO

Introduction: education for a brave new world

Set some time in the not-too-distant future, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* depicts a starkly divided, heavily polluted, post-employment society, in which swathes of workers have been "substituted" by technology (Ishiguro 2021). Forced to find new ways to survive in the wake of these substitutions, some inhabitants of this brave new world have joined militia-style communities in order to protect themselves, while others pay for their children to undergo genetic editing in order to optimise their chances of attending university and of having a good life, despite the significant risks it poses to their health. Children are home-schooled on their smart devices or "oblongs" by "screen professors" and participate in pre-arranged, face-to-face "interaction meetings" to compensate for the lack of peer-to-peer human contact. Those who can afford it have solar-powered humanoid robots or artificial friends (AFs) to prevent them from becoming lonely.

CONTACT Audrey Bryan Audrey.bryan@dcu.ie School of Human Development, Dublin City University Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland

The dystopian future depicted in Ishiguro's novel raises profound questions about humanity's political and ethical responsiveness to a future social reality that will be radically transformed by, *inter alia*, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, diminished opportunities for human interaction, widening economic and social disparities, and the climate crisis. For an increasing number of educationalists, international organisations and global corporations, the cultivation of what is variously referred to as "21st century skills," "emotional intelligence," "transversal skills," or "social-emotional learning" (SEL) in humans is key to preparing for this brave new world. SEL is the term used throughout this paper to refer to a diverse and ever-expanding list of "non-cognitive" or "human-centric" skills, attributes, competencies, values and traits, which are deemed necessary for meeting the unprecedented challenges of the 21st century.

This paper's primary objective is to critically analyse UNESCO's advocacy of SEL as key to achieving United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 4.7—the SDG concerned with ensuring that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including an emphasis on human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, cultural diversity, and the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence. It documents UNESCO's reconfiguration of its long-standing engagement with education for sustainable development/global citizenship education (ESD/GCED) as a set of social-emotional skills (SES) that can be acquired through digital pedagogies. It suggests that this reconfiguration of ESD/GCED is reflective of a deepening institutional and global engagement with *neuro*liberalism (Whitehead et al. 2018). Neuroliberalism is an ideological framework which combines neoliberal principles about the role of the market in addressing global problems with new scientific and intellectual perspectives on the nature of the human condition derived from the behavioural, psychological and neurological sciences (Whitehead et al. 2018). It addresses the increasing capacity of both state and non-state actors (including corporations) to govern via the mobilisation of novel cognitive and emotional regulation strategies in order to produce preferred forms of social conduct.

The central argument advanced in the paper is that UNESCO's adoption of a neuroliberally-inflected "conscious human brain" approach to the pursuit of the SDGs (encapsulated by the slogan "SEL for SDGs") is incompatible with, and antithetical to, the pursuit of social and global justice and is having a distorting effect on its role as "the conscience of humanity" (d'Orville 2015, 100). It maintains that "SEL for SDGs" functions as a "flag of convenience" (Lynch 1998, 9) hoisted by UNESCO in order to retain relevance and legitimacy in a global governance landscape increasingly shaped by corporate interests, new (Tech-based) philanthropy, EdTech (Educational Technologies), and neoliberal (or neuroliberal) policies and funding infrastructures (e.g. Ball 2020; Srivastava and Baur 2016). The article's central claim is that whereas this re-flagging of UNESCO's ESD/GCED agenda under the banner of "SEL for SDGs" enables the organisation to appeal to conflicting interests, purposes and values, it is causing it to drift further and further away from its foundational idealism and foreclosing the very targets the SDGs seek to achieve.[1]

I begin by providing a brief overview of SEL's reach, appeal and positioning as a global policy priority before briefly outlining the historical context and contemporary global policy trends and landscape within which UNESCO operates. Having outlined the wider political-economic, ideological and global governance context within which SEL has

flourished – as well as key actors driving the deployment of SEL advocacy, evidence, and policy dialogue globally – the paper then considers the political efficaciousness and implications of UNESCO's advocacy of "SEL for SDGs" for its identity as the "conscience of humanity." It suggests that the agency's increasing allegiance to a neuroliberal imaginary is profoundly at odds with its humanistic mandate. Furthermore, the re-articulation of ESD/GCED as a set of measurable skills that can be acquired through "personalised learning," "digital pedagogies" and "whole brain learner-centric approaches" is symptomatic of the hijacking and re-configuring of the SDGs in terms more suited to corporate and political-economic interests in a global educational governance landscape increasingly shaped by techno-solutionism and private sector involvement in education (Gorur 2020, 25).

The expansiveness of social-emotional learning

SEL is a capacious term that encompasses a diverse and ever-expanding list of "non-cognitive" or "human-centric" skills, attributes, competencies, values and traits which are deemed necessary for "life-effectiveness" in the 21st century (CASEL 2016, 1). The recent proliferation of SEL curricula, platforms, assessment tools and services to cultivate and monitor specific social-emotional skills (SES) such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, initiative, conscientiousness, "grit," (a combination of passion and perseverance) and a "growth mindset" is reflective of a growing enthusiasm for SEL within national educational systems, as well as among international policy actors, global corporations, businesses and "big" philanthropists. SEL's status as a major field of enquiry has been greatly facilitated by neuroimaging technologies that can identify parts of the brain linked to the control of emotion as well as neuroscientific discoveries about the human brain's "neuroplasticity" i.e. its ability to re-wire itself in response to experience. These discoveries lent legitimacy to the view that human flourishing can be "optimised" through structured practice over time, such that by "training your mind" you can "change your brain" (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 73).The scalability and measurability of *digital* SEL – combined with the simplicity of its message that all the skills needed to thrive socially, psychologically, academically, socially and economically, can be learned – make it highly attractive to policy-makers, funders, educationalists and international agencies alike, as they grapple with the question of how best to prepare students to navigate an increasingly unscripted future dominated by a global climate crisis, precarious labour markets and AI.

SEL advocates prioritise different types of SES, depending on their particular mandates. Yet they converge in their desire to promote peaceful, happy and harmonious classrooms, workplaces, communities and societies. For organisations representing the interests of industry, SEL is advocated as a means of "robot-proofing" employees with "human-centric skills" in an AI-augmented world to ensure the future productivity and prosperity of the "digital economy" (Pavlidis 2009; WEF 2020; Williamson 2019). Others – such as the wellness industry – promote SEL as a means of enhancing (self-managed) wellbeing in the form of capacities for learned optimism, personal agility, adaptability, resilience, positive thinking and other forms of "adversity capital" which individuals need to thrive in competitive neoliberal economies (Bates 2021; Pavlidis 2009). For educationalists, SEL is viewed as a solution to complex school-based problems,

including academic underachievement, anti-social behaviour, bullying and mental health.

In addition to enhancing economic productivity and academic success, SEL is increasingly viewed as having a vital role to play in the pursuit of social and global justice, with "skills" such as mindfulness, empathy and compassion being touted as key to achieving the SDGs (Singh and Duraiappah 2020). Recent years have witnessed several powerful international organisations and multilateral groupings positioning themselves as being ideally suited to the promotion, integration, measurement and/or assessment of SEL globally (Auld and Morris 2019). Since 2018, *global competencies* such as "global mindedness," "perspective taking," "communicating in intercultural contexts," and "openness towards/respect for those from different cultural backgrounds" have been assessed as part of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (See Robertson 2021 for a detailed and critical analysis of the OECD-PISA global competences project). Framing ESD/GCED themes in terms of dispositions or competencies operationalises these otherwise contested, complex and contextualised constructs – as a tangible, standardised, comparable, and above all *measurable* skillset, in line with mandatory reporting requirements on progress towards the achievement of SDG 4.7 (UNESCO 2015). The OECD's conceptualisation of global competencies has been heavily criticised for undermining the wider UN conception of global citizenship, and its alignment with the SDGs has been interpreted as a superficial yet strategic move to position itself as the organisation best placed to monitor progress towards SDG targets (e.g. Auld and Morris 2019, 2021; Engel, Rutkowski, and Thompson 2019; Rappleye et al. 2020; Williamson 2021). Notwithstanding the widely acknowledged difficulties of the OECD's assessment of global competencies, this influential policy actor's newfound interest in the non-cognitive aspects of learning is likely to amplify the policy prioritisation of SEL over the next decade (Engel, Rutkowski, and Thompson 2019).

The present article seeks to expand this emergent research focus with particular reference to UNESCO – another major policy actor who has recently embraced SEL as "necessary to achieve" the SDGs (Singh and Duraiappah 2020 for UNESCO MGIEP, 2). As both the global lead for SDG 4 and the lead UN agency with responsibility for GCED, UNESCO has a major role to play in the global diffusion of "SEL for SDGs" (Asah and Singh 2019). To date, there has been no published research specifically devoted to the context for – or effects of – UNESCO's embrace of SEL as "necessary to achiev[ing] the SDGs" and to building peaceful and sustainable societies (Asah and Singh 2019). This article seeks to fill this gap by critically considering UNESCO's embrace of a new, neuroliberally-inflected "emotional paradigm" (Gagen 2015, 149) for its assigned role as "the conscience of humanity" (d'Orville 2015, 100).

The next section presents a brief historical overview of UNESCO, with particular reference to its positioning as the moral and intellectual "conscience of humanity" and as a proponent of education as a human right with ntrinsicvalue (Elfert 2018). The crisis of legitimacy that the agency suffered in the 1980s – which coincided with the ascendancy of policy entrepreneurs who construe education in economistic, instrumentalist terms and/or as a market or investment opportunity – sets the stage for the subsequent analysis of SEL's emergence as a global policy priority.

A brief history of UNESCO: the birth of the 'conscience of humanity'

UNESCO came into existence "[i]n that curiously utopian moment bracketed by the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War" (Sluga 2010, 393). As outlined in Article 1 of its Constitution, the organisation's *raison d'être* is " . . . to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the UN." Widely regarded as the intellectual agency of the UN, UNESCO provided an intellectual arena within which the burgeoning human rights movement could be advanced. The fledgling UN special agency established a committee of influential thinkers whose work contributed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and comprised a forum within which anti-colonial and nationalist movements could advance their claims for freedom, equality, economic and social justice (Andorno 2018). To this day, the organisation remains a major architect of international standard setting instruments on various problems confronting humanity, resulting in the diffusion of human rights norms and principles within its member states.

UNESCO's "world-making" significance derives from its advancement of "new humanism" as the basis for a new (post-war) world order – a quest that remains at the heart of the agency's mandate (d'Orville 2015; Elfert 2018; Mochizuki, Vickers, and Bryan forthcoming; Myers, Sriprakash, and Sutoris 2021). Key pillars of this humanistic "tradition" or "ontology" include: a belief in universalism, a recognition of the "intrinsic" value of education and its role in realising human potential and human emancipation, dialogue and international cooperation, a commitment to equality and democracy and to the advocacy of "unity in diversity," and a belief in human agency and human beings' responsibility to contribute to the betterment of society (Elfert 2018). The agency's role as the moral and intellectual "conscience of humanity"– an expression attributed to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the ninth session of its general conference in New Delhi in 1956—is frequently invoked in UNESCO speeches, texts and webpages (see d'Orville 2015). This phrase – which is seen to encapsulate the agency's normative principles and political mandate – has become integral to the organisation's understanding of its role and identity over time. Contemporary appeals to the historical positioning of UNESCO as the arbiter of humanity help to reinforce the agency's sense of identity, authenticity and distinctiveness as well as providing it with a sense of coherence and continuity in a rapidly changing global governance landscape (Elfert 2018). As this paper demonstrates, this designation is becoming increasingly untenable as the agency increasingly aligns itself with neuroliberalism and techno-solutionism in pursuit of the SDGs. The next section briefly outlines some of the developments resulting in the agency's loss of "epistemic legitimacy" which help to account for its promotion of fundamentally incompatible ideological perspectives on the purpose and value of education (Menashy and Manion 2016, 329) – one which privileges the intrinsic value of education and its role in enhancing prospects for peace, social justice, and sustainable development, and another which promotes unfettered economic growth, marketisation and private/corporate interests.

UNESCO's crisis of legitimacy in an evolving global governance landscape

Despite the fact that many of its educational projects were shrouded in controversy from the outset, UNESCO's status as the UN's designated voice of education helped to secure its epistemic authority in the decades following its establishment. The withdrawal of the US (in 1984), and Singapore and the UK (in 1985) (Mundy 1999) in response to internal divisions and accusations of politicisation, excessive expenditure and mismanagement dealt a major blow to the agency's credibility. This crisis of legitimacy coincided with the rise to prominence of neoliberalism as a "world-making project", which has significantly shaped the global economic architecture and global educational governance landscape ever since (Bell 2013, 267). It also coincided with the related emergence of other influential multilateral and intergovernmental actors – including the World Bank, the International Development Bank (IDB) and the OECD on the global educational governance stage – organisations primarily concerned with stimulating economic growth, boosting rates of return on investment, and workforce preparation/human capital formation. Armed with considerably more economic and political capital than UNESCO, these policy actors eclipsed the special UN agency as *the* primary authority on education globally and were imbued with their own "epistemic legitimacy" in the realms of educational policy-making and governance. In other words, as influential policy entrepreneurs, these entities have come to play a major role in the diffusion of particular ways of thinking about education which jar with the humanistic idea that education serves an intrinsic purpose of fulfiling non-economic societal goals and enhancing prospects for social justice. As Elfert (2018, 231) explains, despite the fact that UNESCO's "humanistic ontology is deeply entrenched in its institutional structures as a collective mindset," the agency's commitment to its foundational idealism has been severely compromised in response to the ascendancy of an economistic-rationalist paradigm which has come to dominate the contemporary global educational governance arena.

In addition to various historical institutional and political-economic developments which have weakened UNESCO's influence in the global governance landscape, a number of contemporary "interlocking policy trends" are further eroding its ability to remain committed to its humanist mandate, while simultaneously influencing its adoption of SEL as a policy priority (Draxler 2020, 158). These trends include: techno-solutionism in education i.e. an increasing reliance on educational technologies (EdTech) to deliver educational programming and as a "solution" to perceived deficiencies in teaching and learning; a growing emphasis on data-driven, evidence-based educational policy and governance (what works); standardisation of testing, measurement, and international benchmarking, and the emergence of philanthrocapitalism and increasing private sector involvement in education, most notably in the form of global technology corporations which view education as an opportunity to expand market reach (Draxler 2020; Williamson and Eynon 2020). These trends are driven by a complex transnational network of powerful, for-profit actors for whom education comprises a largely untapped market (Mertanen, Vainio, and Brunila 2021). While a detailed analysis of these interlocking trends of digitalisation, datafication, privatisation and marketisation is beyond the scope of his article, their implications for education are wide-ranging. Of particular relevance to the present discussion are: the prioritisation of educational initiatives which are funder or donor-led, rather than needs or values driven, and the re-appropriation of

the SDGs to serve corporate and political-economic interests (Gorur 2020, 25); the valuing of measurable aspects of learning over more valuable elements of education which defy measurement (Unterhalter 2020); and the de-politicisation and de-contextualisation of education via the acceleration of "personalised" learning platforms which mine users' personal information (Mertanen, Vainio, and Brunila 2021; Mochizuki, Vickers and Bryan forthcoming).

UNESCO's advocacy of "digital SEL" provides a useful, if worrying illustration of the profound ways in which policy trends that prioritise private interests over public concerns are altering educational systems and thwarting global efforts to achieve social justice and sustainability. The next section briefly outlines some of the key actors and facilitative conditions driving SEL as a global policy priority as a preface to the analysis which follows, which outlines UNESCO's adoption of a neuroliberal imaginary in the service of the SDGs.

Social-emotional learning's infrastructure

A complex SEL "infrastructure,"– comprising academic "gurus," celebrities, think tank coalitions, entrepreneurs, philanthropic funders, software companies, investment schemes, and international organisations – has played a major role in the emergence of a global consensus about the importance of SEL in addressing problems as varied and complex as behavioural problems, educational underachievement, bullying, conflict, violent extremism and climate change (Williamson 2021; Williamson and Piattoeva 2019). The scientific basis and perceived "objectivity" of SEL research – which is highly visible (on brain scans), quantifiable, policy-relevant and easily translatable into curricular and programmatic intervention – has enabled a relatively small number of academics to wield considerable influence over the direction of global educational policy, programming and practice (Williamson 2021, 135). Operating as scientific evangelists, a small, close-knit network of academics attached to major US research-intensive universities working within the domains of positive/personality psychology, neuropsychology and behavioural economics (SEL's Holy Trinity) have helped to secure and bolster a global consensus about the importance of SEL and elevated its status to a universal "regime of truth" (Foucault 1980, 131). With financial backing from a rapidly growing, multi-billion dollar EdTech industry and tech-based philanthropists – most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (established by Microsoft founder Bill Gates) and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) (a for-profit philanthropy created by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg)—these academic "gurus" use their influence and expertise to advocate for the mainstreaming of SEL and SEL-based EdTech products and services in schools (Williamson 2021, 135).

The deployment of SEL advocacy, evidence, and policy dialogue by bodies as diverse as the EU, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), UNICEF, the WEF, and the OECD has further contributed to a global consensus about the value of SEL (e.g. Cefai et al. 2018; Singh and Duraiappah 2020; Chernyshenko, Kankaraš, and Drasgow 2018; Guerra, Modecki, and Cunningham 2014; GPE 2020; UNICEF 2019; WEF 2016). SEL's positioning as both a technology-driven policy "solution" to long-standing educational problems and as a marketplace and investment opportunity has emerged within an increasingly corporatist global governance regime, whereby concerns about market reach and profit-

accumulation now influence the content, delivery and assessment of learning in education systems worldwide (Carney and Klerides 2020; Williamson 2021). With technological advancements radically enhancing the scalability and measurability of SEL, this new emotional paradigm is ideally suited to philanthropy's "predisposition to quick, short term, 'silver bullet' solutions to meet the 'grand challenges' of development; to do more with less; and crucially, to insert the market in the public sphere" (Srivastava and Baur 2016, 437). Simultaneously, the mainstreaming of SEL provides EdTech companies and tech-based philanthropists with a space within which to promote the skills and values supportive of the social and market conditions they favour, as well as a market for their products and access to student data which can in turn be sold to advertisers (Mertanen, Vainio, and Brunila 2021; Regan and Steeves 2019). The embrace of SEL by for-profit actors reflects a broader trend within the "political economy of philanthropy", whereby decisions about what to prioritise tend to be donor-led, rather than needs driven, resulting in initiatives that the private partner is willing to fund, rather than projects which help to advance the agency's mission (Ridge and Kippels 2019).

UNESCO's embrace of neuroliberalism

UNESCO's efforts to remain financially viable and influential in the present educational landscape have resulted in the formation of a number of private sector partnerships between the agency and various firms, corporations, philanthropic/corporate foundations in recent years. Critics maintain that these partnerships have the potential to transform UNESCO into an extension of the corporate agenda or to cause reputational damage when the partnering organisation's practices contravene its mission and values. Yet as Ridge and Kippels (2019, 97) explain: "While there may be repercussions associated with such arrangements, failure to engage with these new and increasingly powerful actors could leave UNESCO on the margins of substantial shifts in both governance and aid flows in the global education sector." Whereas private sector funding currently accounts for only 15% of the total resources currently mobilised by the agency, UNESCO is committed to "strengthening and scaling up its engagement with the private sector" over the next five years, with a view to reaching the potential $100 million mark (UNESCO 2021). The agency views the SDGs as having a crucial role to play in scaling up private sector funding, and vigorously promotes business-led solutions and technologies as a means of addressing major sustainable development challenges (UNESCO 2021).

UNESCO's plan to secure increased private sector involvement in order to sustain future activities also applies to its "Category 1 Research Institutes" which receive substantial funding from their host governments. For example, a 2016 audit of UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP)—the agency's only research institute devoted to the issues encompassed by SDG 4.7 and its most vocal exponent of SEL – stated that: " . . . [a]ction should be taken to avoid over-dependence on contribution from the host government. Resource mobilisation efforts should be strengthened so that diverse funding sources are identified for the Institute's growth in the coming years" (UNESCO 2016, np). Since 2016, MGIEP has formed strategic partnerships with, and received sponsorship from, private corporations such as Dell Technologies, Microsoft, Samsung and HP, and its governing board includes the Deputy Managing Director of Samsung India as well as the Managing Director for

Microsoft Bangladesh. These partnerships have coincided with a reorientation of MGIEP's mission towards an exclusive focus on "harnessing the power of digital technologies to facilitate quality education for the 21st century Global Citizen" (MGIEP 2020, 2) and the championing of digital learning, neuroscience and AI (See Vickers 2022 for a detailed analysis of the evolution of MGIEP and its "digital turn"). MGIEP's digital turn has been steered by its inaugural director, Dr. Anantha Duraiappah – an economist trained in mathematical modelling whose quantitative (as well as personal) experience help to explain the privileging of psychology, behavioural economics and cognitive neuroscience as paradigmatic lenses informing the Institute's *oeuvre*.[2]

As UNESCO's only research Institute devoted to the issues encompassed by SDG 4.7, MGIEP's vision of how global citizenship and sustainable futures can be achieved has a major role in shaping the agency's overall approach to SDG 4 implementation. Identifying as a "thought leader" in SEL, the deployment of "digital SEL" as a strategy for SDG 4.7 implementation has become central to the vision and mission of MGIEP, its commitment to which is encapsulated in the slogan "SEL for SDGs" (Asah and Singh 2019, 54). Within this neuroliberal framing of the SDGs, ESD and GCED are conceived of primarily in terms of "evidence-based" learning interventions and digital pedagogies to promote emotional resilience and "pro-social"/"pro-environmental" behaviour and as a means of "building kinder brains" and "neural networks for peace" (Singh and Duraiappah 2020, 1; Mochizuki forthcoming). Social-emotional skills such as empathy, compassion, mindfulness and critical thinking are identified as having a major role to play in reducing major social, environmental, geo-political and economic problems and injustices, such as global warming and environmental degradation, conflict and violent extremism and economic hardship. From this vantagepoint, problems as intractable as violent extremism and hatred can be addressed through "re-directing," "re-training" or "rewiring" the brain through mindfulness programmes that focus on the "biological roots of rage and aggression" and that cultivate compassion, empathy and well-being (Singh and Duraiappah 2020, 2) (See Christodoulou 2022 for a critical analysis of UNESCO's approach to "Preventing Violent Extremism through Education" (PVE-E)).

MGIEP's instrumentalist leanings are evident in the frequency with which academic achievement/outcomes and human flourishing/global justice discourses co-articulate in its *Rethinking Learning* Report – a publication devoted entirely to the benefits of SEL (Singh and Duraiappah 2020). The fusion of instrumentalist and more justice-oriented outcomes is expressed in terms of a "double dividend" that SEL provides to learners and to society by "improving academic achievements and also nurturing empathic and compassionate individuals dedicated to building peaceful and sustainable societies across the world" (Singh and Duraiappah 2020, xxvi). Notably, SEL's role in predicting academic achievement and adult success – which the *Rethinking Learning* report describes as "the icing on the [SEL] cake" (Singh and Duraiappah 2020, 2) – is referenced over 100 times in a report produced by an Institute whose stated *raison d'être* is to "transform education for humanity" (MGIEP 2020, 1).

MGIEP's *Reimagining Education* report, based on a large-scale *International Science and Evidence based Education (ISEE) Assessment* – which seeks to "provide the gene pool for developing blueprints to design and implement an education for a peaceful and sustainable planet"—is the Institute's most substantial engagement with neuroscience, EdTech, AI, personalised learning and SEL to date (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 15).

Advocating for a "whole-brain learner centric approach" towards "education for human flourishing," the report stresses the importance of "incorporating neuroscience in teacher-training" (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 87) and the need to inform educators and policy makers " . . .of the basic principles of neuroscience to distinguish information and teaching methods based on scientific evidence vs. pseudoscience" (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 87). MGIEP's championing of personalised learning as an "entitlement and a human right for every learner" (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 11)features as the first key take home message in its Summary for Decision Makers document. This seems at odds with UNESCO's mandate, not least because of the tendency for individualised modes of learning to reduce curriculum to what can be produced online, thereby limiting the wider social and citizenship goals of schooling (Wyatt-Smith, Lingard, and Heck 2019). This "re-imagining" of UNESCO's humanistic vision for education *is*, however, perfectly aligned with EdTech's efforts to reconfigure public education as a marketplace for its products, platforms and services (Mertanen, Vainio, and Brunila 2021; Regan and Steeves 2019). Meanwhile, "human flourishing" is similarly reductively defined in the report as " . . . the explicit training (teaching and learning) of social-emotional skills such as empathy, mindful awareness, and compassion in conjunction (with emphasis on conjunction) with cognitive skills such as numeracy and literacy" (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 73). EdTech/digital pedagogy is identified as having a major role to play in the nurturing of SEL; "social robots" for example, are described as "valuable tools for social-emotional learning" (Duraiappah et al. 2022, 53) (See Mochizuki, Vickers, and Bryan forthcoming for a more detailed, critical analysis of MGIEP's ISEE Assessment).

Whereas MGIEP may be UNESCO's most ardent proponent of SEL, it is by no means the only arm of the agency to embrace SEL and its wider neuroliberal imaginary. UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE)—which aims to "improve access to evidence-based knowledge needed to guide curriculum design and development, and teaching, learning, and assessment within the demands of the global education 2030 agenda"—has "focused its knowledge brokerage" on "the neuroscience of learning"and "future competencies" (Marope 2016, 189).

Evidence of UNESCO's increasingly neurocentric view of education can also be found in its landmark *Futures of Education* report which contains 21 references to the human brain and neuroplasticity, as well as an entire section on "mobilising the learning sciences" (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021, 124). The science of learning is heavily reliant on measurable psycho and biometrical data and tech-based personalised learning platforms, and provides a decontextualised view of education which frames learning as neutral, transferrable processing of information that happens in the brain (Mertanen, Vainio, and Brunila 2021; Williamson and Eynon 2020).[3] The agency's neuroliberal turn is further evident in its Happy Schools initiative, which was first launched as a pilot project in 2014 by UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok, but which has since "gone global" (UNESCO 2022). In March 2022, UNESCO launched a global *Happy Schools Project Framework* (HSF), designed to promote learners' happiness, well-being and SEL, which aligns SDG 4.1 (concerned with quality education and learning outcomes) with SDG 4.7. Fusing the vocabulary of SEL and the vocabulary of ESD/GCED, The *Happy Schools* initiative "asserts that the values of growth mindsets, teamwork, equity, inclusion, and sustainability all ultimately contribute to better learning experiences and outcomes for all" (UNESCO 2022).

The scope of UNESCO's SEL-based advocacy is further evident in other UNESCO publications which state the need to "mandate SEL skills for everyone all the time" (UNESCO 2020, 2) and in the ongoing development of guidelines to support a whole system approach to the mainstreaming of SEL in schools, in conjunction with MGIEP. In fact, calls to mainstream SEL have accelerated in the wake of the global COVID 19 pandemic and the challenges it has posed to the psychological well-being of students. The increasing prioritisation of SEL – in particular the need for greater emphasis on "resilience" in school curricula – has been has identified as one of the "silver linings" of the global pandemic (Reimers et al. 2021, 12). Moreover, as UNESCO scales up and strengthens its relationship with the private sector in pursuit of the SDGs, and a multitude of other policy entrepreneurs, corporations and philanthropists increasingly prioritise SEL in an effort to bolster their legitimacy or increase their profits, the agency's focus on "SEL for SDGs" is likely to intensify further.

Concluding thoughts: SEL for SDGs as a flag of convenience

The foregoing analysis outlined the complex constellation of intersecting conditions that have contributed to UNESCO's growing allegiance to a neuroliberal imaginary profoundly at odds with its humanistic mandate. The agency's advocacy of "SEL for SDGs" can be interpreted as a manifestation of what Maren Elfert (in her critique of UNESCO's lifelong learning agenda) describes as the agency's "susceptibility to contestation and appropriation by conflicting agendas" (Elfert 2018, 235). Elfert characterises UNESCO's continued articulation of humanism as "deceptive" and existing only "at the level of rhetoric" (2018, 36). The present analysis characterises UNESCO's increasing emphasis on "SEL for SDGs" as a "flag of convenience" hoisted by the agency in order to appeal to conflicting interests, purposes and values as it tries to retain its relevance, financial viability and political legitimacy in a radically altered global governance landscape increasingly driven by non-state actors, tech-based philanthropy, neoliberal think-tanks and international financial institutions. For SEL advocates, EdTech businesses and tech-based philanthropies, the alignment of SEL with the SDGs undoubtedly enhances the visibility, status and global reach of SEL while simultaneously boosting the profit margins and corporate and ideological agenda of the private/technology sector. For UNESCO, the fusion of SEL with the SDGs has the problematic effect of obscuring and foreclosing the very targets the SDGs seek to achieve. As such, "SEL for SDGs" distorts and undermines UNESCO's status as the "conscience of humanity" by diverting political energy away from the pursuit of global justice and equality and redirecting it towards a depoliticised, individualistic and neuroliberally-inflected "conscious human brain" approach to ESD/GCED. The privileging of "biological" or neuropsychological explanations for complex global problems such as violence and aggression, or psychological distress, for example, forestalls political dialogue and undermines an appreciation of their material and economic determinants. Neoliberal buzzwords such as "resilience" and "grit" privilege personal inadequacies and psychological dispositions – rather than social and material inequalities – as the source of psychological distress, poor educational outcomes etc. The discourse of "SEL for SDGs" therefore delimits

a particular conception of global citizenship which has profound implications in terms of people's preparedness to show solidarity with others. In short, the perniciousness of SEL for those who are variously framed as "emotional suspects," problem citizens, irresponsible or inadequate parents, and/or as threats to social and economic progress makes it ill-suited as a framework for achieving SDG 4.7. (See e.g. Davidson and Stryker 2020; Edwards, Gillies, and Horsley 2015; Williamson and Piattoeva 2019). Stated another way, neurologically-inflected SEL is incompatible with the pursuit of global justice because it implicitly frames certain people as deserving of care, rights, or justice while positioning others as undeserving of the same treatment, thereby pre-empting the forging of relations of transnational solidarity – the very relations that lie at the heart of global justice. UNESCO must radically change course if it is to avoid drifting further and further away from its foundational idealism and identity as "the conscience of humanity."

Notes

1. The term "flag of convenience" refers to a business practice employed by shipping companies who register a vessel in a foreign state in order to avail of lax regulation, thereby reducing taxation and labour costs. The "re-flagged" vessel sails under a "flag of convenience," enabling it to operate under the laws of the "flag state" where it is registered, which has no genuine link to its vessel owners or operators. In the field of comparative education, the term has been used to describe the discursive practice of invoking policy buzzwords in order to appeal to donor agencies or to bolster legitimacy for national educational reform initiatives, only for these initiatives to 'sail' under different objectives once the funding or legitimacy has been granted (Lynch 1998; Steiner-Khamsi 2004).
2. At the launch of MGIEP's *Re-imagining Education* report in Paris in March 2022 (see Duraiappah et al. 2022), Duraiappah explained that 'personal experience,' in the form of his eldest son's 'acute dyslexia' diagnosis, influenced the direction of MGIEP's work (Duraiappah et al. 2022). EdTech's role in enabling differently abled students to learn features prominently in the report's Summary for Decision Makers (ibid).
3. The learning sciences is an interdisciplinary field combining perspectives from neuroscience, the social, cognitive and behavioural sciences, education, computer and information sciences, artificial intelligence/machine learning, and engineering.

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ORCID

Audrey Bryan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0888-9276

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