

# If education is not the answer you are asking the wrong question



— *why it's time to see planetary crises as  
a species-wide learning opportunity*

A paper for the Transformative Education Alliance

by Zak Stein

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***The Coming Planetary Paideia***

*Paideia* is a Greek term which is the etymological root for words such as *encyclopedia* and *Wikipedia*. The word has a range of connotations, but largely has to do with the raising of youth and the intergenerational transmission of virtues, knowledge, and skill. In ancient Athens, the creation and maintenance of a collective *paideia* was understood as an educational and cultural task taking place *prior* to the tasks of building a coherent *polity*. Education is prior to politics and thus prior to civilisation. Education—the praxis that is our *paideia*—is the “deep code” of both. Changes in the shape and nature of our collective *paideia* are more radical than, and ultimately the cause of, any and all political revolutions.<sup>1</sup>

In my book, *Education in a Time Between Worlds*, I weave together a set of six essays on the future of education by making use of a single idea: we are living in an historical epoch when the nature of education itself is changing. We are witnessing the emergence of a *planetary paideia* that is polycentric, decentralised, and philosophically integral. The so-called “global village” is at risk of turning into something like a shopping mall of planetary scope, but I argue that it could instead be transformed into a planetary “school without walls.” Indeed, I think that this is a highly probable scenario.<sup>2</sup> This world-historical transformation in the nature of our collective *paideia* is going to

take (and is already taking) many varied forms, but the directionality of the change is clear. The *necessity* of the change is also clear: I argue that there is no viable future for civilisation that does not include a radical change in the nature of our educational systems.

For example, in my book I outline a near future design-fiction scenario for educational innovation in the United States, which I discuss as “the educational hub network.” The basic idea is that school systems themselves need to be repurposed and redesigned. I suggest that each school building be transformed into an unprecedented institution that is some combination of a public library, museum, co-working centre, computer lab, and daycare. Funded to the hilt and staffed by citizen-teacher-scientists, these public and privately supported educational hubs would be the local centres of regionally decentralised pop-up classrooms, community organising, apprenticeship networks, and college and work preparation counselling. Giant schools built on the model of the factory at the turn of the last century can be gutted, remodelled, and reborn (metaphorically and literally) to create the meta-industrial one-room schoolhouses of the future. In this new form of public space dedicated to education, digital technologies will enable the formation of peer-to-peer networks of students and teachers of all ages, from all across the local region (or the world, digitally), all without coercion or compromise. What enables these safe and efficient hubs of self-organising educational configurations are fundamentally new kinds of educational technologies, which put almost unlimited knowledge in the palm of every person’s hand.

I wrote these ideas under the frame of “concrete utopian thinking,” as a kind of speculative exercise to spark the social imagination. But since publishing the book, I have been contacted by numerous people who were already working on some version of this idea.<sup>3</sup> It seems there is a logic to the development and evolution of the collective *paideia*, as innovations are

taking place along certain common vectors of change. The tides are turning, to some extent, as there is a dawning awareness of just how potentially radical the possibilities are for educational initiative in our historical moment.

One of the people who resonated with my thinking about the emergence of a *planetary paideia* was Jonathan Rowson. He alerted me to the ongoing efforts of a growing *bildung*<sup>4</sup> movement, in which he and others in Europe have been independently discovering and experimenting with the kind of ideas I was writing about in my book. We could both see that something was trying to emerge, something like an alliance concerning the radical changes taking place in our collective *paideia*. Naturally, as happens when someone from New England gets together with someone from the UK, we decided to make TEA.

This is the first of several concept papers about the scope and mission of the Transformative Education Alliance (TEA), which is an effort undertaken here at Perspectiva, in conjunction with a pan-European *bildung*-education network, as well as a host of sites in North America. This series of concept papers is intended to put in place the “code” upon which TEA will run, intending only to establish the minimum set of ideas needed for the creation of an alliance. TEA will eventually come to life on the ground in communities all over the world, but the first step is to understand the work that needs to be done.

### ***Education is the Metacrisis***

There are a large number of crises drawing increasing amounts of public attention, such as the ecological, economic, immigration, geopolitical, and energy crises. But there is also an invisible crisis unfolding within our own minds

and cultures that is getting much less attention. This is the *metacrisis*, which has to do with how humans understand themselves and the world. It is a generalised *educational crisis* involving a set of related psychological dynamics; systems and societies are in trouble, but it is the *psyche*—the human dimension—that is in the direst of straits.

There is a vicious cycle that characterises states of crisis, precipitating a cascade into catastrophic and profound confusion. You may have experienced this if you have ever been truly lost, especially alone in the woods on foot. Regardless of the difficulty of the actual physical and technical problems that need to be solved for you to survive and find your way again, there is the primary difficulty of simply keeping your head on straight. Failing to do this means you may be unable to learn what your situation actually is, as when, out of fear, you make a snap decision that “camp is that way!” and set out running. You are now running in the wrong direction and exhausting yourself. The crisis was that you misplaced your map and got lost, but the metacrisis that made it go from bad to worse was “in your head.”

This same lesson applies at the social-cultural level, where today we are without a “map” and lost in objective crises involving ecosystems, infrastructures, borders, and bombs. There is a tendency toward action-bias as the situation heats up. The desperate desire for a “map” will lead to situations where anything resembling a map will do. We then set metrics in place even when we do not know what should be measured, just to feel like we are making “progress.” Worse than flying blind, we are flying using instruments *as if* they work, when in reality they do not (“camp is that way!”). When social systems enter these dynamics, it is of course more complicated than being alone and lost in the woods. Large groups of people have to continue to cooperate and solve problems, even as the sense grows on the whole that we are *lost*.

*Welcome to the metacrisis.* This is a generalised educational crisis in which, despite all the concrete problems faced by society, the most pressing problems are actually “in our heads” (i.e., in our minds and souls, we *are in a crisis of the psyche*). This can be made clear by differentiating out the following four aspects:

**Sense-making crisis** (*what is the case?*): Confusion at the level of understanding the nature of the world. Everyday people and experts are struggling to say things that are true, unable to comprehend increasing complexity. The worst-case scenario is a complete epistemic unmooring and descent into the cultural vertigo of an inescapable simulation. The best-case scenario sees emergent forms of post-digital individual and collective sense-making spreading on a massive scale.

**Capability crisis** (*how can it be done?*): Incapacity at the level of operating on the world intelligently. In all social positions and domains of work, individuals are increasingly unable to engage in problem-solving to the degree needed for continued social integration. The worst-case scenario results in catastrophic infrastructure failure due to a brain-power shortage. The best-case scenario is a revivification of guilds and technical educational initiatives for a new economics of social system integration.

**Legitimacy crisis** (*who should do it?*): Incoherence at the level of cultural agreements. Political and bureaucratic forms of power are failing to provide sufficiently convincing rationale and justification for trust in their continued authority. The worst-case scenario is complete citizen-level defection from all organised political bodies. The best-case scenario sees new forms of governance and collective choice-making

that are built out from first principles, factoring in dynamics that are digital and planetary.

**Meaning crisis** (*why do it?*): Inauthenticity at the level of personal experience. Individuals from all walks of life are questioning the purpose of their existence, the goodness of the world, and the value of ethics, beauty, and truth. The worst-case scenario is peak alienation and a total mental health crisis. The best-case scenario would allow for a democratisation of enlightenment, sanity and psychological sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Making TEA in a Time Between Worlds***

The Transformative Education Alliance (TEA) is motivated by an awareness of the metacrisis, which is understood as a generalised educational challenge and opportunity for evolving the foundations of our collective *paideia*. The four aspects of the metacrisis are to be understood as needing to be addressed *by necessity*; they are essential to any coherent *paideia*. All four aspects are interconnected; you cannot answer one without also providing answers for the other three. Indeed, the failure of modern education has to do with its only answering two of the four aspects, as I discuss below (feel free to guess which two now, and later you can see if you're right). Nevertheless, answers to these questions—resolutions across all aspects of the educational crisis—are necessary for the continuity of social forms, and thus civilisation itself.

Jürgen Habermas clarified *the educational nature of social autopoiesis* in the 1970s, and it has been deepened and confirmed ever since, including by Martha Nussbaum and others in the domain of legal and political thought.<sup>6</sup> The basic idea is that societies require each new generation to be in a position to inherit the requisite capabilities, legitimacy, and meaning-making

to continue the project of cooperative social life. This entails that societies have some large percentage of their adult members actively working to maintain sophisticated educational projects.<sup>7</sup> Failing this, the intergenerational fabric of the social world begins to fray. At some point inadequate education results in an inability to fill essential institutional roles, provide motivating meanings, and secure political legitimacy.

Most educational efforts are usually offering answers to only one of these questions. When there is mention of an educational crisis, it is usually in reference to *one* of these four aspects, most often capability.<sup>8</sup> Public school STEM curricula were explicitly built to address the capability crisis, as this is the aspect that is legible according to the terms set by the guiding philosophy of human capital theory. According to this argument, the economy is seen as flagging because educational systems are failing. This is a crisis of job preparedness and “twenty-first century skills,” where the focus is on the ability of people to do the jobs that need doing in order for the social system to work.<sup>9</sup>

Almost orthogonal to these trends, the human potential movement has been addressing the meaning crisis along with much of progressive and wholistic education, as well as depth psychotherapy in general. We encounter this outside of schools (or in “alternative” schools) where your job should be the last thing on your mind (or at least where your soul is more important than your job). There has been a “return” to meaning, spirituality, and various forms of religiously framed (but secularly held) personal growth and self-development work. This is education for its own sake, which is to make someone whole and capable of living a richly meaningful life.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, for nearly a century the major educational force has been the modern public schools themselves. These have been the largest educational initiatives in history, and can be understood as having been invented as a



means for generating political legitimacy and instilling sense-making about the nature of the world for this end.<sup>11</sup> Science and nationalism replaced religion and ethnocentrism, and the idea that a particular form of government is natural (i.e., good / best possible) was made fit for mass consumption through the pedagogy of mass schooling. Electronic media (starting with radio and then TV) changed these dynamics entirely, as sense-making and legitimacy were brought over from didactic instruction into the images and fantasies of the voice and screen. If PBS and Sesame Street represent the best potentials of this shift, then FOX news and CNN represent the worst. Digital technologies changed the game on all four aspects entirely, a point to which I will return below.

Note that an answer to one aspect of the metacrisis entails an answer to them all, even if this answer is not explicit. Imagine training a bunch of scientists while providing no sense of meaning for their lives. Or imagine giving people rich sources of meaning, but never teaching them to do math or operate any kind of machines or organisations. It should be clear that both of those scenarios have been tried (at least in part) during modernity, and the approach is self-defeating. Scientists living meaningless lives create monstrosities; deskilled people whose meanings are dictated to them become sheep-like. Piecemeal approaches that address only one aspect of the four-fold educational crisis are multiplying and piling up, and many of them could be making things worse.

Modern approaches to education have been exhausted. There are no longer any agreed-upon answers to the basic questions that have long been at the heart of intergenerational transmission. A postmodern confusion has set in, which cannot last because these questions about the social world cannot remain unanswered. We are in a time between worlds and it is disorienting. The resolution of the metacrisis (or arrival in the new world) appears almost unimaginable, because each of the four aspects of the

metacrisis requires a resolution that is interintertwined within the resolution of all others. Sense-making aids meaning-making, which aids legitimacy, which helps build capability (and so on, in all directions and combinations). If there is not this kind of complex educational system—this coherent and comprehensive *paideia*—then eventually “things fall apart,” as the saying goes, and the centre of the social world cannot hold. In the evolutionary dynamics of complex systems there is a tendency for these systems to lose their centre of balance—this is a crisis. Something new needs to (and will) emerge all at once, as a fundamentally new kind life makes itself possible. Or the exhausted form of life will simply end—that’s is all She wrote (where She = Nature). When considering the evolution of educational systems, we must ask ourselves: *what is coming next?*

### ***Prefiguring the First of What is Next***

TEA is not being made to answer these questions, nor to solve the educational crisis according to the terms by which it was created. Indeed, there are no answers on hand because these are uncharted educational frontiers. TEA is interested in networking, curating, and supporting educational environments and resources that will prepare people to be able to address the four-fold crisis for themselves as individuals and as communities. This must be done in time, before the old forms of education entirely lose force. There is no *polity* without a coherent *paideia*, no society without the educational resources necessary to keep it running. TEA seeks to forestall as best as possible a catastrophic disruption of intergenerational transmission in the short run, while working to build a fundamentally new kind of educational system that could exist over the long run.

The four aspects of the metacrisis frame the work being undertaken by TEA. They help organise *the best of the best* in a synoptic and retrospective way.

As mentioned above, there are already numerous and important efforts underway that address one (or two) aspects of the four-fold crisis in various ways. TEA is seeking to clarify the history of such efforts, as well as to build an understanding concerning which of the four-fold aspects are currently being worked on, by whom, and with what kinds of quality and tools. This allows us to mitigate some of the impending educational disaster waiting on our doorstep.

To be clear: when thinking about the problems of education today it is not simply that we need more of it. Indeed, more “education” as we have known it could be a problem. Current educational configurations come in many varieties (this is a partial list, in no particular order):

- *transformational*
- *progressive*
- *alternative*
- *wholistic*
- *constructivist*
- *outdoor / placed based*
- *didactic / traditionalist*
- *integral*
- *gamification*
- *techno-optimist (coder camps; start-up incubators)*
- *ecocentric (activist; agriculture; nature-based)*
- *social justice (e.g., anti-racism; LGBTQ)*
- *embodiment / movement*
- *mindfulness*
- *project based / portfolio based*
- *interdisciplinary / transdisciplinary*
- *fundamentalist religious*<sup>12</sup>

The four aspects of the metacrisis outlined above can be used to ensure a kind of clarity of attention when considering the current educational landscape. Many of these approaches are clearly capable of bringing great benefit to great numbers. However, it is also clear that any single approach is not enough to address the four-fold metacrisis entirely.

TEA seeks to *de-centre* every position in order to then weave the *polycentric* meshwork needed to shore up the failing educational institutions that have come to dominate our society.<sup>13</sup> Certain “best in class” work across all areas of the educational establishment should be continued, but these efforts should take up a discerning division of labor with regards to the four aspects of the metacrisis outlined above. The aggregation and constellation of approaches that might otherwise be in competition and rivalry is one of the things TEA is seeking to accomplish. The best of the best within the current educational landscape needs help to self-organise, with a shared sense of purpose and right relationship to various aspects of the metacrisis.

However, constellating the best of the best is different from getting a handle on *the first of the next*. The primary work that TEA is seeking to undertake is that of clarifying the shape of what is emerging as a preferable future for educational innovation. Fostering the creation of new ideal-types and design innovations for the future of education is non-routine work, which is outside the realms of “normal science” (in the Kuhnian sense). TEA is an alliance moving through the space between paradigms, not one representing a new paradigm. TEA is engaged in a kind of “valley crossing” or evolutionary scouting, which is a preamble or reconnaissance prior to the establishment of a new normal.

In a time between worlds there is the possibility for true novelty and emergence. The best of the best of today must form a meshwork of differentiated answers. These answers must cover a fragmented array of

institutional niches in an attempt to immediately mitigate educational disaster (essential but temporary). Transcending but including this, others must consider their work as prefiguring *the first of the next*, examples of a new emergent form. Not a meshwork tailored to the current institutional and social terrain, but something that offers answers to all four aspects in one educational undertaking. This requires making use of truly novel technologies and pedagogies (processes, practices, and community forms), many of which have no place in most of what counts as education today. The first of what is next is edgy, emergent, and complex. What is arising now along this trajectory is most certainly not the best of what will characterise our future world. But there is a real need to start somewhere, to begin to experiment with the evolution of educational forms. TEA is brewing for the future of transformative education.

*Transformative education* (used here as a loose translation of the German, *Bildung*) has long been a term associated with advocacy (and sometimes prophesy) for a form of education that undertakes to transform individual sense-making and capabilities (i.e., development, not mere learning) within contexts of political and cultural engagement. This is the transformation of self and worldview, in community, in service of the world, and carried out on the scale of society itself through a publicly supported infrastructure. Such a vision was one of the dignities of modernity left to us by the Romantics and Idealists. This history will concern us in later writings. The point here is the basic code for “transformation” being written into TEA is as follows:

*Individual transformations of sense-making and capability, done in the context of political and cultural engagement, with an understanding of the four-fold metacrisis and the role of education in a time of planetary transformation.*

This can be contrasted with the code written into modern public education, which is something like this:

*Individual transformations of sense-making and capability, done in the context of abstract work that is isolated from the rest of politics and culture, undertaken with an understanding of the needs of the nation-state and the role of human capital in the economy.*

The origins of this notion of modern public education are found in important ideas about what broadly available educational resources might accomplish. In the eighteenth century the Prussian state was truly pioneering here, but the emergence of large-scale modern public educational bureaucracies was a result of a nationalistic downgrading of the philosophy of *bildung*, which had emerged from the legacy of German idealism. This idea of transformative education has in fact been within the heart of western civilisation since the Renaissance-era humanists attempted to siphon off education from the church. The idea of public education itself was first spread through Europe in the sixteenth century by the Rosicrucian, John Amos Comenius. Comenius argued for a philosophy of universal wisdom (pansophism) that entailed viewing humanity and society *sub specie educationis* (i.e., to see all of the human condition under the aspect of education). This is actually the place where the work of TEA begins: seeing education in a new way.<sup>14</sup>

Forthcoming concept papers will include the history of the idea of transformative education from Socrates to Comenius, through Dewey and Montessori, and up to today. We will then turn to a synoptic examination of what is currently the best of the best, which will allow us to de-centre the contemporary scene in an effort to weave the minimum meshwork necessary to mitigate certain immanent educational failures. Only then we will we begin TEA's true work, which is to organise and galvanise the first of the next,

and to prefigure the shape of what preferable forms of education innovation might look like. With the code of transformation outlined above as a guide, the work is that of navigating a time between worlds with compasses set toward a *planetary paideia*.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I make the case that educational dynamics (broadly conceived) drive world-system transformations in both my books, *Social Justice and Educational Measurement* (2016), and *Education in a Time Between Worlds* (2019).

<sup>2</sup> To be clear: if I am considering those scenarios in which humanity actually survives the coming decades, then this scenario is the likeliest, if not the only route toward a new form of non self-terminating planetary civilisational metastability. The metapolitics of existential risk are beyond the scope of this essay, but relevant to TEA. See: <http://www.zakstein.org/metapolitical-practice/>

<sup>3</sup> I will be getting permissions to share various aspects of these ongoing projects in future writings, so stay tuned.

<sup>4</sup> *Bildung in the 21st Century—Why sustainable prosperity depends upon reimagining education* by Jonathan Rowson CUSP essay series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity | No 9 <https://www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/m/essay-m1-9/>

<sup>5</sup> This model has its origins in Habermas' (1975) *Legitimation Crisis*, but extends far beyond this classic analysis of the problems of the welfare state. The "metacrisis as generalised educational crisis" is also discussed in my book, *Education in a Time Between Worlds* (Stein, 2019). It has been suggested to me that there are at least two more basic questions that need to be asked in this way about the metacrisis, namely *where* and *when*? I agree that there are additional aspects of the education crisis that concern the spaces and times (or lack thereof more usually) in which anything resembling real education is able to take place. This touches on the geographical, urban, and architectural landscapes that impact education (which is no small matter), and is likely to become of relevance for TEA soon.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the role of education in social autopoiesis, see Niklas Luhmann's (1995) *Social Systems*, as well as Martha Nussbaum's (2006) *Frontiers of Justice* (although she does not use the word autopoiesis). It was likely John Dewey who was the first to clarify this in sociological terms, as well as the clarifying the implications for the philosophy of education. Dewey's (1916) *Democracy and Education* is one of the clearest statements of the idea that civilisation reproduces itself via the mechanism of a broadly distributed educational system, which is not limited to schools. The more complex a society becomes, the more sophisticated its educational systems must become in order to ensure continuity of the social system itself. Dewey, of course, is firmly and explicitly in the lineage of *bildung*.

<sup>7</sup> Adults must also ensure that the social world itself is not overrun with lies, incapacitating dependencies, illegitimate or unaccountable power, and senselessness bordering on nihilism. Four-fold breakdowns in the process of educational transmission can also occur due to a more general breakdown in culture, i.e., even if the schools are well funded in a totalitarian state, it is not clear what kind of education would really be taking place.

<sup>8</sup> The rhetoric and rallying call of "educational crisis" was, in fact, started by policy and research efforts under the Reagan administration, with the famous report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The argument was based on a predicted educational crisis that would threaten national security (and American world dominance). The crisis was understood as a drastic economic crunch in the near future as a result of a human-capital supply bottle neck (i.e., they foresaw a capabilities crisis, but not the other three).

<sup>9</sup> I discuss *reductive human capital theory* as the current dominant metatheory of education in my book, *Education in a Time Between Worlds* (2019). See also: Stein, Z. (2013). "Ethics and the new education: psychopharmacology, psychometrics, and the future of human capital." *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*. 8(3-4) 146-162. In both cases I contrast human capital theory with an *Integral Metatheory of Education*. This comprehensive, omni-considerate (integral critical-realist) metatheory of education is the root of the TEA frameworks being devised here.

<sup>10</sup> See Jeffrey Kripal's work on Esalen Institute, which is probably the archetypal example of the attempts in postwar America to address the meaning crisis. See: Kripal's (2007) *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, and Kripal & Shuck's (2005) *On the Edge of the Future: Esalen and the Evolution of American Culture*.

<sup>11</sup> This story about public schools is found in the mainstream histories, such as Lawrence Cremin's (1970-1988) three volume *History of American Education*. But this same story is also found (told with different emphasis) in the critical histories, which are social justice-oriented accounts such as Clarence Karier's (1986) classic, *The Individual, Society, and Education*. So while this is not a controversial way of reading the history of education, the political and ethical implications are controversial. In one sense, this amounts to the question: "Was modernity a good or bad thing?" To which the answer must be: "Both." See: Charles Taylor's (1989) *Sources of the Self*, for a way to understand both the dignity and disaster of modernity (and by implication, the dignity and disaster of modern public education).

<sup>12</sup> This list is woefully inadequate and reflects only my limited sense of the field, rather than a systematic review of the proliferating lexicon of educational innovations. In the future, TEA will work to compile such lists in a systematic way to achieve a comprehensive view of the full set of educational innovations currently in play.

<sup>13</sup> The term “decentering” is from Jean Piaget, who used it to describe the process by which one removes one’s own ideas from the center of the social world by stepping back to see more objectively where one fits in, as well as how others’ ideas and roles make sense and are necessary from their perspective, irrespective of one’s own. Cognitive and ethical development has been characterized as a process of lessening egocentrism and increasing decentering. The outcome is an ability for post-formal operational dynamics of interpersonal cooperation, which is not possible if one is unable to decenter their own view into a network of other.

<sup>14</sup> See: Jonathan Rowson’s (June 2019) essential essay, “*Bildung* in the 21st Century—Why sustainable prosperity depends upon reimagining education,” where he points out the connection to Comenius and begins the work of making TEA. <https://www.cusp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/09-Jonathan-Rowson-online.pdf>