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For Function or Transformation? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Education Under the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

We conduct a critical discourse analysis of the extent to which Sustainable Development Goal 4, "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promote lifelong learning," promotes a utilitarian and/or transformative approach to education. Our findings show that despite transformative language used throughout the Agenda, the SDGs primarily espouse a pro-growth model of development and a utilitarian approach to education. We conclude that for SDG 4 to contribute to sustainable development and transformation, there must be a shift in the dominant educational discourse so that issues of social and environmental justice are placed at the heart of educational priorities. Ultimately, we present a cautionary note to the euphoria surrounding these goals by exposing the extent to which SDG4 is inconsistent with transformative education.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development Goals, education policy, critical discourse analysis, transformation, utilitarian*

Introduction

From Ban Ki-moon, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, and Pope Francis, to Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai and Yoweri Museveni, the president of Uganda, there was excitement in the air at the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in New York in September 2015.The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offer an ambitious vision for achieving "sustainable development." The SDGs promise to eradicate global poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change through the multipronged approach of achieving 17 integrated goals and 169 targets covering social, economic, and ecological issues the world faces today. These are grand promises reminiscent of the previous set of development goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that came to an end in 2015. Education is expected to play a significant role in the realization of these promises. In fact, SDG4 aims "to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning," and has

10 associated targets to be achieved by 2030. But what are the prospects of fulfilling these promises? Given current discontent with neoliberalism, the dominant political economic idea that characterizes the development discourse, a question we therefore ask is: *To what extent does the SDG4 function within as opposed to against the prevailing neoliberal agenda?* Ultimately, we question the extent to which education for sustainable development within the SDGs can be truly transformative. In this paper, we aim to present a cautionary note to the euphoria surrounding these goals by exposing the extent to which these new development Goals, particularly SDG4, is inconsistent with the discourse of transformative education that deliberately challenges social and economic structures that define our contemporary world. We make this argument by situating SDG4 within the context of two historically dominant discourses existent in educational policy and practice – educational transformation and utilitarianism.

We find both discourses are operationalized in the SDGs in different ways. The discourse of educational transformation is activated through a commitment to sustainable development, whilst the discourse of utilitarianism is reflected in the ubiquitous contemporary obligation to a neoliberal capitalist pro-growth development model. Our primary aim, therefore, is to analyze which of these goals dominates the SDGs and how. Our analysis is predicated on the view that it is challenging for any educational policy initiative to equally serve such conflicting value-laden discourses. As such, the presence of both education for sustainability and education for neoliberal pro-growth development within the SDGs is a deeply problematic issue. Through their very construction, the SDGs convey *dominant discourse(s)* or ways of framing and defining development initiatives and in doing so, likely ignore marginalized discourses, which can be challenging when assessing who truly benefits from this development agenda. By prescribing a certain path to achieving "sustainable development," the SDGs likely privilege some interests over others, and may favor certain development ideologies over others. It is imperative to understand the context within which the SDGs have been created, whose interests the SDGs are truly serving, and how the SDGs may affect the sustainable development initiatives being undertaken around the world. We examine how SDG4 perpetuates the discourse of utilitarianism of education and therefore why we must be careful of the extent which we invest social justice aspirations in these new initiatives.

By conducting a critical discourse analysis, we aim to expose the values that will ultimately shape educational outcomes, but also to create space for discourses that are espoused but rendered subordinate. We will explore the possible implications of dominant discourses and their values in terms of achieving "sustainable

development," specifically within the broader context of neoliberalism and globalization.

We first explore the literature on the utilitarian and transformative perspectives, which leads into a discussion of the analytical approach we use, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). We then use CDA to analyze the SDGs generally, after which we conduct an analysis of SDG4 – *Ensure inclusive and equitable education.* We end with a brief discussion of a possible path towards a more transformative approach to education.

Literature Review

Utilitarian and transformative educational approaches

Contemporary globalization, which is largely influenced by the political-economic principle of neoliberalism, has drastically changed the way knowledge and education are perceived and valued. Gibson-Graham (2006) suggest that globalization is characterized by a set of processes, such as increased trade, internationalization of financial markets, and increasingly linked communications technologies, all of which contribute to a rapidly integrated world. The spread and intensification of these processes are facilitated by neoliberalism, which Harvey (2005) defines as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterized by property rights, free markets and free trade" (p.2). Within this ideology, Büscher et al. (2012) argue, social and ecological affairs are subjected to capitalist market dynamics. These characteristics of neoliberal globalization obviously have implications for education in the current context of the SDGs development agenda.

Yet, the link between education and socio-economic development is not new. Particularly since the post-World War II era, education has increasingly been conceptualized as key to achieving economic advancement and social mobility (Fägerlind and Saha, 1989; Stromquist and Monkman, 2000; Chabbott and Ramirez, 2006). In the era of globalization, often referred to as the "knowledge economy," and the emergence of neoliberal economics, countries now participate, willingly or unwillingly, in an increasingly competitive global economy, where knowledge is considered key to successful participation. In a globalized world, technology drives efficiency and economic growth, and "knowledge assumes a powerful role in production, making its possession essential for nations if they are successfully to pursue economic growth and competitiveness" (Stromquist and Monkman, 2000, p.7). The neoliberal approach to education recognizes education as a means to increase economic growth, labor productivity and technological skills for the labor market. Additionally, this view perceives education as possessing private benefits and

therefore ought to be subject to standard principles of economics such as competition. As Robertson (2015) notes, neoliberalism views "the relationship between the teacher and the learning, the family and the school, in market terms" (p. 12). This conception of knowledge as capital operates within the "knowledge-based economy" – a term that OECD defines as an economy that is "directly based on the production, distribution, and use of knowledge and information" (OECD, p. 7). Similarly, Ball (2016) points out that neoliberalism's market performativity-tendencies force educational stakeholders to pursue ultimately perverse objectives in the current globalization era. A neoliberal conception of knowledge, then, perceives education systems as designed to provide children and youth with the skills necessary to function within a knowledge-based economy.

The expanding importance of the global market has had a number of repercussions on formal schooling, such as an increased focus on economic efficiency and productivity where schools operate on principles similar to those of private organizations (Stromquist and Monkman, 2000; Robertson, 2007; Kubow and Fossum, 2007; Lingard and Rizvi, 2009). This often entails a restructuring of the role of educators who lose their autonomy through operationalization of the newest administrative fads, and a reframing of education as primarily a public good to education as a market commodity. Other characteristics of education systems within a globalized and neoliberal system include the standardization of curricula, the use of standardized high-stakes testing, and the prioritization of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines over humanities and social sciences. These characteristics all fall under a primarily employment-oriented focus of education - often termed as a 'utilitarian approach' to education.

A utilitarian perspective "portrays education as a social investment designed to ensure that succeeding generations are able to assume their place as productive citizens within an *established* socio-economic order" (Maclure et al., p. 367; italics added for emphasis). This approach connotes an acceptance of social systems as they are without extended critical reflection on their underlying biases. Such an approach is not a recent phenomenon – in fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly through the work of Theodore Schultz, development and education initiatives existed within the framework of 'human capital theory', which "rested on the assumption that formal education is highly instrumental and even necessary to improve the production capacity of a population" (Fägerlind and Saha, p. 47). Rizvi and Lingard (2009) suggest that there are certain assumptions built into the ideas of human capital, which betray the fundamental economic rationality that underpins the concept. In addition to being based on the idea of economic self-interest of human beings, human capital theory "assumes that individuals are equally free to choose" and that "economic

growth and competitive advantage are a direct outcome of the levels of investment in human capital" (p. 80). Evidently, the human capital and utilitarian approaches to education share very similar DNA, in that both assume that investment in a particular type of education directly results in economic growth, and therefore development. In this regard, Jones and Thomas (2005) posit that the utilitarian approach to education "is undertaken largely to meet the requirements of employers and the economy" (p.1). Both approaches place much less importance on non-quantifiable values and outcomes of education, and make tenuous assumptions about humans and economic change. It is partly for these reasons why human capital theory, as early as it emerged, came under heavy Marxist-inspired critique (Marshall, 1998).

These approaches to education contrast starkly against a *transformative* approach, which "conceives the main purpose of education as addressing the inequalities and injustices that are embedded in the larger society" (Maclure et al., 2009, p. 367). A transformative approach values education for its liberatory and critical capacities that can drive fundamental social change (Maclure et al., 2009). Thus, Jones (2009) maintains that a transformative approach facilitates "learning that can make a contribution to both individual and social change" (p. 9). And Jones (2005) suggests that a transformative approach is more focused on social and individual change. According to Maclure et al. (2009), these two contrasting perspectives – despite being strikingly divergent – have for many years been intertwined in educational plans and programs in developing countries. They argue, however, that this reconciliation of two radically different approaches almost never challenges the established bureaucratic structures of national school systems. Rather, the incorporation of transformative education rhetoric in educational policies only serves to "depoliticize the concept of educational change," as policymakers continue to ensure that "the transformative perspective is consistently rendered subservient to the utilitarian view of education" (Maclure et al., 2009, p. 369). An important difference between education policy today and education policy in the 1950s-60s, which was explicitly based on human capital theory, is that the focus of education policy rhetoric today struggles between these two drastically differing perspectives, often portraying itself as in alignment with the ideals of transformative education, yet inherently utilitarian in practice. We argue that this is exactly the case with the SDG4, the current development goal guiding educational globally. Thus, the central question we ask is, *to what extent do the SDGs function within as opposed to against the neoliberal agenda?* This inquiry is ultimately an analysis of which of the two perspectives – utilitarian or transformation – dominates SDG4.

Our intention behind focusing on SDG 4, *Quality Education*, is to expose how the utilitarian approaches subsume the transformative perspectives of education. We

suggest that without a fundamental transformation of the established economic and social order, our highest aspirations may never be realized. Education is central in questioning and rethinking this economic order. By showing how the utilitarian approach dominates SDG 4, limiting the potential for transformative education, the implication is that we have to be guarded about the extent to which the SDGs can truly live up to the aspirations and hopes they have generated. By maintaining this realism, we are able to continue to work steadfast in our commitment to critique their implementation and search for alternatives paths to social change through transformative modes of education.

Critical Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, p. 352). The underlying philosophy of CDA is that language is a form of social practice that establishes and reinforces societal power relations. Based on this assumption, CDA denies the possibility of a neutral and rationalist view of the world, instead viewing the use of language as highly political. If *language* is the medium through which hidden power relations are constructed and reinforced, *discourse* refers to the specific way in which language is used, in combination with thought and action. According to Gee (1990), discourse is "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network" (p.1). By virtue of belonging to a certain group, discourses are highly constructed, as expressed by Stuart Hall (1992) who maintains that a discourse "is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (1992, p. 201). Hall (1992) further notes that the construction of a particular discourse limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed" (p. 201). Hall's perceptions of discourse are, of course, reflective of the Foucauldian conception of discourse as being rooted in the belief that power constructs knowledge, which in turn shapes discourse and social reality. Dominant ideas, concepts, and facts, therefore, are shaped and disseminated by those in power, and reinforced by dominant structures. By legitimating and normalizing these ideologies, dominant structures obscure the relationship between power and ideology, and ultimately maintain power hierarchies.

The notion of 'critical' in CDA is derived from the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas. Critical theory, from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, claims that social theory should be oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory which is oriented solely towards understanding or

explaining society. This understanding of critical theory is based on the beliefs that critical theory "should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity," and that it should improve the understanding of society by taking an integrative approach to analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p.6). Consequently, critical discourse analysis of policy initiatives serves the broader social change goal.

When applied to policy texts and initiatives, CDA can be used as a tool to deconstruct and examine the dominant and marginalized discourses produced from the policy making process. In practice, CDA includes a detailed textual analysis at the level of the policy text while also situating the analysis within broader economic and political contexts and institutions (Luke, 1997). By exploring "the relationship between a) discursive practices, events and texts, and b) the wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes," CDA exposes how policies arise out of and are shaped by asymmetrical relations of power of competing discourses. (Fairclough, 1995, p.135).

The purpose of a critical discourse analysis is to understand "how discourses emerge, and how they become hegemonic and re-contextualized, and finally, how they become operationalized" (Simons et al., 2009, p. 62). Rizvi and Lingard (2009) articulate that in order to analyze policy, one must understand policy as not merely a specific policy document or text, but as both a process and a product; it "involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text, and processes of implementation into practice." (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p. 5). As we use CDA, then, we aim to: a) contextualize production of the SDGs generally and thus how they privilege certain values; b) analyze how a particular discourse gains power over (an)other discourses; and c) analyze what interests the dominant discourse(s) serve and decipher spaces for contestation. In this way, we can reveal the positions that the utilitarian or transformative educational discourses occupy and the process by which this takes place, as well as the extent to which SDG4 challenges or works within the dominant prevailing neoliberal social order.

We analyze the following policy texts:
- *Transforming Our World - 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which will be the focus of the analysis. This is the official United Nations document that presents to the world the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs), and describes the individual goals and targets, their logic and conceptual framework, as well as the official United Nation Declaration that formally adopts the SDGs. In others words, this serves as an official document that formally presents the SDGs and their purpose and parameters. However, we also make significant analytical references to previous global education policies, such as the:

- *Education for All (EFA), The Earth Summit Agenda 21* (Chapter 36). Perhaps more than any other, this United Nations document articulates how the UN links education to sustainable development and the role education should play in physical/biological, socio-economic environment and human development;
- *Incheon Declaration*, developed by UN member states, NGOs and other global educational stakeholders, through the facilitation of UNIESCO, represents the commitment of the education community to education having an important role in the global development agenda that the SDGs have come to represent;
- *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005 – 2014*, developed by UNESCO in 2005, is a document that describes UN's anticipated role for education over the past decade and describes the values education was expected to play in global development planning. This document is particularly helpful in historicizing current educational phenomena and policy discourses.

Together, these documents provide a comprehensive collection of policy artifacts for critical discourse analysis of the SDG4.

Critical Discourse Analysis of the SDGs

The Context of Policy Making: Production and Meaning

Policymaking is a fundamentally political process and, consequently, policies are inherently value-laden. "Values pervade policy processes and policy content" and these values invariably privilege the interests of the policy makers, or those in power – over the policies' so-called intended beneficiaries (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p.16). David Easton (1953) encapsulates the interrelationship between policies and power, defining policy as the "authoritative allocation of values." Simons (2009) rightly suggests that this definition draws attention to the importance of power and control, which forces us to consider both "whose values are represented in policy" and how they become institutionalized (p.21). Easton argues that policies articulate and presuppose certain values that are legitimated by an authority, such as the government or international bodies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations (UN):

> The essence of policy lies in the fact that through it certain things are denied to some people and made accessible to others. A policy, in other words, whether for a society, for a narrow association, or for any other group, consists of a web of decisions that allocates values (Easton, 1953, p.129-130).

The "web of decisions" that Easton mentions, are made not within the nation state, but through "a range of complex processes that occur in transnational and globalized work spaces" (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p.22). While traditionally, the values reflected in

policies articulated national interests, more recently, global considerations are playing a larger role in the policy making process. With the increasing power and influence of multilateral institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, and OECD along with *epistemic communities[i]*- national governments hold less power over education policy and program design. Today, education systems are embedded in a framework of global power relations and complex systems of policy, knowledge, and financial arrangement that can be termed "the global architecture of education" (Jones, 2006, p.43). Within this system, global power relations exert an enormous amount of influence on how education is constructed at the local context.

'Authority' within this transnational system is not limited to a certain entity or fixed epicenter; rather, "transnational and pluralist patterns of engagement are rooted in diverse foundations of global legitimacy, power, and influence" as opposed to the sovereign authority of independent states (Jones, 2006, 48). When thinking about global education policy, such as SDG 4, then, it is important to consider the role of individual nations and the amount of autonomy they truly have within this system. Referring to Antonio Gramsci's *hegemony*, which demonstrates "how ideas held consensually could replace coercive force as an instrument of social order", Jones (2006) argues that international agencies have been able to extend their reach "through the 'consensual' acceptance of ideas that underpinned them, a socially constructed consensus" (p. 48). In other words, the ubiquitous power of transnational organizations existing within transnational networks and systems has allowed certain ideas to become dominant, through a process of so-called 'consensus.'

Dominant 'consensual' ideas inform policy, which in turn, contribute to the homogenization of education, or as Boli, Meyer, and Ramirez (2000) term the "world institutionalization of education." This term is rooted in the belief that regardless of the diversity and uniqueness of the national and the local, the intellectual and practical inspirations for educational policy and action are largely shaped and driven by powerful global forces and stakeholders, making education around the world seem "increasingly standardized" (Jones, 2006, p.49). International educational initiatives, therefore, play a central role in establishing and reinforcing educational values and techniques, which in turn, influence the kind of education initiatives countries choose to undertake. Therefore, as we think about the SDGs, specifically SDG4, we must understand how their development and use as global policy tools have implications on the shaping and reshaping of national and local values.

Power and the Production of the SDGs
Admittedly, the rhetorical tone and process of global development goals have changed in important ways since the MDGs, which were developed by a small group of

Westerners (Hume, 2009). For example, a fundamental difference between the SDGs (figure 1) and the MDGs is the adoption of a more 'participatory' approach to policy design. One of the initiatives that preceded the SDGs was *The Future We Want*, a declaration that specified the need for greater inclusion of civil society and marginalized populations universally in the creation of global development policies. In response, the UN produced *A Million Voices*, a document that reflected the voices of governments, think tanks, NGOs, civil society, and academics who offered their input concerning the post-2015 development framework. Additionally, the UN launched the *My World Survey* which allowed individuals across the globe to vote online for the top six issues they wished to see in the SDGs. These seemingly more participatory initiatives, drawing from multiples sources, contrast against the policy formulation process for the MDGs, which was left solely in the hands of a small group of UN experts (Hume, 2009).

The SDGs' rhetorical participatory emphasis is evident in the very language used in the initiative's framework. References to *A Million Voices* and the *My World Survey* are clearly made: "The Goals and targets are the result of over two years of intensive public consultation and engagement with civil society and other stakeholders around the world, which paid particular attention to the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable" (United Nations, 2015, p. 6). Similarly, the Framework's (*UN's Transforming our world: 2030 agenda for sustainable development,* 2015*)* emphasis on working "in a spirit of global solidarity" (p. 10); "embark[ing] on a collective journey" (p. 1) to ensure that "no one will be left behind" (p. 1 and 3); and adopting a "people-centered approach" (p. 3 and 8) makes clear the SDGs' effort to appear participatory and reflective of the needs of all populations, particularly "the poorest and most vulnerable" (p. 3) The SDG framework utilizes unifying rhetoric, stressing the importance of all countries playing their part to "free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want to heal and secure our planet" (p.1). Using the word "tyranny" serves to unite countries against a common "enemy" or to achieve a common dream. Likewise, statements like: "Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavor across such a broad and universal policy agenda" (United Nations, 2015, p. 18) also present a highly unifying rhetoric, emphasizing the historical significance of this event.

Alternatively, by recognizing "different national realities, capacities and levels of development" and "respecting national policies and priorities" (United Nations, 2015, pp. 21) the SDG framework does not adopt an overtly regulatory stance, choosing instead to seemingly respect national policies and priorities that must be considered when implementing the SDGs. The SDG framework emphasizes that each government will decide how these aspirational goals and targets should be

incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies, thereby providing governments with a significant amount of agency over the implementation process. On the surface then, by "involving" marginalized voices in the policy formation stages, by using unifying rhetoric, and by recognizing the role of governments in tailoring the SDGs to meet their own national contexts and realities, the SDGs appear highly participatory.

Critics, however, argue that despite attempts at appearing inclusive, the SDGs' creation process was ultimately led by a small group of experts, similar to the MDGs, and pandered to the interests of a handful of major groups – primarily businesses and industries (Pingeot, 2014; Ahmed, 2015; Koehler, 2015). Formal statements issued by 'major UN Civil Society Groups that were involved in the SDGs planning process reveal that marginalized groups like indigenous people, civil society, and women "remain deeply concerned by the general direction of the SDG process – whereas corporate interests from the rich, industrialized world have viewed the process favorably" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 1). The power that the 'Business and Industry' group exert, Ahmed (2015) argues, is disproportionate to other major groups, with the Global Business Alliance (GBA) – set-up by corporations to represent their mutual commitment to 'market-based solutions' significantly influencing the SDG framework. Ultimately, then, although the SDGs involved a range of stakeholders in the planning process, the power dynamics between those groups, and the amount of influence they were truly able to exert were unequal.

In conducting a critical discourse analysis, it is imperative to therefore recognize that the very process of producing the SDGs was deeply entrenched in unequal power dynamics. Beyond examining who was responsible for drafting the SDGs, it can be argued that the very language used to write the SDG Framework is exclusionary in its Western, scientific orientation. As seen in the case of previous development agendas, the use of goals, targets, and numbers is a fundamentally Western approach to achieving development, and in many ways is overly simplistic (Hume, 2009). William Easterly (2015) argues the concept of formulating goals and targets reflects Western obsession with "action plans." The assumption that well-defined "action plans" produce results fails to take into consideration other more effective routes to sustainable development. Though a reasonable argument can be made that the rational scientific method produces such tools as action plans can and are actually useful in certain circumstances, the larger point is that when these approaches define the policy initiative, and are arrived at in the context of inequality among stakeholders, certain interests and values are likely to be marginalized.

SDGs and "Sustainable Development"

One important defining value emerging from and shaping the SDGs is "sustainability," which ultimately implicates education due to the role it must play in helping to disseminate and normalize the values of sustainability. The SDGs were launched to meet the unmet targets of the MDGs, while also adopting a broader sustainability agenda that covers a wider range of social, environmental, and economic issues. Unlike the MDGs, which were explicitly crafted by the West and directed toward the Global South, the SDGs are supposedly universal and apply to all countries. Moreover, the SDGs adopt a more holistic and integrated approach to development, recognizing the interconnections between different areas of development, and the importance of supporting progress across the multiple goals to achieve 'sustainable development.'

The notion of 'sustainable development' has come to dominate the current development agenda. However, the term itself is unclear, allowing people with diverse interests to use it to serve their own agenda. According to Kumi et al. (2013), for example, the term has been interpreted in several ways, such as: "economic development that is complementary to environment and society; a process of development that emphasizes intergenerational equity; and a process of ensuring environmental services on a very long-term basis" (p. 6). These varying interpretations have resulted in a lack of consensus regarding the true aims of sustainable development, and the means of achieving these aims. Generally speaking, sustainable development, according to Kumi et al. (2013) is rooted in the belief of "creating a balance among environmental, social, and economic goals," yet often "presents a simplistic view of the inter-relationships between these components and the broader neoliberal agenda" (p. 6). When framed within the neoliberal agenda, which aims to enhance economic growth and productivity based on the principles of market competition, the notion of 'sustainable development' becomes problematic because a neoliberal system promotes the interests of the market over social and environmental development. The relationships between neoliberal economics and 'sustainable development', is thus, inherently contradictory.

On a textual level, the Sustainable Development Goal Framework (United Nations, 2015) places achieving 'sustainable development' as its focus, calling for "a world free of poverty, hunger and disease," (p. 3); "a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity" (p. 4); "a world in which humanity lives in harmony with nature" (p. 4) and also "a world where every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all" (p. 4). The language used showcases the SDGs' commitment to achieving sustainable development through the integrated approach of ensuring social, ecological, and economic sustainability. When examined more closely, however, the goals – particularly those focusing on ecological

and economic development are contradictory, and ultimately adhere more toward a pro-growth model of development, despite attempts at presenting an alternative vision. For example, while *Goal 12: Ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns (SCP)* calls for more efficient use of natural resources and the need to halve global food waste by 2030, none of the other goals explicitly address the need to reduce consumption. The language used to address big businesses in this Goal – "*encourage* companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle" – is not particularly forceful, and is perhaps the only attempt made in the Framework to hold big businesses accountable for their environmentally destructive actions. Similarly, while *Goal 8: Inclusive and sustainable economic growth* calls for "decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation" the language used, once again, is neither forceful enough nor clear – rather, the notion of 'decoupling' is merely slipped into target 4 of this Goal. In contrast, target 1 "Sustain per capita economic growth…at least 7 *per cent GDP per annum* in least developing countries" is more clearly defined, with an ascribed numerical value.

While their language is largely compelling, and while certain goals (ex. Goal 12) do attempt an alternate vision of achieving sustainable development, the SDGs do not aim to transform the existing global economy. Escobar's (1995) critique of the entire notion of sustainable development as "placing a premium on economic growth over the environment" effectively articulates the contradiction of developing the SDGs within a neoliberal framework. Escobar writes: "this approach purports that only minor adjustments to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental considerations" (Escobar, 1995, p197). By not emphasizing reductions in consumption, the environmental problems of neoliberal growth, and the actions of big businesses enough, the SDG Framework is built on a tenuous construction of 'sustainable development' that simultaneously encourages economic growth and environmental sustainability. This proposed nexus of sustainable development and economic growth within the SDGs has implications on education, as education is called upon to help operationalize these seemingly incompatible values.

Figure 1: 17 Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

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Source: United Nations

Critical Discourse Analysis of SDG 4 – Quality Education

Sustainable Development Goal 4: Sustainable Education?

The SDG 4 is certainly not the first education development initiative that has emerged globally. International educational initiatives can be traced as for back to The Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1924 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 in which education was declared a human right. However, the last two decades have witnessed a surge of global education initiatives, beginning with the Education for All (EFA) initiative in 1990. The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) was adopted during the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, following a period of economic crisis and structural adjustment in the 1980s. Then, 2000, the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All, was adopted by 164 governments to rejuvenate and consolidate; it pledged to

achieve six goals that were largely similar to those presented by the EFA. The Dakar Framework also stressed the importance of educating girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities. In 2002, the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) was established as a multilateral framework for "strengthening national education plans, improving aid effectiveness, coordinating donor support and galvanizing the financing required to achieve the Education for All goals" (Rose, 2011). The FTI was rebranded in 2011 as the Global partnership for Education to include a series of reforms to address implementation problems that supposedly challenged donor coordination and effectiveness (Global Monitoring Report, 2010). The same year that the Dakar Framework was launched, the Millennium Development Goal 2 was also introduced. Goal 2 of the MDGs aimed to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, is considered a vital goal, given the importance ascribed to education in addressing other areas of development, such as health, gender equality, economic growth, and, of course, sustainability. Earlier in this paper, we wrote about the two dominant approaches to education that education policy presently wrestles with – the utilitarian approach, which views the primary purpose of education as preparing children to work within an established socio-economic order with the ultimate goal of achieving economic growth, and the transformative approach, which views the primary purpose of education as addressing societal inequalities and injustices. The latter, the transformative approach, in the current era, echoes notions of education for sustainability.

The process of developing the Sustainable Development Goal 4 culminated in the UNESCO's *Incheon Declaration* (2015), which was welcomed by over 100 countries, non-governmental organizations and youth groups at the World Education Forum 2015. The *Incheon Declaration* constitutes the commitment of the education community to Education 2030, otherwise referred to as SDG 4. This Declaration presents a vision for the future of education that informed the ten targets of SDG 4. The title of the Declaration, *Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning for all* reflects the renewed efforts by the UN and international community at large to ensure that all communities benefit equitably from education and lifelong learning opportunities. This emphasis on "inclusive" and "equitable" access to education is a significant improvement over previous education initiatives such as the EFA and MDGs, which focused more on equal (as opposed to equitable) access to education. The Declaration explicitly recognizes "inclusion and

equity in and through education as the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 2).

The *Incheon Declaration* proclaims: "Our vision is to transform lives through education, recognizing the important role of education as a main driver of development and in achieving other proposed SDGs" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 1). The Declaration emphasizes its "holistic" and "integrated" approach to education, and the cross-cutting role of education in improving other areas of development. In doing so, the Declaration presents a more transformative approach to education that moves beyond the established economic system and power relations, recognizing its numerous positive benefits that extend well beyond economic growth. The language used throughout the Declaration presents a highly transformative vision, and is best captured in paragraph 5 below, which describes the proposed SDG 4 ("Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all") as:

> ... Inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion; protection; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability. We reaffirm that education is a public good, a fundamental human right and a basis for guaranteeing the realization of other rights. It is essential for peace, tolerance, human fulfilment and sustainable development. We recognize education as key to achieving full employment and poverty eradication. We will focus our efforts on access, equity and inclusion, quality and learning outcomes, within a lifelong learning approach (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 5).

The language used in this section combines a number of transformative ideas pertaining to the aims of education. By emphasizing a "humanistic vision of education" the Declaration places issues of human rights and social justice, alongside other transformative objectives, at the center of education, and as necessary for "peace, tolerance, human fulfillment, and sustainable development." These ideals take precedence over the economic benefits of education, which only appear toward the end of the paragraph. By recognizing education as a "public good," and a "fundamental human right," the Declaration also makes clear its commitment to ensuring equitable access to education for all. In addition to the social justice/human rights approach, the new education agenda that this Declaration proposes also stresses the need for gender equality, quality education, and lifelong learning opportunities.

On a rhetorical level, then, the *Incheon Declaration* proposes a promising vision for the future of Education. SDG 4 exhibits several of the prominent ideas of the Incheon Declaration. The first two targets of SDG 4, for example, make explicit the need for quality education:

> 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (United Nations, 2015, p.17).

> 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education (United Nations, 2015, p.17).

Furthermore, SDG 4 makes considerable mention of improving access to equitable education for marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations, as seen below in target 5. Likewise, target 4a recognizes the importance of creating education facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive.

> 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (United Nations, 2015, p.17).

> 4.a: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all (United Nations, 2015, p.17).

The emphasis of these four targets on quality education and equitable access to education is a significant improvement over the MDGs, which focused more on enrolment rates and educational access as opposed to educational quality and equity. However, despite these improvements, the notion of *quality* education remains vague. While target 4.1 does seem to specify that it is up to national governments to determine "relevant and effective learning outcomes," what these outcomes might look like, remains ill-defined. Furthermore, it is unclear whether an improvement in educational quality means transforming existing systems by adopting new and innovative curricula and teaching methods, as well as the validation of multiple forms of knowledge, or whether it means improving existing systems to ensure stronger standardized test results.

The remaining associated targets present both utilitarian and transformative perspectives of education, yet it is clear in the language predominantly used, and in the way the targets have been formulated and structured that the utilitarian approach assumes a more prominent role. The Framework opens with reference to the importance of science, technology and innovation as necessary means of driving human progress:

> Access to education has greatly increased for both boys and girl. The spread of information and communications technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies, as does scientific and technological innovation across areas as diverse as medicine and energy (United Nations, 2015, p. 9).

By emphasizing the importance of utilizing technology to develop knowledge societies, the SDGs do, to some extent, promote a utilitarian approach to education, which closely linked to a pro-growth model of development in knowledge economy of neoliberal globalization. Further, the SDGs seemingly endorse a particular form of Western development model, excluding other interpretations of progress.

Specific targets are also more utilitarian in nature. Target 4.4, for example -"By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship"- clearly emphasizes the employment-oriented focus of utilitarian education, gearing youth and adults to work within the established socio-economic system. Three out of the ten targets, including this one, emphasize technical skills and training; this is particularly evident in target 9, which calls for increased numbers of scholarships made available to youth and adults in developing countries "for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programs, in developed countries and other developing countries." There is an explicit focus in this target on STEM fields, making clear the importance ascribed to technology in maximizing efficiency in production.

In contrast, only one target explicitly presents a transformative approach to education, an approach that is expressly concerned about issues of social justice – this is target 7:

> 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (United Nations, 2015, p.17).

This target conflates a number of transformative objectives of education that are assumed to contribute to 'sustainable development', such as, human rights, gender equality, peace and nonviolence and global citizenship. The focus of this target, however, remains reduced and ambiguous. By lumping these very diverse objectives

into one target, it is also unclear how they will be incorporated into a classroom setting or an education system, how they will be evaluated, and how they contribute to sustainable development. Furthermore, terms like "global citizenship" are undefined, and can even, as Koyama (2015) argues, be problematic if the terms of "global citizenship" are being defined by those in power. The overall vagueness of this target, along with its placement towards the end of the list of education targets, suggests that its inclusion, while intentioned, is ultimately, superficial.

Target 7 is also the only target in SDG 4 that explicitly mentions 'sustainable development.' Barring this target, there is nothing to suggest that this set of targets is any more likely to produce sustainable development than previous educational initiatives such as the EFA or the MDGs. The limited emphasis on sustainable development in this goal is a shift away from the Education for Sustainable Development discourse prevalent in previous initiatives such as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) or Agenda 21, produced during the Earth Summit in 1992. The language used in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, for example, is far more explicit in emphasizing a transformative approach to education. The Agenda calls for "integrating environment and development as a cross-cutting issue into education at all levels"; "a thorough review of curricula to ensure a multidisciplinary approach to education"; and "due respect to diverse and traditional knowledge systems," (United Nations, 1992, p. 321). Target 7 is the closest SDG 4 comes to explicitly engaging with sustainable development but its failure to make any mention of transforming curricula; adopting and validating alternative education systems and types of knowledge; or integrating environmental and/or development issues into education programs, are significant limitations.

<u>To sustain or to transform? That is the question</u>
The question then emerges - how truly potentially 'sustainable' or transformative is SDG 4? If sustainable development, as the UN definition suggests, is development that aims to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," then a pro-growth/ utilitarian development discourse will not satisfy this definition. Sustainable development will only be achieved if ecological concerns are placed at the center of the development discourse, and if a more integrated approach to development is promoted. Sterling (2001) argues that the entire notion of 'education for sustainable development' is problematic in that "education can only contribute to social transformation if it relinquishes the modernist agenda characterized by managerial, mechanistic and transmissive approaches," and if "education comes to be informed by an ecological paradigm characterized by 'whole systems thinking', participation, empowerment and self-organization" (Selby, 2006, 357). By merely integrating aspects of 'sustainable development' into only one target,

and emphasizing the economic benefits of education in at least four different targets, SDG 4 does not make significant strides in transforming the existing education discourse. For education to truly contribute to social transformation, a more holistic and integrated approach ought to be taken, one that, as Selby (2006) suggests, requires the creation of new and innovative pedagogical forms that: focus on the centrality of place and the interconnectedness of life based on local realities and everyday experiences; that value different knowledge forms and educational outcomes; and that center on environmental and development issues.

In failing to adequately recognize cultural differences as shaping people's lifestyles and development aspirations in different ways, SDG 4, and for that matter, the entire SDG Framework, limits conceptions of 'development' and 'sustainability' to Western modes of thought. SDG 4 makes no mentioning of non-Western knowledge forms such as Indigenous Knowledge that "reflect the unique ways that specific societies make meaning of the world and how such forms of knowledge address local problems and solutions that are context specific" (Owuor, 2008, p.2). Research by Owuor (2008) shows that by promoting an *endogenous* approach to education, that "involves the contextualization of the school curriculum by integrating indigenous knowledge with other relevant and useful knowledge forms into formal education", local problems can more readily be addressed by local models of sustainability (p. 1). Such an approach places decision-making power in the hands of local communities to define how indigenous knowledge can best be used to address social, economic, and ecological issues in a sustainable manner. The limited emphasis on alternative knowledge forms demonstrates the SDGs' adherence to dominant Western conceptions of knowledge and the knowledge-based economy.

Ultimately, while Sustainable Development Goal 4 does make attempts at presenting a transformative approach to education by recognizing the role of education in promoting sustainable development, peace, and gender equality (among others), these objectives are not placed at the heart of the goal; more emphasis appears to be placed on the economic gains of education. Through its language, content, and structure, SDG 4 promotes a utilitarian approach to education more than it promotes a transformative approach. By failing to explicitly recognize other forms of knowledge, ways of life, and conceptions of development, SDG 4 is firmly rooted in a pro-growth, Western conception of development.

Conclusion
Based on our findings and the foregoing discussion, we return to out opening exhortation with regard to the SDGs generally and SDG4 in particular; we caution against the euphoria surrounding their adoption as blind acceptance of their form and

content may merely lead to a perpetuation of the global social status quo of inequity. Based on this critical discourse analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals, it appears that on a textual level and on a contextual level, the SDGs can be read in very different, even contradictory ways. The SDGs grapple with both a pro-growth and transformative view of 'sustainable development', and simultaneously encourage and exclude participation. On the surface, the SDGs exude a promising image of the future of 'sustainable development' and transformation but a closer look reveals a highly confused path toward achieving its goals. These contradictory ideals can be seen in SDG 4, which grapples with both utilitarian and transformative approaches to education, yet ultimately renders its transformative ideals subservient to its dominant utilitarian focus. Through its validation of STEM, technical and vocational skills, and education for employment, without an equal call for critical modes of education, SDG 4 largely functions within a neoliberal capitalist model of development.

The role of education in instigating sustainable development is crucial. A transformative approach to education can have cross-cutting impacts, contributing to gender equality, peace, human rights, environmental sustainability and a myriad of other objectives that a utilitarian approach will not achieve. For SDG 4 to contribute to sustainable development, there needs to be a shift in dominant educational discourse; the aims of education must be expanded such that a 'quality' education is no longer strictly associated with standardization, efficiency, and employment, but instead viewed as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for social change. Education must be valued and used as a tool to recognize and act upon societal inequities, placing issues of social and ecological justice at the heart of its objectives.

For this paradigm shift to occur, the utilitarian approach, which has dominated educational discourse well before the creation of the SDGs, and has consequently become normalized and accepted by society, must be challenged. Knowledge must be recognized as fundamentally political and as a product of power. Through this recognition, spaces of resistance may be created, where alternative conceptions of education can come to the forefront. Perhaps as societies attempt to translate the global goal of SDG4 to local contexts, greater focus might be placed on devising policy and practice that advance transformative education. It is only by challenging and expanding the definition of 'quality' education — one that questions what is taught and learned, and how – that education can truly have a lasting impact on other areas of development, thereby contributing to a more holistic and integrated approach to achieving sustainable development. This is not the time for blind faith in these global goals.

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[i] Transnational networks of like-minded actors linked together through a convergence of interest, outlook and technique (Jones, 48).