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## CHAPTER 2

# Education

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*“Education is the most effective means that society possesses for confronting the challenges of the future. Indeed, education will shape the world of tomorrow”. – UNESCO, 1996<sup>1</sup>*

### **Why and how is education important for wellbeing?**

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We begin to learn from the moment we are born, possibly even before. We learn from watching, listening, copying, and trying things out. Then we begin to ask questions. We learn what things are for, how things work, how to communicate, and what matters. We learn not only about the world around us, but about ourselves, and others who share that world. Although most of a child’s brain is developed by the time they are five, learning continues throughout life<sup>2</sup>.

The experiences young people have determine who they become, and the future they will create. Schooling is a significant part of this, from pre-school through to higher and adult education. ‘School’ therefore applies here to all institutions whose primary purpose is learning.

Education is UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, with ten targets to aim for by 2030. In the past decade, major progress has been made towards increasing access to education with more people achieving basic literacy; 265 million children are however, still not receiving any schooling at all, many of them in conflict zones.

If the purpose of education is to create a world where individuals, families, communities, and society thrive, then some education systems may need to change. What is the point

of academic ‘excellence’ for young people who are anxious, depressed, or feel life has no meaning<sup>3</sup>. There are schools across the world where diversity is actively valued and the wellbeing of the whole student (and teacher) are centre stage so there is much good practice on which to build. However, while we still have schools who marginalise, or even exclude students who do not fit the ‘norm’ of compliance or academic excellence, the system is not working for all. The same applies for those beset by fear of not achieving the ‘success’ defined by high academic grades. Broad, relevant, and engaging educational programs need to replace a narrow curriculum and reflect the diversity of students, and the needs of both the world we live in now and that of the future.

One of the most powerful impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on education. It has offered new perspectives on how children might learn, what they need to learn, and the critical relevance of both the social dynamics of schools, and the mental health and wellbeing of students. Parents attempting to home educate have perhaps developed a new respect for the multi-faceted skills of teachers. School lockdown in some countries, however, has exacerbated inequality and highlighted how the availability or lack of resources and support at home can either hinder, or help learning. There is a groundswell of hope from commentators that policymakers will now move from an education system rooted in competition and control to one that enables all students to flourish and become the best of themselves. Here we offer alternatives that will help build a better world for everyone. Some may seem radical, but the evidence suggests that such changes are necessary for the wellbeing of future generations. As we have seen from actions in crisis, nothing is impossible.

**Reflections:**

*What are the most important things young people need to learn for their own future?*

*What are the most important things young people need to learn for the future of the world they will live in?*

## What do we need to learn?

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UNESCO's report *Learning, the Treasure Within*<sup>4</sup> quoted at the beginning of this chapter, provides a conceptual framework for on-going, life-long learning. This model organises learning into the following five pillars:

- Learning to Know – the development of skills and knowledge needed to function in this world, e.g. formal acquisition of literacy, numeracy, science, and general knowledge.
- Learning to Do – the acquisition of a wide range of applied skills.
- Learning to Live Together – the development of social skills and values such as respect and concern for others, and the appreciation of cultural diversity.
- Learning to Be – the learning that contributes to a person's mind, body, and spirit. This can be fostered in sport, the arts, literature, and social and emotional learning.
- Learning to Transform Oneself and Society – the knowledge, skills, critical thinking, and values for creating lasting positive change in organisations, communities, and societies.

A criticism of current education is that the first two pillars have been overly dominant in the name of academic 'excellence', and that the other three have been sidelined. Nevertheless, social and emotional/relationship education has been introduced in many countries and ethics is sometimes offered as an alternative to religious education. Any social and emotional learning, however, needs a clear pedagogy for implementation, so it is a safe and supportive experience for both teachers and students. It needs to be delivered by educators who see students regularly, so that the learning can be reinforced in everyday interactions. This is an area that can address not only skills development, but challenge attitudes and perceptions. The Black Lives Matter movement shows how much this is needed for a safe and inclusive society.

A more recent document on education is from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, entitled *OECD: Future of Education and Skills 2030*.<sup>5</sup> This reflects many of the issues raised in this chapter, including student voice, values, curriculum design and implementation, and the wellbeing of the whole child.

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## The fundamental elements of education

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In school it matters:

- What children and young people are taught – the formal curriculum.
- How they are taught – pedagogy.
- The context in which they are taught – the learning environment.

Although addressed separately below, all interact with each other.

### The formal curriculum

There is much talk about ‘quality education’ and ‘raising standards’ but, despite the UNESCO guidelines and documents such as the Australian Alice Springs (*Mparntwe*) Declaration, governments have rarely been clear about what education needs to be *for* or *about*. Who determines what is taught, and importantly, what is left out? A history curriculum for instance, can gloss over the impact of colonial invasions if those who write this do not give due weight to the past destruction of established cultures whose descendants are still affected. No curriculum is value free.

Policymakers have an agenda about what they want from the citizens of the future. The UN sustainable goals of “*skills for decent work*”, “*youth and adult literacy*”, and education for “*sustainable development and global citizenship*” are laudable, but do not mention the equally important education needed for day to day living: how to relate to each other in healthy ways, child development and parenting, mental health and wellbeing, political awareness, and subjects that honour imagination and the creative arts. In many countries academic subjects are valued above all else and school success is only available to those with a good memory who can pass exams in those subjects. As can be seen from those who do well in their lives despite having few formal qualifications, and those who pass exams but have little competence in other ways, a good education goes well beyond this. Making the same demands on all students, regardless of their interests, background, or ability means a significant proportion of young people grow up to believe they are failures. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the value of those who do significant work to keep things

going – from care-workers, to van drivers to garbage collectors, many of whom do not have high academic qualifications, and are often regarded as low-status. A well-functioning society, however, does not only need doctors, lawyers, and bankers, it also needs these keyworkers. There is also a reinforced acknowledgement that the arts industry is valuable, not only in giving enjoyment, but also in income generation.

There is an underlying assumption that the world will remain the same for the next generation. The reality is that things are changing fast, and we need flexibility, and innovation to respond to the challenges we face. A rigidly prescribed set of learning targets might under-estimate the potential of many to both develop their strengths and work towards solutions.

### **Pedagogy & teaching approaches**

There are two basic forms of school learning: being told and finding out. The first is known as didactic, where the teacher imparts knowledge and the student is a passive recipient. Students are tested on how well this knowledge is remembered rather than applied or critiqued. Although useful for basic skills such as literacy, numeracy, science, and technology, this approach is limited. It leads to a controlled teaching style, where motivation is extrinsic – students may not so much be inspired by learning but by the rewards of a high grade. Richard Ryan and Edward Deci<sup>6</sup> cite a raft of research that supports greater autonomy for students, not only for their motivation, but also their self-worth and wellbeing. Despite advances in technology where information is often presented in vibrant visual ways, some schools still focus on didactic learning, where the teacher is the authority and channel of knowledge. Early years teachers, however, often engage and motivate children with play-based learning, and even older students value those who can instil some fun in the classroom.

Socratic learning, on the other hand, is active, shared, guided discovery, where the student is the primary agent and encouraged to explore and question. The role of teachers is to structure the learning environment, so that students work on targeted areas, do research, ask questions, and are provided with support. Student

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learning is evaluated on how well concepts have been understood, and can be generalised and applied.

Teachers are essential facilitators of learning. According to John Hattie's synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses of effective education<sup>7</sup>, it is the specifics of the teacher-student relationship that make the most difference to outcomes. Good teachers make learning objectives clear, engage student agency, and respect student ideas. Feedback is critical – not so much from the teacher about what a student can or cannot do, but from the learner to the educator in order for the educator to understand how the student is making sense of the learning. One of the things Hattie highlights is the necessity of a class climate where *"errors are welcomed as key levers for enhancing learning"* (p. 4). Educators who are considering leaving the profession are more likely to stay if they are valued and respected for the important work they do.

The value of on-line learning has been headline news, as students being educated at home have few other options. This, however, has potential risks in discriminating against those who either do not have the necessary technology, or the space to use it effectively. It requires targeted investment to balance these disadvantages.

### **The learning environment**

Children learn about themselves and others, what is valued, and what is not, in the 'informal curriculum'. School culture determines the learning environment, how people feel about being there, the relationships they experience, and the values that underpin everything that happens<sup>8</sup>. Practices that demonstrate culture include how decisions are made, the levels of inclusion, participation by stakeholders, the language used, the behaviour expected, and how expectations are communicated and reinforced. Where accountability and micro-management prevail, relational quality is unlikely to be top of the agenda. This can lead to a toxic culture where bullying, exclusion, and cliques thrive.

In such undesirable environments, behaviour policies are more likely to be based in rewards for compliance, and sanctions for

what is deemed unacceptable. When the range of sanctions available are ineffective the default position is to move the young person on or out. In the United Kingdom, the figures for both formal exclusions and suspensions, and informal 'off-rolling' are now a serious problem, as schools compete to be 'the best' in terms of test results. Teacher retention is also an issue, as exhausted and undervalued individuals leave for less stressful occupations.

School climate is increasingly recognised as critical for the mental health of both students and educators. Positive education defines this as ensuring everyone feels valued and included, and relational values such as kindness, respect, empathy, and trust are promoted at all levels. Such a school climate is strengths and solution focused – building on what works.

### **Case-study: The Thinking School**

In his school, headteacher Dr Kulvarn Atwal<sup>9</sup> has focused on teacher learning in order to progress pupil learning. Rather than sending staff on one-day courses, professional development is integral to everyday activity and conversation. Situated, informal, collaborative learning is seen in constructive dialogue, joint activities, reflective practices and creative risk-taking in a trusting, safe, and supportive environment. Teachers are encouraged to participate in both peer learning and action research to evaluate their practice. In this dynamic learning culture everyone has a voice, but the focus is firmly on what works for the pupils and their learning. Outcomes after three years indicate that this approach is highly effective.

If we believe that a world where everyone thrives is both worth aiming for and achievable, then we perhaps might begin by challenging the 'givens' of education. Many approaches developed in the past and supported by evidence such as the WHO 'healthy schools' approach may now need to be revisited to promote both social mobility and wellbeing. How can positive psychology inform a 'good education' for all?<sup>10</sup>

Change begins with questions. These reflections are just a start.

**Reflections:**

*What does it mean to be 'educated'?*

*Who should determine what is taught in school?*

*How can schooling mirror healthy child development?*

*How can we ensure all learners feel safe, valued, and included?*

*How can we give a voice to all students and teachers?*

*How can we ensure that a student's natural curiosity is stimulated so they continue to seek out new knowledge and skills?*

*What else is valuable beside academic skills, and why?*

**An alternative education to build a thriving future**

Here we outline how we might address the issues raised, and develop education aligned with the challenges of the 21st century. We need to foster innovative solutions and promote values that go beyond wealth promotion and consumption to those that involve care for the planet and each other. We also need schooling that motivates all young people to learn together with an approach that mirrors the healthy child development outlined in the previous chapter.

Most information is now on-line, accessible by a quick search. Those with access to technology have the world's library at the touch of a button. The scenario of a class of students all sitting quietly at desks with their books open to the same page is rapidly becoming outdated.

Young people need to learn about themselves and the world around them. As well as understanding the science of the natural and physical world, this also includes developing a positive identity and understanding what keeps themselves, their communities, and the environment functioning well.

Here we suggest how to make education relevant, engaging, and empowering for all students in a way that addresses both basic and higher-level knowledge and skills. It takes education out of the realm of homogenous tests and reliance on memory, to a level of deep learning, and hopefully a joy in discovery and development.



**Reflection:**

*What elements of your own education have been valuable to you in your life on a daily basis, and what has not?*

**What students need to learn**

In *'learning to know'*, students need to acquire the basic skills of language, literacy, numeracy, and science and technology as they do now. There is no sign this will be less so in the future. Curriculum focus beyond basic skills would be varied, and dependent on student age, interests, strengths, and specific needs.

In *'learning to do'*, students also require skills to navigate the vast worlds of knowledge, explore, investigate, ask searching questions, ascertain risk, and check the validity of what they discover, sometimes known as *'digital literacy'*. Many schools have now embraced a *'growth mindset'* approach to learning<sup>11</sup>. This means that instead of seeing themselves as having fixed abilities, pupils become aware that every effort empowers them to develop their knowledge base, understanding, and strengths. Rather than not knowing, or making mistakes, being interpreted as failure, this becomes the launchpad for growth.

Students also need to develop the understanding and skills in *learning to be*, and *learning to live together*. The personal, interpersonal, and intercultural aspects of education are higher on the agenda as policymakers realise that emotional and social competencies have many positive outcomes, from working in teams to family relationships to community safety and mental health. This impacts on how well societies function. The human and economic cost of dysfunction affects everyone.

Optimal social and emotional learning (SEL) combines specific lessons alongside a school culture that integrates this learning in both everyday interactions and the curriculum. In NSW for instance, all teachers are now required to consider the SEL implicit in all lessons. Research indicates that SEL extends beyond developing personal understanding and skills to changing attitudes, and enhancing academic learning<sup>12,13</sup>. Issues that impact strongly on

young people's lives need be addressed in a safe and supportive place with an appropriate pedagogy<sup>14</sup>. Interventions for bullying behaviours, for instance, are often reactive and teacher led. Giving young people the opportunity to create a safe and happy class and take responsibility for the wellbeing of everyone can be far more effective. A pro-kindness program in a primary school, for example, was shown to improve relationships, academic performance, emotional regulation, and the ability to delay gratification<sup>15</sup>. The recent worldwide protests about continuing race discrimination show that much more needs to be done within education to help young people learn both the value of difference, and our shared humanity – how much we have in common. Teaching black history to every student will also help address the myths that are maintained by ignorance and prejudice.

Mindfulness has been introduced into many schools with the aim of increasing self and emotional awareness, developing empathy, and reducing negative emotion. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl and Molly Stewart Lawlor found that students who engaged in mindfulness three times a day become more optimistic as well as developing social and emotional competencies<sup>16</sup>. Mindfulness education also had positive effects on how young people thought about themselves<sup>17</sup>. This is also linked to teacher wellbeing.

### **Aboriginal Girl's circle**

Australian Aboriginal secondary girls involved with a multi-year program that incorporated fun, agency, creativity, and collaborative activities felt more connected to their community, more resilient, and more confident. Some changed their educational aspirations and entered higher education<sup>18</sup>.

Many of the positive psychology principles listed in the introduction are at the heart of the fifth pillar, "*learning to transform oneself and society*". This includes developing skills to evaluate the application of knowledge, taking into account ethical considerations and impact – what does this mean for people and the planet? The curriculum needs to encompass an understanding of democracy and citizenship so that individuals can make informed choices.

## **How students might learn**

Active and collaborative learning comes naturally to children. Many prominent educationalists note that much cognitive development emanates from social interaction. Not only is this more enjoyable and aligned with healthy child development, but collaborative effort can often achieve more than individual endeavour. Although some have taken the lead, few great developments in science, technology, or the arts have depended on one person alone but on teams working together.

Project-based cooperative work is a way to make learning come alive. This requires pre-requisite skills alongside interdependence so everyone contributes<sup>19</sup>. Students, who do not necessarily have to be of the same age, have a given area of investigation and work together over a specific amount of time. The teacher is the director of learning, and facilitator of progress, providing a structure that determines expectations for learning. Each group reports to others, so learning is shared. Project-based work entails a good deal of planning to cover curriculum targets. For instance, a project on earthquakes and volcanoes could include geology, history, physical, and human geography, mathematics, and possibly journalism, politics, crisis management, and various aspects of science. It may also address human survival, issues around sharing, or fighting for scarce resources and relate this to climate emergencies. This combines information, application, and higher thinking skills. Such a project can also engage creative arts – especially in relation to disseminating findings to others.

In Csikszentmihalyi's model of 'flow', people are at their most engaged in a task when this builds on their knowledge and skills but also presents a challenge. If a challenge is too hard, students will become anxious and give up; if it's too easy, they'll become bored. Students may require tasks to be scaffolded into manageable steps, or be given activities to extend their learning. Project based learning has the potential to facilitate both.

All pupils need to see that learning is achievable, they are making progress, and this is acknowledged. You only have to spend a few hours with pupils with severe learning difficulties to realise that even the smallest of steps can be celebrated.

Another aspect of future learning is paying attention to the burgeoning literature in neuropsychology; how the brain works, how we learn, and the links between experience, emotion, and behaviour. Positive psychology in schools promotes positive actions and positive feelings. Nowhere is this more important than with students in distress, whose behaviour can be challenging<sup>20</sup>.

All educators need both pre-service and in-service input to understand trauma, and how this may manifest in the classroom, guidance in how to establish and maintain positive relationships with students who are potentially challenging, the use of strengths-based rather than deficit language, strategies to respond effectively to confrontation, and ways in which to maintain their own resilience and wellbeing. There are resources on the website that may help.

One way of thinking about young people who are presenting with difficulties is called the *Power: Threat: Meaning Framework (PTMF)* published by the British Psychological Society.

For education systems to flourish, teachers need to be positioned as significant and valued professionals. In a re-structured system, their role would be multidimensional, including detailing options available, clarifying expectations, and resources, co-evaluating with students what has been learnt, and offering support where needed.

### **An optimal environment in which to learn**

A positive school environment puts wellbeing at the heart of everything that happens. This includes:

- Leaders with a clear vision for the wellbeing of the whole child and every child.
- Communicating this vision clearly and regularly to all stakeholders, especially families, and building a team of like minds.
- Maximising agency, giving all stakeholders both a say and a responsibility for crafting an environment that fosters wellbeing for all.
- Using the language of strengths and inclusion where everyone is accepted for who they are, and the aim is for each to be the best they can be.

- Being flexible to enable those who have a range of needs, capabilities, and challenges to thrive and learn at their own pace.
- Behaviour policies that acknowledge the reality of student lives and support young people to understand their emotions, and choose better behaviour.
- Promoting positive behaviour, reducing teacher control while responding effectively to challenges, requires teacher learning and support
- Building relationships that promote social capital across the school that entails trust, acknowledgment, gratitude, and support.
- Having intercultural awareness and developing positive links with local communities.

**Reflection:**

*What would you see, hear, and experience on a visit to a school that would tell you how people feel about being there?*

*What questions might you ask to find out more?*

The statements above are supported by an increasingly extensive positive education literature. More information and examples of good practice at <https://www.creatingtheworldwewanttolivein.org>.

## Hope and optimism

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There are signs that positive change is happening all over the world. Finnish education actively aligns curriculum and teaching with natural child development, and has a reputation of being one of the best systems in the world:

*“The nature of a child is to want to know new things, to be inquisitive, curious about the world around them, and to experiment with what they learn. Finland’s education system builds on this, taking advantage of the natural curiosity, and placing it at the heart of education planning and curricula”.<sup>21</sup>*

In Australia the eight ‘general capabilities’ are seen as a key element of the national curriculum, and are addressed and threaded

through the content of learning areas. These general capabilities are: literacy, numeracy, information, and communication technology (ICT), critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding. The aim is for every student to become a successful learner, a confident and creative individual, and an active and informed citizen.

### **Case-study: Glasgow's nurturing approach**

A nurturing approach includes having high aspirations for all young people, and a belief that all have potential. Nurture groups were originally established to provide extra support to children entering school who needed extra care. The Boxall principles for nurture groups are: that a child's learning is understood developmentally; that the classroom is a safe place; that the importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing is recognised; that language is seen as a vital means of communication but also, that all behaviour is recognised as communication; and that the importance of transition in children's lives is acknowledged. Scotland, and particularly Glasgow, have taken these principles and extended them to become the basis of whole school wellbeing. For the Glasgow initiative three more principles have been added: all young people feel they belong, young people's lives and experiences are respected, permission for disagreements ensures that staff and children are both heard. According to Maureen McKenna, Director of Education, Glasgow is a different place now than it was in 2007, with no permanent exclusions since 2017, evidence of a 50% reduction in youth crime for children aged 10–16, and a doubling of young people getting 'highers' – the qualifications taken at 18 – with over two thirds going onto higher education.

A new paradigm for education is overdue but aspects of this are already happening in schools all over the world. We need to build on this good practice.

Perhaps we begin by questioning the criteria for 'success'. Rather than getting high scores, perhaps the aim might be for every student to become the best they can be, be mentally healthy, and able to

connect well and empathically with others. This may mean valuing education beyond academic skills to all other areas of knowledge and human development.

### **Ideas for action**

#### ***What might governments do?***

Invest resources so everyone has access to an education that reflects the changing needs of the world we live in.

Honour and respect teachers as vital facilitators of learning.

Ensure all educators have training in child development and the impact of adverse childhood experiences on learning and behaviour, and ways to redress this.

Pay attention to all five Pillars of Education as set out by UNESCO.

Reduce high-stakes testing to a minimum, and offer a range of assessment strategies.

#### ***What might schools do?***

Ensure that wellbeing is at the heart of all policies and practices, giving everyone a voice.

Have strengths and solution focused approaches.

Have cultural awareness and make positive links with local communities.

Engage constructively with families, sending regular, positive messages home.

Develop behaviour policies that promote positive relationships, and a sense of belonging.

Develop a school culture that is inclusive, safe, and respectful.

Acknowledge the importance of play for resilience and wellbeing.

Focus on identifying 'personal bests' rather than a competitive culture.

Have protected time for social and emotional learning, and embed this learning throughout the school day.

Accept mistakes as part of learning, fostering a growth mindset.

**What might teachers do?**

Find something to like about every student and let them know!

Not take difficult behaviour personally.

Look after their own wellbeing and be kind to themselves – no-one can do everything perfectly.

**What might families do?**

Know they are their child's first teacher.

Encourage schools to focus on bringing out the best in each student, and do not expect their child to be 'top' in a competitive culture.

Show pride in all children's achievements and efforts.

Before enrolling a child, check out the school's wellbeing and inclusion approach.

**Key sources**

Full references and resources are available at our website <https://www.creatingtheworldwewanttolivein.org/references/education/>

**Notes**

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- 10 See our website for a reading list on Positive Education.
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- 13 Durlak *et al.* (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.
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- 21 <https://www.educationfinland.fi/why-finland>