

FUTURE SCHOOLING

THINK PIECE 2

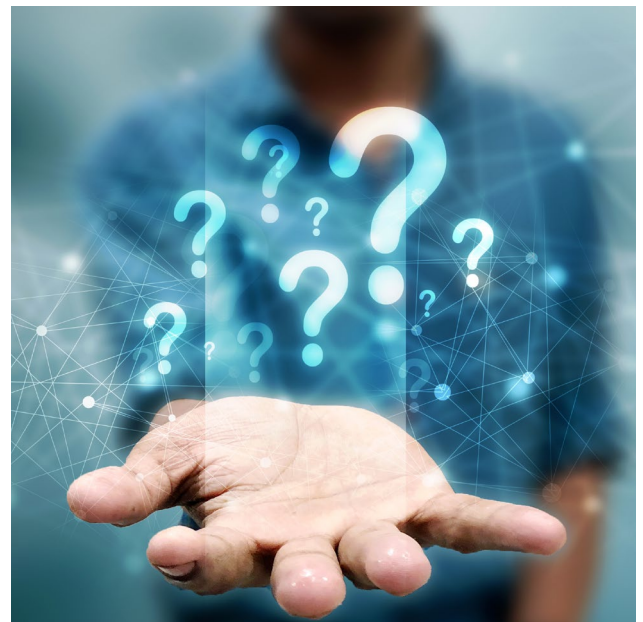
NEW PURPOSES FOR A TRANSFORMED WORLD

WHY WE HAVE TO ASK 'WHY?'

If you ask any audience of teachers or parents “*what is learning for?*” their immediate reaction is likely to be that it’s a very silly question: surely the answer is obvious? On reflection however, I suspect that they would soon recognise that it is anything but obvious because we simply don’t have established answers currently.

It seems to me that the ongoing and often hot and polarised public debates about education (wherever it’s happening) have chiefly revolved around a set of second-order questions:

- **what should be taught**
- **how it should be taught**
- **to whom (who gets access to what?)**
- **how it should be structured**
- **how it should be paid for**



Clearly, these are all important questions and, in times of stability and continuity, they may well be the ones to focus on. However, those are not our times. As the first think piece in this series argued, humanity is entering an unprecedented period of change which is clearly challenging many of our long-held assumptions about education.

The first examples of “mass” formal education systems which emerged in the middle of the 19th century in order to serve the needs of the Industrial Revolution, are now under intense strain. This is also true of most public services that the state plays a key role in providing. The disjuncture between the ideal of a public system that provides similarly for all citizens, and the complex and diverse citizenry and goals existent in such systems, is increasingly creating a perception that public systems are failing.

The standard reform movement that has been prevalent for the last twenty years takes the view that the existing model of schooling is essentially sound but can be enhanced by a mix of better trained teachers and greater use of technology.¹ Basically, this view argues that ‘school improvement’ just needs to be done better. At the other end of the continuum is the view that ‘schooling’ needs to be disrupted entirely, and that technology in the hands of learners will render schools obsolete.² According to this view, ‘schooling’ is close to being over (and possibly the sooner the better), and learning will be disintermediated, just as many industries already have been. On this view the de-schoolers of the ‘60s were basically right, just ahead of their time. The liberating power of the digital revolution makes their vision a realistic possibility.

1 E.g. Hattie, John (2008). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. NY: Routledge

2 For example Christensen C.M. et al (2008) *Disrupting Class: how disruptive innovation will change the way the world learns*. NY: McGraw Hill

Between these two viewpoints is the view that schooling needs to be re-imagined and then re-designed, A new paradigm is needed and is overdue. I believe that schools as community institutions rather than simply places of “learning”, do have a vital role if humanity is truly to thrive.

The outcomes of the school improvement movement, despite many years of so called reform have in practice not done much to persuade critics that it can address the manifest failings of mass schooling systems *even on their own terms*. In short, so much ‘reform’ yet so little change!

In my view, these failings are:

- **Increasing learner disengagement**
- **The growing costs of the current system alongside flat-lining gains on existing outcome metrics**
- **Frustrated, unfulfilled education professionals (who are often not treated as professionals)**
- **Little impact on inequality and equity**
- **Profound mismatch with the needs of societies and economies**

The most recent rounds of international surveys provide a contemporary picture. Since 2000, the vast majority of OECD countries have seen no improvement in students’ skills as measured by the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA).³ Of all the OECD countries, only Portugal has seen sustained improvement in reading, maths and science. In the ten years since PISA last assessed reading (2009 to 2018), only six countries saw improvement in the performance of low-SES students such that they reduced the gap with high-SES students. Yet this was in a period where almost all countries had reducing educational inequalities as a goal. Amongst teachers, fewer than one third agree that ‘the teaching profession is valued in society’. Meanwhile, for students themselves, roughly a third of 15-year-olds across the OECD say they have no clear sense of meaning in their life, rising to almost half in the U.K.⁴ That represents a third of 32 million 15-year-olds, who have each spent approximately 10,000 hours in school. That is a lot of time to spend not working out what you care about.

Notwithstanding these multiple weaknesses and failures – even by current yardsticks, let alone those related to our futures – pressure to change is resisted politically, and educators working for change are thwarted and frustrated.

“...given the fact that expenditure per primary and secondary student rose by more than 15% across OECD countries over the past decade, it is disappointing that most OECD countries saw virtually no improvement in the performance of their students since PISA was first conducted in 2000. In fact, only seven of the 79 education systems analysed saw significant improvements in the reading, mathematics and science performance of their students throughout their participation in PISA, and only one of these, Portugal, is a member of the OECD.”

PISA 2018 Results (Volume VI). OECD

A NEW NARRATIVE FOR NEW TIMES

So, it is surely time to ask that question – *what is learning for?* – in all seriousness. And from that, devise and design the kinds of learning experiences that are likely to achieve our real objectives. What outcomes do we want for our societies and for individual learners? Or – to put it another way: what is the job we need education systems to do for us? It is important to recognise that, in the existing arrangements there is an underlying rationale or narrative: but it is usually tacit, or taken-for granted. And it is all the more powerful for that. Predominantly, the message is this: education is what enables nations to compete to ensure economic growth – and thus individuals can be successful. This is only common sense, right?

3 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa_19963777

4 OECD, TALIS 2013 Results, *An international perspective on teaching and learning* 98

In 1995 Tony Blair, capturing the zeitgeist, said, “Education is the best economic policy there is.” He followed through when becoming the Prime Minister of the UK in 1997 by making education the key focus for the new Labour Government. Barack Obama echoed this sentiment in his 2010 State of the Union Presidential address: “In the C21st, the best anti-poverty program around is a world-class education.” It’s unlikely they shared a speech writer; they certainly shared and articulated the dominant common-sense narrative. Economic growth has become the fundamental underpinning rationale. Occasionally, a dash of ‘personal development and citizenship’ rhetoric is added to the mix. As a consequence of the pandemic, it has also been (belatedly) recognised that schools might have



a part to play in well-being. But the central story has been one of economic growth through competition in the globalised economy, leading to more jobs as well as increased national and personal prosperity; all in a virtuous circle.

I believe that this narrative is wrong and inadequate in a number of ways. Firstly, on the question of education’s contribution to ‘growth’, there has always been strong scepticism from economists.⁵ Moreover, the nature of the ‘growth’ which education was supposed to engender is itself now understood to be, not an unalloyed good, but rather a source of our major existential challenge: the destruction of the planet.

Secondly, at the individual level, significant numbers of learners will no longer reap the promised benefits of educational qualifications: employment and the promise of a better future. Disillusion is growing across a number of countries with regard to education being an effective vehicle for social mobility. Around the world, the hope for upward social mobility, spurred by the massive expansion of access to educational opportunities since the 1990s, is now diminishing.⁶ As education has become for some an identity or mark of success, for others it is an exclusive world, of which they are not seeing the benefit. Young people are beginning to question the ‘return on investment’ of traditionally high-status educational routes. Notwithstanding skill gaps in certain sectors, there are unlikely to be enough high value-added, knowledge-based jobs created to absorb the supply of university-educated workers.⁷ At the time of writing, it seems highly likely that this will be exacerbated by the projected levels of unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Significant numbers of learners will no longer reap the expected benefits of educational qualifications: secure employment and the promise of a better future.

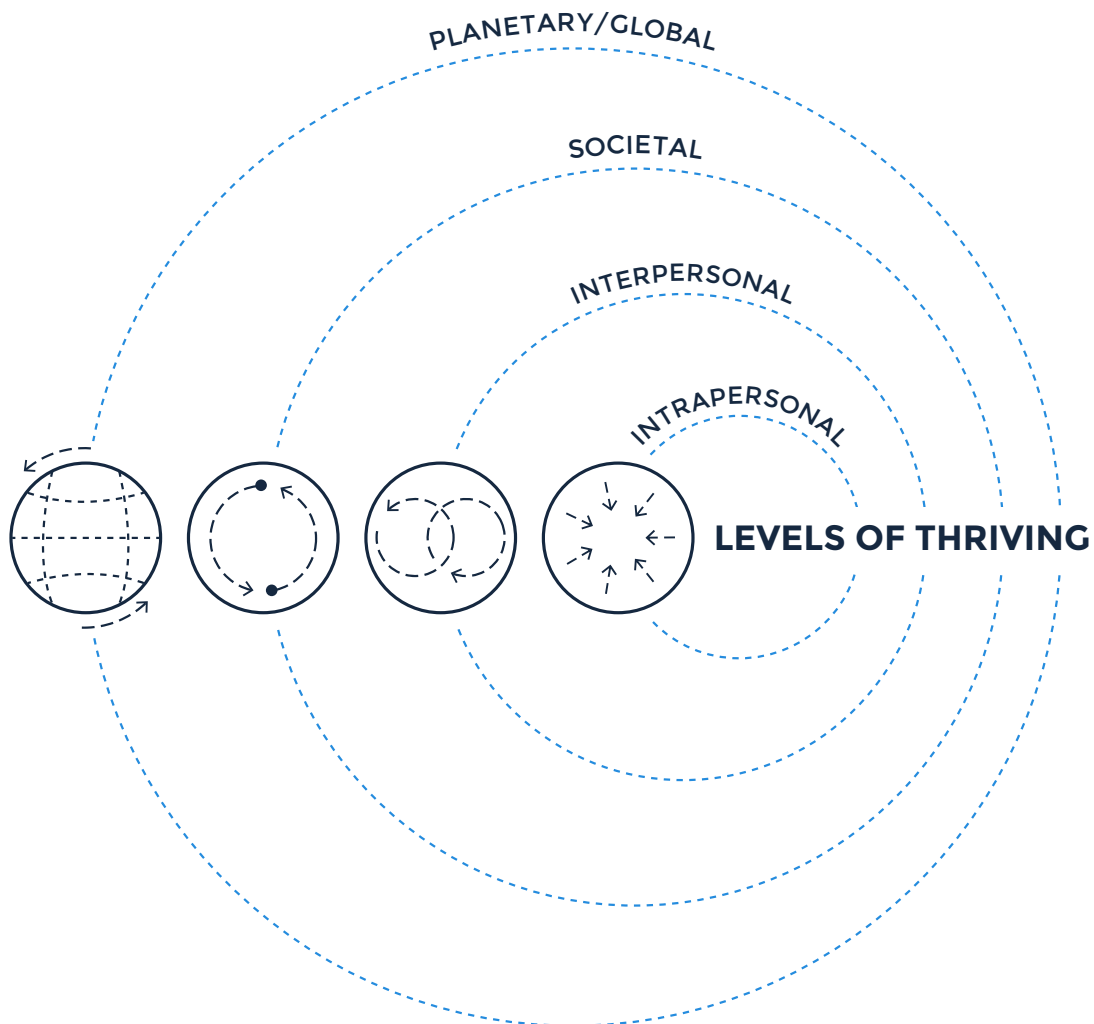
So, if the old narrative no longer applies, what should the new one be? In the first think piece in this series, I set out what I see as the major ‘pivot points’ – or deep structure changes that confront humanity in the coming 50 years. If this analysis is somewhere close – even if say, 50% accurate – then it becomes obvious that equipping young people to live worthwhile lives, not just adjusting to the consequential shifts, but more importantly *shaping* them, must be our moral purpose. And I suggest we can sum that up by asserting that: **The purpose of education should be about learning to thrive in a transforming world.**

5 Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*; Blaug, *The Economics of Education and the Education of an Economist*

6 The Sutton Trust, ‘Social Mobility and Education: Academic Papers Presented at a High Level Summit Sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Sutton Trust’; Volante and Jerrim, ‘Why a Good Education Isn’t Always the Key to Social Mobility’; Narayan et al., *Fair Progress?*

7 Susskind, *A World Without Work*

From this position, a number of things flow. Firstly, it means questioning and then understanding what it means to thrive in such new conditions. When serious thought is given to that we see the interconnectedness of things: thriving actually entails working at 4 different but interdependent levels.



The argument⁸ is that, unless we learn to thrive at the *planetary* or global level, we are unlikely to survive. Thriving societies are what we depend upon to give us equity, justice and prosperity. Thriving *interpersonal relationships* are the bedrock of good lives, as longitudinal research increasingly demonstrates.⁹ And unless we thrive as *individuals*, enjoying sound mental health, a secure sense of self, internal peace, and a sense of personal purpose, then we are very unlikely to be able to achieve success (albeit redefined!) at the other levels. It is increasingly apparent that, as a species, we are failing spectacularly on these fronts currently. And if schooling cannot contribute to these aims, then what, really, is it for?

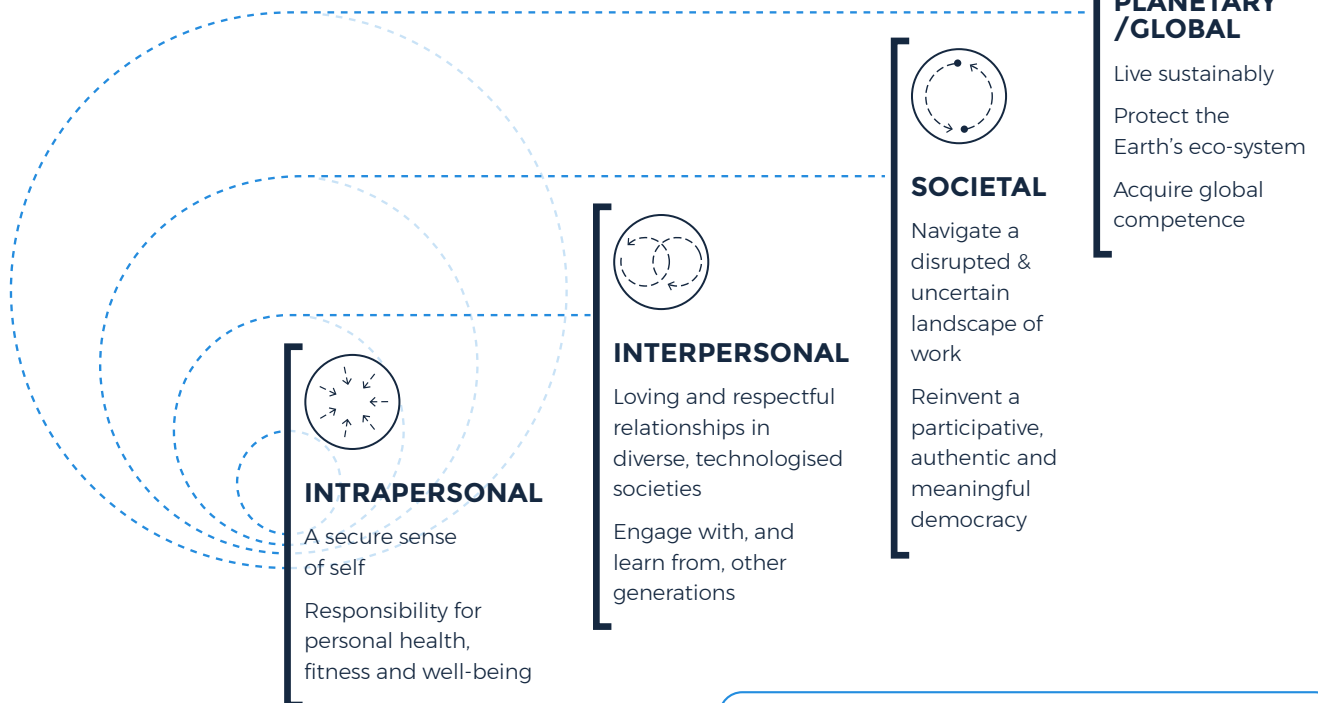
Exploration of the implications of thriving at these levels actually renders some new learning goals. Whilst acknowledging that these are not exactly new, they are nevertheless routinely consigned to the periphery of education (a nice-to-have) and not placed at its very centre as I suggest they should be. Thinking about high-level learning goals *first*; and then figuring about the implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment must surely be the right process. We will not realise our new purpose unless we do so.

So, I offer the following high-level learning goals as a basis for discussion.

8 Made in much greater depth in Hannon and Peterson (2021)

9 Harvard Second Generation Study accessed 9/02/2020 www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org

LEARNING GOALS IF WE ARE TO THRIVE



Behind each of these goals lies a tight argument about how and why they are imperative to achieve thriving in the new conditions we face – and indeed, those we are already in right now.¹⁰ To be clear: this is not an anti-academic agenda. Nor is it a part of the tired old knowledge vs skills debate. Schools pursuing these goals recognise that they entail rigorous academic work – but also experiential and personal learning that goes beyond the cognitive.¹¹

In short, we are talking about the acquisition of competencies in the sense that the OECD has defined these in its work on *Education and Skills for 2030*¹², namely: knowledge + skills + values + attitudes (KSAVA). Understanding a competency as KSAVA gives a completely different perspective on the outcomes we seek from learning programs – and indeed how they should be assessed. This is not mere abstraction. The good news is that there are schools around the world that are turning these goals into a practical reality (some of them, against the odds in the UK) – and in doing so, motivating and engaging their learners (and teachers) as never before.¹³

“Countries and schools around the world are increasingly using four types of curriculum innovations: digital curriculum, personalised curriculum, cross-content and competency-based curriculum, and flexible curriculum. In doing so, the reality they face to date has been that such innovations may enlarge equity gaps among different groups of students, instead of closing the gaps. Thus, this report focuses on how curriculum can be adapted to ensure that no learner is left behind, particularly the most vulnerable and provides the opportunity to think harder about ‘equality, equity and inclusion in curriculum design and implementation.’”

Adapting Curriculum to Bridge Equity Gaps: Towards an Inclusive Curriculum. OECD. 2021

10 Again, see Hannon and Peterson (2021) for the full analysis, together with practical examples of schools around the world that are working in this direction

11 Leadbeater C., (2016) *The Problem Solvers* <https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/learning/Problem-Solvers-Web-.pdf>

12 Education and Skills 2030 OECD 2018 <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project>

13 For examples, see the Pathfinders in various chapters in Hannon and Peterson (ibid); see the *New Pedagogies for Deeper Learning Network* <https://www.npd.global>; and the schools in the *Network of Innovation and Inquiry* (NOII) [https://noie.ca/about-us/#:~:text=The%20NOII%20\(Networks%20of%20Inquiry,forms%20of%20assessment%20to%20assist](https://noie.ca/about-us/#:~:text=The%20NOII%20(Networks%20of%20Inquiry,forms%20of%20assessment%20to%20assist)

WHAT IS NEEDED TO ACHIEVE THIS VISION?

At least two things are needed to achieve the kinds of change outline above (and developed in much greater depth in the sources cited). The first is leadership by which I mean leadership at all levels: political, system and institutional. This issue is explored in the third in this series of think-pieces. The second is a need to redesign the school so that it becomes the kind of institution that could possibly deliver these new ambitious learning goals.

The good news is that we are not working from a blank canvas. Across the world, innovative educators have been prototyping and testing new models, some with spectacular results. For leaders and teachers looking to build on the work already in existence, resources are becoming increasingly available, from sources such as Edutopia¹⁴, HundrED (Finland)¹⁵, Education Reimagined¹⁶, Knowledgeworks¹⁷, and – domestically – Whole Education¹⁸ and Innovation Unit¹⁹. Each of these now hold inspirational examples of what a redesigned schooling model looks like, and the tools and processes that help to get communities of educators make impactful change.

To achieve the goal of learning to thrive in a transforming world, we need school redesigns that address values, operational philosophies and the desired quality of the learners' experience.²⁰ Again, these are no longer theoretical abstractions, but concrete, rigorous developments at the leading edge of practice. One positive consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that we are much more readily connected with the global educational community, and can accelerate our learning in ways which we previously unthinkable or unavailable. An overview of these global developments is given in the video attached to this think piece.

However, even if the pandemic has offered the opportunity to pause, to reflect and to reconsider what our new goals should be and the route to achieving them; and even if we have plenty of tools and resources to get us there; still, it won't happen without leadership.

And it is to the nature of the new leadership required that the next think piece in this series is devoted.



FURTHER READING

- Price D., (ed) et al., *Education Forward* Crux Publishing 2017
- Fullan M., et al *Deep Learning: Engage the World Change the World* Corwin 2017
- Sandel, M., *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York. 202
- <https://charlesleadbeater.net/2017/03/the-problem-solvers/>

14 <https://www.edutopia.org>

15 <https://hundred.org/en>

16 <https://education-reimagined.org>

17 <https://knowledgeworks.org>

18 <https://www.wholeeducation.org>

19 <https://www.innovationunit.org>

20 More detail in *FutureSchool*, forthcoming 2022 Hannon V., with Temperley J