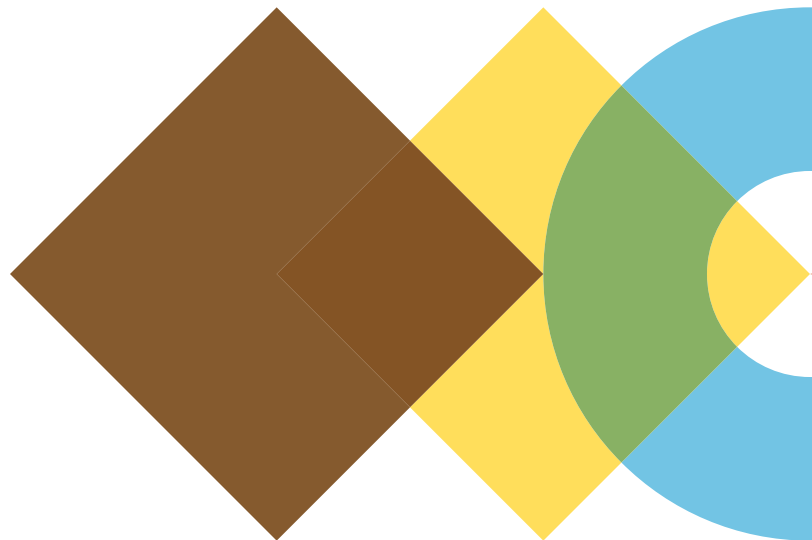


Essay 03

A Curriculum for Our Time

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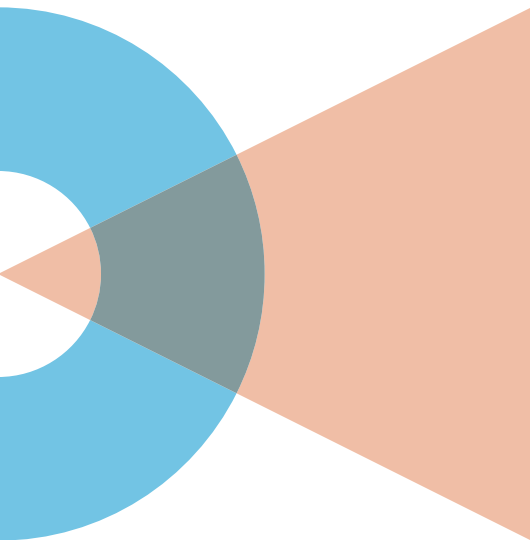
Present-day schools are no longer fit for purpose—if we are serious about equipping young people to thrive in an uncertain future.

We need to revisit what “well educated” means in our time and look to what schools are doing in the light of that. A way forward is to determine, by means of public debate, what consensus there might be around the concept of a well-educated person in contemporary society and ensure that schools’ learning offer is well aligned with that.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY? SHOULD THEY ATTEMPT TO BRIDGE THE SKILLS GAP? CAN THEY DO THAT? SHOULD THEY EVEN TRY?

It is a commonplace that the world is changing and, moreover, that the rate of change is increasing. This is not a matter just for the workplace. Patterns of communication, the construction and distribution of information, political culture and governance, civic engagement, all face major turbulence. It is a brave person who would lay claim to certainty about the future of the labor market or society more broadly. The one certainty is that today’s children will inhabit very different worlds from their parents and grandparents.

If professional pundits cannot predict the future with any certainty, perhaps schools should be let off the hook. Addressing the “skills gap” requires being able to specify what the gap is; building a bridge without having secure foundations at each end is a footless enterprise. There was a time when the skills embodied in, say, shorthand or the use of logarithmic tables were seen as important preparation for the workplace. Who can say which of the many skills currently deemed essential will still be so in twenty years’ time?



If schools do not know what lies down the road, maybe they should concentrate attention on developing each individual's capacity to the full and ensuring they live full lives as children and young people, and focus less on skill acquisition directed at an indeterminate future. Who after all is best placed to thrive in an uncertain world—people who are versed in the narrow set of skills currently prioritized, or fully rounded adults with a broad set of competencies?

WHAT DOES A FULLY ROUNDED/ WELL-EDUCATED PERSON LOOK LIKE?

People are different and have diverse capacities and interests. This will not change and there should be no intention of creating identikit people to a common mold. Is there a case though for a core set of knowledge and competencies that it is worth aspiring to for everybody? Many answers have been offered to this question, from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) *The Treasure Within* (to do, to know, to be, and to live together) to the Learning Metric Task Force's *Seven Domains of Learning* (physical well-being, social and emotional, culture and the arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and mathematics, science and technology).¹

These and similar models imply a notion of the well-educated person which, when elaborated, issues in a school curriculum. What is deemed to constitute a well-educated person has varied over time and place, and it may be timely to revisit the concept in our own time. What does it mean to be an educated person in 2017 (or 2027)? And how would this be determined?

One can imagine engaging civil society in a comprehensive scrutiny of what it means to be an educated person—a *Big Education Debate*, as it were. This Debate would be governed by five principles:

1. Breadth of representation. All sections of society should be involved, not just the traditional education elites. Both traditional and social media should be used to ensure the widest possible participation. It would be especially important to engage young people in the process since it is their future that is at stake. Likewise, every effort should be made to secure inputs from those many people who believe traditional schooling has nothing to offer them.



2. Use of evidence. When empirical claims are being made, the evidentiary basis should be clear. Given that evidence-based claims in education are made with varying degrees of certainty and that worthless claims can gain widespread attention, it might be prudent to establish an independent body to scrutinize claims and determine the authority that can be ascribed to any given claim.

3. Values. A society's vision for education will always incorporate values, and it is essential that these be made explicit during the process. Since there are likely to be differences of view in what constitute core values, these must be discussed in a transparent, respectful way. It is important too that discussion around values and empirical claims are not conflated: values can be contested but empirical claims, if well attested, cannot.

4. Moderation. Procedures for moderating the Debate should be established from the outset and should be transparent to all.

5. Achieving consensus. Full consensus is unlikely to be achieved but there need to be procedures for establishing a workable consensus. This will not be easy but it is an essential part of the process. It may, for instance, entail circulating successive iterations of the positions reached, along with commentary on key points of divergence. There is need also of transparent protocols for achieving closure: some views and cherished positions will need to be set aside in the interests of reaching a common position, and the means by which this is done must be clear to all.

The upshot of this exercise would be a statement of what constitutes an educated person in our time. If this statement emerges from an inclusive, transparent process, one can anticipate that it would have broad support across society and should enable purposeful scrutiny of what goes on in schools.

HOW CAN THE CONCEPT OF AN EDUCATED PERSON GUIDE CURRICULUM SELECTION?

Given some measure of consensus around the core characteristics of an educated person, the task then would be to scrutinize the school curriculum in the light of this consensus and to reform—or create new schools—accordingly.

It is unlikely that what schools currently do and society's expectations about an educated person will be perfectly aligned. Four outcomes can be anticipated. First, there will indeed be aspects of schooling which are conducive to developing well-educated persons—the focus on literacy, for instance, or the importance of structured learning. Other common activities in today's schools may be irrelevant, however; an example might be the memorizing of large bodies of disconnected facts and their subsequent regurgitation in decontextualized examination conditions. Yet other activities may work against the development of well-educated persons; one thinks, for instance, of the focus on individual achievement as opposed to collaborative problem solving or the way in which learning is decontextualized and constrained within the barriers of the traditional school subjects.

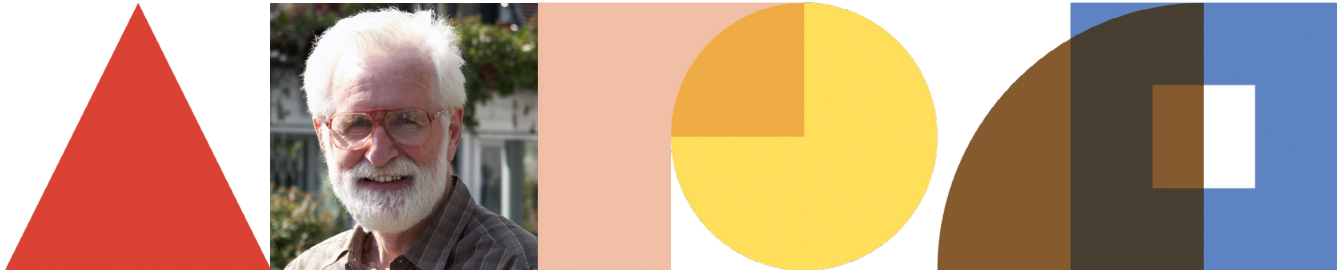
Finally, there may well be significant aspects of personal development that the current school curriculum does not address or neglects to do so in a sustained way for all students. Examples abound, from personal financial literacy, engagement with the arts, media literacy and the capacity to avoid being duped by questionable claims by advertisers and public figures, and so on.

An exercise of this kind would serve as a wake-up call for schools and school systems. There may be aspects of being educated that schools are not well placed to serve—though, given that their primary role is not childminding/containment or the maintenance of social stratification—these should be relatively few. Schools' activities should be targeted rigorously on developing well educated, fully rounded individuals, and any activity that does not serve this goal should be excised. The result would be the emergence of a cohort of dynamic young people who are best placed to meet the challenges of—their—uncertain future.



ENDNOTES

- 1 UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. *Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn*. Brookings Institution. February 2013. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/toward-universal-learning-what-every-child-should-learn/>.



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