

Education: identity, agency, purpose

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As the world becomes ever more integrated, we're also exposed to more risks. The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't respected national borders. People can be infected regardless of nationality, education, income and gender. The pandemic's consequences, however, are less indiscriminate: the most vulnerable are hit the hardest.

Education is no exception. While schools have been closed, children from more privileged backgrounds – eager to learn and supported by their parents – have been quick to access alternative learning resources. More disadvantaged pupils, meanwhile, have been left behind.

INADEQUACIES AND INEQUALITIES LAID BARE BY THE CRISIS

The crisis has laid bare many inadequacies and inequalities in our education system, from unequal access to broadband, to technical equipment and to the support systems needed to foster learning to our inability to attract the best teachers to the most challenging schools. We have an opportunity right now to make sure we don't simply revert to the status quo when things go back to normal. What impact the present disruptions will have on our society is dependent on our collective, systemic response to them.

WE NEED TO RAPIDLY IMPROVE DIGITAL LEARNING RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Real change often takes place in times of profound crisis. If schools have to close at short notice, there are things we can do to alleviate the impact on learners and their families (especially those from the most marginalised groups) and on teachers. We can work together internationally to develop freely available online learning resources and platforms. We can encourage technology companies to get involved with these initiatives. We can rapidly improve digital learning resources for teachers and support collaboration between learners, schools and educational

systems across borders. But the most important thing is that we use this momentum to bring our curricula and learning environments into the twenty-first century.

THE GREATEST THREATS FACING US TODAY: IGNORANCE AND HATE

We live in a world where the things that are easy to teach and test are also easy to digitalise and automate. The world no longer rewards us simply for what we know (after all, Google already knows everything anyway) but rather for what we can do with what we know. The challenge for the future will be to combine computers' artificial intelligence with human beings' cognitive, social and emotional skills and values. It will be our imagination, consciousness and sense of responsibility that help us use technology to make the world a better place.

Nowadays, a successful educational outcome is as much about identity, agency and a sense of purpose as it is about literacy, numeracy and knowledge of history. It's about awakening curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, opening up our minds to new possibilities. It's about fostering empathy, compassion and courage, about being able to mobilise our cognitive, social and emotional resources. These will be our best weapons against the greatest threats facing us today. Against ignorance, which closes our minds, against hatred, which closes our hearts, against fear, which holds us back from acting.

LEARNERS NEED TO DEVELOP A STRONG SENSE OF TRUTHFULNESS AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Nowadays, social media algorithms sort us into groups who already think the same way. They polarise us by amplifying our own views and insulating us from differing perspectives. So the schools of tomorrow will need to teach students to think for themselves and show empathy and civic responsibility towards others. Learners need to develop a strong

sense of truthfulness and ethical responsibility, a sensitivity to other people's expectations and an understanding of the limits of individual and collective action. Whatever jobs machines may take over from humans in future, increasing demands will be placed on the knowledge and skills that will allow us to make a valuable contribution to our society.

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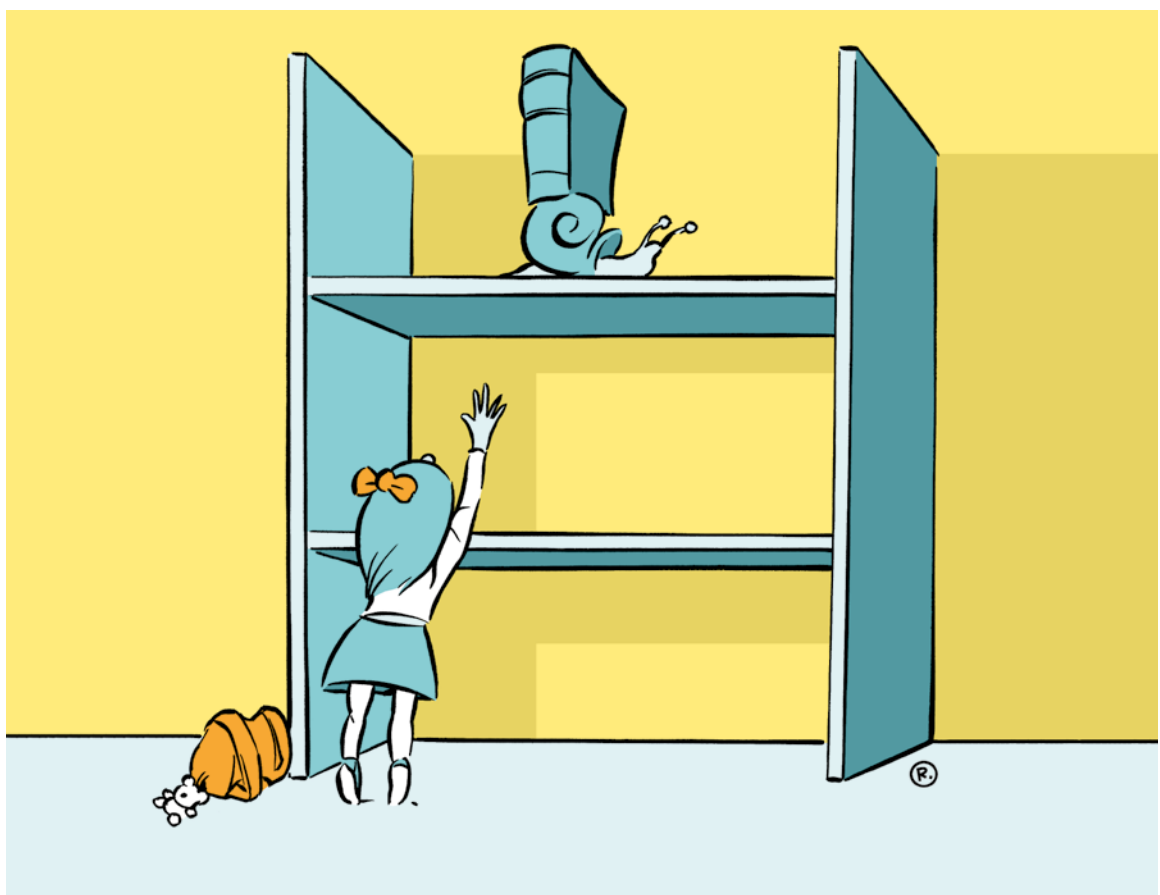
The growing complexity of modern life means that the solutions to our problems will also be complex. In a structurally imbalanced world, the need to achieve harmony between different interests and perspectives will require us to manage conflicts and dilemmas both locally and globally. A balance has to be struck between competing demands. Between justice and

freedom, autonomy and community, innovation and continuity, efficiency and democratic process. To achieve this, we need a more integrative way of thinking. Our ability to overcome uncertainties and ambiguities will be key.

Creative problem-solving requires us to think responsibly about the consequences of our actions, in a morally and intellectually mature way. Our judgements of what is right or wrong, good or bad, in a given situation need to be guided by ethics.

NO EDUCATION WITHOUT VALUES

That brings us to the most challenging issue facing education: the need for our educational processes to be value-driven. Values have always been central to education. But now they need to go from being implicit aspirations to explicit goals and practices that can help us turn ad hoc value systems – “I'll do whatever a situation permits” – into permanent, enduring ones. Unless education provides us with a solid foundation, many people will try to build walls, no matter how self-destructive it is. Crucially, if we want to stay ahead of technological progress, we need to identify and cultivate the qualities unique to us as human beings. We need to complement the abilities of the computers we have built, rather than trying to compete with them. Schools need to produce first-class human beings, not second-class robots.





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