

# RETHINKING SCHOOL

## AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

“Schooling has usually been a process of selection and rejection, with great effort and ingenuity expended on testing, measuring, classifying, and segregating in accordance with the best available knowledge.” Thus qualifies the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1999) the influence of the “Platonic view” of the educated person on schooling in the West during the past 25 centuries and in “those parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America greatly influenced by European culture.” The “process of selection and rejection” referred to in this quote was one based on the primacy of the study of ideas and abstractions over more practical studies and manual work.

It is high time to reassess the assumptions underlying the school concept and to critically review the nature of pedagogies; the roles of learners and of those who facilitate learning; the importance and relevance of the various ingredients that have so much become part and parcel of the schooling culture that we can hardly think of learning without reference to them; the role of the school as a community; and its role within the larger surrounding social context. This paper provides an argument to undertake such a reassessment and proposes an international symposium aiming at opening a transnational dialogue among experts of different disciplines. It suggests a general focus for that dialogue and specifies related questions.

The crisis facing the school is worldwide. It does no longer distinguish between Europe and North America on the one hand and, on the other, “those parts” elsewhere in the world that took Europe as a model. It may, though, be proper for Europe to once again take the lead and show the way, twenty-five centuries after Plato, to what it really means, not to be an educated person, but to be learning. However, it also makes sense for any part of the world that aspires towards taking the lead, to seek to do so in dialogue with others. Everything is to be gained from a truly transnational debate on these matters.

Reassessment of the meaning of learning is key to rethinking the school. Traditionally we tend to think of learning as a process that takes place in the head of the learning individual and that results in the acquisition by the learner of skills, knowledge and attitudes. Basic sets of skills, domains of knowledge, and attitudes, preferably acquired at an early age, are believed to be necessary for a person’s course through life. Should one have missed the chance to acquire these basics as a child or adolescent, then, if at all possible, a second chance should be given. This results in a vision of education as a process of delivery on the part of some, and acquisition on the part of others. The notion of delivery remains strongly present not only in discourse surrounding the classroom-based schooling reality. One can easily find it as well, and often even more emphatically pronounced, in discourse regarding the use of technologies in education and approaches towards distance education.

An alternative view of learning (Visser, in print) stresses that learning should be looked at from the perspective of why people learn. The generic answer to that question is that human learning is an essential feature of evolutionary history that makes it possible for members of the human species to consciously develop intelligent behaviour that allows them to interact constructively with change. Such intelligent behaviour results from the dialogue humans engage in with their human, social, biological and physical environment. Human learning is therefore first and foremost a disposition towards such a dialogue. As change is always there, and we humans not only react to it but also take part in producing it, it is important to realize that the dialogue cannot be but an ongoing one. Learning never ends.

The above assertions define learning as a disposition. What this means should be well understood. The term disposition refers to both ‘openness towards’ and ‘preparedness for.’ In other words, it is an attitude, an *emotive disposition*, as well as a set of skills, a *meta-cognitive disposition*, an ability to learn. That latter ability has, among other things, to do with the wiring and rewiring of the brain at crucial stages of an individual’s life. In fact, it only makes sense to speak of lifelong learning if it is referred to as a disposition. In any other sense, like when we refer to it as the deliberate mental activity within our heads to acquire particular abilities, or to reach a certain status within the hierarchy of educated persons, learning is not lifelong. That kind of behaviour we may turn off and on as we please, there being a time for learning (in the restricted sense) and a time for doing other things. However, we only turn off our disposition to dialogue at the peril of losing our humanity. Therefore, learning in the sense of it being a disposition, cannot be but lifelong and must thus be seen as an innate feature of the human existence. It is, therefore, only natural that great efforts should be invested in preparing young people for their lifelong dialogue and to maintain that disposition in later life. The school has an important role to play, but it does not play that role alone.

Efforts to rethink schooling are as old as the schooling practice itself. Some noteworthy examples of thinkers who have, in the course of European history, contributed to the critique of schooling are people like Thomas Aquinas, who already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century advocated that the centrepiece of the educational process was the learner, whose intellectual autonomy should ensure independence to investigate and discover. Other well-known examples cited in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1999) are John Locke; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Karl Marx (usually in collaboration with Engels); John Dewey; B. F. Skinner and the school of ‘behaviourists’ that followed him; and Martin Buber. To avoid pushing the debate envisaged by this concept paper in a particular direction, more contemporary names and issues, of which it is to be seen what mark they will make on the history of the development of education, are deliberately being left out. In learning the lessons of history, it is relevant to note how many a good idea became part of the official discourse of its time without fundamentally changing educational practice. The Encyclopaedia Britannica cites the case of Thomas Aquinas’s emphasis on the autonomous learner and concludes: “The Roman Catholic Church, however, has usually put the learner firmly under the authoritative superordination of the teacher.” It will be

important for the debate proposed in this concept paper to focus not only on the ideas, but particularly also on the change processes necessary to translate discourse into practice.

A review of the role of schooling in society is more urgent now than it has ever been. The reasons are two-fold. They have to do with two totally different timeframes. One of these timeframes is of the order of magnitude of evolutionary history; the other one is of the order of magnitude of the time it takes for one human generation to replace the previous one. In the long-term perspective of evolution, we have reached the stage where we are getting confronted with the limits of our planet and its resources. We have managed to double the human population from three billion to six billion in less than 40 years, an extremely short time span considering the millions of years of hominid development it took to reach the first three billion. Constructive interaction with change, and thus learning, has all of a sudden become essential for the survival not only of us as a species but also for other life forms on the planet. On the other hand, we face the challenge that the rate at which things around us change is now faster than the period typically required for the leadership of one human generation to pass on to the next one (Pais, 1997). Typically, we must adapt to fundamental change within our lifespan. The notion of learning as preparation for life has become obsolete, except in one sense: we must learn to learn and learn to unlearn.

In view of the above, the idea of 'school' is in for a major overhaul. However, it won't change of its own accord. It will only change within the context, and as an integrated part, of an evolving overall learning ecology. Ways must be sought so that the issue of school reform can be broadened to include also what happens beyond the walls of the school. In other words, we must face the challenge to rethink the school within the perspective of the whole. This implies attending to the role the school must play in preparing new generations of individuals and communities for their place in the evolving learning society. It also implies rethinking the school as a nodal point of a transgenerational community of learners who, throughout their lives, continue to contribute to, and benefit from, the learning of others.

The concept 'school,' as referred to here, connotes more than the formal school system. It includes equally the various alternative pathways to learning whose basic underlying assumptions – as expressed in the acquisition/delivery metaphor and the treatment of knowledge as a commodity – are the same ones that underlie the formal school system. This holds true, for instance, for much of the distance education tradition. Reconceptualization of the school, then, challenges current notions of planning, organization and administration; the idea of the set curriculum; top-down pedagogical approaches; roles and expectations of the different actors in the school environment, such as expressed in the traditional dichotomy between teachers and learners; practices of assessment of learning achievement; and views of who in society is responsible for managing the learning environment as a whole. It furthermore challenges the implicit notions of spatial organization – both static and dynamic – and rigid timeframes that characterize the instructional processes employed in the school context.

An important issue of consideration must also be the potential role of the reconceptualized school as a backbone of the learning society. Within that perspective, particular attention should be given to such basic functions as the creation, maintenance and development of literacy, mediacy, and dialogic efficacy; fostering the continual ability and motivation to learn; and facilitating the organic cohesion of the learning environment as a whole.

Considering the immensity of the challenge, the international symposium envisaged in this paper will not be able to deal with every single aspect mentioned above. A choice has to be made as to where to put the general focus and what specific issues to deal with. Below follows a suggested focus for a transnational dialogue among invited professionals of different disciplines. Seven related questions are formulated to guide the discussion. Together, these prompts are designed to generate a series of papers and conference proceedings able to inspire policy development and change.

### **Overall concern for discussion at the symposium**

*What policies, strategies, approaches should be developed, and what existing experiences are found to be relevant, to move the school out of its state of social isolation and transform it into an integrated component of the backbone structure of the learning society?*

### **Related questions for discussion**

- How can the school most effectively regain its position as a place where people partake in a process of co-developing and maintaining attitudes, motivations and skills that allow them to be lifelong learners, with particular emphasis on the skills and practice of critical and creative thinking?
- How can one retain the best that the schooling tradition has so far developed while shifting the emphasis away from the current strong focus on disciplinary content towards a more inclusive concern with people's capacity to interact with complex problems and their ability to see their world from a transdisciplinary viewpoint?
- How can the contradiction be solved between, on the one hand, the need to cater for the basic learning needs of all and, on the other, to keep a focus on the individual learner and the learning dialogues she or he is part of?
- What are other components of the learning environment at large that are particularly well positioned for the school to link up with and explore ways in which school-based learning can relevantly become an organically integrated part of an individual's learning history within the wider context? (Examples: the family; the broadcast media; museums; libraries; the Internet; play, including computer/Internet gaming; etc.)
- Considering that the ultimate aim of human learning is to allow people to interact constructively with change, how can the school play a relevant role in dealing with the

big questions of our time, such as those of social justice in a global perspective of diverse communities against the backdrop of historical processes of exploitation; the depletion of the earth's resources; the management of the environment; and sustainable development for all.

- In addition to being a place where people learn, how can the school become a community that in and of itself is a socially coherent and connected entity that demonstrates learning behaviour at its own level of organizational complexity, i.e. a community that is in constant dialogue with its environment to participate constructively in change?
- How can today's technologies best be harnessed in response to the above concerns and how can it be avoided that this response be driven by the interests of technological development *per se* and particularly the commercial interests associated with that development?

## References

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