

Skills for tomorrow

Tom Kenyon on learning to learn

Mari Nishimura presents the latest research on green skills for future generations

Sarah Brown discusses global education in the 21st century



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Registered as a charity in England and Wales, no. 212424 and in Scotland no. SC037784

RSA Journal, Volume CLXVIII

No. 5588 Issue 1 2022

ISSN: 0958-0433

RSA Journal

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The RSA Journal is published

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www.wardour.co.uk

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CBP011328

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Anthony Painter



“Reframing struggles in learning can have a surprising impact on future success”

The pandemic has been a time of lost education for children. It has also been a moment when many have contemplated their skills, occupation and future working lives. In this issue, a wide range of global thinkers and social change practitioners consider what a post-pandemic future for education, learning and the future of work looks like; not least in the context of the need to get to a net-zero carbon emissions economy and beyond.

In this issue of *RSA Journal*, we explore how a radical reimagining of what we know, and what we think we know, is necessary for the establishment of new education systems and skill sets with which to successfully transition to a post-pandemic, post-carbon future. Mari Nishimura of the United Nations Environment Programme draws on her expertise in environmental education and youth issues to elaborate on those skills that will be most necessary and impactful as we make the leap into a greener tomorrow.

But this scale of change has never come easy, and RSA programmes do not shy away from exploring these challenges. According to Alan Lockey, head of our Future of Work programme, a key lesson of the pandemic is the need for proactive approaches to reskilling and redeployment, which must change how we learn, train and work. Tom Kenyon, who leads the RSA’s Cities of Learning programme, cautions that, for a radically changing future, we must create a population that is able to learn, unlearn and relearn, rather than simply focusing funding on a specific set of skills.

We also speak to Sarah Brown, Chair of global children’s charity Theirworld, whose work focuses on the needs of children caught up in global crises. She shares some of the innovation and practical solutions that have emerged (such as ‘double-shift’ schools serving children who are displaced), and some of the major challenges we face if we are to equalise access to education and improve not just children’s learning, but also their lifelong wellbeing.

Some of the most progressive thinking surrounding the broader potential of schools is put forward by Ian McShane of Australia’s RMIT University, writing with Philippa Chandler and Benjamin Cleveland of the University of Melbourne, who discuss how the pandemic has emphasised the critical wider role that schools can play in building community and social connectedness. They highlight how, in some locations, new schools are being designed and resourced as integrated community hubs for extended use.

Interrogating the beliefs and systems we take for granted in our culture can yield unexpected revelations. Science writer David Robson discusses how reframing struggles in learning can have a surprising impact on future success. More specifically, Dacian Dolean of Romania’s Babeş-Bolyai University shares new research around the impact that homework at the primary level can have when it comes to relationships between school and home and securing children’s foundational skills.

Clearly, access to safe education is dependent on getting the pandemic under control. Aisha Abdool Karim provides an update on global vaccine delivery and what Omicron has revealed about the perils of ignoring our mutual interdependence. Covid-19 does not pay attention to borders and nor – according to Harvard psychologist and dream researcher Deirdre Barrett – do pandemic dreams. She shares some of the evidence on how our dreams have been impacted and what this can tell us about how we respond to collective trauma.

This March, our new Chief Executive Andy Haldane steps into his role full time. Meanwhile, this is my last editorial as I move on from the RSA after almost nine years with a sense of deep gratitude to the staff and Fellows who make the RSA the essential institution it is. We are proud of Andy’s contribution to the crucial work of levelling up and look forward to working with RSA Fellows and with our many partners to help influence a better post-pandemic future.

Anthony Painter is Chief Research and Impact Officer at the RSA

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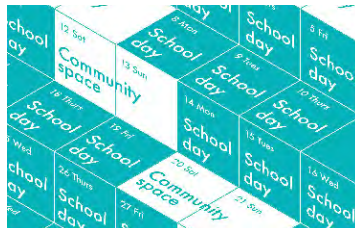
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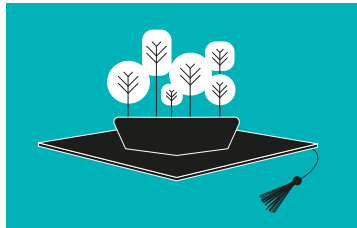
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- 2 More than 80% of the world's population lives in countries using more resources than the earth can regenerate (page 11).
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A just transition

Are the communities most in need of support in danger of being left behind?

The UK government's plan to create green jobs may leave critical communities behind, according to a new report by the RSA. *Decarbonisation dynamics: Mapping the UK transition to net zero*, published in November 2021, shows that the shift to net zero will bring opportunities for job creation – whether wind turbine and electric vehicle battery manufacturing or hydrogen fuel research and development – but that these may not be created in the same locations where other jobs were lost. For example, renewable energy projects will

be concentrated in regions with suitable natural resources.

The RSA analysis finds that the impact of decarbonisation on employment in the UK will be most acutely felt in a handful of areas outside of London and the South. Jobs in fossil fuel and energy production are concentrated in parts of Scotland, the North and Midlands (such as Aberdeen and Stockport), while emissions-intensive manufacturing is most concentrated in parts of the North, the Midlands and Wales such as Scunthorpe, Stoke and Port Talbot. Though some locations already have the capacity for high

renewable energy production, workers in many of these areas may lack opportunities to transition into green jobs.

The RSA's report shows that many of the areas it has identified are not currently included as priorities within the government's levelling up agenda and argues that, without action, these communities will risk being left behind. The RSA is calling for a £1.36bn UK 'just transition fund' and new employment transition services to ensure that these areas are well positioned to benefit from the green jobs revolution and able to diversify into other future industries.

■ To download the report, visit <https://bit.ly/3KqsEG3>

Action

Citizens of now



Too many primary school pupils and their communities are missing out on the benefits that youth social action has to offer, according to *Citizens of now*, a new RSA report published in November 2021.

The research set out to better understand the benefits experienced by primary-age pupils from participating in high-quality youth social action, which it argues can bring benefits to not just the children involved but also to their communities. The RSA explored how more children could get involved with high-quality youth social action and how

opportunities to make a difference in communities could be shared equitably among our youngest citizens.

The report builds on the work that the RSA has been doing in partnership with the Pears #iwill Fund for the last three years, including its design, delivery and evaluation of a youth social action programme for Year 4 pupils.

Researchers also sought to clarify the role of teachers in supporting primary-age pupils in leading their own youth social action projects, and to identify the challenges that exist for primary schools and how these can be overcome. *Citizens of now* shares insights from teachers and school leaders, case studies and practical guidance to inspire more primary schools to lead youth social action in their own settings, empowering pupils to be socially responsible citizens of now.

■ To learn more, visit <https://bit.ly/3KsF7ch>

Arts in the spotlight

Artist Residency Thailand

Jane Bryant FRSA (former CEO of Artswork) spent two weeks in 2020 at Prem International School in Chiang Mai, Thailand as part of Artist Residency Thailand. According to Jane, the residency and development programme, conceptualised and founded by Alex Soulsby, is “unique internationally in its focus on bringing leading creative practitioners into schools to work with students, teachers and community members, and embedding creative learning lenses across the curriculum. Discussions have now started on growing a more robust international network, advocating for the importance of integrating arts and creativity into education globally, and specifically targeting international schools and their accreditation agencies.”

■ To find out more, visit artistsresidencythailand.com and artswork.org.uk

RSA Insights

Nurturing schools

A new RSA toolkit aims to help schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities engage in early intervention work, become more nurturing and reduce the amount of formal and informal exclusions. Produced in partnership with the London Mayor, the Inclusive and Nurturing Schools Toolkit is the result of 11 months of research. It provides exercises to help identify opportunities for change and provides a framework for developing a theory of change for inclusion and nurture practices.

■ To download, visit thersa.org/reports/inclusive-nurturing-schools-toolkit

1 in 4

The number of people who would continue to work while unwell with the Omicron variant because of economic insecurity, according to RSA polling from December 2021. Polling showed those who work from home regularly are more likely (31%) to work while ill, but 23% of those whose job puts them at increased risk would also work with Omicron. The same poll found that the public supports raising statutory sick pay.

■ To find out more, visit thersa.org/future-of-work/economic-security-observatory

47%

The percentage of financially precarious young people, according to a survey of 16–24-year-olds in the UK. A new RSA poll surveyed young people in the UK and found that financial precarity increases as they transition into adulthood. The report also found work and welfare are failing to provide the economic security young people need, with concerning consequences for their future health and financial wellbeing.

■ To find out more, visit thersa.org/blog/2022/01/worrying-trends-young-peoples-economic-security

Agenda



Social housing and economic security

Social housing in its current form does provide security and stability to those who most need it, according to research undertaken by the RSA in conjunction with Clarion Housing Group. The joint inquiry into economic security and automation risk for England's social renters found that people in social housing continue to have worse economic security than their peers in relation to the quality of their work, finances, health and wellbeing. In addition, the RSA's research shows that, in the medium to long run, 61% of social renters are in 'high automation risk' jobs compared with approximately one third of owner-occupiers.

The RSA's starting point is that everyone has the right to a decent quality of life both now and in the future. If the current system does not provide sufficient security, and social tenants are at greater risk from automation, there is a need for both a better support offer and a long-term mindset to increase people's economic security. A key recommendation of the inquiry is the development of a new system, Social Housing Plus, which offers wider support services to all social renters. The report also lists 10 automation-resilient jobs as a starting guide for social renters and employment providers.

■ To download the report, visit thersa.org/reports/economic-insecurity

Fellowship

New Fellows

The 19-year-old social entrepreneur and child rights advocate, **Anoushka Sinha**, is the founder of the Roshan Bharat Initiative in India, which provides education resources to underprivileged children. One of her projects is GirlLytical, which aims to identify girls who are passionate about STEM subjects and then train them with the help of fellow female STEM enthusiasts. Anoushka was a Diana Award recipient in 2021.

London-based **Laurence Lee** is a filmmaker and former journalist who, following a 30-year career as a correspondent for Al Jazeera, Sky News and the BBC, is now pursuing a long-held ambition to teach filmmaking and presenting skills to mostly disadvantaged youth. He hopes through the RSA to meet others who share his belief in the value of oracy for young people and who are interested in supporting his project.

Make the most of your Fellowship

by connecting online and sharing your skills. Search the Fellowship at thersa.org/fellowship. While you're there, don't forget to update your own profile: thersa.org/my-rsa.

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linkedin.com/groups/3391

Where possible, Fellowship events have moved online; to find out more and connect with Fellows in our global community visit thersa.org/events/fellowship

Grow your idea through RSA Catalyst, which offers grants for Fellow-led and new or early-stage projects with a social goal.

■ To find out more, visit our online Project Support page: thersa.org/fellowship/project-support

Events



Catch up online

Leading public thinkers, innovators and changemakers take to the RSA Great Room and digital stage to share and debate the ideas, events and movements that are shaping the future of our societies, our economies and our world.

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📘 [facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial](https://www.facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial)



Regenerative futures: redesigning the human impact on earth

Accepting the 2021 Bicentenary Medal in recognition of his outstanding contributions to regenerative design, author and educator Dr Daniel Christian Wahl explores the role of design as a catalyst for the transition towards a future of diverse regenerative cultures everywhere.

■ *Watch now: <https://bit.ly/3HRSINC>
#RSAshutdown*

Urban wellbeing by design

What will it take for our cities to enable healthy, happy, more equitable lives for everyone? Health policy expert Layla McCay, Westminster City councillor Hamza Taouzzale, and Samantha Themini, RSA People and Place programme researcher, explore the principles and practice of designing and running cities with mental health at the forefront.

■ *Watch now: <https://bit.ly/3nghsl8>
#RSACities*

Online safety, platforms and the public square

William Perrin, Carnegie UK Trust, Chloe Colliver, ISD, Helen Burrows, BT Group, and Reema Patel, Ada Lovelace Institute, discuss the impact of the UK's new Online Safety Bill on services and platforms globally. Should we be concerned about the scale of the new powers it promises to government and regulators? Or does it not go far enough?

■ *Watch now: <https://bit.ly/3nj5Eil>
#RSAonlinesafety*

After shutdown, where next?

Exploring how Covid-19 ravaged the global economy and where it leaves us now, historian Adam Tooze of Columbia University in the US and political economist Helen Thompson of Cambridge University discuss how we can apply the lessons we have learned to future political and economic reforms and how these may be applied to our approach to environmental emergency.

■ *Watch now: <https://bit.ly/3HRSINC>
#RSAshutdown*



ENERGY INTO ACTION

We need swift and radical change in capabilities, innovation and investment to save the planet

by Mari Nishimura

As the global youth population swells and access to education improves, more young people are enrolling in formal education systems, driving their aspirations for the future in a way their grandparents could only dream of. These young people will be tomorrow's leaders; many are today's changemakers, already taking action locally, nationally and globally to respond to the challenges we face. According to the World Bank, there are 220 million students in tertiary education today, a staggering rise of 100 million compared with 2020; what jobs await them in five, 10 or 20 years, if at all?

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2022 there are 68 million people looking (and available) for work (ie, unemployed), a situation only exacerbated by the pandemic, which took a huge toll on global jobs particularly for young people, women and marginalised people. The ILO data shows that work hours lost in 2020 represent more than 250m full-time jobs. The pressure that the pandemic has put on educational and training institutions has already caused significant disruptions in learning at all levels, including the hiring of new graduates.

The planetary crisis

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1972. Over the last half century, the economy and human wellbeing have progressed substantially. Many people have been lifted out of extreme poverty and benefit from improved access to health systems and education, although there is still much work to be done. We are also facing new challenges, namely, the triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

Climate shocks forced 30 million to flee their home countries in 2020. Three times that number were displaced by war and violence. A 2021 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem services (IPBES) shows that 77% of our land (excluding Antarctica) and 87% of our oceans have been modified by human activities. Some 60% of wild animals have disappeared over the last 50 years with a million further species currently facing extinction, while 11m tonnes of plastic are poured into our oceans every year.

Many of these environmental crises are driven by patterns of unsustainable consumption and production to meet the demands of growing populations. According to Global Footprint Network, today more than 80% of the world's population lives in countries that are using more resources than the earth can regenerate. If we continue current consumption and production patterns, we will need three planets to sustain the lifestyles of an estimated 9.7 billion people by 2050.

Through Covid-19, the planet warned us to change our course; 60% of known and 75% of all emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic. Household consumption drives 72% of global greenhouse gas emissions and these human activities modify wildlife structure, resulting in new conditions that favour particular hosts, vectors and pathogens. Ecosystem integrity is the foundation of human health and development, and it requires us to rethink our relationship with nature, lowering the risk of future pandemics. This means transforming social and economic systems by investing in nature and greener economic activities. ▶

Mari Nishimura is a Programme Management Officer in the Executive Office of the United Nations Environment Programme, previously focused on SDG 12 and education

“Combined, young people’s sustainable lifestyle choices have an enormous positive impact on our economy, society and the environment”

Multiple studies show young people today would choose to work for a sustainable company for lower pay. The annual consumption power of Millennials currently sits around \$68bn (£50bn) while Generation Z accounts for roughly \$100bn (£74bn), equivalent to the annual cost of meeting the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, which targets clean drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Combined, young people’s sustainable lifestyle choices have an enormous positive impact on our economy, society and the environment.

The green transition

According to the ILO, transition to a green economy – moving from a linear economy to a circular economy – will not only reduce the burdens on our ecosystems but also add an estimated 60m new jobs to the market by 2030. In addition, nature-based solutions provide huge positive potential for creating green jobs. Ecosystem restoration generates an estimated \$7-\$30 (£5-£22) in benefits for every dollar invested. Nature-based solutions create between seven and 40 jobs per \$1m invested, which is 10 times the job creation rate of investments in fossil fuels. At COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, we saw the first concrete signs of a move towards ending coal and fossil fuel subsidies, hinting at the eventual obsolescence of fossil fuel dependent industries. All of this points to significant changes in job profiles, including in those that do not yet exist.

How will we prepare the future and current workforce with the necessary skills, knowledge and opportunities to meet the new demands made by a green economy? Even among those with jobs, nearly 1 billion workers globally are experiencing a skills mismatch, which means available jobs do not match their educational level. We need to be able to quickly respond to the ever-changing skills needs in society by ‘upskilling’ these workers. New 2021 guidance published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) identifies four key actions to make sure no one is left behind as we make this transition.

First, we need a *major change in mindset* that looks at every job through a green lens. ‘Green jobs’ go beyond just positions for solar power engineers, or other roles typically linked to sustainability. Any job that involves decisions about how and which resources to consume can be a green job, from simple choices such as ordering office supplies to choosing energy sources and designing products. Many people

will be able to remain in their current roles but will need to reskill and/or upskill, in order to work in a more sustainable way. Jobs such as these are key to ecosystem restoration, economic growth and poverty reduction and are increasing faster than other types of jobs, meaning every country is well suited to benefit from green jobs.

Second, we need to *update education* to ensure a stronger supply of necessary green and environmental sustainability professionals. To do so requires curriculum changes, skills gap identification, and making connections with the demand side of the job market. This includes guidance on increasing job placement of students, improving the quality of curricula to meet career pathway and employer needs, connecting students to practitioners for applied projects/research, and enhancing green entrepreneurship. Students can then bring their sustainability literacy to any job to help create a greener economy, acting as green intrapreneurs for organisational change.

On this point, it is important to note that, to be successful at greening a company, students must be able to understand how to assess the organisation’s formal and informal power structure as well as its products and processes, identifying opportunities for greener practices and building the coalition of support necessary to create changes. To achieve this, students must first be exposed to systems thinking and effective change management approaches. Educating young people for an inclusive and green economy enables them to apply this knowledge not only to their professions but also to their roles as consumers, voters, community members and investors.

Third, we must *strengthen cross-sector collaborations*. The education sector will gain from working closely with businesses, governments, local communities, and non-profit organisations and associations, because co-creating the vision for a green economy has the potential to produce necessary financing, policies, market demand, training and education for the new and existing workforce. According to an August 2017 UN Secretary General report on human resources development for the 21st century, “closer collaboration will also be required across government ministries in order to devise integrated strategies encompassing public policies in the areas of education, youth, industrialisation and rural development.”



Lastly, *governments must assess which sectors are driving positive environmental impacts* in respective countries. Some of the jobs with significant positive environmental impacts are within the energy, agribusiness and digital innovation sectors. A 2021 UNEP report on green youth skills explored how technologies are changing, and how a circular economy might change the type of jobs that are available.

ILO research from 2018 shows the energy sector accounts for the largest share of current and future green jobs, especially the infrastructure and renewable energy sectors. For instance, the renewable energy sector employed 11.5 million people in 2019. With added investment, jobs in renewables could reach 42m by 2050, with another 21.3m jobs in energy efficiency and 14.5m people in jobs related to power grids and energy flexibility. In the meantime, the study estimates, only two industries will experience losses of more than 1m jobs, namely petroleum refining and extraction of crude petroleum.

Adoption of sustainable management practices in agriculture, forestry and fisheries will account for 362m-630m job gains by 2050, according to figures from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The world's population is expected to increase by 2 billion people in the next 28 years, from 7.9 billion currently to 9.7 billion in 2050. How are we going to feed everyone? Over a quarter of

available land is used for cattle grazing and 33% of arable land is used for feeding livestock, per FAO figures. Although crucial to reaching the goal of sustainable development, organic farming, sustainable agriculture and green food manufacturing are more labour intensive than conventional production.

As well as sustainable procurement policy, the use of climate-smart technology will help agribusiness and fisheries to ensure that the entire value chain becomes more innovative and sustainable. Indeed, the ILO's *World Employment and Social Outlook* highlights the need for new business models, digital literacy and technological innovations to respond to the continued rise of the digital labour platforms and economies.

The Sustainable Development Goals

All aspects of the green economy and just transition are interrelated with sustainability challenges, and therefore to the UN's 17 SDGs, which are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all UN member states in 2015. Correspondingly, green jobs have several direct and indirect connections with these goals.

For example, SDG 4 supports the promotion of green jobs through its dedicated targets such as the promotion of technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, which will ensure that the knowledge and skills ▶

“The integration of gender equality into economic and social policies is a fundamental requirement for sustainable development”



acquired promote sustainable industries. SDG 7 has specific targets to promote renewable energy and energy efficiency, along with improved energy access, expanded infrastructure and upgraded technology; these are also the main sectors involved in our move towards a greener economy and therefore opportunities for green jobs.

In addition to committing to entrepreneurship and to the creation of decent jobs for all, SDG 8 supports green jobs with its focus on improving global resource efficiency in consumption and production. Making cities and communities more sustainable (SDG 11) encompasses multiple aspects, such as sustainable transport systems, sustainable urbanization and management, and implementation of policies on resource efficiency, climate action and resiliency, which are all opportunities for green jobs. SDG 12 has core aims of sustainable production and consumption; green jobs will also have the expected outcome of improving raw materials efficiency and eliminating waste and pollution. Finally, green jobs are concerned with the impact of climate action while promoting adaptation and mitigation strategies. SDG 13 focuses on climate action and has targets to support these connections, including capacity and awareness raising.

Shifting systems

There is a vast gap in climate financing. A radical transformation of the financial system is needed to achieve low-carbon, sustainable development for a greener world. Shifting investment towards sustainable solutions through science and innovation in developing

countries is key to ensuring the achievement of SDGs by 2030 and a carbon-neutral world by 2050, while also bending the curve on biodiversity loss and curbing pollution and waste. Governments should incorporate natural capital accounting into decision-making and incentivise business to do the same, for instance through carbon pricing, phasing out of harmful subsidies, shifting taxation to resource use and waste, and reforming fossil fuel subsidies. We also need a global commitment within the next two years to put half of all climate finance towards adaptation.

Yet, despite more than 130 countries having pledged to reach net zero by 2050 at COP26 in Glasgow, recent analysis revealed commercial banks and investors channelled \$1.5tn (£1.1tn) to the coal industry between January 2019 and November 2021, positioning themselves as the world's worst climate offenders. In addition, world military spending rose to almost \$2tn (£1.5tn) in 2020, pushed by the economic downturn, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Almost three-quarters of nations have some adaptation plans in place, but financing and implementation fall far short of what is needed. Annual adaptation costs in developing countries are estimated at \$70bn (£51.5bn). This figure is expected to reach \$40bn-\$300bn (£29.5bn-£220.8) in 2030 and \$280bn-\$500bn (£206bn-£368bn) in 2050. However, in the absence of improving absorptive capacity, it would be more effective to focus primarily on the policy and institutional environment in forming strategies to realise the plans than in raising more funds. A sound policy framework and governance are prerequisites for

optimising the sustainability of investments in tackling climate change and building the green economy as well as society.

Lastly, the integration of gender equality into economic and social policies is a fundamental requirement for sustainable development. Although progress in achieving gender parity in the workplace has been seen, women are still more likely than men to have jobs that are vulnerable, insecure, lower paid and less formal. In addition, women are disproportionately affected by climate change, as it affects the poor and most vulnerable, among which a majority are women. According to 2015 figures published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), women tend to have the knowledge and understanding of what is needed to adapt to changing environmental conditions and to come up with practical climate change adaptation and mitigation solutions. Additionally, in 2011 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and World Bank confirmed that putting more income in the hands of women translates into beneficial results for general human development, as women tend to invest more in children's nutrition, health and education. Therefore, addressing gender imbalance in defining economic and social targets and integrating gender equality into green economic policies allows for fairer distribution of opportunities and wealth to the country's population and its economy. The gender pay gap and access to finance, lands, political and economic participation, and education correlate with nations' long-term competitiveness in the green economy.

Green skills future

Young people today are more informed and outspoken about environmental issues than ever. Increasingly they are using their voices and turning this energy into action, becoming changemakers. They are doing what we all should be doing, which is recognising that every lifestyle decision counts, whether choosing to recycle their old phones or deciding on the food they buy or how they travel. Rethinking how we consume directly affects the economies and global resource use of our countries, and therefore ecosystems and the climate.

We should be teaching young people not only the importance of voting at the ballot box, but with their finances. Most of our money is not sitting in the bank but is invested elsewhere, often without us knowing where. By choosing ethical banks and insurance companies, we can accelerate the move away from brown industries, thus creating more green jobs. In addition, by voting for leaders who value green policies, we contribute to building a greener society.

More young people will also set up their own green businesses; many of the jobs necessary for an inclusive and green economy do not yet exist but can be created by green entrepreneurs. Such entrepreneurs have already created many career pathways such as energy managers and energy auditors, solar photovoltaic manufacturers, clean cooking stove providers and carbon offset retailers, to name just a few.

But even though young people may own the future, they are not supposed to own the planetary crisis. Policymakers, businesses, educators, communities and parents are responsible for laying the foundation and environment for young people to fulfil their potential and aspirations towards a sustainable future. It is up to all of us to put in place the systems and infrastructure to support the teaching of green skills and their anchoring into existing and new economies. Many, many more future green jobs are out there just waiting to be invented. ■

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Environment Programme.

RSA Fellowship in action

The Women's Tour-Guide Academy

A £10,000 RSA Catalyst Scaling Grant has been awarded to Alessandra Alonso FRSA to establish the Women's Tour-Guide Academy, a global training programme that aims to address the grave effects of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic on women's employment within the tourism industry.

Alessandra is the founder and managing director of Women in Travel, a social enterprise providing women with access to training, mentoring and employment within the travel industry.

While the Academy aims to provide good work opportunities to all women, in line with the RSA's Good Work Programme, it will focus on those who live complex lives which may not allow for permanent or full-time employment. Women make up most of the employees in the accommodation, food and retail sectors, and many were furloughed during the pandemic, experiencing borderline poverty and/or poor mental health. The Academy will create a path to entry – or re-entry – into the sector using a three-pillared approach that combines learning, mentoring and community support, providing women with necessary training, a wide network of support and job opportunities.

The Catalyst Scaling Grant will fund the creation of an online platform consisting initially of five digital training modules. Mentoring will take place virtually, and in its first year the Academy will aim to train up to 50 women, with an anticipated one-to-one ratio of paying and non-paying candidates.

■ To find out more, visit womenintravelcic.com

“We cannot sit back and accept that 260 million children don’t get to go to school”

Sarah Brown, Chair of Theirworld and Executive Chair of the Global Business Coalition for Education, is interviewed by Rachel O’Brien

🐦 @SarahBrownUK @racobrien

Rachel O’Brien: Thanks for agreeing to talk to us about the work you do through the global children’s charity Theirworld, which you were part of setting up in 2002. How did this come about?

Sarah Brown: My background was in health campaigning and, in particular, maternal health campaigns. Initially, the charity had a UK focus, looking at ‘community-up’ lessons to improve children’s lives. Health and education were the obvious starting points and we started with science-based evidence on what gives children the best start in life. But we were equally interested in ideas that might come from teachers, midwives, nurses or community workers and where they might pitch for funding for a project they thought would improve people’s lives.

For the first eight to 10 years, we were funding really interesting small projects where we could measure impact and assessment, scaling some up. Around 2010 we made a gear change to do more international work. The biggest barrier to meeting health and nutrition goals – even social justice goals – for children around the world, is lack of access to quality education and the lack of opportunity, particularly for girls, to be able to stay in school and thrive. It was here that we could leverage our youth campaigning networks and the knowledge and experience of community projects to talk to people at the very top international

decision-making levels about what would make the greatest difference.

We used our campaigning expertise and found ways to collaborate, bringing in other non-governmental organisations who had an interest in education, improving the impact of our ask. This included coordinating a petition of 11M signatures and drawing on various well-known people and organisations who would stand alongside the petition when it was presented to the UN Secretary General. The outcome was a new fund to finance education for children in emergencies. Until then, if a child was a refugee, there was no education opportunity for them because, historically, being a refugee was a short-term problem, so the emphasis was on obtaining shelter and accommodation, emergency medical care and food. But people were staying as refugees for so much longer, sometimes for many of their childhood years. As we learn more about the impact of trauma on mental health, we understand that very quickly putting in stability, and something that’s a bit more familiar and structured around learning, gives you an opportunity to also offer trauma support. We worked to change the environment in order to quickly provide education in emergencies.

The second thing that really stands out is the work we’ve done on the refugee crisis sparked by the long-running Syrian war. In 2013, more than 500,000 school-aged Syrian refugee children were living in ▶

Sarah Brown
is Chair of
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Business Coalition
for Education



“As soon as we disrupt our own society and have to keep children away from school, we find it’s not just the maths and English that children are missing out on, but so much more”



Lebanon and very few were in school. The proposal that we put into action was the double-shift schools solution, so that when a country suddenly needed to host a large number of children, they could provide education very quickly and at a reasonable cost. They would simply run a school with two shifts to accommodate all the children. That’s something that may feel obvious now, but we drove that through.

We also created a cohort of Global Youth Ambassadors. Our programme, which runs for two years, currently includes nearly 2,000 ambassadors between the ages of 18 and 30 from 90 countries. These young people want to do something that has a wider impact and contribute to a global campaign effort, but they also learn skills from us to take forward into their own activism within their communities or, more broadly, within their own countries. This work was followed up at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Turkey and out of it grew the Education Cannot Wait fund, a multibillion-dollar global education fund within the UN to support children who have been forced to flee their homes.

O’Brien: Obviously the last two years must have been exceptional. In general, do you still feel a sense of progress, or does it feel exhausting to see things fall back?

Brown: The pandemic makes everything so much harder. It’s now clear that well over 90% of children around the world lost education, who will now need catching up. When Covid-19 struck, we reacted swiftly. In Lebanon, the double impact of Covid-19 and the country’s economic crisis meant children with special educational needs were hit hard by a lack of learning

and therapy sessions. We supported the SKILD Center in Mount Lebanon creating short videos featuring activities to enhance children’s emotional, cognitive, motor and speech abilities. The project exceeded all expectations, and the digital lessons and support were accessed more than 400,000 times.

We face a world where half of young people by 2030 won’t have the skills for employment or be able to generate their own income. We’ve had very, very poor investment in early years. Funding is being cut and international development budgets are being slashed, while politicians are shrugging their shoulders and going ‘well, there’s only so much we can do’.

When you’re in the middle of change, you sometimes feel like things aren’t progressing at all. But then you look back five or 10 years, and huge progress has been made, in that education is higher up in visibility and political support for understanding why it’s so essential for future skills. There is also growing recognition of the importance of early childhood development and the difference that can be made when a child starts school and can continue, not just for their education, but for their health and the wider planet. I see progress through the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals being set at country levels with the cooperation of corporations and philanthropists, and a much greater understanding in civil society about what is needed.

O’Brien: Do you get impatient about the UK agenda, especially because we’re incredibly lucky when compared to many of the nations you talk about?

Brown: I’ve never been patient in my life! What I’ve noticed in the UK, which reinforces the case that we

make globally, is that the issues that came up during the pandemic were around children's time with each other socially, around nutrition and holiday hunger, around the impact of school closures on communities. It proves the case again, that where you're able to provide education and educational spaces, you're also providing a nutritious meal, you're providing socialisation, you're providing ways to citizenship. These are things that we know, theoretically, but we sometimes pretend we don't need to worry about in other parts of the world. As soon as we disrupt our own society and have to keep children away from school, we find it's not just the maths and English that children are missing out on, but so much more.

O'Brien: Every nation is different, but do you think there is a broad acceptance that economic and development progress absolutely relies on parity in girls' education?

Brown: There's a very strong move for it and all the evidence stacks up behind it. Where you invest in girls, you're investing in them, their family, their community and their wider society. When a mother can read, her children are 50% more likely to live past the age of five, twice as likely to attend school, 50% more likely to be immunised. In too many parts of the world, girls have been historically left out of schooling. No one is suggesting that you invest in girls at the expense of boys, but there is equal evidence to show that investment in girls will have a greater yield and that every time you invest in a girl's schooling her earnings are going to increase. We know now that education can transform the entire quality of life for that young woman.

Young people are having these conversations and have such a strong connection with each other through social media and technology, which is leading to greater global integration. All of those conversations about what gets taught and how are really, really vital, and young people are quite remarkable in the way they're driving the demand for inclusion of diverse histories, culture and life choices.

O'Brien: In 2012, Theirworld founded the Global Business Coalition for Education, which has a membership of over 100 private sector companies. What is driving that support?

Brown: We started the Global Business Coalition for Education because we'd seen a version of it in health that was a really strong and vital force within the world of funding for global health projects.

The advent of the Global Health Fund made such a difference right away with HIV/AIDS and malaria, and later with crises such as Ebola. We wanted something similar for education so created it ourselves with the support from the GBCHealth people, who gave us their playbook to set it up. It's been a really interesting journey because we're bringing in a lot of big peer global PLCs from around the world, and each of these big companies has its own approach. Some of them are doing the work directly as companies, some of them through their own charitable foundations. While 'youth skills' is certainly a theme for a lot of them, others are focused on where education and environment intersect, or early childhood education, or around play and play development and mental health issues. Regardless of differences, though, you find a deep commitment from companies now, particularly as they start to integrate environmental, social and governance metrics into their work

O'Brien: What do you think are the biggest threats within the area you're working on?

Brown: What always troubles me are the big global meetings. We've seen what happened with the G7 or with COP26. While there is some progress, everyone walks away from it saying, 'we didn't do enough' or 'there's a target set', and then targets are not met. At Theirworld, it is our job to work with projects and communities around the world to see how the targets for education can be met.

We must be more ambitious about the funding; we cannot sit back and accept that 260 million children don't get to go to school. We have a growing crisis in Afghanistan for girls' education, a war in Syria that's still not ending, different consequences in different parts of Africa if availability of Covid-19 vaccines isn't expanded. But it does feel like there's a sense of urgency and there has been a huge amount of work done on innovative ways to finance education with some phenomenal opportunities in 2022. In September, the UN will look at this very specifically at its Transforming Education Summit, and we've also got the World Education Forum in May. There's a growing acknowledgement that you can put a certain amount of money into the pot, but you're going to have to use government guarantees to leverage that money so that we've got enough financing. We need to stop mucking about and properly unlock the political will to finance education to the level that's really needed. ■

■ *To find out more about Theirworld, visit www.theirworld.org*

ALL FOR ONE

Nearly two years into the pandemic we have failed to address vaccine inequality

by Aisha Abdool Karim

🐦 @A_AbdoolKarim

As we reach the beginning of year three of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have swapped the fantasy of returning to the lives we once knew for a more practical dream: to contain the virus enough so that people can return to their pre-pandemic activities.

This new goal is reachable and the key – vaccines – was already available less than a year after the pandemic started. Yet we are falling short on this new game plan, not due to a lack of scientific know-how, but because not all countries are playing fair.

In year one of this pandemic, it hardly seemed imaginable that vaccines would be ready within a few months, but scientists leveraged decades' worth of research to make this possible. By December 2020, the first jabs were going into people's arms. The problem was that not all arms were treated equally.

Countries like the US and the UK swooped in early and poured resources and money into making vaccines, then claimed the front spots in the queue. Meanwhile, other countries without similar levels of disposable income were left at the back of the line. This has in large part left poorer countries, particularly those on the African continent, at a disadvantage.

What has not changed throughout the pandemic is that no one is safe until everyone is safe. Vaccine inequity remains our greatest challenge and until it is addressed there is no chance of finding that new normal. Like it or not, we are all connected.

Where are the world's Covid-19 vaccines?

Around 10bn Covid-19 vaccines had been distributed globally by January 2022, according to vaccine tracker Our World in Data. Yet, according to a December 2021 report from the African regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO), fewer than one in 10 people in lower-income countries had received a shot, only 3% of global doses had gone to African countries and immunisation rates in richer countries were almost eight times higher than those on the continent.

The vaccine landscape has changed drastically over the past year. While there was once a shortage of available doses overall, that is no longer the case. Manufacturers have proved they can keep up with high demand. The COVID Global Accountability Platform reported that around 11bn vaccines were made by the end of 2021. That was enough doses to immunise 40% of the global population, a goal set out by WHO. The secondary WHO target of reaching 70% of the world's population could also be reached by mid-2022 based solely on production numbers, which are expected to double over the course of the year.

While vaccines are not able to (nor intended to) provide 100% immunity, several candidates have proved to provide strong protection against severe Covid-19. The different vaccines vary in efficacy ▶

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when it comes to the level of protection provided. In December 2020 Pfizer-BioNTech was one of the first to publish data showing that two doses of its vaccine offered 95% protection, meaning those that received the vaccine were 95% less likely to be infected by the virus than those who did not.

Vaccine strategies around the world seek to curb the deadly toll of this virus and help ease the pressure on healthcare facilities. Doses are (ideally) diverted to the most vulnerable first, such as the elderly or people with weakened immune systems, and then to the broader population. But, when some countries stockpile jabs, it becomes impossible to ensure sufficient protection for all those who need it around the world. This problem has only grown starker as new forms of the virus pop up.

A pandemic gamechanger: new variants

In the roll-out rumble playing out across the world, it is no longer enough for a country to immunise only its own population. Instead, it has become a competition for who can get the most shots into the most individuals in the fight for ultimate protection. While African countries lag behind in achieving at least one shot per person, countries like Israel are already offering some citizens a fourth dose. A sense of self-preservation has become more prevalent over the past year due to the rise of variants.

All viruses undergo changes over time called mutations. Most are insignificant, but occasionally they drastically alter the bug's behaviour. After nearly a year of minor changes and slight alterations, suddenly there were structural shifts to the virus that put researchers on alert. On 18 December 2020, WHO dubbed the first two variants of concern Alpha and Beta. They were identified in the UK and South Africa, respectively. As the names suggest, these versions of the virus had certain advantages that let them outcompete others. In the case of Alpha, it was able to spread very efficiently from person to person, whereas Beta arrived with excellent outmanoeuvring skills that allowed it to evade the body's natural defences. These were by no means the last variants to emerge.

Less than one year after their discovery, a new variant appeared on the scene: Omicron. This is the fifth variant of concern to be identified. It is also one of the most concerning because it is the most mutated form of the virus that has been seen to date, with over 50 changes to its structure, many of which occur at a key point where the virus attaches to human cells. What that means is this variant shares many advantages of its predecessors – such as the ability

to spread quickly and evade some levels of natural protection – with much more left to learn about the consequences to humans of the other changes.

To date, Omicron is perhaps the most worrisome of the variants simply because of the level of unknowns. What we do know is that, once it enters a country, it can very quickly dominate infections and displace other variants in a setting. It is also able to dodge some of the defences of the immune system. This makes people more vulnerable to reinfection and reduces, at least in part, how much protection a vaccine can offer. Why? Because vaccines were designed to target specific aspects of the original virus. For example, one of the easiest structures for the vaccine to attack is the spike protein, which sits on the surface of the germ and is the point at which it attaches to human cells and infects someone. Changes to this area, as seen in variants of concern, means that vaccines are not able to fight off the virus as efficiently.

For instance, the Pfizer-BioNTech jab showed a drop to 70% protection against Covid-19 caused by the Omicron variant, according to data published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in December 2021. Two doses of the vaccine, however, still proved to be 93% effective against hospitalisation in Omicron cases. The company's own research found that receiving a third booster shot would help bolster the body's immune response and restore protection against Omicron infection 2.5-fold.

The continued existence of variants, especially those that have the potential to reduce how well vaccines work, has driven demand for yet more doses as countries begin to pursue booster shots, not just for elderly people or those most vulnerable to severe disease, but for entire adult populations.

The case for equitable vaccine distribution and uptake

Hoarding shots to use as boosters for an already largely vaccinated population is not the solution because, put simply, a virus that spreads is a virus that mutates.

The more Covid-19 remains uncontrolled in parts of the world, the more likely that variants will continue to develop. "This virus does not respect borders," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in February 2020, a statement which has only become clearer as variants spread across countries. As long as countries choose to serve their own (short-term) interests and leave others behind, the pandemic will not end. As long as people remain vulnerable and the virus is given room to run wild in any part of the globe, it will continue to spread elsewhere.



“As long as countries choose to serve their own (short-term) interests and leave others behind, the pandemic will not end”

Rectifying this requires looking beyond our own populations at the bigger pandemic picture. For countries with excess doses, this means sharing supplies rather than opting for triple or quadruple protection of their own populations. Countries with sufficient vaccines must also make a concerted effort to address vaccine hesitancy and increase uptake of the jabs. Education is a critical component of this effort.

Combating misinformation and getting people on board with immunisation means treating holdouts with empathy and engaging with communities beforehand to find out what information they need to be comfortable receiving the vaccine.

In lower-income countries, the struggle has not been with an unwillingness to take up the vaccine, but its unavailability. That lower-income countries would be left behind was a worry even before working vaccines became available. The proposed solution was an initiative called COVAX, a partnership between WHO, GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. COVAX aimed to provide 2bn doses to 190 countries by the end of 2021, with 92 low-income countries being provided with shots at no cost. The pricing structure was set up so that richer countries would buy in at a higher price to subsidise the lower cost for less wealthy countries.

Unfortunately, this goal was not met. COVAX struggled to get access to doses early on because

richer countries had engaged in their own bilateral deals with manufacturers and had done so in excess. Since manufacturing companies had to honour their agreements with these countries first, COVAX deliveries were delayed. Ultimately, COVAX only hit half of its original goal, delivering 1bn doses by 16 January 2022. WHO highlighted this hoarding and noted that secrecy from pharmaceutical companies and a refusal to share the knowledge surrounding vaccine development hindered access to supply.

But there is hope: individual governments and countries have the power to change this. Many countries have already made commitments to donate their surplus doses to COVAX in hopes of rectifying the inequity they helped create. In September 2021, the US pledged to donate approximately 1.2bn doses to COVAX; it delivered 400mn of these in January 2022. Canada, the UK and Germany have agreed to donate millions of doses. If the remaining donations do arrive in 2022 as promised, this should help alleviate the supply constraints COVAX has faced.

There are more than enough vaccines, but fixing the inequity issues of the past year means more buy-in from everyone. Richer countries need to relinquish their nationalistic tendencies and move towards sharing shots. Globally, everyone needs to work towards ensuring that uptake does not wane over time. Pandemics impact everyone and require a truly collaborative effort. ■

WORK SHIFT

The pandemic kick-started new ways of thinking around employment

by Alan Lockey
 🐦 @Modern_Lockey

As the Covid-19 pandemic enters its third year, it is time to take stock of the wild and wonderful predictions about work that greeted its arrival. Remote work? Here to stay, albeit most likely via the hybrid ‘home and office’ compromise for those who can. An acceleration in the use of digital services? Yep, RSA research last year found the proportion of retail transactions conducted online grew as much in the first five months of the pandemic as it did in the previous five years. A change in our collective values towards the purpose of work? Perhaps. Certainly, for those able to work from home, survey evidence routinely suggests an increased demand for work that better supports their wellbeing, flexibility and work-life balance.

However, arguably the most consistent prediction about work from the pandemic’s early phase has proven to be categorically wrong. Because for all the undoubted economic pain many businesses have endured, what we have not seen – at least in the UK – is a return to the mass unemployment that accompanied recessions in the 1980s or 1990s. Indeed, according to the Office for National Statistics, Britain’s labour market is showing remarkable signs of rude health. Both employment and unemployment levels are only fractionally worse than their pre-pandemic levels, which is astonishing considering the UK entered the crisis with record highs and lows, respectively.

Furthermore, we also currently enjoy record levels of job vacancies. Yes, there may be a small data lag and the recent Omicron wave could yet dampen spirits. But this is still nothing like the scenario envisaged at the beginning of the pandemic.

What explains this yawning chasm between expectation and economic reality? As ever, there are a number of competing hypotheses, but central to all is an acknowledgement of the extraordinary success of the government’s Coronavirus Job Retention policy. Even in the long-view history of Britain’s welfare state, it is hard to imagine a policy as huge or as effective as ‘furlough’. At its peak, nearly 9 million workers – over a quarter of the entire workforce – were paid 80% of their wages by the state explicitly not to work. To put it mildly, this did not come cheap. But as we look at the robust state of the employment picture today it is hard to argue against a verdict of ‘job done’.

The question now is what comes next. After all, it does not seem unreasonable to think a policy of such magnitude could shift attitudes towards work, welfare and society. There are some early signs that it might. In the latest data from the British Social Attitudes survey, the number of people who say benefits are “too low” now clearly outnumbers those who say they are “too high” for the first time since the turn of the millennium. Equally, recent analysis of the Labour

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 Programme for the
 Future of Work



Force survey carried out by *The New Statesman* magazine found that the much talked about ‘great resignation’ phenomenon is more prevalent in lower-paid occupations such as “retail and customer service workers, bar and wait staff, agricultural labourers, machine operatives and cleaners”. In other words, in Britain, the exodus from the labour market is much more a story about material terms and conditions in hard-pressed, pandemic-hit sectors than it is about anti-work, passion-project-seeking professionals.

From this data it seems reasonable to ask two further questions. One, might the experience of furlough and the pandemic have driven this collective reappraisal? And two, if so, what are the opportunities for good work?

The RSA has long argued that part of the appeal of a more generous safety net is that it allows people to say no to bad terms and conditions. Moreover, if we provide people with the security to view labour market and lifelong learning opportunities with an increased element of choice, it could be beneficial for both individual aspiration and long-term productivity.

In France, working alongside our partners Bayes Impact and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, we are testing a digital coaching platform that seeks to support low-paid young workers towards better opportunities. Our hope is that a Jobcentre

Plus reimagined more along these ‘active labour market’ lines – with a focus on supporting people into better work, not just any work – would be both good for workers and help provide the institutional coordinating glue that has long been missing from our lifelong learning systems.

Sadly, rather than explore the lessons from its own outstanding policy success, the government seems intent on returning to the pre-pandemic world of punitive welfare conditionality. In January, it announced a reduction from three months to four weeks in the amount of sanction-free time people who are unemployed and claiming Universal Credit have to find work in their chosen field. This is a retrograde step on its own terms, but it also misses the central lesson of pandemic statecraft: it is not enough to think only about how we make the state efficient; we also must consider how to make it resilient to unexpected shocks. Welfare states must now help people adapt to changing circumstances quickly, not tell people to ‘stay in their lane’ at all costs.

From climate change to automation and rising economic insecurity, such shocks seem scarily present in our expectations of the future. To flourish despite them, we will need institutions that find new ways to protect insecure citizens. The RSA remains at the vanguard of trying to create them. ■





LEARN, UNLEARN, RELEARN

by Tom Kenyon
🐦 @MrTKenyon

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

Tom Kenyon is the RSA's City of Learning programme lead

The American businessman and futurist Alvin Toffler made this prediction more than 50 years ago. What he predicted in his 1970 book, *Future Shock*, was that the challenges ahead could not be met by a linear approach to learning and skills. To meet the radical changes of the future, our own learning must be ready to respond and adapt as our economies, industries and societies face disruption.

Since joining the RSA's Cities of Learning programme I have been invited on several occasions to think, talk and write about the 'future of skills'. As economic, climate and societal challenges loom large on our horizon, there is a growing and legitimate interest in what skills the UK economy and society might need in the coming decades. Unfortunately, I have found more interest in identifying what these skills are than in meeting the challenge of how we teach them, both to young people entering the workforce and to older people who need retraining. Only on vanishingly rare occasions is the question asked of how to conduct this skilling, reskilling or upskilling without further entrenching structural inequalities.

The problem with this approach is that the future of skills is a moving target. One that our systems, even operating at their peak, are too slow to hit. We cannot even keep up with the skills needs of the present.

According to research from the UK Tech Cluster, there are more than 100,000 tech jobs advertised ▶

every month and a World Skills/Learning and Work Institute report suggests we are heading for a “digital skills shortage disaster”. This is not a future skills problem.

We actually have no idea what the future of digital skills looks like. We do not know if coding, as we see it now, will still be needed in 10 years time as low code and no code solutions flood the marketplace. We do not know if the metaverse will take off like the appstore did and whether we need to develop 3D skills and entirely new user interfaces. We do not know if data harvesting, extractive business models that fund the industry at scale, will survive. What we do know is that, whatever the next big shift in the means of digital production turns out to be, another one will be coming just five years behind.

Shorter skills lifecycles and longer lives

Our learning systems are built on a model that expects most people to conclude their formal education by the age of 21. But the notion of a ‘complete’ education is a fallacy left over from an era when one person could learn a skill and have one job for life. This is no longer sustainable for at least three reasons.

First, the skills we need are changing more rapidly. We know the automation revolution is coming and that others will follow. As we enter what the analyst entrepreneur (and RSA Fellow) Azeem Azhar calls the exponential age, radical disruptions in technology and society will come faster and faster.

Second, the time we spend in single jobs is falling. A job for life is a thing of the past. The average person will have at least 12 jobs in their lifetime with an average of three years per job. It is harder to rely on union-provided or on-the-job training for skills development in a role when that job changes so regularly. In some working patterns – for example, gig working – there is no training and development at all.

Third, the duration of our working life is increasing. Retirement age will increase to 68 in 2046. A longer working life will mean even more jobs, even more change, making the idea that an education completed in childhood or early adulthood will sustain a life’s work seem even more outlandish.

What this means is that our learning systems should be planning not just for lifelong access to courses, but for a lifetime of learning and learning and learning again. Unfortunately, we have spent 20 years going in the wrong direction. Adult learning has suffered from two decades of degradation. Public spending on adult learning was cut by 50% between 2010 and 2020; during the same period, participation fell to its lowest level in two decades.

A regenerative approach to skills is not possible without high participation in learning. The danger is that, as skills lifecycles shorten, those who are not learning will be left behind and the disadvantage gap will widen. This is already happening. Fewer than half of adults in lower socio-economic groups have engaged in any learning in the last three years. Adults who left school at 16 or younger are less than half as likely to engage in learning as those who left education at 21.

The people most likely to participate in adult learning already have degrees. Participants without degrees mostly have full-time jobs. This reflects two truths. One, that if you have successfully learned something difficult before, that confidence helps immeasurably with learning again. Two, that learning requires time, structure and support; for many people, this is found in a work environment.

The question that keeps me up at night is not how we retrain graduates and those employed full time; almost by definition, the education system already works for them. The types of challenges that bother me are how we convince a person who has not thrived at school, and who associates learning with failure and pain, to risk learning something new, or what kind of help is needed by the single mother with a part-time job to find reliable, affordable childcare that allows her the time and space to learn new skills (and not feel guilty while doing so).

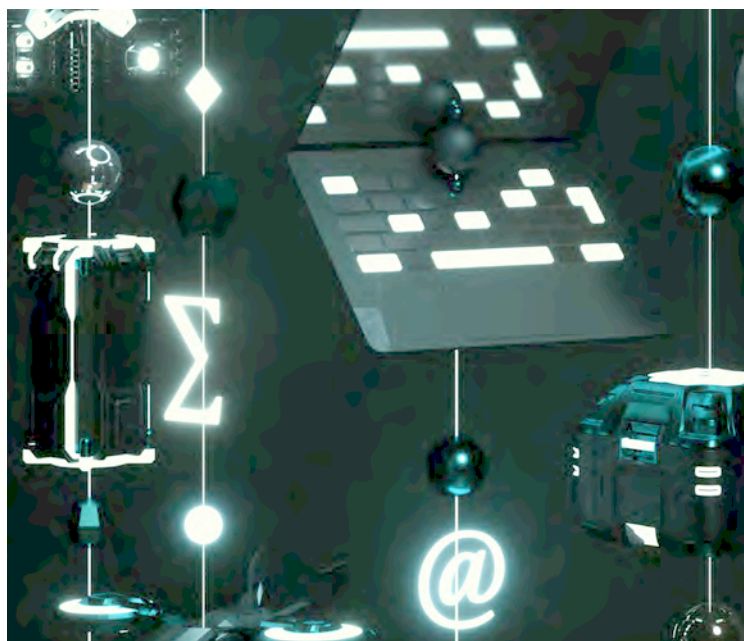
If there is any hope for a levelling up agenda and developing industries to benefit the people who have not already thrived in school and the workplace, then we must urgently act to understand the needs of these people and design policies that are not only inclusive, but inviting. That means putting their needs first.

Rebalancing skills policy

The research on successful adult learning strategies is consistent. It requires visibility, access and recognition. People must be able to see the opportunities for learning and how that relates to their circumstances. They must be able to access learning opportunities close to home and be able to receive meaningful recognition for their efforts in a format that values learning wherever it happens.

Lifelong learning strategies in Korea and Singapore use flexible, government-recognised, skills accreditations to recognise and champion even the smallest increments of learning. Credentials can be earned in work and non-formal contexts, including formal recognition of ‘intangible cultural properties’ (a knowledge or skill considered part of a place’s cultural heritage including crafts and performing arts).

Skills, learning and employability policymakers



“The danger is that, as skills lifecycles shorten, those who are not learning will be left behind and the disadvantage gap will widen. This is already happening”

often talk about being driven by ‘demand side’ needs. The demand they are talking about is the demand for skills from employers. Supply comes from learning providers and institutions. Demand from learners is not a consideration. I have never been asked to convene a group of local people to discuss what they would most like to learn, what skills they feel they lack and how they would like to apply those in a local context.

The government’s recent Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, which developed out of the Skills for Jobs white paper, makes this ‘demand side’ approach explicit. The bill promises “landmark reforms that will realign the post-16 education system around the needs of employers so that people are trained for the skills gaps that exist now, and in the future.”

The bill is welcome. Lifelong learning needs investment, and this is the first it has seen in a very long time. There is much to applaud, from an increased focus on localised learning strategies to a recognition that higher-level qualifications can be built from modular courses. But the bill only promises funding equivalent to one-third of the amount cut from lifelong learning in the previous decade. It entrenches the idea that there is a linear model of skills progression that will meet the needs of industry. It perpetuates the myth of worthy learning (for example, formal STEM-based skills) and wasteful learning (for example, the arts, humanities and languages) while ignoring the need for

foundational skills and literacies to access the courses it promotes.

This is what happens when you design learning provision to support business but ignore the needs of learners. For example, the lifetime skills guarantee does not guarantee lifetime access to skills training, but free access to 400 government-approved Level 3 courses. Only learners who do not already have a Level 3 (A-level or equivalent) qualification can access the funded courses. Those people who struggle with literacy, numeracy or digital access cannot access the training they would need to access the Level 3 qualifications. This is not a ‘lifetime skills guarantee’ but a one-time skills top-up.

My hope is that as the new education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, settles into his role, he will draw from his experience rolling out the vaccine programme and understand that ensuring supply (whether of learning opportunities or vaccines) is very different from ensuring take-up. That said, some of the things that helped widespread take-up of the vaccine programme succeed could also be applied to learning: clear, consistent messaging about the value of participation; hyper-local access built on existing infrastructure; strong ‘social proof’ for participation; and visibility, access and recognition.

Towards a regenerative learning cycle

Taking a regenerative approach to skills means accepting that our learning is never complete, but ▶



“Taking a regenerative approach to skills means accepting that our learning is never complete, but is part of a cycle”

is part of a cycle. Over a lifetime we will work to develop skills, many of which will become obsolete over time, and then we must begin the process again. But every time we learn something new, our ability to learn more, to regenerate, is strengthened.

The first step on this cycle is simply learning, which we must embed a culture of throughout life. According to the 2014 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development brief *Education Indicators in Focus*, “learning begets learning”; the more engaged people are, the more they identify as being capable of learning, the more likely they are to continue to seek out and participate in learning opportunities. This means that we must nurture learning wherever we find it and seed it wherever we do not. There is no benefit in differentiating between the kinds of learning we support. Learning itself is a public good.

We cannot afford people leaving school thinking they have failed at learning. If a student has not gained five ‘good’ GCSEs after 11 years of direct classroom instruction, how do we support their learning differently? Is it a question of pedagogy or passion? How do we ensure that the foundational skills of modern learning – literacy, numeracy and digital literacy – are seen as rights for all?

Unlearning and relearning

Unlearning is harder to pin down. A short lifecycle of skills for many people might mean not just learning new skills, but letting go of obsolete ones. Learning is the literal process of changing our minds, of developing new behaviours, habits, heuristics and biases based on new information.

This is difficult, often emotional work. A day-long course or a series of online modules might be enough to impart the information needed to develop

new skills but is not enough to change the behaviours of a lifetime. As a society we are currently trying to unlearn a two-century reliance on fossil fuels; this means letting go of things we value and identify with.

As we plan to support workers who have spent a lifetime in an industry facing disruption to change their job (within which their way of life and self-identity might be entangled), we must recognise that their needs will be different from young people entering an industry. The same courseware will not meet all needs and these workers will face an ‘unlearning’ overhead that takes time, support and empathy to overcome.

Relearning is the acceptance that education is never complete. Skills degrade in relevance, interests and circumstances shift. If we accept that skills lifecycles are shortening, then learning provision must be able to keep up with the changing needs of both people and industry. Changing formal learning provision can be a slow process and developing new qualifications and curricula takes a lot of time. It is turning round a battleship.

The government’s Local Skills Improvement Plan is a pillar of the skills bill. It decrees that local employer representative groups and chambers of commerce should work with further education colleges to make sure that training provides the skills needed by local employers. One of the difficulties of implementing this is a lack of flexibility in qualifications. How can a college demonstrate any skills it is teaching to its students if a relevant qualification is not available? Do we wait two years for one to be designed and hope that the local skills needs haven’t changed?

One approach that we have championed through the RSA’s Cities of Learning programme is the use of digital badges to capture and recognise different skills that meet employer needs. Colleges can implement

their own badges to make visible the aspects of a course, extracurricular activity or other additionality that meets the needs of local employers. Digital badges offer a flexible means for capturing learning or relearning as it happens, offering a shared language for people to articulate their new skills in a way that is meaningful to employers. Badges suit a modular approach to learning and capture what people can do, rather than the level of progress they have made through a course.

How can the RSA contribute?

As we develop our flagship Cities of Learning programme with new partners and in new places, our ambition is to start from where the learners are, both in terms of place and circumstance. We have built a strong practice of convening local stakeholders (local government, employers, employability providers, cultural institutions, formal and informal learning providers) but we need to get better at bringing participants' voices into our approach.

Working with the Ufi VocTech Trust we have commissioned a research report looking at learner confidence, motivations and barriers. As we analyse these findings, we will build them into our ongoing programme and continue working closely with people taking part to make sure their needs are met by the programme.

We are also developing new pilots to promote digitally inclusive learning in the places where we work. In order to deliver on the promise of regenerative learning at scale, digital approaches must be part of the equation. Access and accessibility become key. In co-designing approaches with the communities we hope to support, we aim to learn how best to ensure digital infrastructure supports learning outcomes for everybody. A significant amount of online learning material is based on video lectures or tutorials. If digital learning content looks and feels like classroom instruction, does this still benefit those who have not thrived in classroom environments? We want to understand what level of human support people need to benefit from online resources, and how best to design online learning to enable engagement.

Evaluation is part of our own learning lifecycle and we are building a stronger practice of impact evaluation into all of our work. We are committed to sharing the lessons we learn with RSA Fellows and the wider fields of adult and place-based learning, and this way, if our practice does not have the impact we hope for, or has surprising unintended impacts, we can unlearn, relearn and begin the cycle again.

I began this piece decrying the myth of the future of skills. The truth is that we can point to sectors that are

growing and sectors that are shrinking. In the coming years we will hear increasingly urgent calls for digital, green and care skills, among others. My colleagues in the Future Work Centre are doing excellent work to understand the needs and challenges in our planet, society and economy from rapidly changing industries and working patterns

My contention is not that we ignore the trajectory of our future needs, but that the needs of a low-carbon, highly automated, rapidly ageing future cannot be met with a linear programme of short courses that only a few will access

Until we can upload new knowledge, competencies and behaviours, Matrix-like, into our brains, we need an approach that invites every person to spend time developing the one skill we can be confident any change will require: the ability to respond and adapt. The ability to learn. ■

RSA Fellowship in action

Ina Ciel Digital

An RSA Fellow has been awarded a Catalyst Seed Grant to further develop a neurodiversity innovation hub to address the challenges of those who could be specifically served by technology. Inspired by his autistic daughter and his own recent diagnosis of Asperger's and ADHD, Marc Goblot FRSA – who has a long career in digital technology – created Ina Ciel Digital, which embraces a neurodivergent perspective to research and co-develop technology solutions.

According to the National Autistic Society, over 1% of the population is autistic and only 16% of autistic adults have full-time employment. Consistent with its mission of engaging those with lived experience in driving inclusion, Ina Ciel has collaborated with a group of autistic adult volunteers, capturing their experiences and ideas. Marc said: "Emergent themes include supporting personal agency and expression of needs, asserting control in bending tech and design towards the needs of people like them, and how a flexible and safe space allows people to flourish with creative ideas."

Ina Ciel will use the £2,000 Catalyst Seed Grant to help establish its virtual research and development studio space and community to test a model for collaborative product design. Prototyped ideas will then be released into an ecosystem of partners for investment and further development.

■ Marc welcomes potential collaborators, partners and interested people to contact him at marcgoblot@inaciel.org.uk

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

The pandemic should make us rethink schools as critical neighbourhood infrastructure

by Ian McShane, Benjamin Cleveland and Philippa Chandler

🐦 @BC_ARCProject

Progressive educators and social planners have long recognised the importance of schools to building community and social connectedness. However, the pandemic has drawn new attention to schools as community infrastructure, questioning how the social, informational and physical resources of schools might be better utilised by local residents.

As the disruptions of 2020 dragged into 2021 and beyond, many schools have been required to flip between classroom and online learning, provide support services and digital connectivity to families, and act as trusted sources of information about Covid-19 and the safeguarding measures being put into place.

The crucial role of schools during the pandemic has come as less of a surprise to some. Schools – which provide both physical and social infrastructure – have often played important roles in times of crisis. Around the world, schools commonly become havens for displaced people in the wake of natural disasters, such as wildfires and floods, turning over their facilities and social networks to humanitarian support. Like other community facilities, schools' physical, digital and social infrastructure can be mobilised to produce adaptive and responsive solutions to emergent situations and build community resilience.

The absence of these infrastructures is a marker of community vulnerability, such as when schools are impacted by temporary closure during Covid-19 lockdowns, permanent closure brought about by neighbourhood demographic changes or school consolidation policies, or – more dramatically – their loss in crises such as wildfires as has happened in at least three recent 'fire seasons' (as summers have come to be known) in Australia and the United States.

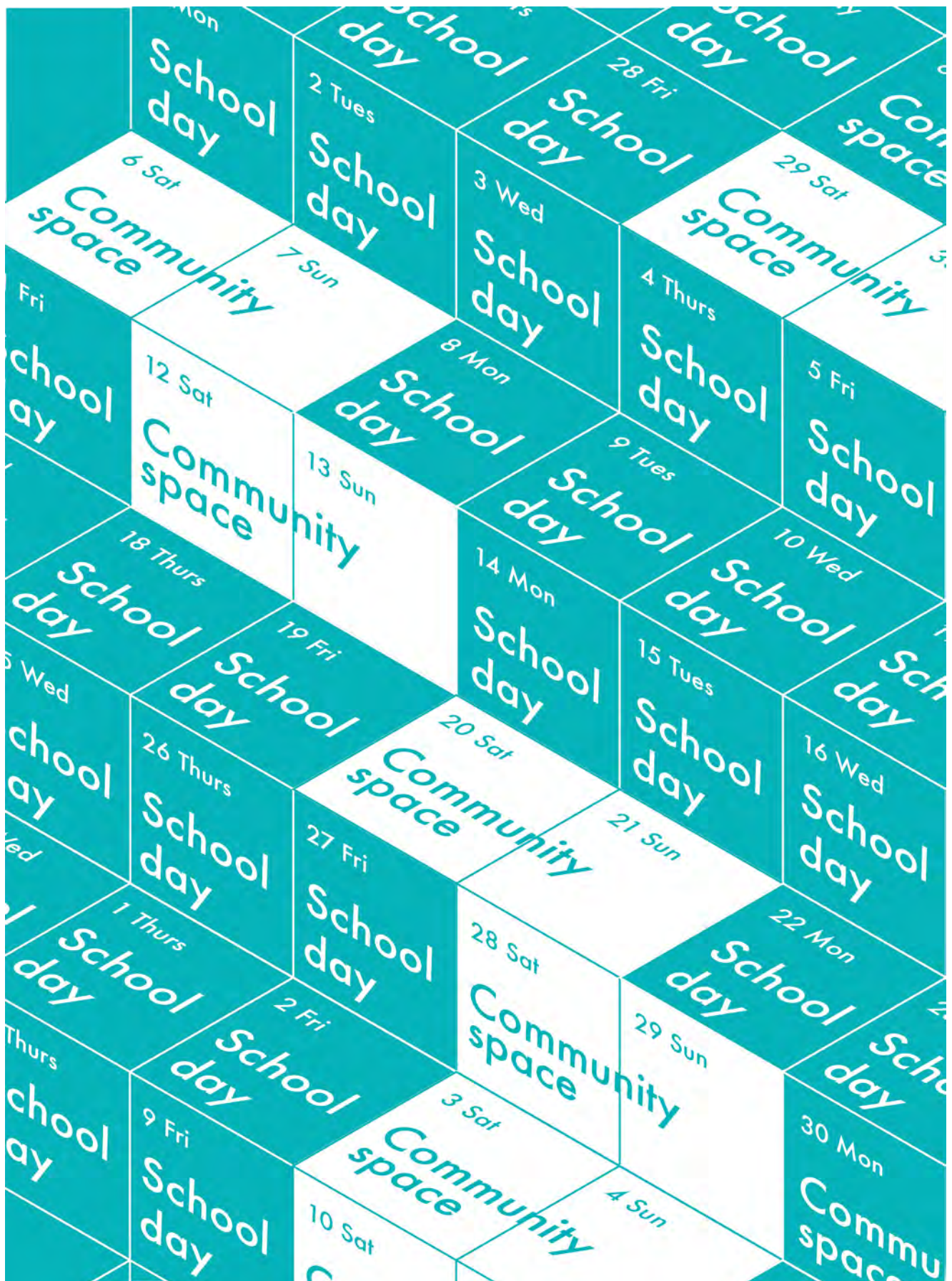
More people now recognise schools as critical response sites and opportunity exists to enhance their role in supporting the resilience of local communities, not just in times of crisis, but on a consistent and enduring basis. Rather than seeing the pandemic as a temporary disruption, it provides an opportunity to rethink how schools might operate as community hubs in a future where environmental and social systems are under increasing stress.

More than a school

Many schools are considered underutilised as social infrastructure, resulting in regular calls to extend their use. But what are the implications for students, educators and policymakers? The conceptualisation and operation of extended, or shared-use, schools varies across the globe. Some school facilities are purposely designed and supported as community facilities, offering additional possibilities for learning, recreation, health and wellbeing. Many also provide valuable green infrastructure, especially in densely populated urban areas.

School-located facilities may provide the sole community centre in sparsely populated rural settlements, or in new urban-fringe housing estates. While policy rationales supporting this model stress its wide social, educational, economic, health and environmental benefits, budget-conscious governments also appreciate the efficiency of shared infrastructure, which partly explains the resurgent interest. Separately, the extended use of schools may focus on students' wellbeing and educational attainment. Full-service school models, often initiated by philanthropic organisations working in under-privileged areas, regularly use existing facilities to

The authors are lead researchers on an Australian Research Council funded project *Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs*





“Cultural, geographical and institutional settings are significant determinants of the relationships between schools and their surrounding communities”

provide students with breakfasts, health services, extracurricular activities and so on.

One concern over the push to encourage wider community use of schools is its potential conflict with their main purpose of schooling. Research conducted in 2021 by RMIT University planning student, Emma Hanslow-Sells, for example, shows that teachers identified the security and safety of students, and the perceived skills and time required for community engagement, as barriers. Some school staff view the move to open schools sceptically, as a default solution of policymakers and opinion leaders to complex social problems, leading to a further stress on the curriculum, school budgets and the staff working day.

An additional concern is that the physical designs of schools – and in some instances the poor condition of school facilities – are unsuited to wider community use. Jeff Vincent of UC Berkeley’s Center for Cities and Schools is one of a number of researchers who have long campaigned for increased attention to school facility maintenance, pointing to patterns of racial and spatial injustice associated with such basic but persistent policy failures.

Increased burdens and inadequate facilities are frequently interconnected: increased burdens may fall on schools and communities that are most poorly resourced and equipped to shoulder them. Furthermore, apart from education, extended-use schools typically provide facilities and services funded by local municipalities, which vary widely in resources. Not-for-profit organisations such as Australian-based Our Place and the City Connects network in the US, led by Mary Walsh at Boston College, have developed place-based responses that successfully engage with local community needs. Their success, though, should not deflect from the fundamental role of governments in providing equitable and accessible public goods. As the cost of Covid-19 programmes takes its toll on public finances, policymakers should be mindful of the work of Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, among others, in demonstrating the value of investment in local educational, health and community programmes.

Some commentators flag the inherent tension between the restricted physical environment of schools and the open and public nature of community facilities as a fundamental challenge. Legitimate concern over risks to students extends to concerns over risk to school property, which can result in restricted access to valuable recreational assets for local communities outside normal school hours. Yet, there is limited evidence internationally that locking up schools is a deterrent to vandalism or major damage. Studies suggest that the integration of schools with surrounding communities, through design, community connections and extended hours of use, is a better deterrent. This is no surprise to urban scholars. The American urbanist Jane Jacobs argued persuasively for the benefits of “eyes on the street” – movement and activity in public places – more than 70 years ago.

Indeed, determination to improve school–community relations, and better connect community members with each other through the school’s agency, is evident in the most dramatic circumstances. A workshop on the extended use of schools, hosted in 2021 by the University of Melbourne, heard moving evidence about the redevelopment of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in the US, following the shooting deaths of 26 students and staff in 2012. School leaders and their architects redesigned the campus to explicitly resist a securitised environment, arguing that the school should remain welcoming, calm and connected to the natural elements. Design concepts like openness and clear sightlines, as well as subtle and concealed safety features, were used to balance practical security measures with a desire to renew community confidence and cohesion.

Schools in the urban realm

Cultural, geographical and institutional settings are significant determinants of the relationships between schools and their surrounding communities. Influential urban planners, such as the American Clarence Perry who led on the 1929 New York Regional Plan and the English town planner Patrick Abercrombie, best known for his plan to rebuild Greater London in the wake of the Second World War, identified local schools as key ‘neighbourhood units’ and urged their integration into the urban and social fabric. Yet, educational authorities have conventionally operated in siloed bureaucracies, largely disconnected from areas of government dealing with social and urban policy. Neo-liberal education settings adopted by western economies in recent decades have also promoted school choice over location-based enrolment, further weakening community affiliation with local schools. A focus of education policy on academic attainment and school league tables has also contributed to a division between curriculum and community. Education is a private and positional good, underpinning career choice and mobility, but it is also a social and public good. Local schools that are well integrated with their communities can encourage the social mix and everyday multiculturalism that are ingredients of inclusive societies, while offering programmes that respond to particular needs.

Some jurisdictions have followed alternative paths. Local schools in Denmark are designed and resourced for extended use and there is an expectation that school facilities can be accessed by local residents. Municipal-level administration of schools may assist in promoting integrated infrastructure planning and shared use. At ‘The Heart’ in Ikast-Brande (Denmark), the multifunctional buildings and outdoor areas support a variety of school and adult education classes, plus community events, exercise and recreational pursuits. Informal places for community members to work are also provided, including a cafe and office facilities. Jurisdictional divisions in countries such as Australia – where community planning is undertaken by city governments and educational planning by state (provincial) authorities – introduce greater structural impediments to integrated planning and the development of shared-use arrangements. Less rigid separation between formal and informal education, where compulsory years schooling is one element of a lifelong learning model (again, the long-established Danish *folkehøjskole* or folk high school is an interesting example) may also be a positive influence on sharing school infrastructure.

The challenge of climate change

The School Strike 4 Climate movement highlighted the urgent concern about global warming among students worldwide, causing some to call on students and schools to focus on learning rather than politics. Climate change, however, disrupts the dichotomy between ‘the school’ and ‘the world’. School infrastructure and pedagogy both play vital roles in supporting community resilience as we respond and adapt to the imminent impacts of global warming.

Imagination and leadership, when supported by research, can build productive links between school campuses and wider urban and environmental settings. For example, inner-urban school campuses may have limited open space, but some of that space can be integrated within urban biodiversity corridors that support the movement of species across habitats. Such initiatives may be integrated into science and environmental curricula. Similarly, the global movement to grow food on school campuses can link to wider urban farming movements while also contributing educational opportunities. Schools have also successfully met the challenge of developing sustainable energy and water systems on campuses. South Fremantle Senior High School, located in a region of Western Australia that is experiencing a significant, long-term rainfall decline, began a journey to become carbon neutral as far back as 2007.

Developing resilient communities requires active social networks and forms of shared identity to drive productive change. Schools have the cultural capital to act as the anchors in mixed-use public service precincts. In partnerships with other organisations, many would have the capacity to offer what Demos identified as “relational public services that can bring together local communities and make it easier for people to build relationships with other users, the community at large and people who provide the services”.

The social isolation and economic vulnerability ensuing from Covid-19 have brought a set of challenges to which local institutions can uniquely respond and which should spur us to rethink the role of schools as critical community infrastructure. With funding, investment and partnerships, schools have the potential to adapt to difficult circumstances and respond well to crises, both acute and pervasive. Extended- or full-service schools as physical, informational and social infrastructure can play more significant roles in supporting the education, health and wellbeing of local communities on an ongoing basis. The potential wide-ranging benefits of multisectoral partnerships should see schools reimagined as even more important and influential hubs of community than they already are. ■

HOME SAFE

How one open door can change a life

by Rachel O'Brien

🐦 @racobrien

For the past 18 months, Sidy (not his real name) has lived with Roland and Juliet and their two sons in East London, not as a tenant but as a welcome guest while he waits to find out whether he will be sent back to the country he left 40 years ago and where his life would be at risk.

Sidy, who is soft spoken and reserved, was born near Conakry in Guinea, West Africa, 72 years ago. Educated at a primary school alongside children from around the world, he has travelled throughout his life for education and work. Sidy studied for a baccalaureate in Germany and hoped to pursue economics, but his father pressed for something 'more practical'. Having completed a mechanical engineering course in Guinea, he secured a job with Air France in Algeria before moving to Paris to study social economics. Unfortunately, he could not complete the course when he could no longer afford the fees.

"As a student I worked in shops in France. I went back to Guinea and opened a tiling and bathroom business, but back home not many people had the money to spend on such things." Later, Sidy moved to Canada for work and then, having secured a visa, back to France, arriving in the UK in the late 1990s.

"I worked in a factory on all-night shifts. One day, I was late and was sacked. A friend told me he could get me a fake ID card so I could get another job,

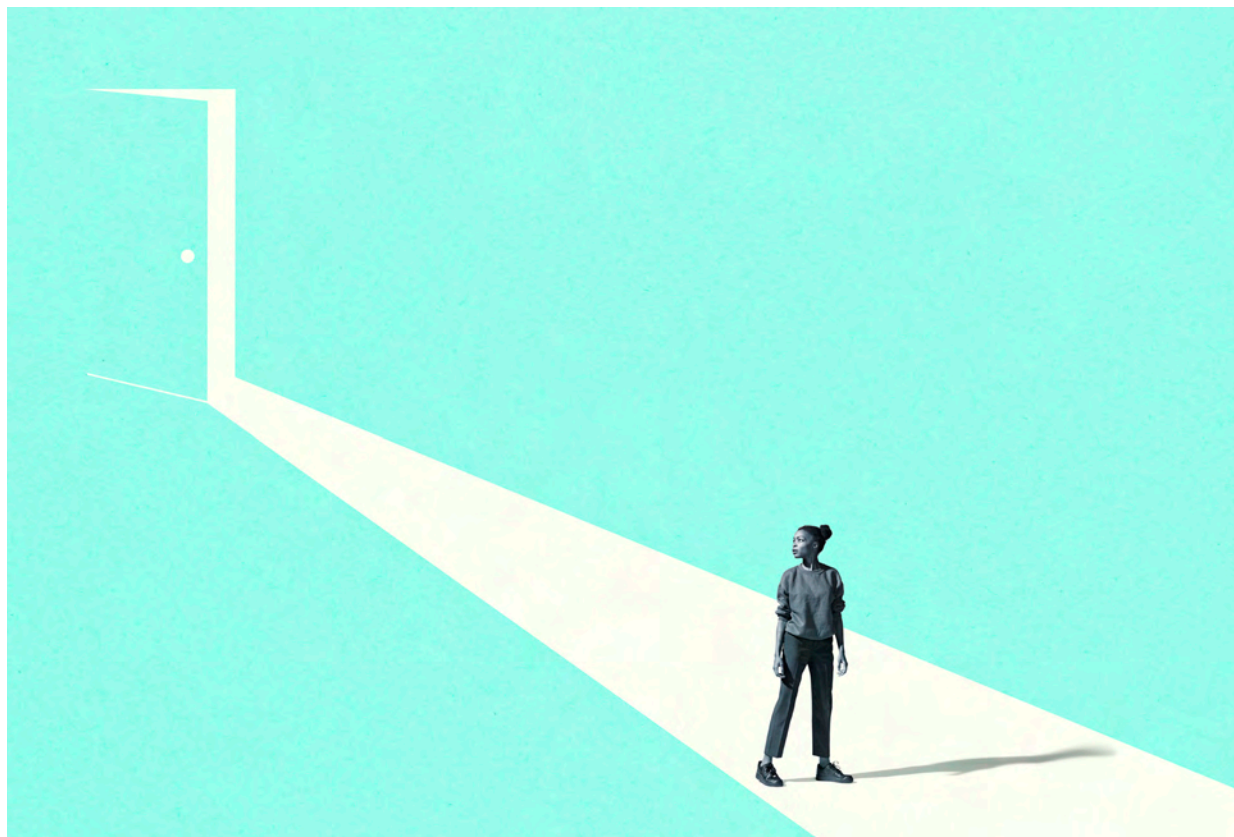
which he did." By now in his 50s, Sidy paid tax even though his National Insurance number "could not have been right." "Then I developed a problem with my foot and struggled to walk and work. I had to have my toe amputated."

When given a blood test in hospital Sidy found out he was HIV-positive. He also has heart problems. "I did not tell people about the HIV as they would run away from me. In the Black community, there is still massive stigma about HIV, which became such a big part of my life. I feel like a pariah. I was staying with a friend who was also from Guinea but, when she saw correspondence about my HIV treatment, she asked me to leave."

Desperately worried about his future, and with no money or home, Sidy contacted Praxis, which every year provides expert support to around 2,000 migrants and refugees in the UK. Taking a holistic approach, it recognises that people and their problems, which can include homelessness, isolation and destitution, are complex.

Two days before Sidy was due to leave his accommodation, Positive Action in Housing (of which Praxis is a referral partner) found him a place to stay. In April 2021, the charity had over 8,000 registered host families who offer breathing space to families and individuals so that they can begin the process of

Rachel O'Brien is the Commissioning Editor of *RSA Journal*



rebuilding their lives. Hosts decide for how long they can offer refuge and referrals are screened to ensure a safe match.

In September 2020, Sidy was introduced to Roland and Juliet. Roland explains: “We approached Positive Action in Housing as we were interested in hosting. They put us in touch with Sidy, who moved into his own room at the top of the house.

“We were anxious and wanted to ensure that we took any precautions needed in relation to HIV, which we did not know enough about. We got really useful advice from the hospital consultant, who gave us confidence that we could make Sidy comfortable.” Sidy was also nervous. “You do not know if they are going to accept you. I have my own demons in my head, my depression. But they have been so kind and understanding.”

At the time of this interview, Sidy’s application to stay in the UK had just been refused. “I could not understand. I felt completely lost and was shaking, my heart was racing. I am vulnerable if I leave this country. I won’t be able to get the medicines I need, and I will die. In Guinea, I don’t have anyone and there’s still a massive stigma about HIV.”

For Roland and Juliet, the motivation to host was a fundamental appreciation of how lucky they are; this was deepened by the pandemic, which underlined

the vastly different circumstances and resources of people in our society. For Roland, there is also a family tradition of helping people. “My grandmother was in the Netherlands during the Second World War. Her family looked after a Jewish girl, protecting her from the Nazis by inventing a ‘maid’ who lived with them. Their home was machine-gunned and my grandfather’s leg was injured. The family later moved to Scotland, while the young girl went to Israel. Years later they tracked her down in Jerusalem and were awarded the Jewish Award for Gentiles. If someone needs help and you can help, then you should. We are lucky, and frustrated by the politics around refugees.”

Sidy will remain with the family, where he has both company and privacy when needed, while Praxis helps to prepare his appeal. “I am so lucky. One person in a million would do what they have done. They are so kind and treat me with such respect and generosity. It is something to take a stranger into your home, to open your door...”

Sidy and Roland agreed to talk to us to encourage others to host people in need. ■

■ *To find out more about Praxis, visit: praxis.org.uk To find out more about Positive Action in Housing, visit: paih.org*



PERILS OF PERFECTION

Why welcoming frustration and failure may be the key to establishing successful lifelong learning practices

by David Robson

🐦 @d_a_robson

“**W**hy am I such a bone-head?”
“If I feel this confused, I must be doing it wrong.”

“I’m out of my depth and destined to fail.”

If you are like me, you may find thoughts like these running through your head as you embark on learning a new skill.

A sense of trepidation is natural, but many of us hold needlessly negative attitudes toward our capabilities; even the slightest feeling of frustration can spark a spiral of defeatist thinking. These pessimistic attitudes not only destroy our motivation, they can reduce our mental resources through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The result is that we no longer think as sharply as we are capable of, and the material itself is much harder to remember.

Fortunately, the latest research shows that we can remove this self-imposed barrier by reframing our attitudes around the challenges that we face and our capacity to overcome them. By embracing frustration, rather than fearing it, we can all learn a lot more efficiently.

A healthier attitude to learning will be essential in the years ahead. Rapid technological change has meant that people’s knowledge in many jobs must be updated at an ever-increasing pace. The economic upheaval of the pandemic, meanwhile, has pushed numerous people to look for alternative ways of making a living, many of which require the acquisition of new skills.

A change of mindset may not be able to transform you into an instant genius, but it can at least put you on the right path to more efficient and effective

learning, so that you can make the most of your own unique potential.

Professor Carol Dweck at Stanford University laid the foundations for our understanding of expectation effects in learning with her ground-breaking research on the fixed and growth mindsets. If you are not already familiar with this concept, consider a skill that you would like to learn, and then read the following two statements: ‘Your abilities are something very basic about you that you cannot change very much’; and ‘No matter how much ability you have, you can always change it quite a bit’.

People who agree more with the first statement are said to have the fixed mindset: they tend to see their skills as being an innate part of them. The people who agree more with the second statement are said to have the growth mindset: they believe in the possibility of incremental change.

Over a series of experiments, Dweck has shown that people with the growth mindset tend to have greater perseverance and are more willing to take on new challenges that might stretch their abilities. Those with the fixed mindset, in contrast, often struggle to confront problems in learning. They lose motivation as soon as they have a disappointing result and tend to shy away from challenges that fall outside of their comfort zone, which means that they are less likely to improve their skills in the long term.

Importantly, Dweck found that you can encourage people to adopt a growth mindset by teaching them about the brain’s ‘neuroplasticity’: its capacity to rewire and adapt to new challenges. That seems to improve learning in the short term, and if the message ▶

David Robson is an award-winning science writer and author of *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Transform Your Life*

is consistently reinforced over a longer period, such as the academic year, it can help a sizeable number of students to get better grades.

Following Dweck's research, many psychologists have started to look at the other ways our beliefs might shape our cognitive abilities and potential for learning. Much of this work has focused on our perceptions of frustration and confusion and the meaning that we assign to these feelings.

It might seem natural to dislike frustration and confusion: these feelings may suggest there is something wrong with your brain that simply will not allow the new knowledge or skill to sink in. Seen from another perspective, however, frustration and confusion can be interpreted as signs that your brain is working hard to arrive at a deep understanding and build a strong memory. Much like the sweat we build up in a physical workout, it is the price we pay for intellectual exertion.

In 2012, researchers at the University of Poitiers in France hypothesised that anxieties about frustration and difficulty could take up mental resources that you might otherwise devote to the required tasks; it is difficult to concentrate, after all, while telling yourself that you are stupid. By shifting to the idea that frustration is productive, you may remove that anxiety and increase your cognitive ability.

In their first experiment, the researchers gave a group of participants three sets of extremely difficult anagrams to solve, a task designed to trigger frustration. Half the participants were told to see those feelings as a sign that learning was occurring, while others were simply left to make their own interpretations. Afterwards, participants took a test of 'working memory', in which they listened to various sentences and were then asked to list the last words of each one. This is a challenging task that requires substantial focus. Overall, the participants who had reframed their feelings of frustration proved to have a significantly larger working memory span than those who had not.

Working memory is a key mental resource that allows the brain to process complex information, meaning that the altered mindset could have widespread benefits for many kinds of cognitive tasks.

To test whether this was the case, the researchers conducted a second study that replaced the working memory test with an exercise in reading comprehension. As expected, the people who had reframed their frustration as a sign of learning performed significantly better than those who had not received coaching around their feelings of frustration.

Your attitudes to intellectual challenges, and the feelings that they evoke, may even influence your

overall intelligence, according to a study by Daphna Oyserman at the University of Southern California, and colleagues, published in 2018. To prime different mindsets, the researchers asked students to read and rate a series of statements, such as: 'Some school tasks feel easy and some feel difficult. My gut tells me that if it feels difficult, it is important for me.' Or: 'Some school tasks feel easy and some feel difficult. My gut tells me that if it feels difficult, it is impossible for me.'

Overall, the participants who had been primed with the idea that difficulty can be a sign of importance performed significantly better on a non-verbal IQ test called Raven's Progressive Matrices.

Besides increasing our mental resources, a reappraisal of frustration – and its potential benefits – could help us to choose more effective learning strategies. A huge body of research has shown that we tend to retain more information when we create 'desirable difficulties'. For example, you will learn more from a nuanced textbook, with long detailed passages, than one that presents the facts with pretty graphics and bite-sized chunks of information, yet the aversion to potential frustration means that few learners would actively choose the more complex text.

Similarly, people learn more from applying what they have learnt in new and unfamiliar contexts. For example, someone studying a language will benefit from having 'language exchange' conversations with native speakers. But the fear of frustration means that many avoid those valuable learning opportunities even if this prevents them from progressing more quickly.

Together, the combined result of these effects can have significant long-term consequences. Peter Meindl at the University of Pennsylvania and colleagues recently measured high-school students' attitudes to frustration and followed their academic achievements over two years. The researchers found that students' ability to tolerate frustration not only predicted their grade point averages and standardised test scores in maths, reading and science in their final years at school, it also helped to predict their progress when they moved on to university.

In my own life, I found that it took a little practice to readjust my attitudes to frustration as I embark on the learning of new skills. In general, I would advise that you start slowly, with small steps – rather than giant leaps – out of your comfort zone and use each new challenge as an opportunity to question the negative assumptions about your abilities. With time, you will see that the slight discomfort is evidence that you are exercising and strengthening your mind. Far from showing incompetence, it is propelling you towards your goals. ■



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PANDEMIC NIGHTS

Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on our dreams

by Deirdre Barrett

“I’m with my family and boyfriend and we’re being chased by silent, almost invisible rats. I only see their tiny eyes and flashes of teeth behind us as we run.”

“My home was a Covid-19 test centre. People weren’t wearing masks. I’m taken aback because I wasn’t asked to be a test site. I’m worried that my husband and son (who actually lives out of state) will catch it because of my career.”

As the pandemic swept around the world, dream recall skyrocketed. The virus itself was the star of many of these dreams, either literally or in one of its metaphoric guises. As a dream researcher at Harvard University who has studied the dreams of prisoners of war (POWs), survivors of 9/11 and Kuwaitis during the first Gulf War, I was interested in what dreaming patterns might re-emerge during the pandemic? Alternatively, what dream metaphors would be unique to this historic moment?

On 23 March 2020 I posted an online survey that has since collected dreams from more than 4,000 people in 89 countries and counting. I also discussed

dreams with friends, in online dream chat groups, and over Zoom and live dreamwork sessions. My goal was to discover what our dream lives might reveal about our deepest reactions to the ongoing pandemic.

Supercharged dream lives

“Is anybody else having really weird/vivid dreams during this whole lockdown or is it just me?” @juustmolls

“I thought I had vivid dreams before but since quarantine they’ve been over the top realistic!” @litesue

Almost as soon as the pandemic started, people’s dreams became longer and more vivid, bizarre and memorable. A 2020 Lyon Neuroscience Research Center study found a 35% increase in dream recall. Twitter and Instagram posts with hashtags like #coronadreams, #covid19dreams, #quarantinedreaming and #pandemicnightmares went viral during the first three months of the pandemic.

The period we are living through is utterly unique in the shared dreamlife of humanity. While the 1918 ▶

Deirdre Barrett is a dream researcher and lecturer at Harvard University, the author of five books, including *Pandemic Dreams*, and an artist who creates images inspired by her dreams





“The period we are living through is utterly unique in the shared dreamlife of humanity”

pandemic was almost as widespread, we had limited ability then to share waking experiences with strangers on the opposite of the globe, much less nocturnal ones.

Any major historical event affects our dreams, and a crisis tips anxiety into the mix. I believe dreams are just thinking in a different biochemical state; since we are thinking more intensely and emotionally by day, of course our dreams are also more intense and emotional. I saw a surge in vivid dreams from Americans after 9/11, Kuwaitis during and after the Iraqi occupation, and British officers (whose dreams were recorded in a dream archive) in a Second World War Nazi POW camp.

Most crises are accompanied by less sleep: people experience insomnia from anxiety or stress, or must work harder to keep themselves and their families safe. Increased vividness in dreaming comes from heightened emotions, not increased dream time. During the pandemic, however, especially at first, we were told to stay home and avoid socialising. Even those who were working full time from home or taking virtual courses no longer spent time commuting or engaging in an array of tempting nighttime social activities. Studies showed we began sleeping much more than usual early in the pandemic.

Most dreams occur in rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. We enter REM every 90 minutes throughout the night, but each period gets successively longer. If you sleep for eight hours, the last dream period of the night is the longest and includes the most vivid dreams. When we are catching up on sleep, we have unusually long and intense dream periods. Starting early in the pandemic, but even now, people are having more vivid dreams of all kinds, and most of the reported dreams focused largely on the new threat.

I’m catching the virus!

“I have a reoccurring dream that we get a knock on our door and outside are people in hazmat suits. The door no longer opens because we haven’t used it in so long. The hazmats tell us someone in our home has Covid-19 as confirmed by Parliament. Since we’re unable to get out, we are going to die of it.”

Some of the dreams collected by my survey are simply about catching the virus: having trouble breathing or spiking a fever, dreaming that children or elderly parents are infected. Others dream of more fantastical symptoms: one woman looks down and notices bright blue stripes on her stomach and faux ‘remembers’ that this is the first sign of the virus.

The realisation that one has contracted the virus often ends a dream. In others, this realisation spurs a search for help. An array of attitudes towards the medical system play out on the dream stage. Some dreamers struggle endlessly to get to a hospital (“I ordered an Uber, but a hearse showed up instead.”) or to get attention once there (“The medical staff was marching and staring straight ahead; I wondered if they had been replaced by androids.”).

Attack of the metaphors

Not all dreams about the virus are literal. Negative experiences stimulate dreams of our most instinctive fears. Dreams of tsunamis, tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires and mass shootings were common after 9/11 and other collective historic traumas and are showing up again in my pandemic dreams survey. One dreamer covered most of that list until she made a significant life change:

“I had constant dreams of glowing jellyfish, crumbling and cracking roads that were impossible to get out of without rolling the car, family members lined up on the wharf with a tidal wave coming, flying whales, blimps crashing over the sea, pushing boats across coral and rocks to safety with family and friends in the boat, rollercoasters, hiding and running and packing belongings . . . but all catastrophic dreams came to an abrupt halt when I made the decision to

leave work and stay home with the virus starting to get out of hand . . . the VERY first night!”

Interestingly, the survey identified clusters of dream metaphors about Covid-19 unique to the nature of its threat. The most common of these metaphors is “threatening bugs”. Swarms of attacking flying insects, whether bees, hornets, wasps, gnats or horseflies. Masses of wriggling worms menace dreamers, or armies of cockroaches race towards them. Bedbugs, stink bugs, centipedes. Our dreaming mind is very visual, so when the dreamer feels fear, the mind searches for an image to match that feeling. Bugs express what many are feeling about Covid-19. I saw no bug attack dreams after 9/11; they seem to be the definitive metaphor now partly because of how we use the word ‘bug’ to mean a virus or other illness. Dreams often represent words with visual images in pun-like fashion. At a deeper level, though, the fear of numerous tiny entities that cumulatively might harm or kill you makes a perfect metaphor for the threat of Covid-19.

Other categories of dreams unique to this epidemic are invisible monsters and barely visible clouds of deadly smoke or fog. As with the bugs, these seem related to the unseen nature of the threat posed by the virus (which can nevertheless still harm or kill us) in contrast to the crashing planes, invading armies or more apparent threats that were seen in dreams during other periods of crisis.

Secondary effects of the pandemic

As the pandemic wore on, the survey shows, dreams shifted toward representations of the pandemic’s secondary effects. People who were sheltering alone tended to have dreams of exaggerated loneliness: “I dreamed I was put in prison—solitary confinement. When I would hear guards outside my door, I would ask what I’d done and when I would be released but no one ever answered.”

Those sheltering with family or roommates dreamed exaggerated scenarios of crowding and lack of privacy: “I woke up (not for real) and found my apartment filled with everyone from the neighbourhood (in reality, my in-laws are living with us for the pandemic). People had camp stoves going in corners, cots all through each room and I couldn’t find a place to walk or sit.” And for parents, dreams of homeschooling gone awry were common: “I am homeschooling my 10-year-old. I dreamed that the school contacted me to say it had been decided that his whole class would come to my home and I was supposed to teach all of them for however long the school remained closed.”

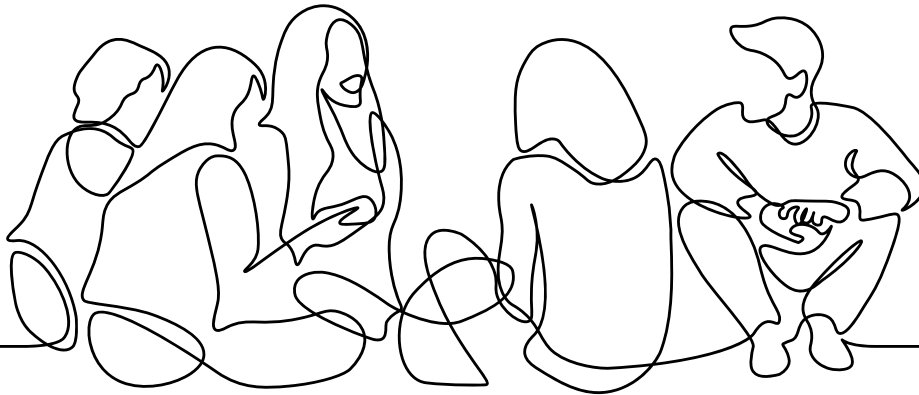
Recent trends in survey dreams

As workplaces and schools returned to physical settings, the survey showed that a new type of anxiety dream developed. These were often cast as ‘it’s my first day back at work and...’. Dreamers encountered realistic threats such as sickly, coughing co-workers or crowded, unventilated offices. But they also met with fantastical ones: filthy carpets with new rules about taking off shoes at the door, rituals requiring shaking hands with every co-worker. Teachers and parents of school-age children experienced dreams of even more exaggerated threats. In one, the school had aged 100 years during the shutdown, its roof sagged, and a mother was sure it would collapse on her child if they entered. In another, a teacher heard Halloween-like sound effects in her classroom, followed by eyes peering out at her from the bookcases; eventually, the ghosts that had taken over the school chased her down the hallways.

Mask dreams have become steadily more common throughout the pandemic, with dreamers experiencing anxiety caused by others failing to mask or the sudden realisation that one does not themselves have a mask on. The survey shows that, as the pandemic wore on, more dreams featured the dreamer as the mask-less one in dreams now more often dominated by feelings of embarrassment or shame than fear; the social faux pas became the more emphasised aspect. While the classic dream of appearing naked or inappropriately clothed in public has served as a metaphor for the exposure of some social inadequacy, it is now being without a mask that represents that feeling.

Although negative dreams constituted a majority of those collected, some hopeful, happy dreams were submitted to the survey even from the start and they are greatly increasing of late. Some dreamers invent a cure for the virus themselves or discover that someone else has. Others glimpse a better future with fewer people, one in which whales and dolphins frolic at the shore, or in which the dreamer emerges from quarantine to find “the whales had learned to fly”. Some dream of cleaner water in their local rivers and lakes. One dreamer is in her backyard, which appears as usual, except that now she can see high mountain peaks in the distance; her mother tells her that pollution had hidden these for decades.

I expect to see more evolution in the survey content, particularly more local divergence given the broad differences in vaccine uptake and availability globally, as well as variations in government lockdown and quarantine policies. It continues at: surveymonkey.com/r/B8S75CN ■

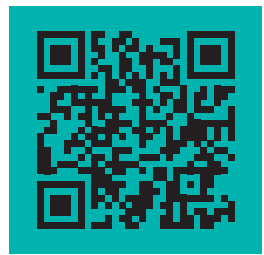


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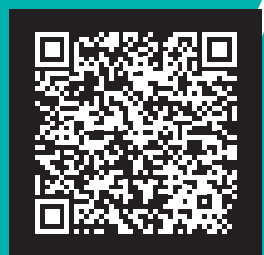


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IS THERE A POINT TO HOMEWORK?

New research indicates we may have overlooked some surprising benefits to primary school students

by Dacian Dolean

🐦 @DDolean

For more than a century, teachers, parents, administrators and educational policymakers have engaged in one of the most heated debates in the field of education: the utility of homework. Detractors of homework claim it deprives students of quality time spent pursuing enjoyable activities with family and friends and has the potential to lead to negative school-related interactions between children and their caregivers. These claims have historically been supported by the argument that research conducted in the past decades could not find a significant association between homework and academic achievement in primary school. So: is there any point in giving homework to primary school children? Or should we adopt a ‘no homework’ policy?

When questioning the utility of homework in primary schools, we must acknowledge the limitations of the existing research. For instance, Professor Harris Cooper of Duke University found in his meta-analyses that all experimental studies that investigated the utility of homework were methodologically flawed. But when we cannot accurately measure the impact of a phenomenon it does not mean that no impact exists. In our recent study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Education*, we randomly allocated differing amounts of homework to students in Year 3 and measured the impact. Our results support the idea that, for primary school children, a moderate homework allocation can be beneficial and that, under certain circumstances, a ‘no homework’ policy can be detrimental.

The decision to give up homework in primary school also risks burning one of the most important bridges of communication between the school and home. If a parent or caregiver asks a child, “What did you do

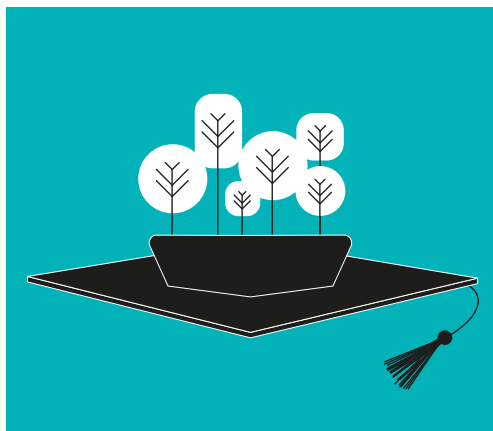
today at school?” and receives a cold “Nothing” in response, they miss the opportunity to initiate a conversation with the child about the science of watering the plants in the backyard, or to notice if the child has misunderstood the procedure of regrouping in subtraction and therefore needs extra guidance. A short, well-designed homework assignment can be a powerful communication tool to connect the school with home, and serve as a valuable conduit between teacher and caregiver regarding a child’s progress and performance.

Another benefit of moderate homework is the opportunity for students to take more time to sharpen critical skills. Many skills that students develop in primary school (for example, writing, or learning the times tables) require extensive practice, but the school day often does not allow time (or enough time) for this. During our study, students were taught new spelling patterns and editing rules. While they all made important progress during the six-week period of instruction, the students given a moderate amount of homework outperformed their peers who received minimal homework. Interestingly, these effects were sustained several months later.

Most notably, the effect size of our study was similar to those found in costly intervention programmes often implemented in education. We concluded that, when allocated in moderation and designed professionally, homework has the potential to be an effective, cost-free educational intervention programme that can enhance academic achievement and prove a powerful communication tool between school and family. ■



Dacian Dolean is an educational psychologist at Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania



HEALING EDUCATION

Challenging embedded beliefs might just save the earth

by Bas van den Berg

As Gert Biesta, the Dutch philosopher of education, shared in 2021's *World-Centred Education*: "Education is a thoroughly practical art, and educational sciences are at their finest when they inform the artistry of others." How, then, do we ensure that our artistry as educators does not contribute to further destruction of the earth?

Several of earth's fundamental systems are at tipping points which will threaten the future of life on the planet. I see regenerative higher education as a fundamentally ecological, or living-system, approach to education that connects with people, places and the planet as a healing force. As the American biologist and author Janine Benyus said, "Life creates conditions conducive to life"; that is to say, living organisms are primed to adapt in ways that perpetuate their very survival. The question, then, is whether humans can similarly shape the conditions under which education creates conditions conducive to life? This requires challenging many beliefs held sacred within modern higher education, such as the predictability of learning outcomes.

Happily, instances of this evolution in education are already emerging around the world. At the Challenge Lab 'master thesis lab' at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden, students generate a thesis based on local transition challenges that is co-designed with businesses, governments and residents. Similarly, the University of Amsterdam offers courses that embrace the uncertainty often found with transition challenges via a willingness to change the aims of the course depending on feedback from students, Amsterdammers, policymakers and

entrepreneurs. In Colombia, a group called the Earth Regenerators is developing a new type of hybrid learning hub (to help regenerate a large ecozone) in which participation is open not just to students, but to the broader community. Ambitiously, the latest *Blueprint on Educational Transformation* published by global common good not-for-profit platform r3.0 brought together a group of trailblazers across all continents to further explore what such a regenerative vision means for the future of universities.

What these examples (and there are many more) share is a whole-human approach to learning that combines doing, feeling and knowing. They also share several key design principles. In each, the artistry is locally embedded, engaging with transition challenges that are urgent and relevant in a particular place and time, and with a particular group of people. Each cultivates a whole-human approach that includes dimensions of learning normally managed outside of education such as challenging values, beliefs and worldviews, allowing universities to act as bioregional facilitators of learning-based change if they are audacious enough to fully embrace this transformed role in society.

We are living in times which require large-scale transformation of the human presence on earth and bold visions for the future. So here is mine: what if all universities around the world could be bastions of healing, through their education, to play a part in realising regenerative futures? While we may not be able to embrace all these principles, all at once, there are multiple paths emerging that can guide us towards making our artistry kinder, more meaningful and a force for regeneration. ■

Bas van den Berg is acting coordinator at the Centre of Expertise Mission Zero at The Hague University of Applied Sciences and host of *The Regenerative Education Podcast*

WORKING PARTNERS

A transatlantic collaboration supports post-industrial communities

by Jamie Cooke

🐦 @JamieACooke



A Fellow-led project, bringing together Fellows in Scotland and the US alongside other partners, is seeking to bring new ideas for the future of work to Inverclyde, a proud post-industrial area outside Glasgow. Once famed for shipbuilding and later for computer manufacturing, the area has struggled in recent years as the economy has changed. The Inverclyde Makerspace project will create an accessible venue containing cutting-edge manufacturing and design equipment and technology. Located in a town in Inverclyde, this space will allow for skills to be developed among the local population which can help them access good jobs in developing sectors of the economy, and bring their own skills, knowledge and creativity to the community.

The Inverclyde Makerspace project was initiated by US Fellow Joseph Katter, Executive Director of NextFab Foundation, working with RSA Scotland and RSA US. Bringing NextFab Foundation's wealth of experience, the team identified the potential for learning and collaboration with a similar project currently being developed by NextFab in Western Pennsylvania. The project features advanced training in STEM and digital manufacturing for young people aged 12–18, combined with an apprenticeship programme aligned with the needs of local advanced manufacturing industries, with the aim of developing a career pipeline from the community to rapidly expanding sectors of the economy. As well as bringing together communities that have both experienced industrial decline and associated challenges, the Inverclyde project builds upon the existing partnership between the closest major cities of Pittsburgh and Glasgow, in which the RSA has been heavily involved.

The project benefited from the input of Scottish Fellow Mick O'Connor, who – among other roles – is leading the development of the new Prestwick Spaceport in Scotland. The space sector is rapidly growing in Scotland, and Inverclyde is perfectly positioned between industry hubs in Prestwick and Glasgow, but with few easy routes for residents to access jobs. By harnessing the links with Prestwick and other partners, the new makerspace aims to shift this dynamic by opening up new opportunities for employment in both technical and public-facing positions.

The team next plans to carry out a feasibility study in Inverclyde to ensure the project is rooted in the priorities and needs of the community and identify the optimal location for the makerspace. The project harnesses the creativity of Fellows in different countries for impact, underscoring the mission of One RSA and opening doors to new collaborations. Evan Malone, Founder of NextFab Foundation said: “NextFab Foundation is proud to work with the thought leaders of RSA and our partners in Scotland on this exciting project, which will apply the spirit of innovation which produced the first industrial revolution, to current day challenges faced by legacy manufacturing communities in the UK and the US. Supporting local communities in the transition to the future of work is of highest priority to our Foundation and the civic duty of us all.” ■

■ Updates on progress will be shared later in the year; meanwhile, to find out more, please contact jamie.cooke@rsa.org.uk

Jamie Cooke
is Head of
RSA Scotland



When two big egos collide, does it make a sound?

by Daliso Chaponda

🐦 @dalisochaponda

Successful artists, as a rule, have massive egos. Yes, even your favourite one. Especially them.

It's necessary for survival. I'm a comedian and every week I am rejected. It might be for a voice role, a TV show, or even by members of an audience in front of me who tut and shake their heads, disappointed. The stream of rejections is so constant that, in order to not descend into depression, you need to have an overinflated sense of your own value. You were rejected because they are WRONG. Any approach, from slight self-delusion to total narcissism, is recommended.

When fellow artists mention they are considering going to therapy, I want to scream, "No, no, you need your dysfunctions!" How does one write a 10,000-page tome that nobody might buy? Firm conviction that it's brilliant and it will change the world. How do you perform that 400th show for meagre monetary rewards? You know you're the most hilarious carbon-based life form on the continent and it's just a matter of time before you are discovered.

But here's the problem: you need this overgrown ego to become a successful artist, but once you get your hands on that hard-earned success you might need to collaborate. How does a narcissist react to criticism? With disbelief: "Why is this producer asking me to change this character?" A piece of furniture may even be flung. Collaborating with another artist is even more trying because they think

they are a genius, too. Your perfectly formed vision must do battle with their perfectly formed vision.

So how do you collaborate successfully?

The easiest collaborations I've had were when one artist was the lead writer and the other was the contributor. This means all final decisions will be made with no giant tug-of-war. I worked on a play for the BBC World Service with fellow writer and egotist Sibusiso Mamba. He was the head writer, so he incorporated many of my genius impeccable jokes and bits of dialogue. There were many more he tossed aside. He was wrong, of course, but he was in charge. I bet he occasionally regrets it.

Collaboration also works if both artists are madly in love with each other's work. That way, even your narcissism might take a break because it thinks their ideas are as good as yours (and a few may even be better).

A splitting up of necessary chores can also work. I co-wrote a script once and I wrote all the funny scenes; my writing partner wrote all the dramatic ones.

But on occasion, you have no choice. You must collaborate with a fellow narcissist whose work you don't admire, neither of you is the primary artist and you can't split the chores. What happens?

Most likely, pistols at dawn, the band breaks up.

By the way, if you haven't enjoyed this article, it's the editor's fault. They diluted my brilliance. ■

Daliso Chaponda is a Malawian stand-up comedian living in England. He was a 2017 finalist on *Britain's Got Talent* and is the writer, creator and host of the BBC Radio 4 show *Citizen of Nowhere*. His 2021 stand-up show, *Apocalypse Not Now*, is currently touring the UK

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