Chapter 1

Vision: Why schools have to change

In this chapter we explore the reasons for seeking to change education, focusing on:

- creating economic prosperity
- wellbeing
- social trends
- increasing digitalisation
- the competitive educational environment
- the pressure of being successful
- disaffection among young people

T he world is changing fast, and education systems around the planet are trying to keep pace. Some are responding by trying to squeeze more pupils through tests of literacy, numeracy and knowledge. Others, like Building Learning Power, think we need to go deeper, and ask hard questions about what schools in the twenty-first century are actually for. We think there are a number of compelling arguments that all seem to point in the same direction: schools need to get better at helping young people learn how to flourish in complex and demanding times. This chapter summarises some of these arguments, so that schools can understand and explain clearly *why* they are trying to change—as well as how to.

Creating economic prosperity

Education is often justified, by governments and others, as an investment in national competitiveness and prosperity. 'We' need, so the argument goes, a national workforce that is highly-skilled, creative, and adaptable, so as to be able to compete in global marketplaces. But how well are schools actually doing, in terms of producing large numbers of youngsters who possess these characteristics?

In 2009 Guy and Bill undertook a major review of the kinds of wider skills that economies around the world are trying to cultivate, precisely in order to make their citizens more innovative and, therefore, employable. 'We found that, wherever you go, from Singapore to Venezuela, New Zealand to Sweden, Brisbane to Birmingham, employers are crying out for people who can think for themselves, show initiative and collaborate effectively.'[1]

Effective Education and Employment: a global perspective

Also in 2009, Edexcel, the giant multinational educational provider, published the results of an international survey entitled *Effective Education and Employment: A global perspective.*[2] The research canvassed the views of a wide range of stakeholders, over 2,000 of them, in over 25 countries. Two findings screamed out of this report. First, from the employers' perspective there was an astonishing consensus about the desirable outcomes of education. Whether in Brazil, China, South Africa or the UK, employers are crying out for 'workers who have the right attitude, a willingness to learn, and an understanding of how to conduct themselves in the workplace'. And second, there was an equally clear international consensus that schools and colleges are not delivering the goods. The report concludes that:

> *'There is a significant disconnection between education systems and the needs of twenty-first century employers. People may or may not have the right clutch of certificates—but far too few of them have the attitudes that employers know are the more important foundations of that elusive 'world-class work-force'.*

Ross Hall, the Director of International at Edexcel who commissioned the report, was surprised by the common dissatisfactions being expressed in Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Beijing and Dubai, and the repeated calls for a curriculum which would be effective at cultivating a core set of 'generic skills and attributes'—pre-eminently, 'the ability to learn'. Amongst the qualities of mind that kept being mentioned as both widely desirable and widely lacking were problem-solving, creativity, initiative, responsibility, team-work, empathy and communication. 'One of the most striking findings across the whole of the research,' wrote Hall, 'was the commonality of these transferable qualities.'

Go back thirty years and it is depressing to see how similar the criticisms being expressed were then. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, the RSA, published a manifesto in 1980 called 'Education for Capability' signed by 140 leading figures of the day in the world of work.[3] It said:

> 'The country would benefit significantly in economic terms... if educators spent more time preparing people for life outside the education system. A well-balanced education should, of course, embrace analysis and the acquisition of knowledge. But it must also include the exercise of creative skills, the competence to undertake and complete tasks, and the ability to cope with everyday life; and also doing all these things in cooperation with others...In schools, too often, young people acquire knowledge of particular subjects, but are not equipped to use knowledge in ways which are relevant to the world outside the education system.'

In the words of Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College:

> 'The new world does not need container loads of young men and women whose knowledge is narrowly academic and subject-specific which they can regurgitate in splendid isolation in exams. It needs people who have genuine understanding not just in one but in several academic domains, and who comprehend how these different fields relate to each other. It needs people who can work collaboratively, with advanced interpersonal skills, as opposed to those who have been tested merely on their ability to write exam answers on their own. It needs problem solvers rather than those who just hold a large body of data in their memories. It needs employees who will have mature thinking skills, able to understand the complexity and the interaction of intricate systems, people who are able to think way beyond standard and formulaic patterns.'

A curriculum to cultivate the ability to learn

Voices from the past

Social wellbeing and cohesion

Mental Capital and Wellbeing: Making the Most of Ourselves in the 21st Century

Tomorrow's world will be, if anything, even more complex and fast-changing than today's. The UK Government's major Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing gathered a wide range of expert advice on foreseeable social and technological trends, and the personal and material resources that will be needed to meet the challenges, and capitalise on the opportunities, which those trends are likely to bring.[4]

These trends include:

- **Ageing:** people are living longer; the elderly will become a larger and more important group in society; state pension provision may well become less secure. So the disposition in the young towards long-term thinking and planning, coupled with both empathy and flexibility as parents begin to require more care, will be essential.

- **Health:** government scientists are beginning to get 'tougher' on the issue of 'lifestyle disorders' and people's responsibility for their own health, as obesity, alcohol consumption and sedentary lifestyles cause expensive conditions like heart disease and diabetes to rocket. So dispositions towards self-discipline and personal responsibility will become increasingly important.

- **Economy:** the rise of highly skilled workforces in China, India, Brazil and elsewhere mean that much 'brain-work' can be digitally outsourced, while the practical skills of making and fixing things cannot. A reversal of esteem for the trades and crafts that cannot be 'done down a wire' may well be on the way, with a corresponding reappraisal of practical problem-solving and hands-on intelligence.

- **Social change:** continuing shifts in social conditions and expectations will surely require flexible mindsets across the entire lifespan, and a positive attitude towards lifelong learning, whether self-chosen and welcome or imposed and unwelcome.

- **Public services:** the trend in recent years 'has been towards a model of public services based on greater levels of personal choice, active citizenship, personal responsibility, and "co-production". This is set to continue. To work most effectively, these models of service/client relationship require the greatest number of the public to be equipped with the mental capital and disposition to participate. This calls for a policy mindset that aims to foster mental capital and wellbeing across the whole population.'

- **Environmental issues:** increasing concern about climate change, and initiatives like '10–10', will require people to change habits throughout their lives. So—and here we mix our metaphors a bit—we have to sow

the seeds, through education, of the willingness and ability of leopards to change their spots and old dogs to learn new tricks!

The Foresight report concludes that human wellbeing in a complex time will become increasingly dependent on the dispositions to be curious, inquisitive, experimental, reflective, and sociable—in short, to be lifelong and life-wide learners.

The digital revolution

Schools are no longer the prime sources of knowledge, as they were in the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. The digital revolution has opened up many more ways for young people to learn. Many children who seem dull and disengaged in school are bright as a button on their home computer. With good-enough literacy and the will to learn, most of us can now teach ourselves what we need to learn from the internet. Or if we can't, the internet will hook us up with a teacher of our own choosing who, like as not, will be happy to swap their time and expertise for something we can do that they would like to. Websites such as www.schoolofeverything.com will help you arrange such learning exchanges for yourself. Within minutes one of us found a singing teacher who would have been delighted to exchange some singing lessons for some help with their pond maintenance, for example. Most of the 'students' and 'teachers' in the School of Everything are children and young people.

www.schoolofeverything.com

Sugata Mitra's famous 'hole-in-the-wall computer' experiments in India dramatically demonstrate children's ability to learn in an entirely self-organised way. Mitra set a computer and a touch-pad in a wall in a slum in New Delhi and watched what happened. Within hours, children as young as six years old had taught themselves how to access the internet, and within weeks, these children who had no previous knowledge of English had taught themselves enough English words to communicate both with the computer and with each other. Within a month they were happily emailing and surfing away. Typically, says Mitra, you will find one kid on the computer, three or four close advisers watching and advising her,[5] and a dozen or more other onlookers who are also watching intently and chipping in. If you test them, the entire group show substantial learning from each session. Take away the school, the teachers, the books, and the exams, and children, even from very impoverished backgrounds, will organize and teach themselves in highly efficient and successful ways.[6]

The lesson seems to be: schools, watch out. If we do not find things to teach children in school that cannot be learned from a machine, we should not be surprised if they come to treat their schooling as a series of irritating interruptions to their education. A cautionary tale from nearly a century ago would do well to ring in our ears as we plan our lessons:

Greeting his pupils, the teacher asked:

'What would you learn of me?
And the reply came:
How shall we care for our bodies?
How shall we rear our children?
How shall we live and work together?
How shall we play?
For what ends shall we live?
And the teacher pondered these words,
And sorrow was in his heart,
For his own learning touched not these things.' [7]

Another way of winning at school

It is very hard to break the hypnotic spell of 'standards', as defined by examination success. Despite an increasing barrage of fine words and good intentions, it is the examination results by which schools' and students' performance are ubiquitously judged—by politicians, and by the media. Politicians like to look effective, so they have to show they are having an impact on 'hard data'—and examination grades are conveniently countable and statistically manipulable. Hence the ritual annual fanfare about 'best ever results' (1% more A grades; hooray!), and the equally predictable counterpoint of 'dumbed down tests'.

Judged by exam results

It is much harder to find ways of showing whether 16-year-olds are more inquisitive, determined, imaginative, and convivial than they were a year ago, so politicians tend not to try. But unless such indicators are developed, GCSE and A-level results will continue to be the tail that wags the dog of education.

Measuring what we value

As someone once said, if we do not find ways of measuring what we value, we will end up just valuing what we can measure. And that distorts the process of schooling, and inhibits teachers from pursuing other aims that they know to be more important.

It is also obvious that, once a single indicator is selected to be the measure of success, people will find ways of manipulating that indicator to their advantage in ways contrary to the original spirit of what 'success' was supposed to mean. In economics this is called 'Goodhart's Law': 'once an indicator becomes a target—especially if funding depends up on it—it stops being a good indicator'.[8] Only someone with a complete lack of insight into human nature could be surprised by the fact that, if 'number of operations performed' becomes a target, hospitals will start doing more of the quick and easy operations (like cataracts), and fewer of the harder and longer ones (like heart surgery). Or headteachers will discourage low-achieving pupils from attempting difficult subjects, connive at their absence on the

days of the critical test, and enter more pupils for courses with assessments that are known to be easier.[9]

Examinations are competitive. Not everyone can be a winner. Your son's four A's at A-level only have value (for university entrance, say), because someone else's daughter didn't get them. This is an inconvenient truth that politicians tend constantly to fudge.[10] Less than half of all 16-year-olds will achieve the UK government's own benchmark of a 'good enough' education—five GCSEs, two of which must be English and Maths, at C-grade or better. Many fewer will achieve the 'English Baccalaureate'. So what do the others come away with, if not a sense of relative failure?

From an assessment and certification point of view, there has to be another 'way of winning' at school that is valued by young people themselves. The word they often use is 'confidence', which is the opposite of 'insecurity', 'anxiety', and 'self-doubt'. In other words, young people themselves, so the surveys show, want those wider skills just as much as their potential employers do.

Disaffection

Very many young people don't find value in what they are doing at school, and either muck about or bunk off. Over 67,000 play truant every day, and the rate is rising—despite nearly 10,000 parents of truants in 2008–9 being prosecuted in an attempt to 'crack down' on absenteeism. There are over 200,000 persistent truants, those who regularly miss a day a week of school or more. According to a 2009 piece of research for the Department of Children, Schools and Families, more than a quarter in Years 9, 10 and 11 actively dislike school. They are at risk of dropping out or, if they stay, of disrupting the education of others. Only a third of 14- and 15-year-olds 'were highly engaged with school and aspired to continue with full-time education to degree level'.[11]

Why are so many young people disengaged? Some people blame the parents, or bullying, or 'trendy teaching methods'—as if good old-fashioned chalk-and-talk and 'firm discipline' were as unquestionably valid in twenty-first century London or Belfast comprehensives as they were in nineteenth century grammar and public schools. Some blame low levels of literacy, and urge that young people who are not good at reading and writing, and have learned to dislike it, should be made to do more and more of it—as if it were a mere technical difficulty totally divorced from youngsters' more general attitudes and feelings towards school.

Professor William Richardson of the University of Exeter has suggested that a major difference between those who stay engaged with school beyond the age of 14, and those who don't, is not that one group is 'brighter' or 'better behaved' than the other. It may be, in large measure, that those who stay engaged are simply more willing to remain in the role of 'pupil'—are

better able to sit still and listen, or are just more interested in the subject-matter and procedures of school—while others are more impatient to take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood. The route that seems to offer them this faster-track entry into adulthood is the vocational one, so their interests may develop in a way that allows them this escape. Richardson says:

Why some young people want to leave school

> 'It was always the case that large numbers of young people wanted to leave school at the earliest opportunity. They hated the uniform. They felt infantilised. They wanted to be adults... They were aware of the world "out there" and wanted to join it, and school felt like it was holding them back. So it is not just a matter of their interests or mentality; the vocational route is the one that seems to respond to that urgency. The majority of this group who want to leave school early have huge capacities and potential, but ... they [tend to] get shunted into a low-status, low-prospects route and then feel trapped and let down. Their potential could have come alive had the pedagogical environment been much richer. You see people thrive quickly when the setting changes.'[12]

A richer pedagogical environment

BLP aims directly to develop that richer pedagogical environment. In BLP, the traditional concern with subject-matter is balanced fairly and squarely with an equal emphasis on the development of a broad repertoire of useful, transferable qualities of mind. It is these mindsets that all young people want and need. Some of them can stretch and strengthen them by studying physics or Spanish; others can get equivalent mental exercise in the context of learning to colour hair, fix engines or care for people with learning difficulties. It is, to use a fancy phrase, the epistemic exercise regime that matters most deeply, not whether you can solve simultaneous equations or analyse the causes of the First World War.

> 'When I was at school and college, I would pride myself on being able to pass doing nothing. It was cooler not to study and pass than to study and pass—do you know what I mean? And I think that's totally wrong now... I'm ashamed of it. I think [writing the scripts for] The Office taught me that the struggle is the best bit... I liked learning the struggle. I've really tried to get good at writing. The pleasure is the journey, looking back and seeing how hard it was... The pure joy of learning is a revelation at forty-something!'
>
> Ricky Gervais[13]

The pressure of being successful

In terms of 'life skills', 'key competencies', or 'essential qualities'—call them what you will—schools are failing high-achieving, as well as low-achieving, students. There is good evidence that high-achievers—especially, but not exclusively, girls—often develop an anxious attitude towards their own

performance that makes them go to pieces in the face of unexpected difficulty, and avoid new kinds of challenges in case they 'look stupid'. They know how to get good marks in school's terms, but lack resilience and adventurousness in a wider sense. They know how to succeed, but they have not learned how to fail, or how to struggle.[14]

This failure to develop resilience, curiosity and independence at school stores up trouble for those bright young people later on. In 2009–10, around 1,500 students sought out the Cambridge University Student Counselling Service. Between 15 and 20% of Cambridge undergraduates will seek counselling at some point during their studies. Mark Phippen, head of the service, says the pressures on them are severe and getting worse. More and more intense spoon-feeding at school renders them less and less capable of coping with these pressures when they arrive. Many of them fear that they are impostors—significantly less capable than they have been helped to appear.

Fear they are impostors

It is the same at Oxford. Alan Percy, clinical director of the Oxford Counselling Service, has charted yearly increases in referrals for debilitating stress and anxiety. If these high-achieving young people cannot achieve quick success, they flounder. As their school courses have become more modularised and packaged, Percy says, so students have been deprived of the opportunity to learn how to grapple over time with genuinely difficult things. Percy notes a paradoxical trend which he calls 'pseudo-maturity': young men and women who seem much more confident and worldly-wise than their more gauche equivalents of 20 or 30 years ago—but who, below the surface, have fewer resources with which to meet difficulty.[15]

Being happy

Unless they are protected from change by living in highly remote places, or within closed societies that deliberately insulate themselves from the complex currents of globalisation, young people find growing up in the twenty-first century hard. From an increasingly young age, they are exposed to multiple pressures and uncertainties concerning such deep issues as livelihood, sustainability, sexuality, loyalty and identity. They have to select and craft for themselves answers to questions such as 'What matters?', 'What shall I become?', 'What am I ready for?', 'Where is my "place", both geographically and socially?' and 'Who is "Us" and who is "Them"?'

In his seminal book *In Over Our Heads,* Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan charts the ways in which young people are now growing up in 'stick-shift' rather than 'automatic' cultures. In an 'automatic' culture, as in an automatic car, much of the decision-making is built into the workings of the culture itself. You have neither the responsibility nor the opportunity to think about these deep questions: your path is largely mapped out by the

In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life.
Robert Kegan

way the culture itself functions. It is pretty clear when to get married and what it means to be a 'husband' or 'wife', for example.[16]

But in a stick-shift (or what in the UK we would call a 'manual') culture, much more is up for grabs. You, the driver, have to decide when to change gear. Different value systems collide daily on our television screens, as we are exposed to an endless fashion parade of learned academics, ardent environmentalists, narcissistic supermodels, gentle gardeners, insouciant fat cats, and misogynistic rappers. If young people are not to be swept away on this torrent of imagery, they have to learn how to think for themselves. And this is both exciting and liberating, and stressful and demanding. Whether young people flourish or flounder depends on the resources they have at their disposal. To swim rather than sink demands a level of mental and emotional development (as well as a good deal of stable and sensible external support) that those who live in more predictable times simply do not need.

The evidence is that a great many young people around the world are indeed struggling to cope. An authoritative comparison of teenagers' mental health between 1974, 1986 and 1999 documented a 'sharp decline' in a range of indicators of well-being. More recent surveys show that these trends are not just continuing but becoming worse. It is not just a few kids at the margins who are skewing the stats, nor is it merely a matter of increased frequency of reporting. Across a wide range of countries and backgrounds, youngsters are struggling to cope.

One of the most reliable sources of happiness turns out to be learning. People report feeling happy with themselves when, like Ricky Gervais quoted earlier, they are engaged in struggling with something difficult but worthwhile; when they feel in charge, and are not being chivvied or criticised by others; and when they are able to become so engrossed in what they are doing that all self-consciousness and self-awareness drops away.[17]

What is happiness?

So when parents say—as they often do—'I just want my child to be happy', here is one of the best pieces of advice. Help them, and get their schools to help them, to discover what it is that they would love to be great at. Help them discover the 'joy of the struggle': the happiness that comes from being rapt in the process, and the quiet pride that comes from making progress on something that matters. And help them to understand and develop the craft of worthwhile learning—how to make best use of imagination, reasoning, concentration, collaboration, and so on. **That is what BLP aims to do.**

A radical rethink for education

Taken together, we (along with many others) believe the arguments for a radical rethink of the priorities and practices of education are overwhelming. And so is the direction in which all these arguments are pointing. If you want that world-class flexible workforce, coach young people in the pleasures and skills of learning. If you want to help young people prepare for the stresses and uncertainties of twenty-first century life, help them to be more resilient. If you want them to be able to join the world of self-organising, resourceful learners, like those young computer whizzes in the slums of New Delhi, give them the confidence to experiment and collaborate.

What do we need to do?

If you believe that there has to be 'another way of winning' in schools, parallel to the examination competition, focus as well on developing the broader qualities and skills young people actually need in the real world. If you are worried about the thousands of young people bored and disengaged by the traditional school offerings, providing a more genuinely problem or enquiry-based approach may just engage them again. If you are worried about the brittleness and conservatism of some of the apparent successes of our system—articulate people with firsts from well-known universities but little resilience or initiative—then we can start them earlier on building those vital dispositions. If you just want to give children the best chance of being happy and fulfilled human beings, you can't do better than give them the passion, the confidence, and the capability to become the best whatever-it-is—hairdresser, dental hygienist, poet, animator, chef—they can possibly be.

Focus on developing qualities and skills for the real world

For all these reasons, we believe that approaches like Building Learning Power are at the very heart of the work of designing schools that will be fit for the twenty-first century. And it is teachers and school leaders who really 'get it' who are making it a reality. The kinds of arguments in this chapter fuel their own conviction, and also give them the ammunition they might need to convince parents, students, and their own colleagues that the journey is vital.