

The futures of education

Responding to global challenges through school-based education

Executive summary

Schools – as social institutions, as well as places of formal education – can promote the values and skills that underpin the culture of a healthy, thriving democracy such as empathy, mutual respect, and social responsibility. Academic subjects can build the foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills that young people need to understand democratic processes and to challenge divisive narratives. While the content of the curriculum matters a great deal, it is only in adopting a whole-of-school approach to resilience that young people can be fully prepared to be active, informed, and responsible members of their schools and wider communities.

In this period of complex challenges, both new and old, facing schools, staff, and students, places of formal education have not been equipped with the tools, space, and resources needed to respond. The toxic impact of disinformation, systemic racism, and the neglect of mental health and wellbeing not only undermines social cohesion at the national level but also adversely affects young people and school environments. Covid-19 has stress-tested education systems and laid bare pre-existing issues. Yet crises present an opportunity to ‘build back better’ and prioritise educational responses that ensure the long-term resilience of societies in the UK and around the world.

In 2020, to support UNESCO’s global consultation on the [Futures of Education](#), Protection Approaches held a series of focus groups with UK-based education experts to confront these challenges and identify workable solutions. These 17 experts included educators, academics and leaders of academy chains. To complement this exercise, we collaborated with [VoteforSchools](#) to ask over 60 young people their views. This paper sets out the concerns and conclusions of those activities.

Key findings:

More time, space, and resources must be given to whole-school, joined-up approaches to resilience through:

1. reframing ‘quality’ education to include the social and civic purposes of education
2. the sharing of best practices amongst schools in the UK and around the world
3. sustained support to educators to enable them to adopt and embed best practices.

Challenges to cohesion: how the education system can respond

“ The pace of change and uncertainty will only accelerate in the future. Young people need to be equipped with a sense of collective responsibility, critical thinking, and resilience to changing circumstances...so that every child can play that full, rich part they all deserve to. ”

- **Leader of academy chain**

The UK and other democracies around the world are facing a growing number of crises. Ongoing crises, including rising political polarisation, public prejudice, and structural inequalities, have challenged the democratic principles of mutual respect, cooperation, and justice. Acute crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic have jeopardized social cohesion and the safety of marginalised groups. These crises have been further aggravated by the spread of disinformation and ‘fake news’ which fuel uncertainty, xenophobia, racism, and conspiracy. In this context, it is vital that schools – as social institutions as well as sites of formal education - are able to prioritise social and civic learning, as it is not just critical to societal cohesion during Covid-19, but has long-term implications for building stronger, more resilient democracies.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has raised critical questions about the ability of education systems to withstand crises and prepare young people to succeed in an increasingly complex world. Educators, young people, and school leaders raised concerns that the renewed focus on creativity, wellbeing, and care during the pandemic will not be sustainable in the long-term without adequate resources, time, and space. They worried that the pressure to meet academic targets will continue to undercut schools’ capacity to support the ‘whole child’ intellectually, socially, and civically. Education systems need to become more responsive and more resilient to crises, both present and future, including against the toxic influence of disinformation, systemic racism, and the neglect of mental health and wellbeing.

To meet these challenges, schools need the time and space to prioritise joined-up, whole-school approaches to resilience that embed empathy, respect for differences, and social responsibility in their ethos. The purpose of schooling is commonly associated with academics; however, ‘quality’ education needs to be reframed in order to include the social and civic purposes of education that nurture the values, attitudes, and behaviours that underpin informed, empathetic, and engaged citizenship. When schools are able to prioritise these dual purposes of education, they can better prepare young people for the world of work; adapt to complex and changing situations; withstand the influences of disinformation; and find positive solutions to conflict together.

A whole-school, joined-up approach to resilience spans schools’ ethos, teaching practices, behavioural policies, administrative processes, and relationships. This is not the job of educators alone – as one participant put it, ‘educators have a particular responsibility, but we need to work with young people, parents, carers, and health and social care workers’ to support the positive development of young people. Key components include:

1. An inclusive school culture and ethos:

“ Inclusive school cultures ensure that every child is able to thrive, develops a sense of social responsibility, and makes it less likely that they will buy into divisive debate - ”

Civil society expert

Inclusive school cultures ensure that students feel that they belong, can contribute to school life, and are responsible for one another. For example, some UK schools have embedded the [Restorative Model](#), which is an approach through which young people learn how to develop mutual respect, take responsibility for transforming conflict, and strengthen the school community.

2. A flexible, varied curriculum:

“ *The civic purpose of education cannot be an add-on but must be threaded through every subject and aspect of the curriculum* - **Leader of academy chain** ”

In addition to core subjects, cross-cutting themes that are central to positive citizenship include digital literacy, ethics, peace education, human rights, values-based education, and citizenship. Seeking opportunities to integrate these topics in the curriculum will enable young people to be better able to critically interpret news and information; learn about different life experiences; discover the root causes of prejudice and inequality; and become more compassionate, civic-minded citizens.

3. Interactive, creative teaching practices:

“ *Education should be done with, not to, young people...to empower them to create their own futures.* - **Civil society expert** ”

As teaching encompasses *what*, as well as *how*, young people learn, teaching practices that are interactive, creative, and student-centred can empower young people to put their ideas into action. Examples include using oracy practices, dialogue and ‘circles learning’ as ways to foster active listening, multi-perspectivity, empathy, and wellbeing. Outside the classroom, outdoor learning and technology can connect young people with each other, the wider world, and the planet. Sustained teacher training can support educators to adopt and embed these practices.

4. Space for student voices:

“ *Educate people on more things than just academics including the uncomfortable subjects like sexism and homophobia - having more open-conversations in a learning environment could help change opinions* - **Students in Years 11-13** ”

Creating space positive debate and ‘the power of meaningful conversation’ are ways for young people to build skills such as inquiry, curiosity, and empathy. Facilitating conversations about ‘difficult’ issues such as homophobia, racism, and sexism can enable young people to discover the root causes of and solutions to identity-based harms. Conversational and interpersonal skills can also make young people more resilient to the divisive forces of disinformation and polarisation.

5. Community Partnerships:

“ *Schools need to be more responsive to the communities we serve...to work together to make a difference* - **Leader of academy chain** ”

Partnering with community organisations can foster connections with and societal responsibility to the local area. Partnering with other schools can help illuminate and tackle barriers to inclusion. Meaningful work with parents and carers can help them feel part of the school community, break down barriers to engagement, and empower them to support learners at home.

Recommendations

“ We need to work together in coherent and cooperative ways for long-term visions of education, so that everything is in place to support teachers and young people - ”
Leader of academy chain

To ensure that schools are able to prioritise both individual and collective resilience through whole-school approaches, educational experts and young people called for:

- **Reframing the meaning of ‘quality education’** beyond academic targets and access to learning in order to include the social and civic purposes of education.
- **Supporting research and innovation** through the sharing of principles and best practices in the UK and internationally, including Restorative justice practices, peace education, human rights education, and values-based education. Participants were eager for there to be an ongoing forum to share best practices, learn from one another, and consider how to apply learning to their specific contexts. Participants recognised that examples of best practice already exist in many UK schools, and that amplifying these success stories and providing support to further implementation is key.
- **Providing sustained support to educators** to enable them to adopt and feel confident practicing interactive methodologies and holding space for ‘difficult’ conversations. Participants recognised that one-off workshops are insufficient; instead, sustained, in-school support is vital to ensure that educators are empowered to adapt methodologies to their contexts.

Individuals and organisations consulted include:

Beki Martin, Executive Director, Facing History UK

Claire Hardy, Co-Founder & Managing Director, Move the World

Deborah Mitchell, CEO, RJ Working

Ellis Brooks, Peace Education Coordinator, Quakers in Britain

Eric Murangwa Eugene, Founder & CEO, Ishami Foundation

Hugh Starkey, Professor of Citizenship and Human Rights Education, UCL Institute of Education, University College London

James Trewby, Justice & Peace Education Worker, Columbans

John Murphy, CEO, Oasis Community Learning

Julian Drinkall, CEO, Academies Enterprise Trust

Kavita Tanna, Global Education Consultant, Inspire Citizens and Collaborative Learning Network

Nicola Wetherall, Founder, Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Programme, Royal Wootton Bassett Academy

Penny Lamb, Director of Partnerships, VotesforSchools

Phill Gittins, Education Director, World BEYOND War

Rebecca Boomer-Clark, Director of Secondary, Ark Schools

Stephen Edwards, Director of Partnerships, Star Academies