

Ideas to redesign education systems

Garden, Kitchen, Forest

“There are only two things that are wrong with today’s education: what we teach and how we teach it.”

Roger Schank

“The real challenges that humanity faces will only be solved by empowering those teachers who are creative and enthusiastic, and by stimulating the imagination and motivation of the students.”

Ken Robinson

“Go out into nature and open your heart and mind to the mystery, the magic and the majesty of the natural world.”

Satish Kumar

Over recent years, our society has changed radically. Educational systems and schools have been unable to adapt to this transformation, and have all too often become seats of boredom and frustration. They follow their own inertia and insist on instructing our children and youngsters in a way that has become obsolete and that underpins an unsustainable system which is in crisis. Often that involves a lack of respect towards the students and an attack on the development of their potential and talents, from within the education system itself.

The final aim of schools seems to be to prepare students to compete hard for a job that, should you be fortunate enough to get and keep it, means you will be serving the global industrialization and commodity market.

What's more, this all takes place within a hostile environment. Schools surrounded by fences, concrete- covered play areas, deplorable ergonomics that go from inadequate classroom acoustics and lighting to badly designed desks and chairs that are unsuitable to be used for hours on end.

This model outgrew its usefulness a long time ago. An educational institution created to teach the masses and provide the Industrial Revolution with submissive workers and technicians, simply makes no sense in the reality of the 21st century workplace and society.

How can we appreciate certain educational experiences, if we can barely measure them by purely quantitative tests? What happens with qualities as important as creativity, critical thinking, motivation, persistence, sense of humour, enthusiasm, public spirit, self-awareness, self-discipline, empathy, cooperation, leadership or compassion?

We do not know which will be the specific abilities that our students will need tomorrow, but we can sense that this is an ever-evolving world that they will have to adapt to, by constantly developing new skills.

It is time now to push for a qualitative leap, from academic standardization to a real Education: an organic, humanist, collaborative and multidisciplinary process whose aim is for students to be able to answer the following questions: Who am I? Who are those around me? What is the world I am part of really like and how does it work? How can I be physically, emotionally and mentally self-sufficient? How can I become a person who has freedom of thought and criteria? What tools, languages, skills and capacities do I have which will let me relate and collaborate in a constructive way? What talents and skills make me happy and how can I offer them to society?

If we want to evolve, from training obedient workers to educating citizens with their own criteria, who can find their way in a changing world and who can solve a multitude of challenges we have never faced before, we need to initiate a transition that allows for education systems to be profoundly reinterpreted and redesigned.

We need a wider and more regenerative framework, a new paradigm in education. We need a new model in which those at school or university no longer go to study, but attend to learn and to thrive. Education cannot be merely a way to get the skills to land a job in an office, but a process that teaches people how to care for themselves, their communities and their surroundings.

Integrating the ecological trilogy of garden, kitchen, forest into the curriculum can be a catalyst for the transformation of a school, helping it become a veritable community of comprehensive learning. Let us see how:

Cultivating a food garden at school and using it as a resource in the school canteen is an ideal project that nurtures the experience of thinking systemically and of living the principles of ecology in action. Growing food at school reconnects children with the basics of nature and of a healthy diet, while integrating and breathing life into every other activity taking place there.

In the school garden you learn to plant, cultivate, harvest, compost and recycle. Through this practice, you also learn that the garden is nested within larger systems: the water cycle, the cycles of the seasons, symbiosis, the cycle of life and death... which are none other than the connections of the planetary web of nature.

The garden allows us to recover the healthy habit of teaching outdoors and is a perfect place to learn Biology, Mathematics, Economy, Literature, Language, Geography, Arts, Sciences... These learning spaces are rich in shapes, textures, colours, smells and sounds from the real world, which are essential to the all-around development of children, both cognitively and emotionally. Learning in the garden is learning in the natural world. It is beneficial to the development of the student and to the school community, and is one of the best ways in which children can receive environmental education and thus be able to contribute to the construction of a sustainable future.

Another very special type of classroom, where systemic visions can be explored, is the kitchen. If a school has a well-equipped kitchen where students and teachers prepare food together and integrate it into the educational process, that school has a treasure. Tasty, wholesome food is necessary for a good community, and cooking together teaches many skills. When the children are in the kitchen or in the garden, working with their hands, together with their classmates and teachers, they will obtain information, knowledge and experience, all at once. It is no longer about theoretical simulations, but about real experiences that can also be savoured.

A large percentage of university students have not learnt, neither at home nor at school, to cook adequate meals, and when the time comes to become independent, they rely on ultra-processed foods.

Nature is the best teacher, and when children can have regular contact (daily or weekly) with a forest or natural ecosystem, this is a huge gift for them, as it awakens their senses and stimulates their curiosity. It is precisely curiosity that is the driving force behind learning. This innate trait points at the capacity of the brain to create new synapses and develop existing ones. When a child feels curious about something, s/he is ready to come out of their comfort zone and face situations that are a challenge to overcome. Boys and girls need natural environments where they can move and explore, and there is nothing like a forest to fire up their curiosity.

Some immediate benefits from taking students to a forest are the improvement of their hand and body motor skills and of their concentration. It also provides them with more confidence in themselves, more capacity to analyse risks, and promotes team work and cooperation.

Outdoor classes and breathing fresh air strengthens their immune system. Activities like running, walking on uneven ground or climbing trees stimulate a type of learning in which children process information by associating it with their sensations and body movements, which leads to a solid and profound learning.

In the forest, everything can be used as a teaching aid. There is so much that can be done with the huge variety of species of plants, animals, stones and soil that nature has to offer.

The garden, the kitchen and the forest, when used as classrooms, become laboratories of diversity and complexity, interweaving social functions and natural processes. Using them as such, amplifies perspectives; prompting us to examine the relationships between disciplines, and to develop abilities that are often undervalued in the academic curriculum. Their use must not be limited to something occasional or anecdotal, but should instead be integrated into the school rhythms; they can even be an axis around which many multidisciplinary projects can revolve. In this way, they can even become the lever that we so need to change the direction in educational paradigms.