



SHAPE

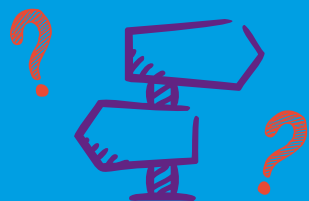
Education for a changing society

What is blocking real change in education?

Key outcomes from the April 2021
SHAPE Education event

What is blocking real change in education?

SHAPE



No consensus on the purpose of education

What is education actually *for*? What does it *do*? Many advocate for change, but lack of agreement on the detail and reasons leads to educational inertia.



Accountability, responsibility and agency

Who is responsible for bringing meaningful change to educational systems? Who can we trust to get it right? Children are undaunted but unempowered; adults are empowered but trapped in old-fashioned hierarchical accountability structures. And limited funding can make it difficult to bring about real change even when we are otherwise ready.



False dichotomy: school vs 'real life'

A focus on content knowledge without adequate focus on skills can lead to a disconnect between school and other parts of life, such as individual wellbeing or interpersonal relationships. And tech use inside schools doesn't look like tech use outside schools.



'What society needs' vs 'what I want for my own children'

Nobody wants children to be unsafe, or to go through 'innovative' experiences with unknown long-term consequences. Parents effectively say: 'Great idea to reform education – except when it comes to my child!'



How to prepare for an uncertain future

Fear of the unknown may explain much conservatism worldwide, in education and in other realms of life. Are people truly willing to change their lives today in order to prepare things for the next generation(s)? Does anyone really know the long-term effects of our short-term choices?



The mistake of equating technology with innovation

We need to ask: what does tech do better than non-tech solutions in education? When we do introduce tech into education, how can we support teachers and learners to make the most of it? Are we challenging ourselves enough to think about innovation that is not tech-led? How can we avoid losing the rich inherited expertise of those practitioners about to retire?

Introduction

Aims of the report

SHAPE events bring audiences together around specific themes to collaborate in discussion and design thinking, focusing on specific users, and identifying significant challenges, constraints and opportunities. This report aims to capture the predictions, ideas and opportunities generated at the SHAPE event held on 21 April 2021.

The report is structured around six key themes that emerged, all of which centred around one key question: What is blocking real change in education? The outcomes reported aim to extend the conversation around how best to dismantle these blockers, where to start (or continue) to make a difference, and where our actions might have the most desirable impact.

Context of the event

The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being felt by individuals, organisations and countries worldwide. While crises can create positive opportunities for change, their reverberations can also damage well-set foundations. Despite tireless efforts by teachers, learners, parents, institutions and governments to continue education during this period of incredible stress and uncertainty, we must not forget the bigger picture. One day, the pandemic will be over, and the next generation of bright young minds will still need an education system that supports and prepares them for their future in the wider world.

The field of education traditionally moves slowly and is resistant to change. There are many players, from many backgrounds, with many different priorities and vested interests, and ultimately, each individual is responsible for making change happen. Research conducted during the pandemic (Cambridge Partnership for Education and EDUCATE Ventures 2021) has shown that ineffective connections and communications between the people and players in the

educational ecosystem have prevented real change, and that too little attention has been paid to the system as a whole.

An all-day SHAPE event held virtually on 21 April 2021 aimed to take a step towards addressing this disconnect by bringing together people representing key elements of the educational ecosystem. The purpose was to develop an understanding of some of the challenges experienced by those trying to change the education world, and to begin to explore where to focus future effort in order to achieve the greatest impact.

The event focused on two areas revealed by pre-event research as key blockers to real change in education: the importance of mindset and a lack of understanding and experience of digital pedagogy. Five education experts from diverse professional contexts gave short presentations and 'fireside chats', which were interspersed with breakout discussions in which attendees reflected on the issues raised and what might be done about them.

Methodology

A qualitative analysis was conducted to identify the key themes that emerged from the day's rich content. Source materials included notes taken in real time throughout the event by a specialist observer/researcher, sketchnotes produced live on the day by a graphic artist, presenters' slides and audience polls, as well as video recordings and transcripts of the presentations and discussions. These source texts were read and reread in several 'passes'. Key points were coded and these codes were grouped according to emergent themes, which were then synthesised into the six 'blockers'.

It is important to note that this report reflects the outcomes of a single event. As such, the focus and discussion may have been influenced by the topics of the presentations, speaker and attendee backgrounds, and the grouping of attendees for breakout discussions. The report reflects the presentations and discussions of those present on the day, with a view to providing a useful basis for future discussion and thus a step in moving – collectively – from discussion to action.

Speakers



Andreas Schleicher

Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills
OECD



Dr Alison Wood

Academic Director, Homerton Changemakers
University of Cambridge



Valerie Hannon

Board Director
Innovation Unit



Mohit Midha

Co-founder
Mangahigh



Jon Smith

Co-founder and CEO
Pobble



Watch the recordings from the April 2021 SHAPE Education event ▶

Attendees

Additionally, approximately 60 people attended the event, bringing their experience from various parts of the whole educational ecosystem, from primary schools to higher education, not-for-profit organisations to edtech start-ups. All participated in the breakout discussions, and the insights contained in this report represent the combined contributions of both named speakers and attendees.

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Executive summary

The virtual SHAPE Education event held on 21 April 2021 aimed to address one key question: What is blocking real change in education?

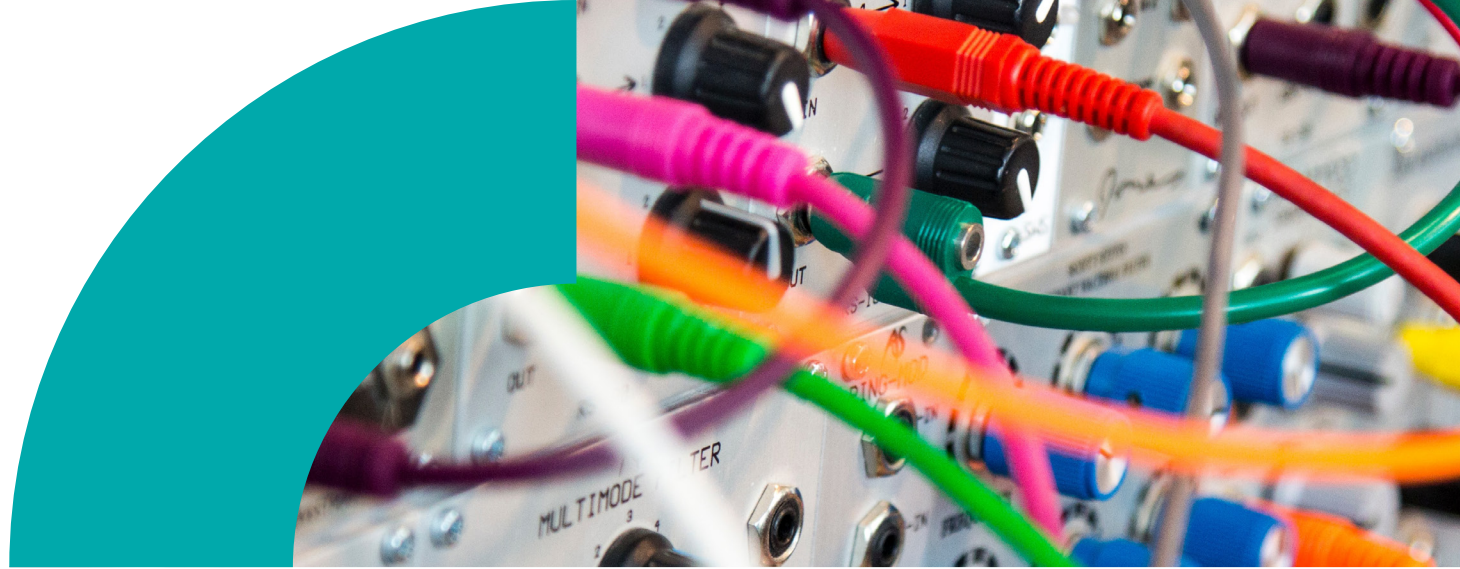
An initial answer appeared to be the need to shift the collective mindset. However, this approach was deemed too broad to be actionable, and too idealistic to be practical. A greater focus was needed on three key points: what it really *means* to shift mindset; why conservatism in education persists when there are clearly so many eager minds and innovative approaches; and why, when we demonstrate such a strong will, we have yet to find a way.

Perhaps a more useful approach, and a helpful strategy to avoid change simply for change's sake, is to break down the abstract issues of conservatism and mindset into things that can be tackled practically. From this starting point, a closer analysis of the key themes revealed six broad apparent blockers to meaningful change in education:

Blockers to change

1. A lack of agreement about the purpose of education and therefore what needs to change.
2. Accountability, responsibility and agency – whose job is it to enact change?
3. A false dichotomy between school and 'real life'.
4. Dissonance between what people think society needs and what people want for their own children.
5. The inherent unpredictability of the future and how to respond to this.
6. The mistake of equating technology with innovation.

Each of these points relates in some way to the difficulty of bringing about fundamental changes in mindset.



Recommendations


Identifying major blockers to meaningful educational change is just the first step. This learning then needs to be put into practice. Fortunately, there is considerable overlap between the issues outlined here; in some cases, a single powerful recommendation may help address multiple blockers. The list below is grouped into several key areas of focus, and numbers 1–6 indicate those recommendations that relate to one or more of the specific blockers identified in this report.

Identifying major blockers to meaningful educational change is just the first step. This learning then needs to be put into practice.

Embrace complexity

1. Avoid the trap of looking for one big solution.

Education, let alone making changes to long-held educational practice, is extremely complex. The most effective methods and resources vary by context and by individual. Consider that many small behaviours or changes, apparently insignificant on their own, can have huge cumulative effects over time. Perhaps the best way to bring about meaningful change in education is for every individual to do their part to tackle small elements of the system that are within their sphere of influence.

Blocker  2

2. Plan flexibly for the future.

Do not try to predict or to plan one utopian vision of the future of education – there are too many unknown and unknowable factors. Instead, consider multiple alternative scenarios and work iteratively so that goals and methods can be adapted, if necessary, to meet new needs as they arise.

Blockers  4,  5









Rethink the curriculum and syllabus

3. Think systemically.

Look at all parts of the education system, all players within that system, and how those parts and players interact with other systems. Instead of asking: ‘Why don’t these learners fit in this system?’, consider asking ‘Why don’t our systems fit these learners?’

Blockers  1,  2,  4,  5

4. Focus on both content knowledge and skills.

In particular, do not overlook the importance of intra-personal awareness and interpersonal relationships in education. As some commentators argued, we have a real responsibility to enable young people to learn to live with themselves. Every person in the world benefits from having skills and strategies for communicating effectively with others and with oneself. The best way to deal with an ever-changing world is to be prepared to adapt one’s practices and attitudes throughout life.

Blockers  3,  5

5. Do not treat ‘school’ or ‘learning’ as separate from real life.

Ensure that what happens in class is relevant to learners’ lives outside class. This means not focusing only on content knowledge, but also including the development of socio-emotional and interpersonal skills as fundamental throughout all years and contexts of learning.

Blockers  3,  6

Instead of asking: ‘Why don’t these learners fit in this system?’, consider asking ‘Why don’t our systems fit these learners?’



Include diverse voices in the conversation


6. Include those participating in learning experiences every day in research and discussions on education.

For example, research conducted by teachers and learners themselves could contribute key insights to wider decision-making processes. Ensure these teachers and learners have adequate time, funding and support to undertake such valuable work.

Blockers  2,  6


7. Harness the power of collaboration.

In particular, foreground the importance of including young people themselves in discussions and decisions about their future. Events could feature speakers and participants from an even wider range of ages and backgrounds.

Blocker  2

8. Help young people to contribute their perspectives.

When including young people in discussions about how formal education can prepare them for their future lives, ensure suitable support or scaffolding is available so they have the requisite skills and tools to express their thoughts on the matter.

Blockers  2

9. Empower people at all levels, and on a local scale.

This may facilitate a consensus on what they are trying to achieve in their context and how best to do this. Giving more people a voice and a real practical influence will enable each individual to bring about change and be more likely to feel a sense of ownership in the process, which may also lead to more effective systems of accountability.

Blockers  1,  2,  4

In particular, foreground the importance of including young people themselves in discussions and decisions about their future.



Provide support, funding and training

10. Provide more time and funding for teacher and learner training.

Appropriate training in using digital devices effectively will help ensure that they complement (rather than replace) non-digital tools and methods. Help teachers and learners transfer their skills in using technology outside class to using technology *for learning*. Avoid simply supplying tech and hoping the user will know what to do with it.

Blockers 📱 3, 🧠 6

11. Ensure support and training for teachers are provided continuously/frequently.

Otherwise, people will be less likely to follow up in their everyday practice what they learned during a training session.

Blockers 📱 2, 🧠 6

12. Facilitate ‘low-stakes’ or ‘no-stakes’ opportunities for teachers and learners to try new things.

Remove the fear of experimentation or innovation by removing the risk of failure or negative judgement (e.g. in inspections or evaluations), at least temporarily. Ensure teachers have some freedom to deviate from everyday practices and to reflect on the difference this makes. This might range from smaller teacher- and learner-led changes, to trialling new learning products or exploring a new approach, such as experiential learning.

Blockers 📱 2, 🧠 6

Finally, remember that real change takes time and co-operation from all involved.

Remove the fear of experimentation or innovation by removing the risk of failure or negative judgement (e.g. in inspections or evaluations), at least temporarily.



Blockers to real change in education

Blocker 1 A lack of agreement on the purpose(s) of education and therefore what needs to change

Blocker 2 Accountability, responsibility and agency – whose job is it to enact change?

Blocker 3 A false dichotomy between school and ‘real life’

Blocker 4 Dissonance between what people think society needs and what people want for their own children

Blocker 5 The inherent unpredictability of the future and how to respond to this

Blocker 6 The mistake of equating technology with innovation

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Blocker 1

A lack of agreement on the purpose(s) of education and therefore what needs to change

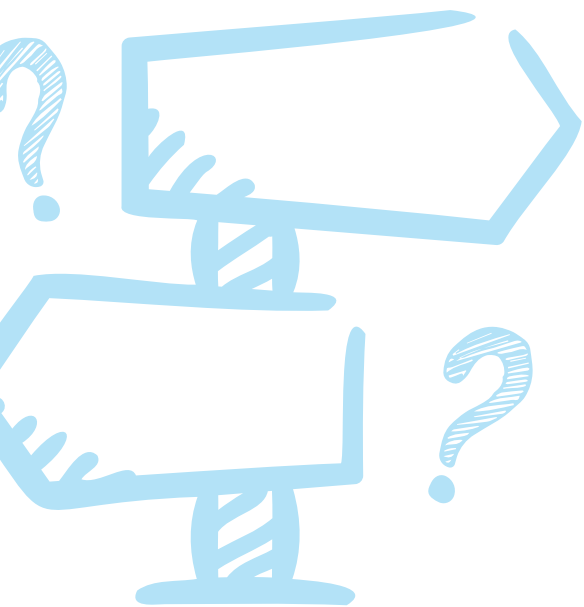


Throughout the day, one question arose several times – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly: **What is education actually for, and what does it do?** One participant noted that, given the fundamental lack of consensus on the purpose of education, it is perhaps unsurprising that a fear of change exists at a political level and that change is stifled. Several people suggested that education is often ‘seen as a goal for career, success, power and advancement in social status’, making nations more prosperous by increasing growth (usually defined as gross domestic product (GDP)), creating jobs and facilitating social mobility. But Alison Wood observed that, while systems of interest, platform, power and economy may underlie current motivations for education globally, ‘at heart is an *imaginative* change’. A wider social change may be needed – a change in mindset that views schools as part of a wider education ecosystem. Valerie Hannon’s suggestion to this end, echoed by several participants, was that if different types of organisation were

to partner with each other, schools could act as ‘choreographers of learning’ rather than gatekeepers or founts of all knowledge, bringing a range of resources to learners via an extended web of expertise.

But what of these resources? Even in this imagined alternative future educational ecosystem, what are we bringing together to feed young minds, and why? What skills are we trying to develop? Andreas Schleicher argued that whereas traditional educational models have prioritised the acquisition of content knowledge over real-life skills, the world increasingly rewards us for what we can *do* with what we know. He also observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened global interest in socio-emotional skills that enable us to live with ourselves, as well as to distinguish fact from opinion (which, he notes, PISA data suggests only 9% of students are currently able to do (OECD 2019)). Other participants agreed that such real-life skills are critical:

education should help young people to build better intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, to gain an awareness of the range of value and knowledge systems that exist within society and to appreciate the world as seen ‘through different lenses’. Alison Wood reiterated the importance of this for the future of humanity – these are core, not ‘soft’, skills. But despite this, education currently tends not to be designed specifically around such social and global learning experiences, and potentially only covers these at certain levels/age groups or as add-ons, rather than across multiple areas and stages of learning.



Key insights and implications

1. With so many different ideas about the purpose of education all pulling in different directions, is it any wonder if the result is educational inertia? Perhaps large-scale consensus is unlikely anyway, given all the different factors, stakeholders and contexts involved in learning globally. It may be more realistic to empower people at a smaller scale so that – once they agree on the purpose and goals of their education system – they will be able practically to bring about meaningful change. (See Blocker 2, below, for a discussion of who would then be responsible and accountable for such change.)
2. We need a new vocabulary that can undermine the current dominant narrative. Andreas Schleicher suggested that a common language in education would enable us to better share and discuss our experiences; similarly, Valerie Hannon suggested that starting a new conversation at all levels, focused on considering a new paradigm with far-reaching consequences, would help us avoid simply ‘getting better at a bad game’.
3. There was a sense among some participants that governments tend to focus attention and funding on areas that educational practitioners would actually deem as lower priority. For example:
 - A significant amount of public money has been spent on new tech, but not much has changed in the fundamental focus of our education systems.

- Similarly, a lot of effort is invested in creating new tech instead of harnessing what already exists and providing adequate time, funding and infrastructure for teachers to explore these tools and how they might be used with learners.
- Poll responses¹ indicated that two strategies by which some governments try to support digital adoption (centralising school procurement procedures and building resources/tools centrally for schools) are also the two things participants at this event are *least* interested in. Rather, participants’ responses overwhelmingly prioritised funding and teacher training as areas in which the government could better support the development of digital pedagogies.
- 4. Participants recognised that political leaders are also people, and often parents. However, at least one participant pointed out that if political leaders send their children to private schools, they may struggle to empathise with the ‘pain’ felt by many parents nationally, or indeed globally. It is clearly important for all stakeholders in the outcomes of education to listen to and understand each other’s experiences in order to reach an agreement on the purpose(s) and value(s) of education.

¹ Responses of 30 participants to a live poll held during the SHAPE event on 21 April 2021, asking ‘In what area can the government do most to support digital adoption?’

Blocker 2

Accountability, responsibility and agency – whose job is it to enact change?



One recurring theme of the day was the word ‘accountability’. Speakers and participants asked who was responsible for bringing about meaningful change to educational systems and who they could trust to get it right. When polled directly about whose mindsets and attitudes should be prioritised for change, 16 of 34 respondents chose ‘politicians’ above all, followed by ‘teachers’ (10 respondents). Students themselves were prioritised by only one respondent.²

There was also a sense that the pace of change is determined (and often slowed) by the fact that multiple parties are simultaneously working on different goals, or else waiting for somebody else to take an active lead. These were frequently identified by participants as politicians or school leaders, i.e. those theoretically able to give more funding for resources and support for teachers, yet typically perceived as not doing so (or not doing enough). It could be that politicians in

² Responses of 34 participants to a live poll held during the SHAPE event on 21 April 2021, asking ‘Whose mindsets and attitudes should we prioritise to change?’

charge of education do not themselves have experience or expertise; it could also be due to political interests and the fundamental conflict between the frequency of elections (every few years) and the time it takes to see the potentially beneficial effects of educational change (many years); or it could be that funding does exist but is very limited or (in some stakeholders' opinions) spent on things that are not the highest priority.

Many participants also highlighted the role of teachers in driving the will for change within their own classrooms and institutions, even despite a lack of time or influence to make major systemic changes. Some teachers will strongly advocate for change but, as one participant asked, what can they really do if they work in an environment with a leader who does not agree with their approach? Ultimately, as Andreas Schleicher suggests, the typical structures and dynamics of power may themselves hinder the creation of conditions in which educators can respond and improvise in more agile, innovative ways. Current hierarchical accountability structures tend to encourage compliance rather than innovation, whereas more lateral structures within local contexts may lead to better shared accountability. For example, teachers' sense of accountability may be enhanced if they truly felt they co-owned the profession and shared professional standards.

Finally, an implicit question was raised over whether children can rely on adults to bring about positive change in education. One participant noted that, somewhere along the way, we are 'taught to be grown-ups', which unfortunately entails forgetting how to be creative. And under Blocker 1, above, we saw that the purpose of education is not obvious, so even those with creative minds cannot easily answer a question that nobody agrees on. Valerie Hannon added that any attempt to answer this question must involve young

people themselves, who currently tend to 'feel they are not listened to (nor helped to think about the issues seriously)'. One participant gave examples of two young people (10 and 15 years old) who needed no prompting to suggest what changes they would like to see in education – but when asked how to go about it, replied: 'That's your job!' They were unable, unprepared or perhaps simply unwilling to be agents for change. Another participant suggested that the Can Do attitude many of us see in young people is, unfortunately, 'quashed' once they get to school in favour of 'doing as they're told, learning what they're meant to learn, etc.'





Key insights and implications

1. Sharing accountability laterally, among different stakeholders in the educational ecosystem at a local or regional level, could lead to a more flexible and responsive approach – in Alison Wood’s terms, to being more ‘epistemically humble’, i.e. knowing when it is your time to take the lead versus when it is more appropriate for another ‘instrument in the orchestra’ to become more dominant. In other words, there are times when both learners and teachers can, and should, lead on what is appropriate with regards to how the curriculum is applied and to innovation in learning.
2. In terms of technology, time and support – both pedagogical and financial – are key barriers to implementation. If we want teachers to come up with innovations in digital pedagogy, we must give them time, space and support to do so. Practical suggestions from participants ranged from removing the ‘overwhelming bureaucracy’ that many teachers face, to giving teachers ‘permission to take risks, to fail’, to providing more funding for training – not merely supplying digital devices, but helping teachers use them to enhance learning. Until such support is in place, Andreas Schleicher’s observation that ‘pedagogy is a long way from the world we want’ will likely remain true.
3. Similarly, standardised inspections and evaluations (e.g. by official or government bodies) can lead teachers to fear any deviation from the norm. To have space for innovation, teachers need the ‘freedom to experiment or try things out’.
4. The OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project (OECD n.d.) endeavours to include young people’s voices in shaping educational change, but it is important to

remember that they may not be ready or able to answer questions about the future that they want without adequate support or scaffolding. They may also feel powerless to bring about the changes they desire.

5. Though not explored in depth in this event, systemic inequalities may be partly responsible for the absence of young people’s voices in this discussion. One participant gave an anecdotal example of children in his country of residence needing their parents to enrol them for sports teams, rather than this being arranged at school. We can infer that those children whose parents have less time than the parents next door, for example, may be unfairly excluded from important conversations about issues such as how their education prepares them for their future lives.

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Blocker 3

A false dichotomy between school and ‘real life’



A number of presentations and breakout discussions raised the issue that school is often seen (or treated) as separate from other parts of life, such as individual well-being, interpersonal relationships, use of technology, and so on. This is despite young people reporting that they want to see more direct connections between what they do in school and what they do outside. Mohit Midha argued that the world moves at a faster pace than the education system and that, for example, the use of technology in schools does not resemble young people’s use of technology outside school. He asked us to consider the child who plays video games in their room with other children around the world, then steps into a classroom ‘in a monochrome world, learning the same things at the same pace as everyone else’, or the child who gets stuck on Question 4 of a 10-question worksheet from school, but who ‘needs his iPad snatched away from him after 4 hours because he’s so engrossed – is this the same child?’, Midha asks.

Several speakers pointed out that teaching young people now in the way we were taught a generation(s) ago is problematic, and similarly, Valerie Hannon suggested that academics risk ‘working in a bubble while society grapples with its problems’. The point here seems to be that by spending more time talking *about* education than actively participating in it – experimenting, iterating, innovating, then reflecting – we end up with situations like the one reported by one participant whose teenage daughter feels that school is not a welcoming place for teens because it is too disconnected from their everyday reality outside school. She argued that only one day every two months or so is not nearly enough for dedicated discussion of issues of everyday significance, such as personal and social relationships or well-being. This has obvious parallels between the minimal training and support offered to many teachers – one hour or even a whole day of training per month/term/year is unlikely

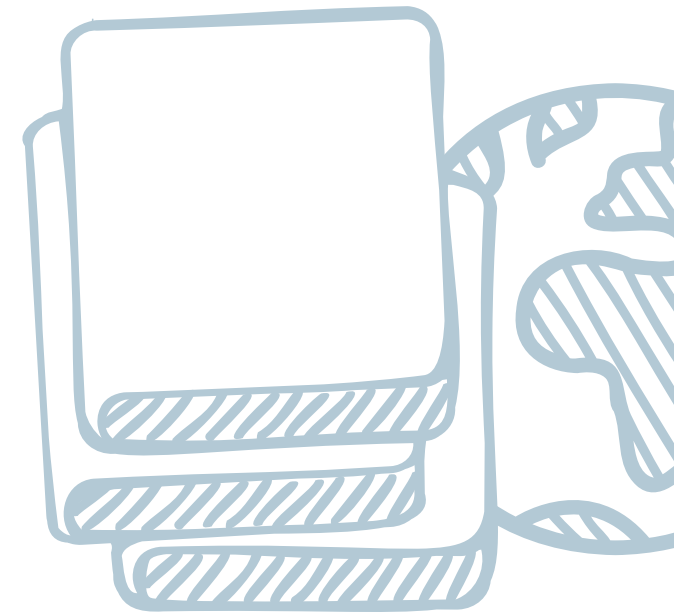
to be sufficient to help teachers become very comfortable with using new technologies effectively in their teaching.

On a more positive note, however, there was some suggestion that the COVID-19 pandemic has already had an impact in terms of opening people's minds to new possibilities they might otherwise not have had time or opportunity to consider. Remarks to this effect from various contributors included:

- 'Some things we've learned to do during COVID will probably stay because they're just genuinely a better way of doing things.'
- 'We may not be getting it perfect this year, but it has at least shown us that there are alternative ways of doing things.'
- COVID has forced us to see other ways of thinking – where certain processes have hitherto been done entirely offline, 'the pandemic has forced people to find a way to do them virtually'.
- It is not necessarily the same pupils who thrive online and who thrive in the classroom – 'quieter kids often thrive online'.
- 'I think we will find that parents have now been exposed to education – albeit via an online environment – and now know they have choices, such as blended, hybrid, remote, global, etc. Mindset is already changing.'

Key insights and implications

1. There is a disconnect between the very social world we inhabit and the way subject matter is taught in schools. If we agree³ that socio-emotional and interpersonal skills are a critical part of preparing young people for their future lives, then why are our schools and curricula still not deliberately designed to facilitate the development of these skills?
2. The blurring of lines between school, work and home that were brought about globally by the COVID-19 pandemic may have some positive impact on how people conceptualise the purpose(s) and best method(s) of formal and informal education. Time will tell whether any of the changes that educators, parents and students were forced to adopt due to widespread school closures will remain in place longer term.
3. Academic study and discussion of education should not be divorced from the everyday reality of those 'at the chalkface'. Research conducted by teachers and learners themselves⁴ could contribute valuable insights to the decision-making processes of those in positions of power and influence. Potentially, this could lead to meaningful change, at least at local levels, and therefore a greater sense among teachers and young people that their input and experience is truly valued and heard.



³ But see the discussion of Blocker 1, above.

⁴ However, do not forget the issue of limited funding, as discussed under Blocker 2, above.

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Blocker 4

Dissonance between what people think society needs and what people want for their own children

This dissonance could partly be explained by a fear of the unknown that is simply part of the human condition. Andreas Schleicher pointed out the inherent tension between the long-term consequences of short-term choices and costs: until some years have passed, we simply do not have full visibility of the results of today's educational practices and policies. One example suggested by a participant was that of school-leaving qualifications from generation to generation. How is a 40-something parent to understand the relation between their

16-year-old's exam and the one they themselves sat many years ago? What does a grade 'A', '1' or '5' really mean, and do these different scores really have the same practical value across generations? Conversely, parents may feel they know what is best for their children because they have been through school themselves so know 'what works'. One participant observed that this apprenticeship of observation is a powerful force for preserving the status quo: the notion that 'what worked for me will do just fine for my child'.



Of course, it is understandable that people do not want their children to be the subject of some grand experiment, even if they claim generally to believe that change is necessary and good. As one participant remarked, nobody wants children to be unsafe, or to go through ‘innovative’ experiences with unknown long-term consequences. Many of the participants in this event were themselves parents or guardians, and admitted – despite their very participation in these future-focused discussions – a reluctance to embrace radical change to the education systems that their own children were currently going through. One participant commented on the ‘fantastic force for conservatism’ that exists throughout education, echoing Andreas Schleicher’s earlier observations that ‘everyone supports reform – except for their own children’ and, more generally, that ‘even those who promote reforms often change their mind when they understand what change entails for them’.

Key insights and implications

1. Questioning education, restructuring it, and redistributing the power balance is just too disruptive for people to handle. One participant argued that education is no different from any other ‘perpetual system’, whether in society or any other sphere, in that even if it fails to work, it suits everyone for it to remain stable.
2. We often speak of ‘real change in education’ as if education were a universal, monolithic object, whereas, in reality, it is extremely variable, as are learners themselves. Many participants agreed that we should think more systemically, but one actually suggested flipping the notion of systems around: instead of asking, ‘Why don’t these children fit in this system?’ we should ask ‘Why don’t our systems fit these children?’
3. Theories commonly discussed in other fields, such as marginal gains in sport (London Business Forum 2016) or microaggressions in studies of racism (Vassell 2020), hold that many small behaviours or changes, apparently insignificant on their own, can have huge cumulative effects over time. Some participants’ comments reflected similar ways of thinking, noting that people always think there is a ‘big thing to do’ but that in fact, the best way to bring about meaningful change in education is by tackling many small elements of the system.



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Blocker 5

The inherent unpredictability of the future and how to respond to this



Many of the day's keynote sessions and follow-up discussions made the point that we do not know precisely what skills children will need in the years to come. However, several speakers and participants also pointed out that this may explain, if not excuse, the extent of conservatism currently seen in education systems worldwide. Mohit Midha observed, for example, that if students leave formal education without adequate grounding in creativity, problem-solving, etc., they will be ill-prepared for whatever the future holds. He argued that we must be 'nimble', see how the world is changing

and consider more than just content or curriculum. Andreas Schleicher reiterated this point, advocating an approach that is 'less hung up on making predictions and more open to different futures'. Only by imagining alternative futures and their implications for educational policy and practice can we prepare young people to address future challenges facing humanity and the planet – i.e. only by doing this can we address the future of the world, not just our education systems.

The difficulty of thinking about the future in such an open-ended way is that it entails a significant change in mindset and behaviour for many people. It means understanding the need to make trade-offs between present and future, and a willingness to change our lives today in order to prepare things for the next generation(s). While this may seem a lot for adults now to handle, a number of participants noted that children appear undaunted. Their Can Do attitude and the availability of more tools than ever before that give them a voice and an audience, such as social media, will arguably enable the upcoming generation to self-identify, communicate and problem-solve in new ways. However, some participants countered that the flipside of such empowerment and influence is that it may generate issues with mental health that are arguably unprecedented in seriousness and scale.

Key insights and implications

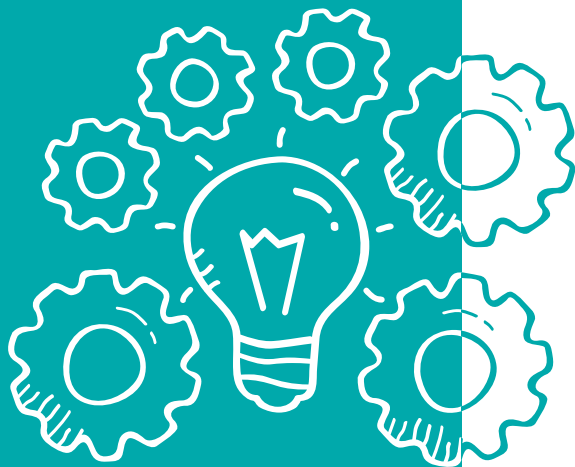
1. If we cannot predict the future, we can *create* it. We can resist the pull of old paradigms and reinvent education systems in favour of better intrapersonal awareness and interpersonal relationships.
2. However, reported levels of anxiety and depression among young people worldwide are at an all-time high. Some commentators argue that we have a real responsibility to enable young people to learn to live with themselves.
3. The unknowable nature of the future suggests a benefit in incorporating a focus on skills and strategies for communicating effectively with others and with oneself. The only way to deal with an ever-changing world is to be prepared to adapt practices and attitudes throughout life.



SHAPE

Blocker 6

The mistake of equating technology with innovation

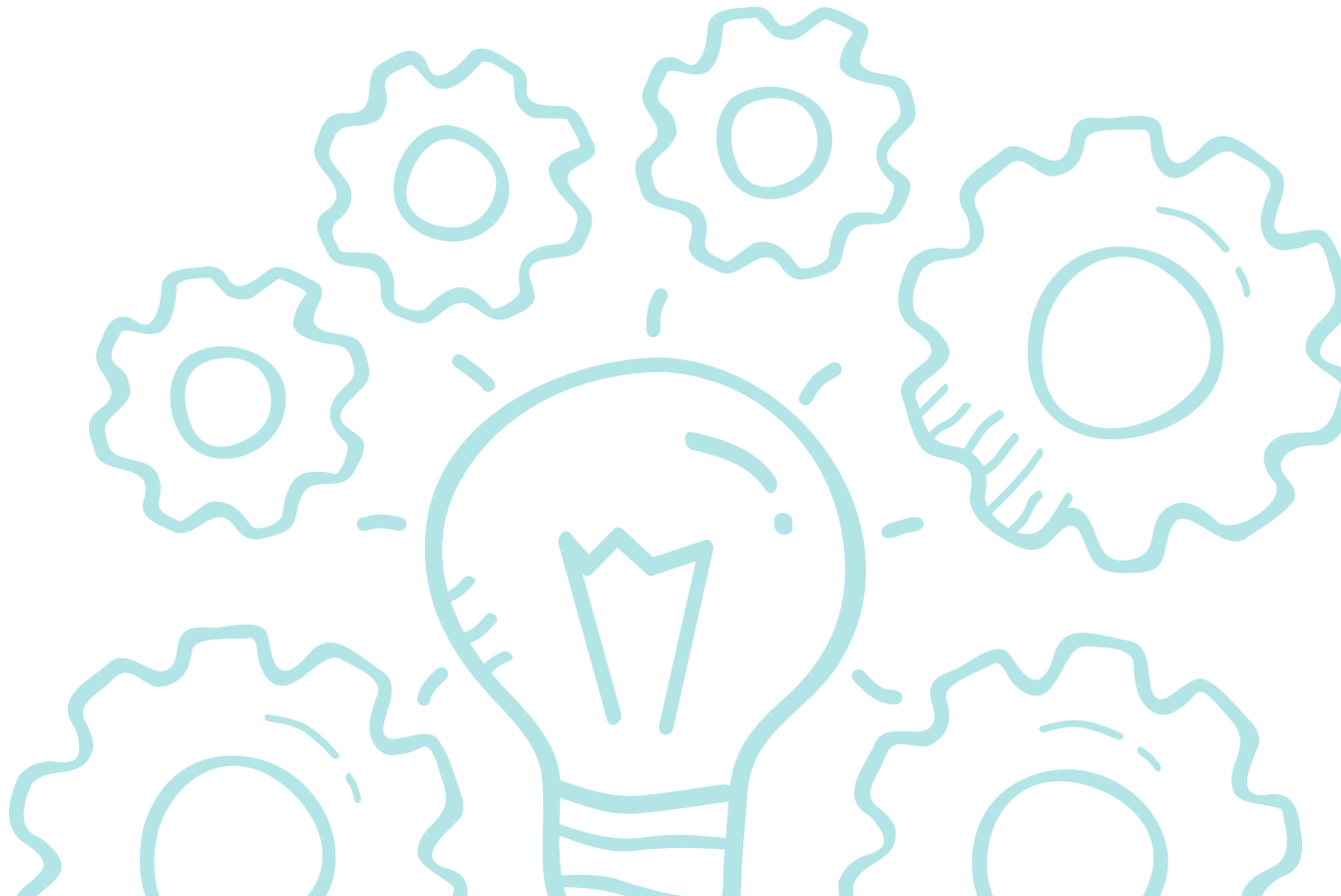


Innovation and technology are often assumed to go together, but this does not have to be the case. One participant suggested that we need to ask what tech does better than non-tech solutions in education and whether we are challenging ourselves enough to think about innovation that is not tech-led. Another pointed out that many teachers nearing the end of their careers have decades of experience, insight and ‘cultural heritage’ that it would be remiss to lose sight of when dazzled with shiny new technologies – it must surely be possible to combine inherited wisdom with new tools and approaches. Similarly, a key theme throughout the day was the notion that ‘technology is only as good as its use’. It cannot replace teachers in and of itself, though it can ‘leverage and amplify good teaching’, as Andreas Schleicher argued.

While technology and innovation are not one and the same thing, in cases where technology could support innovation, teachers need better funding and support. Jon Smith undoubtedly spoke for many teachers when he posed the question: ‘Why bother innovating or experimenting if you know there’s no funding available to get it adopted in your school?’ It is notable, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to try methods and tech that they may not have considered previously. Also, as indicated by Andreas Schleicher, once the pandemic subsides just 22% of OECD countries aim to return to the status quo, and over half of them look to hybrid models as the new normal, i.e. where virtual and on-site learning environments are integrated.

Key insights and implications

1. Technology will not, and should not, replace teachers or teaching; rather, the benefits of both human and tech elements can complement each other.
2. Currently, the use of technology in schools does not tend to reflect its use outside schools. Young people are aware of this and may well wish to see better connections made between the two spheres – certainly, we should consult them. (Note, however, that we cannot assume learners automatically transfer their skills in using technology to using technology *for learning*, so some training and support is often required.)
3. Sometimes it takes a major external event (in this case, a global pandemic) to force people to adopt change, evaluate its benefits and plan how new methods could be integrated with older methods going forward.
4. In the absence of such external catalysts, education systems and institutions could do more to support teachers and students to take risks, to experiment, and to reflect on what works (and what does not) so that they can make informed choices about where change is needed and how to go about it.

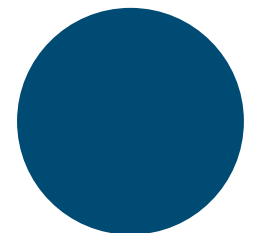




Watch the recordings
from the April 2021 SHAPE
Education event ▶

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About SHAPE

We are facing unprecedented challenges in society and the world of work which demand changes in the design and delivery of education. It is vital we ensure that education continues to meet the needs of young people, preparing them for the world they will face on leaving school. An education system designed for an industrial economy, now being automated, requires transformation from a system based on facts and knowledge to one that actively applies that knowledge in ways that develop human potential. However, many working to implement new education tools and models are working piecemeal in silos with solution-focused approaches that do not adequately address underlying pain points or connect with a clear vision.

SHAPE Education, an initiative from Cambridge Assessment together with Cambridge Judge Business School, seeks to connect complex real-world problems of education with creative educational ideas and research to build the next generation of educational solutions and thought leadership for the good of global education.



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