

9 BIG QUESTIONS SCHOOLS MUST ANSWER TO AVOID GOING "BACK TO NORMAL"

(*BECAUSE "NORMAL" WASN'T THAT GREAT TO BEGIN WITH)



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"Questions that have the power to make a difference are ones that engage people in an intimate way, confront them with their freedom, and invite them to co-create a future possibility."

~Peter Block, *Community*

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INTRODUCTION

A Year of Exhaustion

“Your present circumstances don’t determine where you can go. They merely determine where you start.” ~Nido Qubein

The experience of 2020 and early 2021 has been described in turns as tragic, infuriating, turbulent, isolating, heartbreaking, exposing, scary, stressful, and uncertain. For educators around the world, however, no word may be better to sum up the past year than “exhausting.”

Just on its own, the COVID-19 pandemic exhausted school leaders who were forced to pivot their systems on an almost minute by minute basis due to lockdowns and quarantines. It exhausted teachers who felt the weight of “Room and Zoom” and the absence of children in their classrooms. It exhausted parents who suddenly had to navigate homeschool, childcare, and career. And it exhausted students who lost their bearings as the time-worn rhythms of school were thrown into chaos.

It wasn’t just the virus that caused the strain, however. Sparked by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery in the US, these past months have also surfaced the 400-year epidemic of race-based inequality that has been ever-present, unleashed with virulence for the world to reckon with. We have seen polarizing political campaigns from the U.S. to Ukraine that tested our old narratives about government and leadership. We’ve been exposed to a growing global challenge to our understanding of literacy and our ability to live in community. We’ve uncovered deep economic inequalities, where billionaires’ [wealth grew](#) by more than 25% in the short period from April to July in 2020, even as [global extreme poverty](#) rose for the first time in twenty years, and chronic hunger in the U.S. reached [record levels](#). And, if all that were not enough, we ran out of names for tropical storms and hurricanes last year, and many parts of the world burned - not so subtle reminders of climate challenges that lie ahead.



An Uncovering

With the astonishingly rapid roll-out of an effective COVID-19 vaccine, many now simply want to “get back to normal.” And we understand that.

Given how much disruption and

upheaval the last year and a half has brought, we all want some semblance of predictability to return to our day-to-day lives. Despite the trauma and

“2020 surfaced some significant problems with our conception of ‘normal’ in schools.”

discomfort, however, we’ve surfaced some significant problems with our conception of “normal” in schools that we need to acknowledge and reckon with. As the author and activist adreinne maree brown [suggests](#), “Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.”

So, what have we uncovered and learned about the “normal” state of education and our schools as we try to cope with this moment of chaos?

INEQUITY

The sense of a “global learning crisis” was already apparent pre-pandemic, but we’ve learned that education around the world is nowhere near equitable for every child. Even in the richest countries, millions of children were left behind in the forced transition to online schooling, many without access to required technologies and social services. The U.S. stood out with images of students doing school using weak wifi signals in fast-food parking lots, and school buses carrying out massive meal delivery programs to significant numbers of hungry families.

PARENT POWER

School partnerships with parents can no longer be treated as an after-thought; during the pandemic parental engagement emerged as a critical element of student success. At the same time, the depth to which parents saw schooling through the lens of child care emerged as an important sub-text, as mothers’ earning power and careers were disproportionately, negatively impacted with children at home. In some communities, parents were most powerful in voicing demands that

schools reopen despite health risks to students, staff, and teachers, and in other cases, parents took control by organizing learning pods or opting their children out of formal schools altogether.

INFLEXIBLE SYSTEMS

Despite the limitations of remote and hybrid schooling and the emotional toll on both students and staff, the expectations for curriculum coverage, homework and assignments, unit exams, and other regular features of the school day remained similar to those of the traditional school day. Not uncommon were reports of six or eight hour days in Zoom sessions scheduled according to the regular timetable, some even with virtual bells to signal the end of class. When [parents from numerous states recount](#) their children having to endure active shooter drills even from home in Zoom, we begin to grasp the extent to which schools are under the thumb of state and local policies - even when the policies no longer serve children.

ONE-SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

While most students suffered both emotionally and academically from limited social interaction and the daily routines of school, the general well-being of a significant number of others [actually improved](#) during remote schooling periods. This reinforced the long-held sense that traditional systems and practices of school do not meet the unique needs of all learners.

TEST OPTIONAL

Despite long-time, ongoing concerns about standardized high-stakes tests and narrow pathways to continuing education, the cancellation of SAT, ACT, AP, IB and other tests taught us that, at least temporarily, we can do without large scale assessments propped up by multi-million dollar companies as required steps to graduation and/or higher education.

TECH ILLITERACY

While many schools moved to online delivery in short order, we were reminded that our collective technological literacy as educators is behind the curve, as evidenced by our general inability to do more than replicate face to face teaching online.



SCHOOL AS COMPETITIVE BATTLEFIELD

When the story of “success” for many schools is told by test scores, grueling content delivery and memorization, selective admissions, and elite sports, we are treating schools as competitive battlefields for our

“We believe that not ‘going back to normal’ must be our goal in education in 2021.”

children. When school facilities shut down for weeks or months of quarantine, we recognized those stories of success do not matter as much as cherished traditions, human contact, and the collective experience of community.

Taken all together, we believe that going “back to normal” must not be our goal in education in 2021. In fact, we would argue that this moment presents an incredible opportunity for schools to continue to “pull back the veil” and deeply interrogate our practice, and come together and “hold each other tight” to envision a very different sense of normal for our work in schools.



The Most Important Lesson of 2020/21

No question, we educators learned a great deal from the disruptions in we’ve recently lived through. In fact, for educators in general but especially for educational leaders, this has arguably the most powerful period of learning in our lives. The amount of collaborative problem solving required to navigate all of the seemingly unending and unpredictable challenges was no less than astounding. One can only be impressed with the ways in which schools and school communities

learned to cope with the difficult new realities that came on in such short order.

And it's that story of learning that provides optimism for what's to come. That's not to say that the challenges and the disruptions and problems to be solved will abate any time soon. The "new normal," for the short term at least, will be more like a "no normal" where change will be constant and uncertainty will remain.

That said, what we learned about learning over the last 18 months offers us a powerful model for what classroom learning might become, virtually or face-to-face. *The most important lesson from these last months is the reminder that deep and powerful learning only happens when it's relevant, real-world, collaborative, driven by inquiry and passion, and shared transparently.*

The question now is, "How do we apply that lesson to our work with children in school?"

From Crisis to Opportunity

As we begin to move toward a post-pandemic world, finally, we sense opportunity at our doorstep. As writer and activist Arundhati Roy [declared](#), "the pandemic is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." In terms of education, it's a chance to begin to rewrite the narrative of school, to make it more relevant to the realities of the world today. To make it more just and equitable for every child. To make school a place where learning happens much in the same way that we adults learned this year, not out of a textbook or a worksheet, but through real-life problem solving that prepares students to thrive in a very different and fast-changing future.

We believe that the questions around "why" we need to change are clear, and that growing numbers of educators and parents (as well as students) around the world are ready to pass through that gateway to the next iteration of school. As Roy says, that will require us to make some difficult choices:

"We can choose to walk through [the portal], dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

In other words, real change will require us to leave many of our old ideas about school behind. And the pandemic gave us a kick start: Cancelled SAT, AP, IB and state and national exams. Pass/fail assessments. Reduced time on task. Less homework and fewer tests. In these ways, the pandemic has already lightened our luggage.

"Real change will require us to leave many of our old ideas about school behind."



Now, as we begin to emerge from lockdowns and quarantines, will we fall back and add on the dead weight that we already shed? Or will we choose to leave it and other aspects of school behind?

FROM “SURVIVE” TO “THRIVE”

Nine Big Questions

As the rollout of vaccines accelerates, it seems likely that the disruption and dislocation of the pandemic in schools will slowly but steadily begin to fade. And that means that the pull to get “back to normal” will intensify. It will be difficult not to embrace old systems and practice, if for no other reason as to find some space to breathe, recover, and latch on to what is familiar. That is understandable.

To have survived the immediate though prolonged crisis of the pandemic is one step. Now the question becomes: “How do we *thrive* into the future?” To arrive at an honest and realistic answer, we must take stock, reassess, and recalibrate what the fundamental purposes of school are in an age of deep uncertainty and change. Now is the perfect time to ask whether the learning environments our students need today are the same as the ones schools offered them pre-pandemic.

To even entertain the notion of reimagining schools for this new age, we have to be willing to think “radically,” to *pull up at the root* as the definition of that word suggests. To truly thrive, we need to rebuild our foundations at the same time that we widen the aperture of what children need in order to flourish. We believe that means going back to and spending time interrogating the more fundamental questions about the way we think about not just the practice of school but the idea of school itself.

“Now is the perfect time to ask whether the learning environments our students need today are the same as the ones schools offered them pre-pandemic.”

To that end, we offer **nine big questions** to start us on that journey:

1. **What is sacred?**
2. **What is learning?**
3. **Where is the power?**
4. **Why do we ____?**
5. **Who is unheard?**
6. **Are we literate?**
7. **Are we ok?**
8. **Are we connected?**
9. **What's next?**



At a glance, these questions may seem fairly straightforward. But our collective 40+ years of working with schools and organizations around the world suggests the opposite. While these are fundamental questions, ***most school communities do not have shared, coherent answers for them that are then lived in practice.*** In fact, even the most basic question, “What is learning?” in many cases proves to be a very difficult negotiation.

We are convinced that the work ***not*** to go back to normal starts with these fundamental questions. The answers we articulate will form the foundation for our collective work to reimagine the experience of school for children not just in a post-pandemic world but in whatever future may be on the horizon.

“The answers we articulate will form the foundation for our collective work to reimagine the experience of school for children.”

You might notice that none of these questions start with “How?” That is no accident. We firmly believe that the answers to the “How?” questions, as in “How do we design a process for reimagining our classrooms?” lie within each school community’s capacity, as long as they have grappled with these bigger questions suggested here.

To quote the author [Peter Block](#):

“Too often when a discussion is dominated by questions of How? we risk overvaluing what is practical and doable and postpone the questions of larger purpose and collective wellbeing. With the question How? we risk aspiring to goals that are defined for us by the culture and by our institutions, at the expense of pursuing purposes and intentions that arise from within ourselves.”

In this unique moment, we cannot move forward with relevance if we do not first deeply consider those “questions of larger purpose and collective well-being.” While we realize that there are many other questions that would fit that description, we offer these nine as a starting point for our collective inquiry.



Aligning Purpose and Action

These questions, when interrogated with a collective focus and passion, will help you define the “purposes and intentions” that are worth pursuing in your unique circumstances. We encourage you to convene diverse groups in your school community (including inviting a range of students to the table) to discuss and debate them.

Consider if your school’s values and commitments align with the actions you actually take. If efforts feel more like reactions to a long list of disparate, disjointed priorities rather than contributions toward deliberate outcomes and aspirations, bring this to light. Consider how you might create coherence, as in “the quality of forming a unified whole,” or harmonizing knowing, doing, and being. Continuously reflect on the gaps between your values and your practice using these big questions, and

then design a path forward which allows you to live the answers you've arrived at.

We also encourage you to grapple with these questions on your own. "What do *you* feel is sacred?" "Are you ready?" Then, see how well your own practice maps to the answers you give.

As we said above, this is not easy work. Right now, however, as we look back on what has been the most disruptive year of our collective lives, it is urgent, urgent work.

"For educators to seek only a path "back to normal" is to have missed all that 2020 had to teach us."

For educators to seek only a path "back to normal" is to have missed all that the recent tumult had to teach us. It would suggest that we did not learn as much as we thought we did.

Towards a New Normal

In the pages that follow, we amplify our thinking behind each big question, then offer some tools (audit questions, examples of initiatives, and some additional reading/resources) for realizing momentum around each question.

The "**Audit activities/questions**" are designed to help gauge where you/your school community are at with respect to the questions and some of the elements that contribute to your context. Despite using the word *audit* we are not suggesting a rigid process, or that the questions require comprehensive studies that might postpone meaningful action. In many cases, if you bring diverse voices to the table, the data will already be available in your collective experiences. Our audit activities embody paying attention, with deep listening, authentic inclusion, and thoughtful reflection. If our audit questions spur you to come up with more questions that invite creative inquiry and action, we would consider that a success (and would love to hear about your experience). In short, the radical candor that is required for such audits is not mutually exclusive of a data analysis, but it does need to be prioritized.

Each big question also includes a bulleted section we call **“Towards a new normal.”** Here we offer a few ideas on what it might look like to live by the principles you arrive at through your honest inquiry. Our suggestions are not meant to be followed rigidly. They represent a beginning. We hope they might spur creative initiatives and take whatever form makes sense in your own environment.

Status quo is around the corner, and it has a strong pull. It will take discipline, community, courage, strong arguments, and a healthy dose of optimism and wonder to resist that pull. We hope these nine big questions help light your path.

“Status quo is around the corner, and it has a strong pull.”



Q1

What is Sacred?

The disruption of the past year forced us to make important choices. Despite the ways in which the world might require us to change in the future, what are the aspects of school that we want to preserve 10 or 20 years or even longer into the future?

Over the past half century, the perceived value of schools has been changing. Once seen primarily as a public good, a place where students were prepared to contribute to and flourish in both local and global communities, today the emphasis has turned more to being a private good. As evidenced by the 2019 “[Varsity Blues](#)” scandal where parents were prosecuted for cheating on their students’ college applications, increasingly school is valued as a way to rise or maintain personal status.

Accordingly, the emphasis in schools has become more about what’s measurable, as in standardized test scores, grade point averages, AP exam results, and getting top tier college acceptances. US News and World Report’s annual rankings of schools are heavily weighted toward these metrics in conferring “excellence.” Ask most realtors in the U.S. what story they tell about the local high school and the answer will be similar.



Lost in the quest for the measurable, however, is a focus on the immeasurable, those dispositions and mindsets that arguably today will determine a students’ ability to thrive more than any test score might. In

addition, the well-being and mental health of our children has been sacrificed to the focus on metrics. It's just one of the many ways that we have lost our connection to what's most important in schools.

Ironically, the pandemic did much to remind us that wellness and physical, mental, and spiritual health are paramount for learning (and for teaching.) Not long into the move to hybrid or fully remote schooling, stories of fatigue, frustration, and overwhelm on the part of students and teachers were rising to the top of the list of concerns. In response, many schools cut back on schedules and curriculum and general expectations. But many others "went back" to a full schedule with expectations that students sit at a computer for 6-7 hours each day, adhere to strict discipline guidelines, and complete a night of homework online afterwards.

Going forward, we must now continue that recalibration for a much different reality. And we believe that begins by going back to the most

"What is so sacred about the school experience that we would fight to keep it into the future?"

foundational aspects of our work with children:

The things that really matter. Our non-negotiable values. Those aspects of school we consider sacred.

Our work with schools from all over the world has made clear that for meaningful, sustainable change to happen, we must ground our work in

our deepest beliefs and values. Asking "What is so sacred about the school experience that we would fight to keep it into the future?" is the first place to start. It forces us to get to the core of what's most important about our service to children.

And it creates a powerful marker against which we can begin to measure our current practice. Anything that doesn't make your list of "sacred aspects of schooling" is then ripe for conversation as to whether or not you want to keep doing it, and what the impacts are on your sacred work if you do keep them around.

That may be the hardest part.

Audit activities/questions:

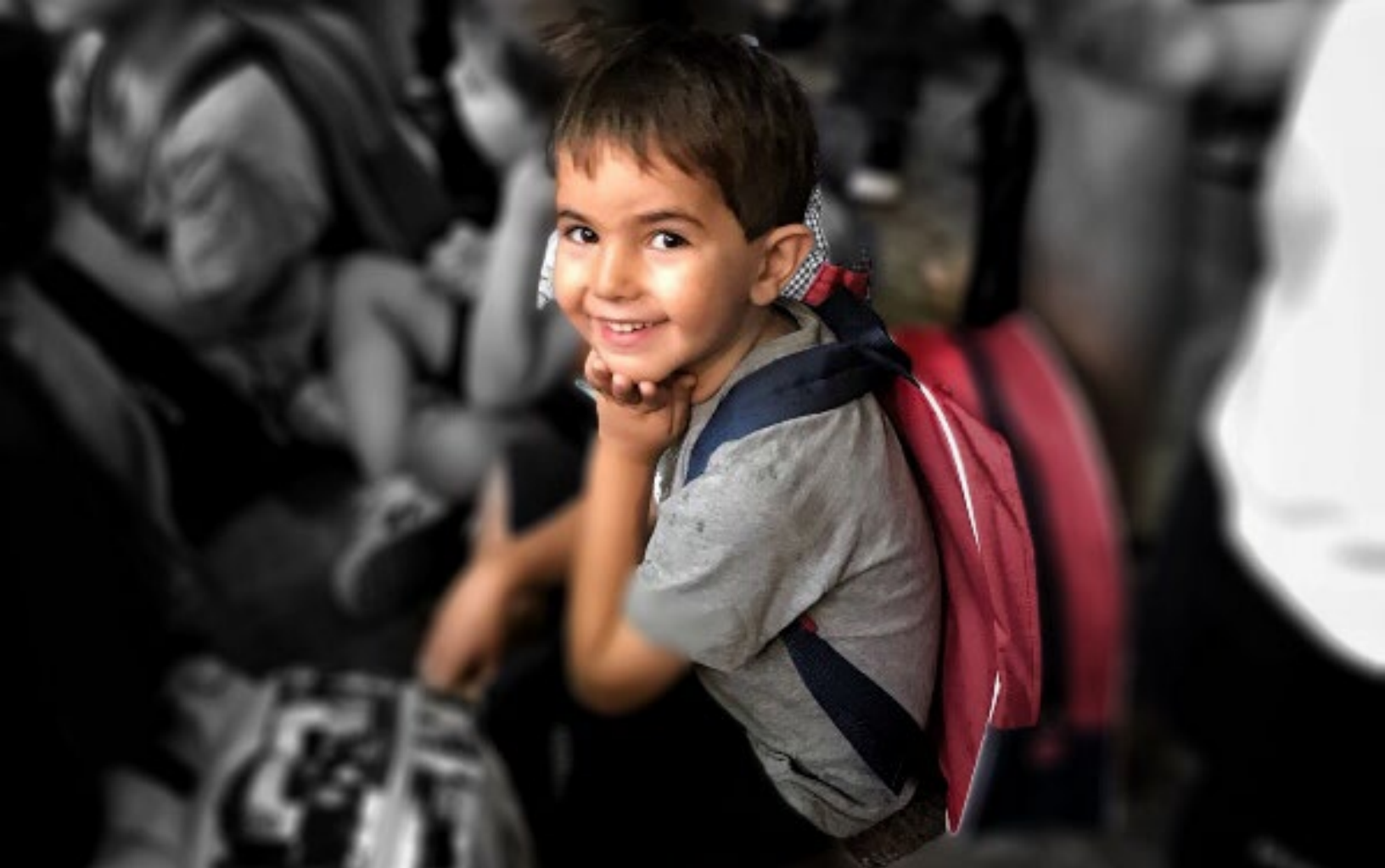
- Bring together a representative group (including students and parents, as well as faculty and administrators) from your school community and ask “What do we hold sacred about this school? What do we hold sacred about learning and education? What would we fight to keep?” Share the responses transparently.
- Walk around your school (when classes are in session face-to-face.) Look for and note what looks to be sacred symbols, sacred practices, sacred beliefs, etc. Ask if those things actually align with your deepest values.
- How do your schools’ mission and/or vision statements suggest what your school holds sacred? Is the mission being lived?
- For all of those aspects of school that are not on your “sacred list,” ask “What if we stopped doing this?” Also ask, “if we continue to do this, how does it impact our lived values?”
- Take your “sacred” list and see if you can find examples as to how it is currently being lived in the school experience.

Towards a new normal:

- Post your “sacred list” widely throughout the school community to remind people what you see as most important about your work.
- Focus professional learning on how to strengthen those aspects of school that you name as sacred.
- Share stories regularly with the community that highlights your emphasis on your values.
- Do an annual end of the year audit to assess how you have held onto and/or advanced what you find most important and powerful in your school.
- Regularly ask, “Are we living our values?”

Resources:

- [Classrooms as Sacred Space](#) by Paul Michalec
- [What is Sacred in Education?](#) by Kelly Tenkely
- [Values](#) by Reggio Emilia Project
- [These Schools Belong to You and Me](#) by Deborah Meier
- [Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education](#) by Nel Noddings



Q2

What is Learning?

Learning is the focus of our work in schools. Does your school community share, and can it communicate a clear, coherent definition of what learning is and the conditions that lead to deep and powerful learning in schools? Is it living that definition?

It would seem to be an easy question to ask an educator to answer: “How do you define learning?” Yet, surprisingly, it turns out to be much more difficult than you’d think.

In his book [*And What Do YOU Mean By Learning?*](#), Seymour Sarason writes:

Is it not noteworthy that the word or concept of learning probably has the highest of all word counts in the diverse literatures in education and yet when people are asked what they mean by learning they are taken aback, stammer or stutter, and come up with a sentence of two which they admit is vague and unsatisfactory.

We’d add that it’s equally noteworthy that no more than a handful of schools that we’ve come across engage that question on a regular basis.

And in this moment, “learning” is very much on our minds. Everyone from parents to policy makers are voicing concerns about the apparent “learning loss” that students are reportedly experiencing. But even here, our struggles with the word are clear. Students haven’t stopped learning. In fact, many kids have learned a great deal during the free time they found themselves with during quarantine. Instead, we’re experiencing a “schooling loss.” (Similarly, most are not engaging in remote or hybrid “learning;” it’s remote or hybrid “schooling” that we’re trying to navigate.)

Especially now, sharing an understanding of exactly what learning is across a school community is not only an imperative to sustainable change, for it is that from which all pedagogy must flow. But it’s equally

necessary if we are to achieve the goal which most all schools say they share: creating lifelong learners. How can we do that if we haven't a clear, coherent sense of what exactly that means?

In the absence of a consistent definition, we in education seem to have an addiction to modifying the noun. We have blended learning, flipped learning, learner-centered learning, inquiry-based learning, collaborative learning, passion-based learning...the list goes on and on. It's pretty clear that our adjective-itis stems from our unease with allowing the word to stand alone.

“What if our current practice doesn't really support our definition of learning?”

So, why are we uncomfortable with just “learning”? Perhaps because we never really have taken the time to define it for ourselves. Or, perhaps having a shared, consistent definition through which to frame our work scares us. What if our current practice doesn't really support our definition of learning?

As much as we hear that “learning is changing,” the truth is that it isn't. Learning is a natural act. Always has been; always will be. And if we are sincere in our desire to create an experience of school that develops our students as powerful, curious, passionate learners who are ready to learn their way through whatever comes next, we better make sure we're in agreement on what it is.

Audit activities/questions:

- Convene a diverse working group to create and articulate a definition of learning.
- How do you personally learn most effectively and powerfully? What conditions exist when you are learning most effectively?
- Ask a random sampling of teachers, students, parents, and other members of the community to define learning. What do their answers tell you about coherence and clarity regarding learning? What are the implications for how students experience your school?

- Along with creating a clear and coherent definition of learning, make a list of the conditions that will foster that kind of learning. Are they consistently present in your school?
- Would your school community describe learning as an event or as an ongoing practice? What are the implications of each?

Towards a new normal:

- Instead of “students” and “teachers,” refer to everyone in the school as “learners.”
- Commit to filtering every decision through your definition. Ask regularly, “Does this promote more powerful learning experiences as we have defined them?”
- Compile stories of students and teachers who are learning by your definition inside and outside of school, and share them regularly with your community.
- Increase the freedom that students (and teachers) have to learn on their own terms wherever possible.
- Make sure that students understand how what’s being asked of them aligns with your definition of learning.

Resources:

- [And What Do YOU Mean By Learning?](#) by Seymour Sarason
- [The Book of Learning and Forgetting](#) by Frank Smith
- [What Kids Need to Learn to Succeed in 2050](#) by Yuval Noah Harari
- [The Time Has Come to Acknowledge Authentic Learning](#) by Linsey Ogawa
- [A Thousand Rivers](#) by Carol Black

Q3

Where is the Power?

Power relationships in the world are shifting. To what extent are learners in your school community able to pursue learning on their own terms, deciding for themselves what, when, and how to learn?

No word has seemed more ascendant in education of late than “agency.” Students deserve more of it, teachers want more of it, and the phrases “student agency” and “learner agency” are popping up frequently in conference proceedings either off or online.

All good.



It's not clear, however, the extent to which these calls for a redistribution of power are really about expanding freedom or about simply increasing choices. There is a big difference between the two. Ask people to explain

what they mean by the term “voice and choice” and you’ll most likely hear more about the latter than the former.

In its deepest sense, agency is about a freedom to learn. And in schools, agency is difficult to bestow because of the many complex power relationships that exist between teachers and students, leaders and teachers, students and parents, leaders and school boards and on and on. Don’t underestimate the impact that those power relationships have, especially on kids.

Author Carla Shalaby writes in her book *Troublemakers* that success in school relies in large part on students’ ability and willingness to accept that adults have power over them. And writer/educator Ira Socol [agrees](#): “That is the primary thing kids learn in school. They learn about power, and how power is personal, and how power is abused.”

Interrogating power in school communities may be the least discussed yet most important aspect of creating fundamental change in our work. If we’re not clear where power resides, and if we’re not able to share power more evenly, then no amount of talk about agency (or change) will make a real difference in terms of enhancing our community-wide ability to learn.

“Interrogating power in school communities may be the least discussed yet most important aspect of creating fundamental change in our work.”

As Sean Michael Morris [reminds us](#):

“This is the right of agency. It does not give us power over another, but it gives us mastery over ourselves. And an education that does not encourage or facilitate this agency is not an education. An education that convinces us of what needs to be known, what is important versus what is frivolous, is not an education. It’s training at best, conscription at worst. And all it prepares us to do is to believe what we’re told.”

Which type of education do we desire?

Audit activities/questions

- Who chooses and/or designs the curriculum? The resources? The activities in the classroom?
- Ask students, teachers, parents and others “Do you feel that you have the license to deviate from the script, to choose your own learning path?”
- Create a “Learning Org Chart” that articulates how decisions are made and implemented. Where are leaders, teachers, students, parents, board members, policy makers, and school staff on the chart? What are the implications?
- How does power manifest itself in the school environment? What messages, overt or subtle, are being communicated by the architecture, the signage, the rules?
- To what extent is yours a “democratic school” meaning that individuals within it have equal voice over the experience?

Towards a new normal:

- Implement a “Genius Hour” program where everyone (students, teachers, leaders, parents) has time to work on a project of their own choosing.
- Ask everyone in the school community to finish the prompt “If I could spend time learning about anything in the world right now it would be _____.”
- Give students the opportunity to put together proposals for classes that teachers might sign on to teach.
- Increase the amount of free play time that students (and teachers) have in school.
- Engage students in ongoing conversations around how they would like to be assessed on their work, and include space for self-assessment on major units or specific projects.

Resources

- [What Do You Mean When You Say “Student Agency”?](#) by Jennifer Davis Poon
- [Troublemakers](#) by Carla Shalaby
- [Instead of Education](#) by John Holt
- [We Want to Do More Than Survive](#) by Bettina Love
- [The Case for the Self-Driven Child](#) by Gareth Cook



Q4

Why do we _____?

Much of what students experience in school has always seemed to lack common sense when it comes to creating effective conditions for learning. We need to continually ask, “why do we do the things we do in school?”

Let’s start with this ultra challenging quote from the writer Carol Black in an essay titled “[A Thousand Rivers](#)” which we highly recommend you read in its entirety:

“Collecting data on human learning based on children’s behavior in school is like collecting data on killer whales based on their behavior at Sea World.”

In other words, it’s important to remember that we are attempting to take a very natural act, learning, and make it happen in a very contrived, unnatural space, school. And in doing so, we’ve created all sorts of systems and practices that are built to be efficient for schooling but are hard to justify as effective for learning.

This tension obviously resonates.



What is less obvious is the extent to which we are willing to interrogate those “most embedded practices” on a regular basis. Some, like grouping students by age, siloing subjects, using grades, and many others, are time worn and almost universally accepted and expected of schools. Others, like portfolio-based assessments or project-based learning, are less traditional, but their reason for use is often equally vague aside from the sense that “everyone else seems to be doing it so it must be good” response.

“It is easier to continue to do what has always been done without clearly justifying it in a learning context.”

A school community’s ability to clearly make the case for embedded or emerging practice in ways that align to their beliefs about what learning is and their deepest values and commitments to children is critical to creating experiences that will ensure students thrive in their futures. No doubt, it is easier to continue to do what has always been done without clearly justifying it in a learning context.

That would, in fact, be normal.

Audit activities/questions:

- Schedule an annual “Why Do We Do This?” Day and ask the school community to suggest topics for interrogation.
- Ask students to provide answers to various “Why do we _____?” questions, or even debate key issues to probe multiple perspectives. Share their answers with the rest of the community.
- Survey the community and ask “If there is one practice we currently employ in our school that we cannot defend in a learning or a values context, what would it be?”
- Ask veteran members of the community to reflect on what has and hasn’t changed in the last 20-30 years in education in general and in your school specifically. (Let students do the interviews.)

- Make a two column list that captures where you do and where you do not have choice when it comes to the systems and practices you are employing. What is and what isn't under your control when it comes to the school experience you are living? (Be honest.)

Towards a new normal:

- If you could start over from the ground up in designing a school experience that aligns with your beliefs, values, and common sense about learning, what new practices or systems might you employ? What of your current practice would you stop doing? What would you keep?
- Regularly discuss with students the intended relevance of what they are doing in class.
- Create a culture of “why?” by encouraging ongoing interrogation of practice.
- When implementing a new practice or resource, articulate how it supports your definition of learning
- Allow students to suggest new ways of experiencing learning in schools.

Resources:

- [The Game of School](#) by Robert Fried
- [The Lesson to Unlearn](#) by Paul Graham
- [How Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?](#) by Abraham Verghese and Denise Pope
- [Remote Learning Isn't the Only Problem With School](#) by Erika Christakis
- [The Schools Our Children Deserve](#) by Alfie Kohn

Q5

Who is unheard?

Going beyond a reactive diversity statement or special event, what does it look like when justice, equity, diversity and inclusion are infused throughout the school culture, from hiring practices to curriculum, and in healthy relationships across generations and roles?



The global reckoning on racial justice in 2020 did not spare schools. Indeed, the universal cries for a reckoning on equity in education forced us to conclude, in a variety of equity-centered conversations with school leaders, *your house is on fire*. The heat has been building up for decades,

and conditions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic coalesced in a combustible tipping point. It took a global pandemic, repeated public instances of unprovoked violence followed by a mass mobilization of young people (in particular) from diverse backgrounds around the world in a Movement for Black Lives, and the glaring reality of education and access differentials during online learning to center the urgent need for racial and social justice in schools.

As we have heard, “mattering is the least we can do for Black lives.” Schools must take this to heart. Data on achievement gaps reveal deeper stories of an equity debt. Consider the gap as a reminder of the missed voices and genius we need at the table. When students don’t see their stories represented, centered or celebrated in the range of subjects they are expected to study, this invisibility impacts engagement and achievement.

While 80-90 percent of American teachers identify as white, fewer than half of public school students do, with the effects of racial segregation and unequal school quality at its worst level in decades. With 66% of LGBTQ students experiencing verbal assaults, and over 50% of Asian students reporting bullying in the classroom, school feels unsafe for too many young people. Returning to the decision-making structures, curriculum and pedagogy pre-pandemic will not only block achievement on equity and inclusion – it is dangerous to *all* students’ social, emotional, spiritual, physical and academic well-being.

Diversity itself is not enough. Schools must go deeper than diversity, to consider racially literate and culturally responsive practices that embody respect, appreciation, trust, joy, deep listening – elements that contribute to meaningful relationships and unleash creativity and innovation. As the numerous Black@ Instagram accounts which proliferated during summer 2020 showed, even when a predominantly white institution is successful at recruiting diverse students, glaring gaps and painful stories abound, at all ages. Every Instagram recounting of trauma may be seen as a data point, and a reminder to consider *Who is Unheard? Why? What conditions have we created that perpetuate invisibility and injustice?*

“Diversity itself is not enough. Schools must go deeper than diversity.”

Audit activities/questions:

- Review U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights data on discipline for your school district ([search here](#)) or comparable schools if you are not in the database. Note the disparities by race, gender, ability. What are the patterns?
- What is the demographic composition of students assigned to special education? To honors, advanced, and gifted programs? Does this reflect the community you serve?
- How are you nurturing relationships with underserved students, and seeing their actual stories as the data that drives decisions?
- Which parents are engaged in volunteering, fundraising, other roles? How might more parents feel welcomed to offer their service, knowledge, experience?
- Do hiring practices adequately recruit and retain diverse staff and faculty to reflect the community you serve?

Towards a new normal:

- Consider what “decolonizing education” looks like in your specific role. Who are the experts you learn from? What sources of knowledge, traditions, practices need to be questioned, added or replaced?
- Identify and collaborate with champions who share your commitment to equitable and anti-racist education - whether they work in your building, or on the other side of the world.
- Identify units of study in each grade that uplift diverse authors, scientists, innovators and thought leaders. Whose work has been overlooked in your traditional canon?
- Expand your network of diverse professional relationships well before you need to fill a leadership role. If personal networks serve as a crucial pipeline for jobs, how can we expect robust,

diverse recruitment without significant, upfront effort to nurture authentic relationships?

- Take personal responsibility to learn the pernicious effects of racism – historically, systemically, emotionally. If you are not Black, consider any discomfort you might feel as a healthy start to a vital learning and reconciliation process our students deserve.

Resources:

- [Guide for Racial Justice and Abolitionist Social Emotional Learning](#), Abolitionist Teaching Network
- [Equity Work: Too Much Talk, Too Little Action](#), by Jal Mehta, Harvard GSE, for NextGen Learning
- [If We Aren't Addressing Racism, We Aren't Addressing Trauma](#), by Dena Simmons
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#), Zaretta Hammond
- [Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting in the Cafeteria?](#) Beverly Daniel Tatum

Q6

Are we literate?

The world of information and knowledge is increasingly complex. Are we able as a school community to discern truth from lies, reality from fantasy, and fact from opinion in a world where we have access to an abundance of knowledge, information, people, and technologies?

In the “old days,” the idea of literacy was pretty straightforward: reading with understanding, writing with clarity, and math skills that allowed you to function in day to day life. While debates as to how to best teach and achieve literacy have been ongoing, the end result was fairly easy to define, and to assess.

No longer.



Among the biggest challenges that we as a global society face today is what some are calling an “infodemic” defined as “an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” We are swimming in a sea of media, text, video, and audio, most still created by humans but increasingly being spun up by artificially intelligent programs that are quickly learning how to mimic human thought and communication.

The reality is that today, many of our students can and are “writing” in various forms to a global audience on a regular basis. In general, Instagram users post almost 350,000 stories a minute, the same time it takes for 41 million messages to be sent on What’s App. All that means our kids (and we ourselves) are consuming much more information than in the past as well. With estimates now that teens spend upwards of eight hours a day in front of various screens, there’s no question that the information world has changed and continues to morph dramatically almost by the day.

“To put it bluntly, we are collectively unable to discern what’s real, what’s true, and what’s fact, we have little hope of coming together to solve the major problems that face us in the future.”

Add to the fact that there are quite a few bad actors who are taking advantage of the ease of publishing and the lack of gatekeeper editors to help filter out truth from fiction and you have a moment which is fraught with complexity and challenge.

But literacy today is even more complex than that. Literacy now means that we are aware of how algorithms work and how they influence what we see, what we do, and what we believe. It now means that we are fully aware of the privacy and surveillance issues that go along with reading and writing on the internet. It means that we understand to some extent how to program our technologies to help us create and consume more quality information. And it means that we have to have a very well trained “crap detector” in order to make sure we’re getting diverse viewpoints and thinking critically about the information we come across.

Let's be clear: Whatever you call it, "information literacy" or "media literacy" or "news literacy," we're not talking about developing it through a series of one or two week units in a middle school English class. Literacy development today should be a focal point in every course throughout every school year. And the old and new skills of modern literacy should be modeled regularly by teachers and others in the community.

Audit activities/questions:

- How do you personally consume and create information?
- How does your school community currently define literacy?
- Do a survey and ask members of your community where they get their news and information from.
- Use the [NCTE literacies](#) to assess your collective level of modern literacy.
- What types of student data are currently being collected and how? What types of surveillance are happening right now in your school?

Towards a new normal:

- Work to develop modern literacy skills throughout the curriculum, not just in specific units.
- Have students create "fake news" in a variety of media to learn about how misinformation is produced and distributed.
- Regularly share examples of misinformation being deconstructed by students with the school community (we all need help with this right now.)
- Center literacy whenever introducing or using a new technology or website.
- Develop and share the results of a privacy/surveillance audit.

Resources:

- [Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age](#) by the National Council for Teachers of English
- [The Analog City and the Digital City](#) by L.M. Sacasas
- [Curations as an Educational Challenge](#) by Silvia Tolisano
- [Yes, Digital Literacy. But Which One?](#) by Mike Caulfield
- [Racist Algorithms: How Code Is Written Can Reinforce Systemic Racism](#) by Calder Katyal



Q7

Are we ok?

We've moved beyond school as a place to deliver content; how can education uplift the physical, social-emotional, cognitive and spiritual well-being of children and adults?

With global stay-at-home orders intended to protect individuals against the coronavirus, experiences of extreme stress, isolation, uncertainty, exhaustion, and fear, among other emotions, emerged as secondary traumas of the pandemic, particularly among teachers and students. The causes of these tensions are many, but the results are clear: holistic well-being must be centered for learning to take hold in our schools (and elsewhere).

Just as student accomplishments aren't captured simply by test scores, well-being goes beyond physical health and even "happiness." Having meaning and purpose, as expressed in purposeful work and meaningful relationships, is integral to overall well-being. If curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture ignore the extensive research making this case and the abundant lived examples since the quarantines, our kids (and we) will not be ok.

Complicating this learning is the fact that some students thrived while away from school, while others struggled mightily during online or hybrid schooling. Peeling away generalizations demonstrates the value of high-quality interaction to get to know the strengths and needs of students and families. Meaningful relationships and psychological safety contribute to well-being and deeper learning. At the same time, positive emotions and overall well-being contribute to key 21st Century [democratic competencies](#) such as flexibility and adaptability, openness to other cultures and beliefs, self-efficacy and tolerance of ambiguity - a state that we will be living in for a long time.

A plea for well-being from educators over the course of the pandemic was expressed by the popular statement "Students have to Maslow

before they can Bloom.” This refers to the idea that basic human needs (expressed in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) must be met before learning requirements (identified in Bloom’s Taxonomy) can be imposed. Against the backdrop of the priority to decolonize learning, we can take the statement further, and achieve a clearer picture of well-being.

As [First Nations scholars](#) have demonstrated, Abraham Maslow conducted his research among the Blackfoot Nation in Alberta, where the tipi inspired the pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs. In the Blackfoot version, “self-actualization” (Maslow’s pinnacle) is only the base of the tipi, with “community actualization,” “cultural perpetuity,” and ultimately, spiritual knowledge and experience building from there. This expanded knowledge of the influence on Maslow offers a more complete picture of holistic well-being. When our individual actualization is treated as the ultimate goal, we may isolate ourselves from the benefits of community, culture and context – the awareness that spurs working toward something bigger than ourselves. If we stop at the self, our well-being is compromised.

“The pandemic offers a chance to open the aperture of what well-being looks like.”

The pandemic offers a chance to open the aperture of what well-being looks like, for whom, and how it is practiced, so we might consider more fully if we are ok – in the full sense of the word.

Audit activities/questions

- What does it mean for a school to center well-being?
- What does each element of physical, social-emotional, cognitive and spiritual well-being look like reflected in children and in adults at your school?
- What blocks well-being at your school? Does this vary across different populations?
- How might you create partnerships across leadership, faculty, parents, students to nurture greater well-being across your community?

- What pre-COVID practices might you leave behind in order to realize well-being?

Towards a new normal

- If there is a clearly identified source of anxiety in your school or in specific grades, present this to decision-makers and consider changes in the classroom that foster a feeling of safety, particularly through a trauma-informed lens.
- Address issues of bullying and exclusion in online and in-person settings, as these (along with anxiety) are among the major threats to student well-being.
- Consider how your academic priorities uphold or compromise student well-being.
- If you reduced homework by 50%, what would your students lose? What would they gain? How might this enhance the quality of learning in your class?
- How might you take advantage of more play and time outdoors for post-COVID teaching, and even faculty and staff engagement?

Resources

- [Improving well-being at school](#) from the Council of Europe
- [Well-being and Success: Opposites that need to attract](#) by Andy Hargreaves, Dennis Shirley
- [Student Well-Being Survey](#) from the Institute of Positive Education, Australia (to capture key elements of a flourishing life for young people)
- [Research on the Relationship Between Mental Health and Academic Achievement](#) research summary by National Association of School Psychologists
- [The Emergence of the Breath of Life Theory](#) by Cindy Blackstock, PhD.



Q8

Are we connected?

Schools can no longer operate in exclusively local or even national contexts. Are we preparing students to identify and confront problems they care about, collaborate beyond classroom walls, and overcome the false dichotomy between local versus global? Do we see our work as educators as the work of building a better world?

The pandemic has reminded us that as a global population, we are truly all in this together. It spared almost no community in its spread, and the longer lasting economic and environmental impacts will be felt by nearly everyone for years if not decades to come.

Clearly, schools must play a role in preparing students to live in an increasingly connected world where not only viruses but ideas can be shared at light speed, and where the outlines of how we learn and how we work with one another are being fundamentally redrawn. As our global conceptions of time and place become less rigid, our conceptions of schools must also change to embrace the reality of anytime, with anyone, anywhere learning for steadily increasing numbers of kids. Indeed, every child deserves to learn with and from the world and to believe they can make a difference in it.

“Every child deserves to learn with and from the world and to believe they can make a difference in it.”

That means that schools must now live in the world, as well as in the local community. Not only must they include the wider scope of ideas and experiences that they now have access to, they must also contribute to and play an active role in helping to solve the global (and local) challenges which now face us. Just as we’re seeing a rise in the number of activist brands and businesses, so

too must schools take on a more activist stance. In other words, the real world now must be the curriculum.

While the online landscape is increasingly fraught with misinformation, rancor, and foolishness, educators need to be able to navigate networked spaces with some level of skill that they can model for their students. They need to model best practices for creation and connection, both in their personal and professional lives. Connecting and collaborating with classrooms and teachers from around the world on joint projects that begin to build students' social capital should be a feature of "going to school." Projects with relevance that spur deeper investigation, recognize a range of perspectives, communicate ideas through multiple channels to authentic audiences, and culminate in taking action will contribute to [global competence](#), a vital skill set.



Global competence demonstrates the need to move away from a rigid, time-worn curriculum that is focused on the past to one that scholar [David Perkins characterizes](#) as more “lifeready and lifeworthy,” one facilitated through “network collaboratives” that regularly curate and share new and updated information. In essence, the new curriculum is built from the world to make sure our students can live in the world and contribute to it when they leave us.

Clearly, a sense of connectedness goes beyond our ability to use the Internet and the latest technologies. To be connected is, at its highest level, deeply human. It embodies a sense that we are each an integral part of something much larger than ourselves, that each of us has a role to play in the future that we create together, and that only by expanding our sense of community can we and our students begin that work in earnest.

Audit activities/questions:

- How do you personally connect to or learn from people around the world who share your interests, concerns or talents?
- Survey teachers and students to see the extent to which their work in classrooms lives in the larger world or helps to solve some of the challenges we face today.
- How much of the world is visible and integrated into each classroom? For example, do you see a world map or globe? Are books by authors from various cultures on display? Do sources of art, crafts, music and other cultural expressions reflect the heritage of members of your community and cultures beyond? Do teachers learn to correctly pronounce names of all students and get to know the cultural traditions they bring with them?
- Investigate how multicultural scholars and authors, global events and emerging contexts impact the curriculum and how it is taught. Overlay this with questions from our Big Question # 6, “Who is Unheard?” to review diversity of perspectives in the curriculum.

- Convene a diverse group of students, parents, and staff to learn about the range of international experiences and perspectives they possess and what particular topics or resources they care about. Connect them as resource people for adding to learning and life at your school.

Towards a new normal:

- Find and share stories of teachers and students who are currently engaged in projects either inside or outside of school that have a global audience.
- Make a personal commitment to expand your global network over the next 12 months by publishing and interacting online, and getting to know at least one member of your community whose heritage differs markedly from yours.
- Engage with the [U.N. Sustainable Development Goals](#). This could take the form of adopting a particular goal for each department or grade, having students determine a problem they care about and figuring out where that fits within the 17 goals, or collaborating with other teachers or an organization dedicated to working on one or more of the SDGs.
- Find a “sister school” in some other part of the world with whom you can work on projects and problems together.
- As a school, become a member of an active, global community of schools and educators who are sharing new practice.

Resources:

- [Connecting Beyond the Classroom](#) by Julie Lindsay
- [Schools of the Future](#) by the World Economic Forum
- [“Leading With the World in Mind”](#) by Ariel Tichnor-Wagner
- [Educating for Global Competence](#), Veronica Boix-Mansilla and Anthony Jackson, for Asia Society
- [#TeachSDGs Resources for Schools](#)



Q9

What's next?

Against the context of unprecedented challenges and uncertainty, how might we lead and learn with fearless inquiry, to face, not flee from, an unknown and turbulent future?

If you've gotten this far, it's a sign that you're serious (or at least curious) about not going back to normal. We know the pull to do just that is strong, but we hope you resist. Opportunity, and a more powerful, more relevant school experience for children and teachers awaits those that do.

By keeping "fearless inquiry" top of mind in the face of unprecedented challenges, the consciousness of leading with courage can be simultaneously deepened and made visible. To be fear-less in this context shouldn't remind you of jumping off a cliff. It calls for facing the hardest questions, obstacles, and truths, like an act of radical candor. To be fearless isn't a sport with an ego-boosting prize at the end of a race or the top of a peak. It's often humbling, murky, lonely, and tread with uneven steps over a long run - and even that is unpredictable. Fearlessness brings with it a state of discomfort, arising from situating ourselves in so many uncomfortable conversations and unknown futures.

Reflecting on the biggest questions of schooling leads us naturally to consider what the future holds. If we don't think boldly about the future, we might always be caught short - unprepared for the possible scenarios we will face. We have seen this play out over and over in the lack of coronavirus preparedness and in so many performative statements communicating shock over repeated, recent episodes of racial and social injustice. Avoiding bold thinking about the future also keeps us playing a sort of competitive catch-up game when it comes to student achievement: rushing to cram for the test, pointing to test results as a sign of our effectiveness, believing the story conveyed by averages when so many students are actually

"If we don't think boldly about the future, we might always be caught. short."

struggling at the margins. Most educators know that narrative has expired, but pulling back the curtain feels too daunting, especially when we are so exhausted.

Fearless inquiry into the future looks at systems and system-wide change, even though it might start with small steps. It taps into human capacity for creativity, in dreaming up and imagining what might be. It honors the experience of our ancestors, particularly drawing on indigenous wisdom to reconnect with authentic and organic earth-based systems. It interrogates patterns of the past that must be confronted in order to center mutual benefit. And it translates insight into strategic foresight by practicing honesty about potential alternative scenarios, no matter how hard to face. Together, these build resilience, relevance and collective response.

An important lesson from 2020 for schools is that even though front-burner priorities are tactical and feel urgent (e.g., getting students ready for state exams, distributing digital devices, installing handwashing stations in every classroom), if we don't pay attention to the broader, systemic challenges as reflected in our big questions and the wider, global context in which they were formed, new crises loom around the corner to overtake every other priority. Though it may be uncomfortable, continually wondering "what's next?" is a demonstration of leading with courage, foresight, and love.

Audit activities/questions

- What is your personal sense of the future? How do you see yourself evolving as a person and as an educator? What are the drivers of those changes?
- How much of your curriculum aligns to or addresses [skills needed for careers of the future](#)?
- Collect a list of "big questions" that your school community is discussing on an ongoing basis.
- Survey your community and ask what are the most challenging aspects of the future that we have to prepare ourselves and our

students for? Then ask, how do those things show up in our current practice?

- To what extent are discussions about the future and scenario planning influencing the decisions your school community is making about curriculum and practice?

Towards a new normal

- Create a community-wide feed to curate resources that speak to future trends regarding education, work, health and wellness, technology, etc.
- As a school community, write a “history of the future.” Use 2040, perhaps...what has happened in the intervening 20 years? How has your school changed?
- Have students, teachers, and parents co-create and keep a list of changes in practice and structures over the next year in your school. Then, do an end of the year reflection around the theme of “How Have We Changed?”
- In every course, include an “Eye on the Future” section that explains how what is being taught connects to an uncertain future.
- Create a Futures Roundtable that meets regularly to interrogate current practice and map next steps for community wide capacity building around innovation and change.

Resources

- [Eight Emerging Lessons: From Coronavirus to Climate Action](#) by Otto Scharmer
- [Emergent Strategy](#) by adrienne maree brown
- [Post Corona](#) by Scott Galloway
- [Our humanity needs to develop at the same speed as our technology](#) by Esko Kilpi
- [Lessons for a Post Pandemic World](#) by Fareed Zakaria





Looking Forward

Confronting any one of these big questions with honesty and thoroughness is deeply challenging, let alone all of them. The cognitive complexity called for by the multiple interlocking crises we are living through and we have yet to discover poses an amplified, urgent challenge to anyone who cares about education. Rather than shrink from the magnitude of it all, we must maintain a dedication, a discipline to be here for it.

As we said at the very beginning, we recognize that educators, like so many front-line workers, are exhausted. Yet, it feels like little is being done to relieve the sources of individual and systemic depletion. As long as decision-makers feel pressured to squeeze in old grammars of school into new delivery methods, to solve current problems with tired recommendations, to force conformity where creativity and authentic relationships are called for - exhaustion will dominate, and many amazing educators will opt out of the profession.

Restorative justice activist and educator [Mariame Kaba](#) famously said, "Hope is a discipline," calling for a commitment to the future that must manifest as action. Amidst such hope, this is no time to give it up.

For hope to sustain, we need to get our affairs in order. This is particularly crucial in education where our charge is to help students be prepared for their futures. We believe the nine questions are important, foundational starting points for doing that. Just as important, however, is that we learn how to look to the future, to “read the signs” that are all around us, and to get better at using those contexts to make more effective, more relevant decisions during this inflection point we are living through.

*“For hope to sustain,
we need to get our
affairs in order.”*

Some of those signs are more clear than others, especially those amplified by the events of the last 18 months. We’re facing a much different future of work. Higher education is at a breaking point. Technology will continue to redefine what it means to be human. Inequity will continue to rise. And climate change is not just on our doorstep any longer. It’s in our house. Everyone in our school communities must now develop and employ the skills, literacies, and, importantly, the dispositions that will allow us to not just react to what the future may bring, but to create a future we desire.

To maintain hope, and ground it in discipline, we need to develop resilience in our school communities, and clarity that our work in schools is really work for the greater global good. In this moment, we must build and maintain hope through contribution, cooperation, and collaboration with others with whom we form new types of communities that transcend time and place.

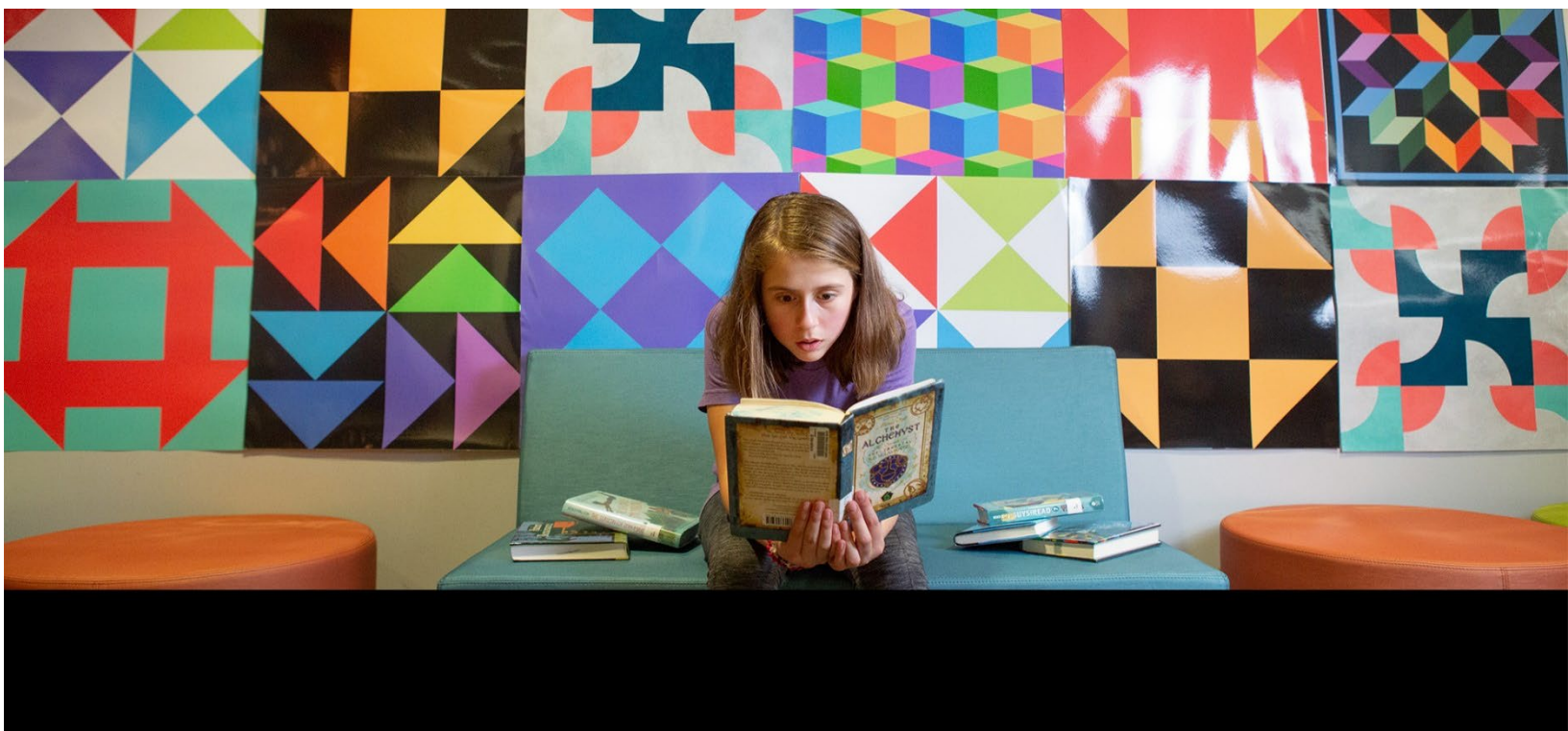
Amidst the pervading narrative of fatigue and turmoil, we see signs of hope everywhere. After decades of calls for Confederate flags to be removed from State houses and in [popular culture](#), 2020 served as the tipping point for removing them. After trying to fit more content into packed class schedules, [teachers found](#) that doing less made them more effective, opening up curiosity in students; and teachers’ capability to pivot quickly to teaching online was immense. The critical role of parents and the home environment became more appreciated. Relationships and communities were maintained and nurtured, even during imposed distancing. Despite calls for nationalism, [scientists collaborated](#), and a

process of [global cooperation](#) yielded a highly effective vaccine in record time, led by a [young Black woman](#) and other [minorities](#) in science.

Finally, while it may not always be obvious, and while it may be subject to fits and starts, it's clear that the story of education and schooling is changing. It's becoming more centered on the learner, on equity and justice, and on participation and creation, not just obedience and consumption. We are writing new stories, aspiring to new outcomes, and reimagining our work with children. We can't know exactly what the future holds. But if 2020 taught us anything, it's that we need to continually interrogate our world, to work with one another to solve our problems, and to constantly learn.

In the midst of interrogating with sincere curiosity, new questions will naturally arise. For example, you might ask "What's worth learning?" and "How will we know?" pointing to the challenge of evidence. Uncovering additional big questions stands as an essential feature at the heart of learning, and in the story of change.

Our hope is that if you as school communities grapple with these questions with serious intent, it will provide a strong foundation to amplify that work. Sincere best wishes on that journey.





Helping leaders design the future through inquiry.

WHY BIG QUESTIONS?

We started the BIG Questions Institute to accompany educators to grapple with the conversations and change initiatives outlined in the previous sections. We began with our own big questions: *What tools and dispositions do educational leaders need to navigate the future with fearless inquiry, and how might we serve them to embrace and work effectively in the new, no-normal?*

Recognizing these profound challenges alongside the manifold urgent needs educators must rise to and respond to if our communities and world are to heal, we have combined expertise from diverse fields to make facing the hardest questions do-able. Our approach is to offer [accompaniment](#) and updated tools, so that you aren't alone through your fearless inquiry and leadership journey.

Our professional learning experiences build the capacity of individuals, groups, and even communities to get in touch with what most matters about our work with children, and to situate that work in how the world actually exists today. We help you write a new, unique story for your schools and classrooms into the future, and we support the development of new organizational and classroom practices that let you live that story to the fullest.

“Our professional learning experiences build the capacity of individuals, groups, and even communities to get in touch with what most matters about our work with children.”

In practice this might take the form of helping re-tool your vision with [new leadership lenses](#), or a fresh look at your strategic plan with guidance and collaborative exercises for [Boards and Trustees](#). Or it might look like learning [futures-informed scenario planning](#), anticipating and creating potential responses to conditions impacted by uncertain internal or external forces. Experiences that help you [get unstuck](#) amidst so many challenges, create conditions for

realizing student agency, go [deeper than diversity](#) to realize empathy and equity, navigate the [infodemic, unlock the potential of teaching in hybrid and online](#) settings, and engage with cultural relevance and global competence are all offered to help you avoid detours to progress, to navigate the no-normal.

If you are wondering, *what now?* You are not alone.

"I think that the work you are doing with people is very deep, planting seeds within for the future. While people are running around reacting to moment by moment changes, the two of you are holding ground for this critical work. It is visionary, and as usual, ahead of many who are not yet open to this type of thinking." ~ Anna Sugarman, Shenendehowa (NY) SD

Join the BQI Global Community

To explore our big questions related to the changing nature of education in complex times, we'd like to invite you to join the BIG Questions Institute Learning Community. It's a dedicated space steeped in "fearless inquiry" where you can engage in ongoing professional learning and collaboration with other educators from around the world.

Learning in community moves beyond an event and becomes part of organic practice, bridging individual growth with institutional or systemic transitions. Rather than call for stop-gap, one-off measures, learning and doing in a community of practice seeds lasting, creative, relevant measures with support from peers around the world.

Our hope is that in the BQI Community, the learning will be authentic, less lonely, iterative, shared, dynamic, and joyful.

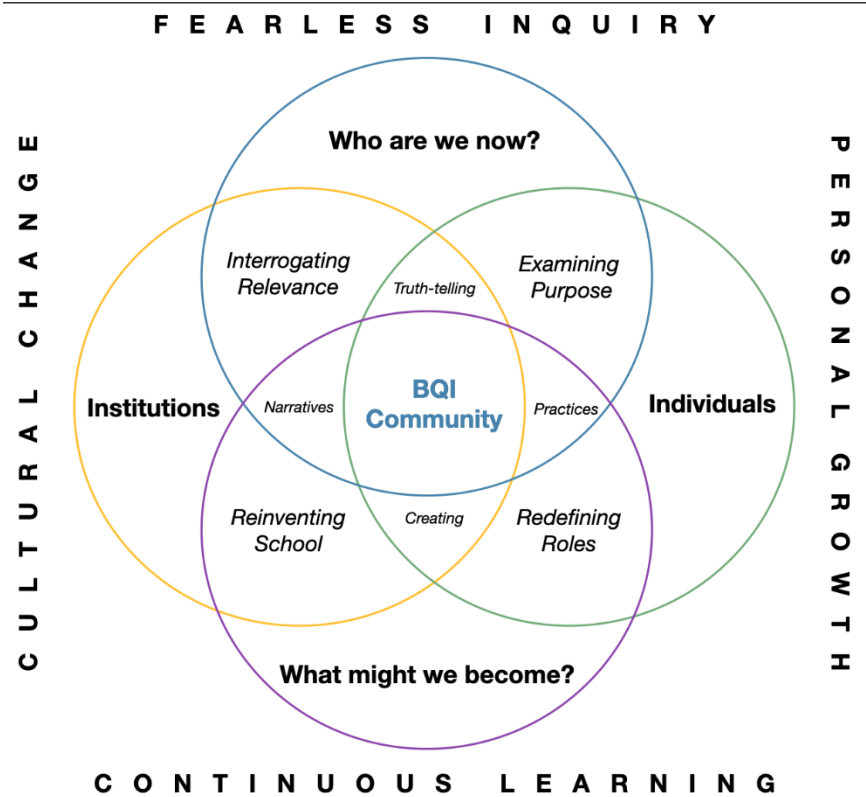
Now more than ever, education needs designers, explorers, creators, and writers of new stories of learning.

So, please join us by accepting the invitation you should have received after requesting the download of this book, [use this link](#) to join.

To explore what professional learning with the BIG Questions Institute might look like for your school community, schedule a call with us at your convenience.

We look forward to learning with you.

THE BIG QUESTIONS INSTITUTE FRAMEWORK



The **BQI Framework** envisions the engagement of three actors: individuals, institutions, and the community. As we emerge from a time of great upheaval and change in the world, we must start by asking “Who are we now?” which creates a foundation to ask “What might we become?”

As individuals, we start by examining our purpose with a focus on clarifying our personal “why?” as educators. This begins with deep reflection steeped in truth-telling about our current practices. As

institutions, we begin by interrogating the relevance of our systems, once again being honest about the narratives that we are living.

With those answers as a starting point, we work towards redefining our roles as practitioners and reinventing school as institutions, done by creating new pathways forward.

These processes reflect the progression from individuals to systems, where each stands as vital to lasting change. Fearless inquiry and continuous learning serve as powerful dispositions framing this process for cultural change on the macro level, and personal growth on the micro level.

The 9 Questions articulated in this book serve as a starting point along that path of fearless inquiry and continuous learning.

About the Authors

WILL RICHARDSON



A former public school educator of 22 years, Will has spent the last 15 years developing an international reputation as a leading thinker and writer about the intersection of social online learning networks, education, and systemic change. Most recently, Will is a co-founder of [The Big Questions Institute](https://www.bigquestionsinstitute.com/) which was created to help educators

use "fearless inquiry" to make sense of this complex moment and an uncertain future.

In 2017, Will was named one of 100 global "Changemakers in Education" by the Finnish site HundrED, and was named one of the Top 5 "Edupreneurs to Follow" by Forbes. He has given keynote speeches, lead breakout sessions, and provided coaching services in over 30 countries on 6 continents. (Come on Antarctica!) He has also authored six books that have sold over 200,000 copies worldwide, and given TEDx Talks in New York, Melbourne, and most recently [Vancouver](https://www.tedxvancouver.com/). He coaches educational leaders on creating and supporting relevant, sustainable change in their school communities.

Will has two adult children, Tess and Tucker, and lives in rural New Jersey with his wife Wendy.

HOMA TAVANGAR



For over three decades, Homa’s work has addressed themes of culture, innovation, leadership, global citizenship and global competence, and deep diversity, equity, belonging and inclusion. She connects timely topics of the moment with the timeless desire to work with purpose and make a difference – whatever one’s circumstances.

Homa is the author of best-selling [*Growing Up Global: Raising Children to Be At Home in the World*](#) (Random House), co-author of five books for educators, and most recently, [*Global Kids*](#) (Barefoot Books), a colorful activity deck exposing children to world cultures, rich diversity, and global mindsets. Homa advises and trains K-12 schools around the world, and organizations like the University of Pennsylvania’s Coalition for Educational Equity, Disney Channel and other Fortune 50 and small companies, the National Education Association Foundation, Empatico.org and the Pulitzer Center. She coaches leaders on accountability for equity, leading through crisis, and launching inclusive and transformational practices. She is co-founder of [BigQuestions.Institute](#) and [OnenessLab.com](#). She serves on the boards of [International Schools Services](#) and the [Tahirih Justice Center](#).

A graduate of UCLA and Princeton University, Homa was born in Iran, has lived on four continents, has heritage in four world religions, is married and the mother of three daughters.



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