

~~1~~

# Shifting the Focus



2  Mindful teacher, Mindful school

**E**ducation today is so pressured, so overstuffed, that every now and then we need to strip away all the clutter and come back to basics. To try to simplify things. One question I sometimes pose to students and teachers at the start of the school year is:

'We're actually just a bunch of kids and a bunch of adults, in a building; so really the question is, "How are we best going to spend our time together"?''

This kind of focusing question can be helpful when trying to look at the big picture, develop curricula or explore behavioural norms. In order to answer this question, as educators and as parents, we need to ask ourselves another:

'What really matters?'

Given the competing demands on school programmes, this question can help us explore the role and purpose of schools on a deeper level. With overcrowded curricula and overly busy school days we need to learn to let go of things, not continually keep adding on. We can't do it all. So we need to be clear about what really matters.

Ask yourself now, as a parent, thinking of your own children, or as an educator, thinking of the children you teach:

'What do you really want for your children?'

Ask yourself again - don't rush to answer this - take a moment, take a breath and allow a response to emerge:

'What do you really, deeply, want for your children?'

Make a note of your top three words or phrases before reading further.

When we ask this question of parents and teachers in workshops, these are the type of answers we get:

Self-esteem	Ability to make good decisions
Compassion	Curiosity
Happiness	Imagination
Excitement	Joy
Wellbeing	Resilience
Fulfillment	Well-equipped to deal with life
Self-belief	

Occasionally a parent (or teacher) may say 'Hard-working' or 'Successful' but these more traditionally expressed objectives of schooling are very much in the minority. Although the type of responses listed above may connect quite well to the glossy mission statements of many progressive schools, how often do they align with our students' daily experiences of life in a learning organisation?

There is so much more to effective human learning than grasping at concepts and regurgitating content. The importance of explicitly acknowledging these deeper qualities - for making more space for inner life and for the experience of the learner - will be a core theme of this book. When we *do* give these areas more focus in our schools and in our lives, we can also achieve more. Learning how to deepen our attention, and to become more self-aware, can enhance our academic capacities and make learning more relevant and more impactful.

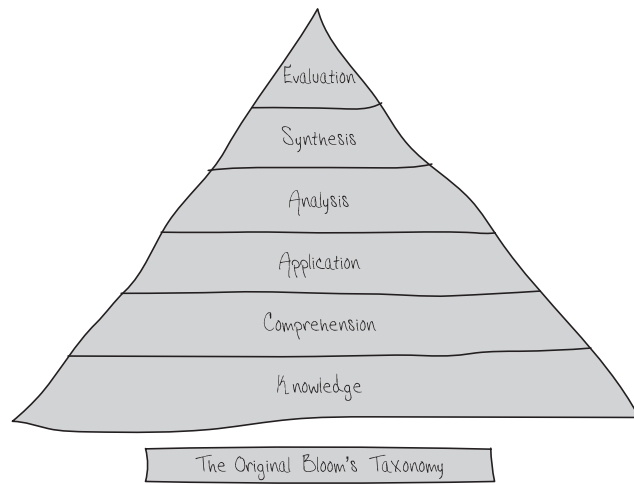
So, our essential, guiding question is:

'Can we begin to shift schooling to more effectively meet these fundamental needs for growth and development?'

Our intention as teachers does not need to start with changing the whole system - much of this book is about how we can first start to shift the focus within ourselves before seeking to change the rest of the world. Indeed, this is the only shift that can make a real difference, and as we learn to draw on a wider and deeper range of our own capacities, we will naturally begin to help shift the focus in our students and in our schools.

## THE FORGOTTEN TAXONOMIES

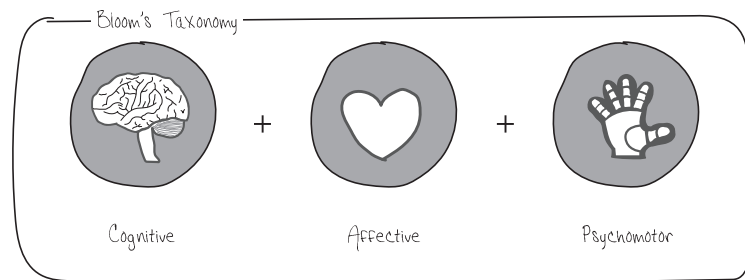
Bloom's Taxonomy of learning (Bloom et al., 1956) was created in the 1950s to help teachers and schools formulate a framework for the key skills to be developed through education. Many teachers have been brought up on Bloom's Taxonomy and almost all have been influenced by it - whether we know it or not. Even if it wasn't explicitly on the agenda during your training, it will probably have informed the teachers who taught you and the educational system in which you operate. It may well have had an indirect impact on your deeper assumptions about learning.



**Figure 1.1** Bloom's Taxonomy - Cognitive Domain

What many people don't know though, is that the taxonomy we are familiar with is just *one of three* that were drawn up by Bloom's committee at the time. The one we all know is the taxonomy of **Cognitive** development - dealing with *Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation*. Somehow the other two - **Psychomotor** (physical) skills and **Affective** (emotional) skills - have been largely forgotten.

Why have we forgotten these two taxonomies? It's not an accident; it's symptomatic of educational approaches that fail to aim to develop the whole child. Many schools these days do place an emphasis on physical activities and many have



**Figure 1.2** Bloom's Taxonomy - Domains of Learning

begun to incorporate elements of social and emotional learning (SEL) into their programmes. But overall, we are a long way from giving young people an experience of schooling that helps them develop into well-rounded individuals with a balanced focus on body, heart and mind.

## FINDING BALANCE

The underlying concern that drives this book is: the world is out of balance:

- There are serious questions about our collective mental health.
- As a species we are very clever but we lack wisdom.
- Many education systems both reflect and perpetuate this imbalance.

There is a fundamental problem with our ability to live well and to be well - to share this planet in harmonious ways and to make wise choices about our actions.

This imbalance in human development and activity shows up in so many ways. Our technological prowess is extraordinary. Measuring devices have recently been devised to record gravitational waves with instruments so sensitive they can detect changes in the distance between us and the nearest solar system down to the width of a human hair. We are amazingly clever. But cleverness alone is not enough - we are not so clever, or even very knowledgeable, when it comes to sharing the planet sustainably. Powerful technological skills driven by economic incentives that often only benefit a minority, combined with an inability to see the big picture clearly and to make sound decisions about our actions and their impact, create an unhealthy mixture for ourselves, other species and the planet.

Mainstream school systems often reflect this imbalance. Most schools are good at developing certain capacities and approaches - namely the academic, analytical and critical - but not so good at cultivating the collaborative, social and affective skills that can provide this much needed balance of heart and mind. True education involves more than just becoming smarter - it demands that we cultivate *all* our capacities. The Greeks knew this, and as Aristotle said:

‘Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.’

What we lack is wisdom. We need to balance our heads and our hearts with an embodied wisdom that can help us find the courage to face complex issues and take wise actions that benefit all.

The core intention of this book is to encourage individual educators and schools to begin to *shift the focus* towards a more balanced and more heart-centred environment that can truly tap the full range of human capacities in the young people we work with and want so much for.

In a complex, challenging world, we need our children to develop resilience, self-awareness and the capacity to be able to make sense of complex systems. We can consciously nurture these neglected competencies in our schools.

## HOW WELL ARE WE?

In order to be well and to live well, a degree of economic security is clearly essential, but it's only part of the story. Even those of us who are lucky enough to live in economic comfort aren't necessarily getting any happier. The World Health Organization predicts that by 2030 depression will be the single biggest cause of ill health worldwide (WHO, 2012). A 2005 *British Journal of Psychology* paper indicated that half of us in the West will experience depression in our lifetimes (Andrews et al., 2005).

Especially at risk are the elderly and, more recently, the young. We live in a time of crisis for the mental health of young people. Much of the recent growth of interest in wellbeing and mindfulness in schools in the UK is coming less from education and more from public health officials concerned about an epidemic of mental instability amongst young people:

- 1 in 10 of the 5-16-year-olds in the UK now have a diagnosable psychiatric condition (Mental Health Foundation, 2015).
- Globally, depression is the top cause of illness and disability among adolescents, and suicide is the third highest cause of death (WHO, 2016).

The age of onset of clinical depression is getting younger and younger. Just 50 years ago the most common age for the onset of major depression was seen in people in their 40s and 50s; now it's in their 20s. In fact, one study showed that the new peak age for the onset of major depression is amongst 13-15-year-olds (Williams et al., 2012).

Poverty can add a whole other dimension to these psychological factors, but anxiety and depression know no boundaries. Even if you work in privileged private or international schools, you will know that many of our young people are no strangers to the negative impacts of psychological stress.

We don't know exactly why this downward trend in mental health is affecting people at an increasingly early age, but the impact on learning and growth is highly worrying. Education systems that put a lot of focus on high-stakes exams (and I guess that includes most of them) certainly contribute to the stress young people feel. My three children grew up in international schools and all have now taken the International Baccalaureate Diploma. It's a very well regarded pre-university qualification and a well-thought through framework for a well-rounded final two years of school. But in reality I have to say that, much as I respect and admire the overall concept of the programme, in practice it is just far too demanding. Each teacher wants you to do well in their subject and as results are published there is significant pressure on teachers too. This for me is a clear example of how a lot of well-intentioned people and ideas in a complex system can end up having a negative effect on some of the individuals it was intended to serve. The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is aware of these concerns and is looking at ways to reduce stress (Hawley, 2016). Similar issues, of course, arise for students coping with exam stress in the UK (Ali, 2016) and in many other countries. It's part of a bigger picture in which school systems continue to be filtering mechanisms for increasingly competitive university places - and along the way there are many casualties.

In addition, many of our young people today are often sleep deprived - their lives may be dominated by a battery of digital 'weapons of mass distraction'. If you are in your late teens and live in a wealthy country, chances are that you have had a pretty intense connection to a number of screen-based devices for over half your life. As a school leader, I have been responsible for introducing IT programmes and I appreciate the many ways technology has opened up learning for us all. But

digital learning brings its own issues of compulsion and distraction, which we now need to equip our students to deal with.

And it's not just the young who are struggling with this - it's teachers, parents, you, me, all of us. We live in an age where *busyness* and being switched on 24/7 are the norm. It's the nature of modern life and we are all more or less becoming dependent on information technology. If, as adults, we know how challenging it can be to manage our own screen time, can we really expect a 10-year-old to know when to pull themselves back from being sucked in?

We can't put all the blame for modern stresses on technology and social media - changes in general in recent times have been enormous. The increased pace of life is one major cause of our experience of stress. There's an interesting analogy in the book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014) by Yuval Noah Harari: if someone in the year 1000 fell asleep like Rip Van Winkle for 500 years, and woke just as Columbus was setting sail for the Americas, he would be in shock but the world would be recognisable. However, if one of Columbus' sailors fell asleep in 1500 and woke up 500 years later, he wouldn't know what planet he was on. We are not necessarily hardwired to deal with this increased pace of life.

In order to be successful and resilient in this age of distraction and complexity, there are some basic competencies that we have to learn - or perhaps to rediscover. We need to consciously cultivate our skills of:

- Attention
- Self-awareness
- Emotional regulation

It's not simply that we need to learn these skills in order to be able to cope with all the problems of modern life, it's also that modern life is giving us many insights into human behaviour that we can draw from - about how the brain works and about how humans best learn. We now know much more about the importance of *attention*. We know from studies of taxi drivers (Maguire et al., 2006) and violinists (Elbert et al., 1995) that we can change our brain by the way we use it. *Where* we put our attention and *how* we pay attention are key factors in understanding how to learn effectively.

Our understanding of the brain has improved so much through brain imaging techniques over the last 20 years, and it is helping us see what happens when people consciously work with their minds. One 'big understanding' is about the plasticity of the brain. **Neuroplasticity** helps us understand the value of training and of retraining and significantly expands our vision of human potential. We are also learning more about how we can train affective skills and capacities such as empathy and compassion as well as how to improve our capacity to attend and to use our minds to their fullest potential.

But our definition of intelligence in mainstream schooling is still far too limited. Testing regimes still dominate our approaches to assessing understanding, and this gives confusing messages to children about the deeper purposes of education.

## THE FILTERING SYSTEM

When I was 10 years old we were all made to sit a one-hour IQ test. This test filtered those who did well, on that day, in that hour, from those that didn't. Most of my friends didn't. So I went to the posh grammar school with the silly caps and the bright green blazers, whilst most of my friends went to the much tougher secondary modern school down the road, with the dull green jackets (and no caps). The transition was, for me, a regression - from feeling quite mature and valued in my relatively progressive mixed-gender primary school class, to being the youngest and shortest of 800 boys in an antiquated grammar school (not a great place to be when you are 11 years old). The focus was strictly on academic success and I got myself through the 13 'O' level, 3 'A' level and 2 'S' level exams I sat from age 13-17, but there was no joy in it. I learnt to be more critical, more analytical, and there was some satisfaction in the academic success, and of course in getting a place at a university, but I didn't feel I had really grown in the deeper way I had in my primary school years.

On the day I got my final results at university I thought to myself 'Not bad at all, considering I really didn't work that hard for it'. The very moment I had that thought, it suddenly became clear to me for the first time that no one else would really care that much about my result. Useful perhaps for getting me into some lines of work, but really what did anyone care about that particular number? And why did it matter to me anyway what anyone thought? It was, after all, my education, my career, my life. I had been jumping through academic hoops without really understanding why. The possibility that I could have been studying and learning for the pleasure of it or for my own benefit had never really occurred to me.

As I readied myself to finally step away from an education system that had absorbed much of my waking hours for the past 16 years it suddenly felt like it had all been a sort of game - one that I didn't know I had been playing until that moment.

That narrow view of intelligence that saw my friends and me sifted by IQ test results at such a young age no longer holds quite such sway. Education has moved on since then (thank goodness) and many countries no longer base key life decisions on such narrow parameters at such an early age. But it has not moved on enough - the UK government has plans to increase the number of grammar schools as I write, and we are still obsessed with grades and numbers and other extrinsic motivators that take the focus of learning away from an intrinsic sense of discovery and from the joy of learning itself - and we are still confused about whether school is about learning for life or filtering for college.

In terms of rational, scientific understanding of human learning, we know there's so much more to being 'intelligent' than we thought even a few decades ago. We know there are multiple aspects of intelligence, and we know that our IQ is just the tip of the iceberg. A high IQ may help get you a good job, but it's our other capacities - our emotional and interpersonal skills - that can enable us to make something of that job; to build leadership skills, to grow and develop. Many companies know this - some actively recruit and promote for emotional intelligence - but do our schools really reflect these developments?



Understanding ourselves, our minds, bodies and emotions, is a key 21st-century life skill.

A legitimate function of schools can be to foster this understanding. If we know more about how to use our minds effectively, how to train the attention, how to develop awareness and build emotional regulation, and if we appreciate the value of these key life skills, should they not be more central to our school curricula?

## WHAT WE WANT FOR OUR CHILDREN. WE NEED FOR OURSELVES

How can this shift of focus be achieved? The key, of course, lies with you, the teacher.

It is becoming increasingly important to society that we value and develop these self-awareness and self-management capacities in our students, but for this to happen we need teachers who value, and who are developing, those same capacities in themselves; educators who are emotionally and socially intelligent as well as intellectually and academically knowledgeable.

The importance of the role of the teacher is not fully recognised in many societies. Teachers are often undervalued - by parents, schools, governments - and even by themselves.

The role of the teacher is vital - it is powerful and it needs our attention.

I say this not just because I am a teacher but because of the significant scientific research in this area (particularly in social neuroscience) and also because it aligns with my own experience.

### MWALIMU

When I left university in the 1970s I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, but the one thing I knew for certain was that I didn't want to spend my precious time teaching. I knew too well what terrors we inflicted in those days on some of our teachers at Chichester High School for Boys; the exhaustion, breakdowns and departures from what had promised to be a noble profession.

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

Over the years I saw too many friends who had chosen to teach getting worn down and cynical.

But the best laid plans of mice and men ...

At the age of 30 I found myself wanting to review my career path (I was a social worker in the voluntary sector) and after a period of reflection ended up choosing to move along a 'road more travelled'. One of my prime motivators in deciding to become a middle school teacher in particular was the horrible transition I had experienced as a child in moving from primary to secondary school. Surely there had to be a better way of doing this?

I started my new career as an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher in upper and middle schools in Bradford, Yorkshire where I encountered some inspirational teachers working in challenging inner-city situations who found meaningful ways to connect with students and to somehow make an overly prescriptive national curriculum schooling relevant to the children they taught. Years later I somehow found myself in East Africa, starting up a very small 'Junior Secondary' school for 9-13-year-olds that was being added on to a growing English language primary school in Arusha, Tanzania.

From the moment I stepped off the plane I, as a teacher, was made to feel respected, honoured and valued. Not just by the small international community the school had been set up to serve, but also in general, because in Tanzania education is highly valued. The then President, Julius Nyerere, had been a schoolteacher himself and his popular nickname was 'Mwalimu' or 'Teacher'. There is such hunger for education in Tanzania that, despite underpaid teachers with very limited resources, and schools that are sometimes literally just the shade of a tree, children often walk proudly for many miles for the chance to become educated. Coming from the somewhat cynical staffrooms of some pretty tough schools in Thatcherite Britain, where the government almost seemed to despise, and certainly to mistrust teachers, and where parents in our communities could sometimes appear indifferent to the importance of education, this experience of automatically being respected was unsettling - in fact, slightly spooky.

To have a parent community that openly supports, respects and values its teachers is a real gift to a school. Starting that school in an old bungalow in Arusha with just 30 children, one set of atlases, one set of dictionaries and one unreliable computer was one of the best experiences of my teaching career. Strip away all the clutter and it was so obvious to us as a small group of teachers that the essential elements of a school are the students, the teachers and the parents - and the quality of the relationships that connect them.

The central aims of this book are:

- To help shift the focus of mainstream schooling to incorporate more centrally the often overlooked affective capacities that are increasingly understood to be core, not fringe elements, in a school that truly aims to meet the needs of the 21st century.
- To help teachers and schools consider the benefits of using mindful awareness training as a basis for developing these skills within an integrated framework that promotes wellbeing in their communities.
- To help individual teachers - and especially young teachers and trainee teachers - to be able to deeply value the importance of their role, and to help them discover practical ways to sustain themselves and to thrive in this exacting and rewarding profession.