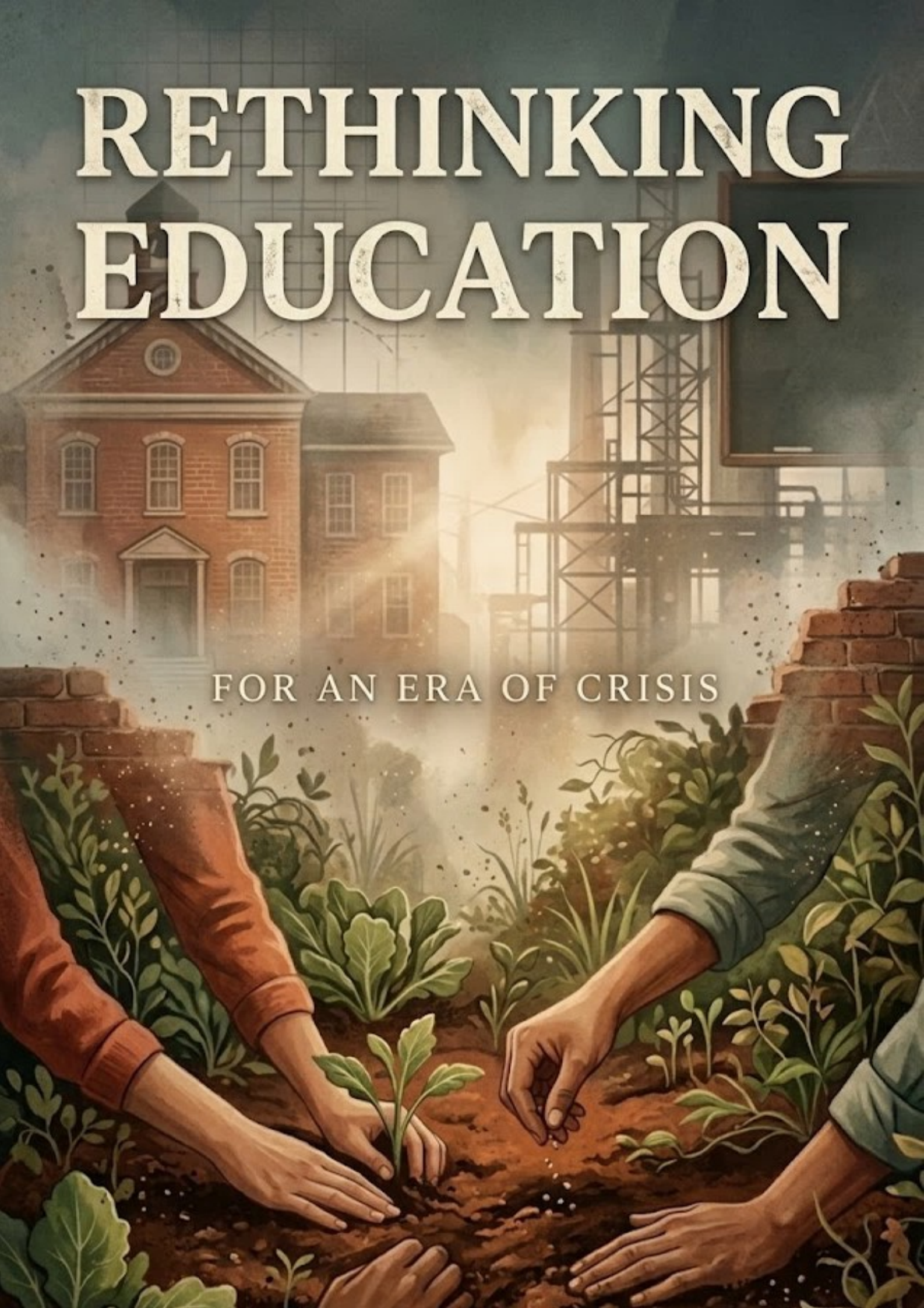


RETHINKING EDUCATION

FOR AN ERA OF CRISIS



Introduction: Rethinking Education for An Era of Crisis

By Alexander Benesch



Image by [Jose Antonio Alba](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Educators like me face a huge challenge. We know that the world is in crisis. Most days, we try to blend it out. We suppress this knowledge, just like everyone else does. Because we are humans, after all. But no matter how much we try to deflect from it or ignore it, we still feel it. It is in our human nature.

Yet we walk into our classrooms every day and try to prepare our students for what is to come. We know that we have an obligation to lead the way for all those young souls in front of us. But in reality, we feel just as powerless as they do. Not only do we know that the world is in crisis, but we also know that we do not possess the tools to prepare our youngsters for a future which sometimes seems increasingly dark and hopeless.

How do you prepare a young person for a world that is changing at a rapid pace towards a future that seems increasingly opaque and desperate?

How do you even know what knowledge or skills are needed for such a future?

We don't. Nobody does. At least not yet. There is only one way we can solve this dilemma. We need to think deeply. We need to dig through the mud, and we need to find bold ideas. To do that, we must commit to three things.

1: We must acknowledge that the crisis is real.

More than that, we must acknowledge that we are facing multiple crises at once, which are all intertwined.

- **Geopolitical Instability:** We are closer to a high-intensity global conflict that carries existential risks for our species than at almost any point during the Cold War.
- **Ecological Collapse:** Human-induced climate change is disrupting ecosystems, destabilising weather patterns, and threatening our basic foundations for survival.
- **Unchecked Capitalism:** Unchecked market forces continue to commodify human relationships and undermine the essential social fabric of our communities.
- **Accelerating Technology:** Technological shifts are outpacing our biological and social evolution, threatening to destabilise everything from labour markets to monetary systems and democratic institutions.

2: Conduct a rigorous, root-cause analysis

We must dare to look past superficial symptoms and understand where these crises originate. Only then can we grasp the full scale of their potential consequences without flinching or retreating into cynicism. We may not like what we find, but we must keep looking nonetheless. Just like a doctor can only find a cure, if he knows the correct diagnosis, we too must be uncompromising in our search for the truth.

3: Develop bold, human-centred strategies for 21st-century pedagogy

We need modern curricula and teaching methods grounded in a realistic understanding of human learning, paired with an unapologetically humanistic outlook. We cannot simply default to 20th-century economic models of schooling. We also cannot rely on old methods just because they are convenient. What worked before may not work any longer, and we must accept this.

A Starting Point for the Path Ahead

I have been writing about these systemic breakdowns and pedagogical solutions for several years on my blog abenesch.info. To offer a concrete starting point, I have compiled six core essays into a single, structured volume called *Rethinking Education for an Era of Crisis*.

The pieces contained inside this volume are by no means an exhaustive answer, but they represent a necessary beginning.

- ***What Are the Forces That Shape Our Education System?***
An examination of how economic pressures, standardised testing, and institutional incentives have distorted the core purpose of schooling.
- **Relevance is Key for Successful Teaching**
Applying John Dewey's dialectic of theory and practice to ground learning in real-world context rather than abstract test preparation.
- **Theme-Based Learning Is A Necessity In The 21st Century**
A concrete approach to bring relevance into the classroom and inspire a deeper understanding and inquiry of the world and the society.
- **We Need to Start Teaching Philosophy in Schools**
Why ethical reflection, critical inquiry, and foundational values are essential tools for navigating an uncertain world.
- **Our World Is in Crisis. Let Us Teach Our Children to Grow Food**
A practical case study in ecological literacy, community resilience, and building real-world self-sufficiency outside market logic.

- **The Hidden Skill Gap Nobody Wants to Talk About**

Why young adults struggle in modern workplaces due to missing executive habits—and how we can explicitly teach reliability, focus, and self-advocacy.

Whether you are a classroom teacher, a school leader, or a parent navigating these shifting landscapes, I invite you to read with a critical yet curious mind.

Let's dive in.

Chapter 1: What Are the Forces That Shape Our Education System?

And why is it important for us to understand as teachers?

The debate about our education system is raging all the time. That is not a surprise. Teachers have a strong influence on a child's life. After all, during their school time, students spend up to a third of their day in school. We, teachers, need to understand which are the forces that shape our education system. Both in a positive and negative way. And we also need to understand what role we as current or future teachers play.

For the purpose of this article, I will frequently refer to Germany and Denmark. I will use them as examples of modern, Western education systems. This is because these are the education systems I am most familiar with.

Important Questions to Ponder Upon as Teachers

Because education plays such a major role in our lives, most of us have opinions about it. Teachers are no exception. But we should ask ourselves the following questions as an exercise.

- As a teacher, what are the ideal conditions for you to teach?
- If you were a student, what would be the ideal conditions for you to learn?
- As a parent, what are the ideal conditions for your child to thrive and learn?
- If you were the minister of education, what do you think the ideal education system should look like?

Try to take notes on each question. Compare. Do the expectations from each point of view match up 100%? Chances are that they don't. That is one of the forces that shape our education system. Education is a dialectic process. There are many actors involved. And all have different expectations of the system. For the most part, the current system we have is simply a result of trying to align those expectations. But that is not all.

History and Traditions Are Some of the Forces That Shape Our Education System

The concept of a public school system for educating the masses is a new one. At least if you look at it on the scale of human history. Most public school systems have only been in existence for a bit over 200 years. Some of the early examples are the [Danish Rytterskoler](#)¹ or the [Prussian schools in Germany](#).² Their structures still form the basis of many Western school systems.

For most of human history, however, education mostly took place in informal contexts. Or it was only reserved for the elite.

There are some examples of school systems in ancient times. For instance, Plato's Academy and the Spartan Polis. The former focused on debate and reflection. The latter had another focus. To teach children the virtues of military discipline and skills.

Actually, the core content of modern Western curricula traces back to the Greeks and Romans. They formalised the idea of the 7 liberal arts. The Romans subdivided them into the Trivium and the Quadrivium.

Trivium:

- **General Grammar**
Answers the question of the “Who, What, Where, and When” of a subject.
- **Formal Logic**
Answers the “Why” of a subject.
- **Classical Rhetoric**

Provides the “How” of a subject.

Quadrivium:

- **Arithmetic**
The study of numbers and quantities.
- **Geometry**

The study of numbers in physical space

- **Music**

The study of numbers in time. It is the applied theory of numbers. Also the study of relations between quantities.

- **Astronomy**

The study of numbers in space and time.

These 7 liberal arts still form the basis of nearly all Western school curricula.

Education usually reflected the needs of the communities in which it took place. For most of human history, formal education was only accessible to the elite. Wealthy families would hire (or enslave) private tutors. They would teach the children to read, write, and do arithmetic.

For the rest of the population, the situation was different. Fundamental skills were passed down from generation to generation. How to hunt, how to take care of a farm, etc. This has been the case since the early hunter-gatherer societies. The methods are also very similar to what we see in modern education. Learning by doing, Storytelling, and Songs, are some examples. The "curricula" always served to perpetuate existing gender and social structures.

The Desire to Preserve Existing Power Structures Is Also One of the Forces That Shape Our Education System

During medieval times, formal education was firmly in the hands of the church. Priests and Monks were guardians of knowledge. It also meant that the church had the privilege to decide what students should learn. Therefore, religious themes and bible studies formed the backbone of formal education. Private tutors were usually recruited from the clergy.

Even in the early public school systems, the main focus was to study Christian teachings. This was clearly the case in the aforementioned Rytterskoler. These influences persist in modern education systems, even in secularised states.

Take a look at the curriculum for [Christian studies](#)³ in Denmark. It is a compulsory subject for students of all ages. Other religions do have a minor place in the curriculum. But the emphasis is very clearly on Christianity as the main theme. The curriculum is therefore not secularised.

The Prussian Schools emphasised building the national spirit and learning patriotic values. Another important aspect was to teach obedience and subservience to children. This is also still reflected in many modern school systems.

Obedient and subservient workers were also what capitalists needed for their mass-production facilities. This is also the reason why school starts between 7 and 8 in the morning. That coincides with the working hours in the factories. This is unlikely to change. Even though we have evidence that shows the [benefits of starting school later in the day](#).⁴

A further feature of the Prussian schools was to foster elite students. The first 8 years of school were free. After that, education had to be paid for. Only students from wealthy families had a real shot at studying at university. Most countries adopted this model.

Segregating student bodies is still very prevalent in Germany. Students are usually segregated after primary school (usually around grades 4 - 6). The secondary school system is quite inflexible. [It leaves little room for upward mobility](#).⁵

Ideology Is One of the Forces That Shape Our Education System

These historical forces do not provide the full picture, however. There are also other forces, which are not always visible. In general, education is an important pillar for preserving society. According to Karl Marx, the education system is part of the ideological superstructure. Through education, we create narratives that preserve the existing order.

We already discussed the example of Christian teaching. Another example is the difficulty in history curricula to address past transgressions. Among these are slavery, [human rights violations](#)⁶, and illegal military campaigns.

This is one of the forces on which we as teachers can make a direct impact. But it comes at a cost. Education is often an ideological battleground. We can see that in the U.S. right now, where we see an ongoing [ideological conflict about how to deal with the historic crimes against coloured people](#).⁷

There Are Also Structural Forces at Play

Last, but not least, there are also numerous structural forces to consider. There is the [issue of underfunded schools](#).⁸ The pandemic revealed how far German schools have fallen behind in digitalisation. In Denmark, where the digital infrastructure is in place, teachers lack adequate training. Delivering high-quality lessons [with digital tools is not an easy challenge](#).⁹



Bathrooms like this are a common sight in many public schools in Germany. Image by [timbo](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Also, the pressure to compete has infiltrated every layer of society. The [PISA studies](#)¹⁰ are an example of that. Most countries reacted to the first PISA results by introducing rigorous standardised testing. They have [had little effect](#).¹¹ But they increased pressure on teachers to teach to the test. This has lowered overall educational quality.

A very important structural issue is the quality of teachers and didactic methods. Almost all Western countries experience severe [teacher shortages](#).¹² But there is also little extra training for existing teachers. This is in spite of the fact that the field of educational research is picking up speed. We know what works and what doesn't work. One of the most extensive studies on educational quality was done by John Hattie's meta-study, where he produced a ranking of different methods by effect size. You can watch him present his [findings on YouTube](#)¹³.

But that knowledge rarely enters our education system. If it does, it is only in small doses. We also know how teachers can best support [neurodivergent students in the classroom](#).¹⁴ But often, the existing structures or frameworks do not allow teachers to provide necessary accommodations.

Last, but not least, there is a lack of flexibility. We know that not every student learns the same. But the fundamental structures that deliver education have not changed. Not since they were first introduced more than 200 years ago.

Among the Forces That Shape Our Education System Is a Rapidly Changing Society

When I studied to become a teacher, Social Media did not exist. Now they are an integral part of my students' lives. We know about the [negative impacts of social media on teenagers](#).¹⁵

But they are here to stay. The effect they have on my students is also shaping my lessons. The task for us as teachers is to find out how to counteract these negative effects. And to teach children to navigate a changing media landscape.

There are also other external factors. Such as a rapidly developing climate crisis. This will demand an appropriate response from schools. Whether they want it or not. I will discuss some ideas on this in a later chapter.

Back in 2020, the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in lockdowns of schools and other institutions, massive disruptions in supply chains, and political turmoil. What we learned is this: External shocks can easily disrupt our education system. Teachers scrambled for solutions to circumvent school lockdowns. Some [succeeded more than others](#).¹⁶ But it is clear that online learning as a concept is here to stay.

The internet not only led to a spread of information. It is also shaping our understanding of education. Most Universities now offer online lessons. Often in modules, so people can start to design their own training when it fits their busy schedules. And then there is a plethora of [course platforms such as Skillshare](#).¹⁷ They put the individual in the driver's seat of their education. The result is that the path to an education is not as straightforward as it used to be.

Education systems will also adapt to this change in society. Albeit slower than we would like.

The Most Exciting Time to Be a Teacher is Now

There are many forces that shape our education system. History. Tradition. Structures. A changing society. Right now, they are converging. The resulting clashes will create a big revolution.

It might be the biggest revolution in our education systems ever.

There will be many ideological battlegrounds. And nobody can say for sure what the outcome will be. But there is little doubt, that we as teachers play a decisive role in this process. We are the dots that connect it all.

This is a big responsibility to shoulder. And the reward for us as individuals is often meagre. Our societies [undervalue and underpay teachers](#).¹⁸ But in exchange, we do have the power to plant the seeds for the future of human civilisation. Few professionals can lay that claim for themselves.

Notes in Chapter 1

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Chapter 2: Relevance is a Key Driver for Learning

Let us talk about an important concept in teaching and learning. Relevance.

Every teacher has been asked the question "Why should I learn this?". Chances are, that you have asked it yourself when you went to school.

A common answer to this question is that the topic will be part of your exam later on.

This answer is, of course, technically correct. But it is not a satisfying one. It implies that the only goal of learning something is in order to pass a test.

You ask me, that is not exactly motivating.



Perceived relevance can greatly improve cognitive learning. Image by Yan Krukov via [Pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)

The Question of Relevance is Important

If you think about it for a moment, you will realize how important the question is.

How do we know that the stuff we spent a lot of time and effort on learning actually matters in the long run?

After all, our attention is valuable currency in these modern times.

Like always, the answer is not simple. As the old saying goes: "It is hard to make predictions. Especially about the future"

But we do know from research, that the perceived relevance of a topic or subject matter greatly [improves motivation to learn](#).¹ Using this knowledge means, we have an obligation as a teacher to add relevance to the things we teach.

How to Add Relevance

How then, shall we increase the perceived value or relevance to the student?

There are several options.

We can do this in several ways.

- Connecting the matter to real-world contexts
- Drawing on your own and the student's experiences and subjective realities
- Increase the dialectic between theory and practice

Connecting the matter to real-world contexts

Find examples of where the content is used in practice. Let the students know how this skill can benefit them outside the classroom. Use experiments, investigations, and hands-on teaching.

Try for instance to think about where knowledge about trigonometry is relevant or even indispensable. What are the concrete applications we can find?

Do not hesitate to let your students know, or even encourage them to seek out examples by themselves, which again creates perceived relevance value for them. Better yet, can we go out and put this in practice ourselves? How about letting the students measure that flagpole in the yard?

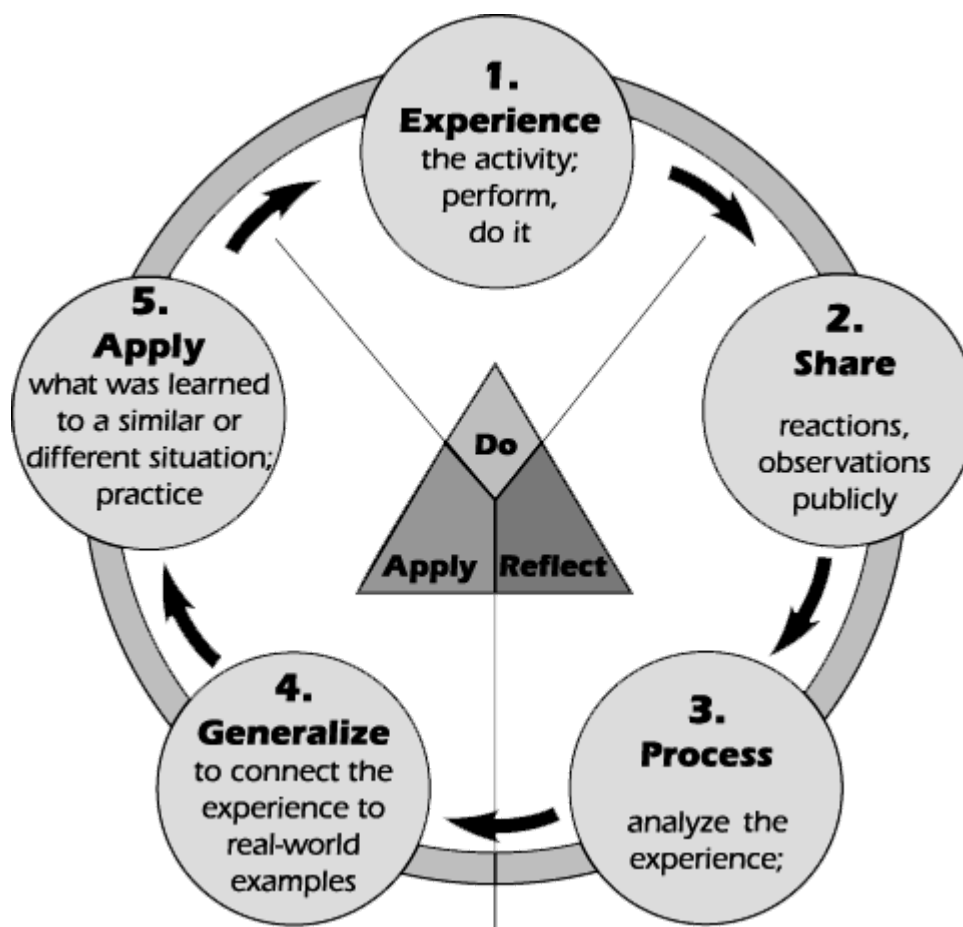
Drawing on your own and the student's experiences and subjective realities

One of my students used to be obsessed with farming and tractors. Therefore, I often tried to find ways to match up the subject matter to the relevance of running a farm

(Yes, you do need to know how to calculate the area to appropriately plan your crop production). Almost any topic or subject matter has real-world relevance. The world is often more connected than we realize. Try and find it.

Increasing the dialectic between theory and practice

The dialectic between theory and practice is at the core of [John Dewey's](#)² pedagogical theory. This is illustrated in the model below.



The thinking is, that an experience forces a reaction. This triggers a process, where we analyze the experience. We then connect our experiences and observations to real-world examples. This enables us to apply our learning in practice, which leads to new discoveries. Thus, the circle starts over again.

From this follows that we should find more ways to connect the theory and the practice.

When planning a lesson, we can, and should, think about a concrete product that should come out of the lesson, where the subject matter has been applied.

[This dialectic is very important](#)³ and in my own teaching experience a major driver of motivation. And Motivation adds perceived relevance.

Questions for inspiration

Below, I put together some questions and reflections that can help with planning your lessons.

- Can I have my students build/construct/create something, where this knowledge is applied?
- How about making an investigation that can bring more insight?
- Do I know someone who works with this? Can we interview this person to get more insight?
- How about making a performance to show for an audience?
- Can we go out and find concrete examples of this in the real world?
- Does this in any way relate to my students' hobbies/pastimes/interests?

If you would like to share some good stories for inspiration on how you applied some of these methods, just let me know in the comments.

Notes in Chapter 2

[1]

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[3] <https://abenesch.info/theme-based-learning/>

Chapter 3: Theme-Based Learning Is A Necessity In The 21st Century

It is a concrete way to add relevance to what you teach.



Image by [Esther Merbt](#) from [Pixabay](#)

I will come right out of the gate. I think Theme-based is a pedagogical approach that needs to play an important role in education.

What is theme-based learning?

First, let me clarify what theme-based learning means.

The idea of theme-based learning is to create learning environments where learning happens more organic. This is often done by introducing the subject matter in the form of concrete phenomena.

In this way, the students gain an understanding of how the different matters connect and appear in real-world settings.

Often, this also involves blending together different subject areas.

Theme-based learning is therefore different from how we usually organize education today.

[This article provides a very nice introductory understanding of the matter.](#)¹

Many alternative school systems, such as Montessori and Waldorf schools, already use this approach. It is deeply embedded in their core pedagogical principles.

Even some countries, like [Finland](#)², are launching efforts to promote theme-based learning.

An Example of Theme-Based Learning

I once designed a program for a class of mine, which I called the "[World Class](#)".³

The idea was to study a continent or a country in detail every month. My students learned about geography, customs, literature, art, society, and history.

We also studied each region through the lens of Climate Change. For instance by investigating how ecosystems would be affected by a changing climate.

The lessons content was related to the region in almost all school subjects.

At the same time, my students got a more comprehensive view of our planet and its inhabitants.

Why theme-based learning makes sense

We tend to construct neat boxes to compartmentalize our perception and understanding. But these boxes rarely reflect the real world.

Take a look at a typical backyard garden, for example. You will notice that there is an intricate ecosystem. Every living organism and plant is dependent on and interacting with each other. Every plant, insect, bacteria, fungus, or predator has a place in this ecosystem.

That ecosystem is part of the much larger ecosystem. We call this ecosystem planet earth. This ecosystem is governed by what is going on in its atmosphere. And the atmosphere interacts with the rest of our universe. You get the point.

When we put things into boxes we can examine something in detail.

But we risk failing to understand the whole.

When it comes to Climate Change, I recommend reading this piece by the [Guardian](#).⁴

We Need Not Only Know But Also Understand Our World

There is a fundamental difference between knowing and understanding something.

Our children need the skills to become capable agents in the world. They need to build their own future. And that of our planet.

Therefore it is vital for us to strive for this goal. That our students move from knowing to understanding.

Our world is changing faster than ever before. While I have been on this planet, many, things have changed. For better and for worse.

As a teacher, I cannot answer the question of what the future will hold for my students. Not even our most skilled scientists can.

Theme-Based Learning Trains Adaptability And Flexibility

Half of the knowledge and skills that my students learn today might be obsolete in twenty years. In the age of advanced AI technologies, this process will accelerate.

For perspective, I recommend reading Yuval Noah Harari's book "[21 lessons for the 21st century](#)".⁵

The teacher is no longer the one who knows and can show the students everything there is to know about the world. Those days are long gone.

Therefore, the most important skill set for students to learn is flexibility and adaptability. And they need to be ready to continue learning throughout life. They must not only learn how to acquire new knowledge. They must also learn how to put knowledge into new contexts.

This makes a Theme-based approach to learning not only useful and [relevant](#)⁶ but also a necessity in the 21st-century.

The roots of our compartmentalized education

How did we end up with our subject divisions?

Our current education system has its roots in the industrial revolution.

This revolution was spurred by a progressive development of science, which we now call the scientific revolution.

Scholars during this period developed many advanced analytic and scientific methods. One common view among scholars was that we need to break things down into small components to understand something.

This gave us many great inventions and discoveries. But viewing the world like this also has its limitations.

Nonetheless, this worldview is still with us today. It forms the basis of our compartmentalized education system.

The industrial revolution also created an enormous demand for trained laborers. The factories at the time needed workers that all received the same skills. Among those skills were precision, obedience and punctuality.

In order to meet this demand, we created the first public school systems for the masses.

Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen has elaborated on the roots of our education system in a very good and comprehensive way in her book ["The Future of Smart"](#)⁷

Compartmentalization No Longer Serves Our Needs

Humanity has come a long way since those early days of the industrial revolution. Our education systems no doubt have given us many benefits. But it is time for them to change.

Our society has transformed massively. Just the past 30 years and we saw a massive transformation.

Humanity is facing many complex problems. Climate change, accelerated AI development, global pandemics. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

All of these problems require a much deeper understanding of the world. Not only of the individual phenomena but also about how they work and interact with each other. This is something that only a Theme-Based approach can accomplish.

To change our education system from scratch is a massive undertaking. It is not something that will happen overnight. Until then we need to do what we can to push that transformation forward in our classrooms and schools. Wherever we are.

Start Where You Are. Use What You Have. Do What You Can

Sometimes we just need to get moving. We can introduce more project-based learning in our classes today.

- If you are a math teacher, apply math in the real world as much as possible. Plan a renovation of your own classroom with the students. Make budgets and plan for common highlights and events.
- In literature, use articles on climate change. Read novels on big issues. Or meet people who work with literature for a living. Find talented poets or storytellers in your neighborhood. Invite them or arrange a visit.
- You can also use classic fairytales, such as [H.C. Andersen's "The nightingale"](#).⁸ Use these as a launchpad for a debate about how humans relate to the natural world

- In Science, go out where you can. See where the science you learn about is being applied. Visit your local water purification plant. Analyze the water in your local lake or river. Try and track what happens with the waste your school produces. And then try and develop how your waste management can be improved.
- You can also agree on project days/weeks with other subject teachers. Design the program together. Here is an [example](#).⁹

We need all the good examples. If you are a teacher who already designed some good project-based lessons, do not hesitate to share with others for inspiration. I am happy to make space available on my blog for this purpose.

Notes in Chapter 3

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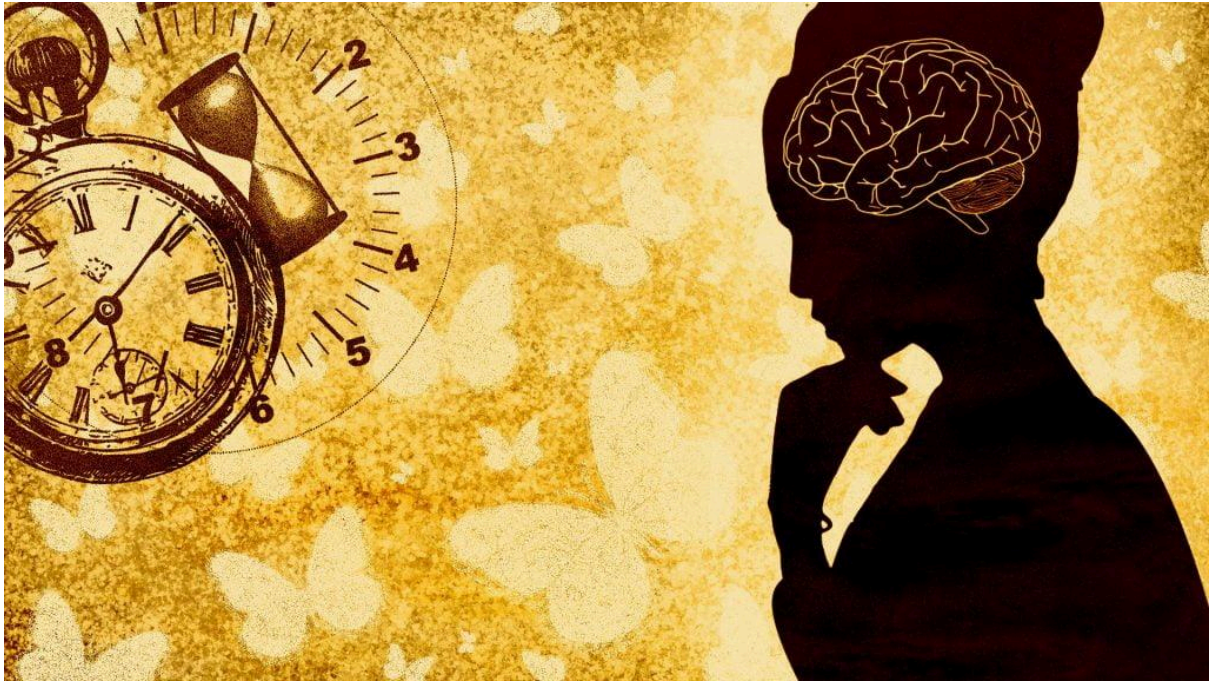
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Chapter 4: We Should be Teaching Philosophy in Schools

The capacity for deep reflection may be a very important skill to teach for the 21st century. Maybe even the most important one.



We should start teaching philosophy in schools. Image by chenspec from [Pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com)

I am sure that I am not the only educator concerned about the state of our world. There is no shortage of crises that humanity is facing and will face. This demands radical new approaches to our [methods](#).¹ But that is not enough. Teaching philosophy in our schools is another necessity. Let me elaborate.

There is a climate crisis that is threatening to rip our planet apart. We may be on the brink of a full-scale global war. We are still dragging on through a pandemic that has caused immense casualties. The house of cards that is late-stage capitalism is about to collapse. Advances in AI are threatening to make billions of workers redundant. In short, these are scary times to grow up in.

The above list is by far not exhaustive. I think that these issues are compounding. This signals that we are at a major turning point in human history.

Those of us at the forefront of our education system bear an immense responsibility. We can no longer pretend that these issues do not exist. It is the privilege of the teacher to teach. Whether we deny it or not, we play a significant part in forming our students' lives. Privilege comes with a duty. To me, it comes down to these questions.

What should our students learn and why?

How do we do it?

I see teaching philosophy as one of many possible answers to the first question. We must re-learn to ask deep foundational questions. When the future is as uncertain as it ever was, the only thing that can guide us is a set of fundamental values. But how do we find out what those values should be?

We Are in This Mess, Because We Fail to Reflect Upon Our Actions

Our current mess is also caused by our lacking ability to reflect in the first place.

We exploit our natural resources for profit without ever considering what our purpose for seeking profit is.

With every new technology we invent, we are only concerned about what amazing things we can do. But we never ask why we should do it in the first place.

This failure to reflect permeates every layer of our society. Like when we push for one education reform after another because we fall behind in PISA rankings. Have we ever asked what the purpose of such ranking was in the first place?

Part of the solution to this dilemma is to rectify our failure to reflect. One way to start is by teaching philosophy to our coming generations.

Philosophy Is The Art of Gaining Knowledge Through Reflection

The word philosophy has its origin in ancient Greek and consists of two parts. 'Philo', which means love, and 'Sophia', meaning 'knowledge', or 'wisdom'.

So philosophy is the art of pursuing and embracing wisdom.

Philosophers have the same goal as scientists do. To find some universal truths about life and the universe. The method of choice for the scientist is observation and experimentation. For the philosopher, it is observation and reflection.

One thing that strikes me when I study philosophy and also many religious texts is that there seem to be some core ideas that seem to appear again and again.

To illustrate this, I would like to present you with four quotes.

Love these people among whom your lot has fallen, but love them in all sincerity. – **Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 6.39**

If a man says, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? – **John 4:20**

Men think that it is impossible for a human being to love his enemies, for enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes--and your enemy looks just like your neighbor. – **Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love**

In the end, only three things matter: how much you loved, how gently you lived, and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you. – **Buddha**

Four different quotes direct us to show love and compassion towards others. Each of these was formulated hundreds of years apart from each other and in different corners of the world. Yet they all fundamentally conclude the same.

The only logical conclusion to this observation is that showing love and compassion is a fundamental, universal value. What a beautiful insight.

How Should We Be Teaching Philosophy?

The way I see it, there are several ways to go about it.

One is to redesign the curriculums of already existing subjects like religion and instead transform it into an actual philosophy subject, that encompasses all major religions and other philosophical schools. This is by far the most difficult, but also the most radical way to go about it and likely involves changes and paradigm shifts on a political level in most countries. But I think it could be worth fighting for.

Another one is to include debates, reflections, and study of philosophical texts in existing subjects, like literature. This is something that we can already implement today. If you are a literature teacher, for example, try to include some writings of ancient or contemporary philosophers for your students to read. Give space in your classroom for debating and reflecting upon them. Maybe even take a step back and let your students lead the process.

Maybe it should be a combination of both. What do you think?

Notes in Chapter 4

[1] <https://abenesch.info/relevance-is-key-for-successful-teaching/>

Chapter 5: Our World Is in Crisis. Let Us Teach Our Children to Grow Food

They Need a Shot at Emancipation From Capitalist Production and Consumption



Image by 9lnw from [Pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com)

School gardens are not a new concept. When I was a kid in primary school about 30 years ago, we had a school garden in my public school. We were offered voluntary classes where we could learn to grow food.

I didn't sign up back then, because there was also a computer room, which I found more exciting.

Since then, my perspective has shifted. As a teacher, I now emphasize the importance that children learn to grow their own food. In my previous school, it was a compulsory part of my class curriculum.

It enabled me to teach principles about ecology. I could teach my students how ecosystems function. And I could let them experience it first-hand.

It was a classic [theme-based learning approach](#)¹ for my natural science classes. Plus there are many interesting science experiments to do in a vegetable garden.

But I also see it as a revolutionary act. If my students can learn to grow their own food, they have a real shot at self-sufficiency. Outside of the capitalist framework.

You don't have to take my word for it. Look at [Cuba's example](#).² You may think of Cuban politics whatever you want. The fact is, the country still has not collapsed. Despite decades of harsh economic sanctions. Those sanctions crippled Cuba's farming industry. Cuba's solution was collective small-scale farms and urban gardens.

To Grow Food On Our Own Will Become a Necessity in The West As Well

Food shortages will become common in the west, also. We get hit by climate change and rising food prices as well.

Few people agree with me, including many of my colleagues. That is not surprising.

We have become used to going to supermarkets and buying whatever food we want. From whatever corner of the globe. At a fraction of our income.

In Germany, we spend on average [15,5 percent of our income](#)³ on food. A lot less than developing countries. For Kenya, the figure is actually [close to 34%](#).^{4*}

This Privileged Situation Will Not Last

We are nearing the [endgame of capitalism](#).⁵ The pandemic and the resulting supply-chain disruptions are not going away soon. We have overexploited our natural resources. It is too late to reverse climate change. We are starting to feel the consequences.

It is only going to get worse. It will start with luxury food items, [like coffee](#).⁶

But it will not stop there. Our agriculture industry relies on the same supply chains. You know, the ones that are starting to break down.

Don't believe me? Go, investigate how much food in your supermarket gets produced locally. Do it with your students, if you are a teacher. You are in for a surprise.

And how do the markets react, when supply is short? [Prices go up](#).⁷

As always, it is the poorest people that bear the brunt. In every country.

Many of my students came from socioeconomic troubled backgrounds. Their families already struggled to make ends meet.

Their circumstances will get even more uncertain. If they learn to grow their own food, they at least have a shot at getting by.

To grow food is thus an essential skill.

I acknowledge that there is an issue of access to land. Therefore we also need to teach our students to collaborate. To build resilient local communities. Even in urban areas. We have some models for this already. Detroit's urban farms are [one example of many](#).⁸

To Grow Food Should be Compulsory

Given our global situation and the mess we are in, there is no way around it. I always believed that education is an essential precondition for social change.

It is time to teach our students more essential skills. Growing food is at the top of that list.

I know that there will be those that disagree with me. There will be those that will think we can "go back to normal". Or that some technological wizardry will save us. That we can have "green growth". [It is unrealistic](#).⁹ And it is not a gamble I want to make on behalf of our children.

- *A little disclaimer on the food expenditure figures. The German figure includes tobacco products. For Kenya, tobacco products are listed separately (3,33 %). To make a direct comparison, Kenya's figure is actually 36,24 %.*

Notes in Chapter 5

[1] <https://abenesch.info/theme-based-learning/>

[2]

<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/cubas-urban-farming-revolution-how-to-create-self-sufficient-cities>

[3]

<https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/75719/umfrage/ausgaben-fuer-nahrungsmittel-in-deutschland-seit-1900/>

[4]

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1288727/distribution-of-household-expenditure-in-kenya-by-category/>

[5]

<https://medium.com/new-writers-welcome/it-is-time-to-accept-that-we-have-reached-the-end-1b00f2f629fe>

[6]

<https://apnews.com/article/brazil-climate-change-drought-coffee-harvest-a6516a4b314e6ba7c11513c08afb6996>

[7]

<https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/blog/date/2025/html/ecb.blog20250925~7fd65a388a.en.html>

[8]

<https://why.org/segments/detroits-urban-farms-engines-growth-omens-change/>

[9]

<https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/sustainability-may-not-be-possible-3018ebe278b5>

Chapter 6: The Hidden Skill Gap Nobody Wants to Talk About

Why young adults are struggling on the labour market— and how we failed them.



Image by [Silvia](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Right now, there are 30 students in my class. Most of them are over 18 and have finished school. They are supposed to be ready to join the workforce, and my job is to get them hired within a year. But before we can work on their resumes, practice job interviews, or review math, we have to learn something else entirely: core skills that everybody missed.

Finishing School Does Not Mean That You Learnt Something

When we think about students finishing school, we assume they are ready for work. We think they know how to read and write, can do basic arithmetic, and are somewhat self-reliant. We are wrong. A surprisingly large number of my students can not clear this bar (yet).

But there is another, much more important, hidden skill gap. The big problem isn't hard skills. What young people lack are very basic skills, which in turn affect their ability to improve all other skills.

- **Basic reliability:** Showing up on time and properly reading a timetable.
- **Workplace etiquette:** Writing a professional email to request time off or submitting sick notices promptly.
- **Focus & preparation:** Disconnecting from a phone during work hours and ensuring you have the necessary tools for a task.
- **Self-advocacy:** Knowing how to organise paperwork and asking for help when stuck.

If you want to understand the scale of the problem, let me give you a concrete example. Before my current position, I was a math teacher at a school. In grade 9, I often conducted routine utensil checks: *Do my students have a ruler? A working calculator? A pencil? Checkered paper?* Especially in recent years, at least half of the class had forgotten to bring at least one necessary utensil to school every time I did these checks. It was not a socioeconomic issue, either. I was working at a private school in a wealthy area just outside of Berlin.

I do not just want to complain about it, but I think we need to take this issue seriously.

Their Chances of Success Diminish Radically

Here is the uncomfortable truth: if a student spends their adolescence without learning to pack a pencil, they become an adult who shows up to a job unprepared to work. Where there used to be maybe two or three students who struggled with this, the rate is now at least 20 to 30% in any given class. I know because my employer also provides employment coaching at public schools.

Lacking those basics is the biggest impediment to my students succeeding in their quest to secure a job or an apprenticeship. Employers do not fire entry-level workers over bad math. They fire them, or refuse to hire them, because they miss shifts, ignore emails, or cannot detach from their phones.

Employers do not have the time or resources to teach those basics. And in my opinion, they should not have to. An employer is fully within their rights to expect an adult hire to show up on time, stay focused, and complete tasks with basic due diligence.

But remember, most of my students are already adults. They spent between nine and thirteen years in formal education and went through their entire adolescence without acquiring these habits. This means we, as a society, have failed them. Collectively. We cannot just blame the schools, the parents, or the youngsters themselves. That does not solve the issue. Let us acknowledge that we failed them, and that we all played a role in this.

Now What?

Okay, we can analyse ourselves to death about where we went wrong.

- Did we fail to rein in [social media](#)?¹
- Did we lean too hard into [helicopter parenting](#)?²
- Did we focus so much on [standardised test scores](#)³ that we forgot about the basic process of learning?
- Did we expect too little — or demand too much of the wrong things?

It is likely a combination of all of it, in my opinion. But endlessly debating root causes will not help the 30 adults sitting in my classroom tomorrow morning. Every one of them is hoping my colleagues and I can help them find their footing in a competitive job market. If they lack these core competencies, we have to teach them. It is never too late.

To do that, we must meet them where they are. We have to accept that nobody ever showed them how to compose a professional email, manage a personal calendar, or map out a reliable commute.

To do that, we must meet them where they are. We have to accept that nobody ever showed them how to compose a professional email, manage a personal calendar, or map out a reliable commute.

This has become our primary focus as educators.

Yes, they will still practice math and refine their resumes. But without foundational executive habits, none of those hard skills will save them in the workplace.

Building a curriculum around these basic competencies does not require us to lower our standards. It forces us to reshape our priorities. If we want young adults to succeed, we have to stop assuming they already know how to operate and start giving them the explicit tools to become functional adults.

We are currently building and refining this curriculum, and I would love your input.

Join the Conversation

What basic life or workplace habit do you think is most critical to teach explicitly?

This book is meant to be a living dialogue, not a monologue. Share your perspective and join the discussion with fellow educators and readers on [Medium](#), or feel free to use the contact form on my Blog abenesch.info.

Notes in Chapter 6

[1] <https://www.healthline.com/health/social-media-effects-on-teens>

[2]

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/childhood-narcissism/202409/how-helicopter-parents-hurt-their-children>

[3] <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/standardized-testing-still-failing-students>

Epilogue: Synthesizing the Path Forward

From Systemic Critique to Classroom Action

With the 6 essays I compiled in this book, we can see a clear red line. When we look back across the six essays compiled in this volume we can conclude that the current education system is fundamentally out of sync with the realities of the 21st century. This is not a new critique. But it is worth examining its root causes and potential solutions nonetheless.

We began our journey by examining the historical and structural forces that shape our schools—from 19th-century industrial directives aimed at standardizing compliant workers to the high-stakes, test-driven metrics that fragment knowledge today. We saw how subject silos, rigid scheduling, and systemic inertia keep educators trapped in 20th-century paradigms, even as the world outside the classroom experiences compounding economic, ecological, and technological shocks.

Yet this book is not an argument for cynicism or retreat. It is a call for intentional, grounded renewal.

Throughout these pages, we have traced a clear progression from abstract critique to tangible, humanistic pedagogy:

1. **Relevance as the Grounding Wire:** By reconnecting theory and practice through John Dewey's dialectic, we restore the student's intrinsic motivation to learn. Learning becomes meaningful when it speaks directly to the learner's real-world environment.
2. **Theme-Based Integration:** By breaking down artificial subject boxes and embracing phenomenon-based learning, we equip young people with the interdisciplinary flexibility required to navigate complex global problems—from climate instability to rapid advancements in artificial intelligence.
3. **Philosophical and Ethical Depth:** By introducing deep reflection, ethical inquiry, and foundational values into our classrooms, we help students develop the moral compass and critical capacity needed to examine why we build, produce, and live the way we do.

4. **Ecological Resilience and Self-Sufficiency:** By taking students into the soil to grow food, we offer them a practical model of community resilience, ecological literacy, and direct self-reliance outside of pure market logic.
5. **Executive Habits and Fundamental Agency:** By explicitly teaching the hidden skill gap—reliability, focus, communication, and self-advocacy—we restore the basic operational foundation that allows young adults to navigate the workforce and claim agency over their own lives.

The Work Begins Where We Stand

None of these transformations require us to wait for sweeping institutional mandates or top-down government reforms. Systemic change in education has always been a dialectic process—driven as much by courageous practitioners in individual classrooms as by macro-level policy.

We can start where we are. We can introduce theme-based projects next week. We can take our students outside to examine local ecosystems or budget a real-world classroom initiative. We can carve out space for philosophical debate during literature lessons, and we can explicitly coach the executive habits that traditional schooling takes for granted.

As educators, we occupy a rare and privileged position. In an era defined by crisis and uncertainty, we are the ones who plant the seeds for the future of human civilization. By rethinking what, how, and why we teach, we offer the next generation something far more valuable than test scores: the adaptability, resilience, and wisdom to build a viable world.

About the Author



Alexander Benesch is an educator, writer, and pedagogical practitioner based in Northern Europe. Drawing from extensive teaching experience across public and private school environments in Germany and Denmark, his work focuses on synthesizing macro-level systemic critiques into actionable, humanistic classroom practices.

His writing explores the intersections of educational policy, theme-based learning, ecological literacy, and the practical executive habits required for young adults to navigate an era of compounding global crises.

Beyond his daily work in the classroom and adult vocational coaching, Alexander publishes essays on education, society, and international perspectives on his personal blog and Medium.

Connect & Continue the Conversation

- Blog & Essay Archive: abenesch.info
- Medium Profile: medium.com/@abenesch1982
- Feedback & Workshops: Feel free to reach out via the contact form at abenesch.info to share how these ideas resonate in your own classroom or institution.