

Education and Citizenship

By Rose Marie Azzopardi and Alexiei Dingli

The reputable Salzburg Global Seminars recently organised an online interactive seminar on closing the skills gap, with the focus being on different educational systems.

There were presentations from all over the world, each expert showing the range of educational reforms his or her country has recently undertaken to be in a better position to prepare students for tomorrow's society and labour market. Often, we tend to think of schools as merely preparing workers for the future, but in reality schools are there to prepare citizens of communities and countries.

This has become even more imperative due to the pandemic creating a learning crisis for those who could not afford the hardware to engage in online learning. It eventually worsened the already existing digital divide and led to more social fragmentation between those who have and those who do not. We are also facing a climate crisis which can only get worse, and we all need to be more aware of our role in that. The fourth Industrial Revolution is moving so fast that it continuously needs new skills in place. These were only a few of the demands made on the need to continuously reform education.

The main assertion that was made by most presenters was the fact that while in the 20th century knowledge acquisition had been the main goal, today's world demands more from schools. They are expected to enrich students with attitudes towards the world they live in, towards the environment, towards each other, towards others who are more vulnerable and towards making the world a better place for everyone.

The third thing expected from schools are skills acquisition, more than life skills, skills dealing with creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, and skills for resilience.

The fourth expectation from schools are values, the values we all carry on and build upon throughout our life, values related to humanity, to empathy, to community, to inclusion and so many more. Would we be so individualistic if we showed more of these values towards each other?

Schools cannot just deliver content. Those days are over. Especially when the child, at the touch of a button, often has access to more than the teacher him/herself. The information is so readily available everywhere, not just in textbooks and libraries as earlier on, but we are surrounded by a myriad of information from so many different sources. The role of the teacher then changes, becoming how to guide the pupil or student to discern reliability, bias, doctored information, fake

news and many others aimed to mislead those who read it. That is the problem with the information overload which we have to face these days.

From the debates and comparative analysis guided by professionals from Germany, Scotland, Portugal, Vietnam, Colombia, Jordan, America, Kenya, South Africa, India and so many others, a couple of statements stood out. The first was, 'the teacher does not teach, but supports the learning process of the child'. In some countries children are not 'taught' anything until they are six or seven. But those early childhood years are the most precious when a child learns to be a successful learner, a confident individual, an effective contributor and a responsible citizen (the aims of the Scottish educational strategy).

One does not become all these things by being able to recite the alphabet or string along the numbers without faltering, but by playing with others, sharing the resources available in class, helping each other build a Lego house, taking care of a plant, keeping the classroom clean and tidy, stacking the things back in their cupboards when ready, learning to appreciate music or the written word, saying thank you and please, learning from one's mistakes and being happy to be in school.

Those are the values which children continue to develop as they get older. The second sentence was, 'there is no need to cram information in a child's mind, only to be regurgitated on an exam paper and forgotten the next day.'

This is the problem of knowledge acquisition for the sake of knowledge acquisition alone. It is as if we are trying to create walking encyclopaedias. What we should be aiming for are creative, thinking, sensible, sensitive, caring, loving, confident, responsible, small human beings, ready to solve tomorrow's problems together.

To tackle this challenge, the HSBC Malta Foundation is sponsoring The Human Capital Research Project. This is supported by the Ministry of Education, the Malta Chamber of Commerce, the Malta Business Bureau, the University of Malta and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology. The project aims to analyse the current and future economic environments, assessing their impact on Malta's labour market while also highlighting the skills needed. Further details can be found:

<https://www.facebook.com/HumanCapitalResearchProject>

Prof Alexiei Dingli, Professor of Artificial Intelligence and Dr Rose Marie Azzopardi, an economist focusing on the labour market, are the lead researchers on this three-year project