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The Critical Role Of Teachers In Transforming Education Systems



Ashoka, Contributor

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Andreas Schleicher is Director for [Education](#) and Skills and Special Advisor on Education [Policy](#) to the Secretary-General at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris. Overseeing the Programme for [International](#) Student Assessment (PISA), Schleicher is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in education today. Ashoka's Director of Education Strategy, Ross Hall, interviewed Schleicher about the need for education systems to adapt to the demands of the modern world.

There is growing recognition that the world today is defined by change, complexity and hyper-connectedness, and that education systems are falling behind in terms of equipping young people with the skills that are essential to thriving in the world and to making the world a better place. What is your perspective on this?

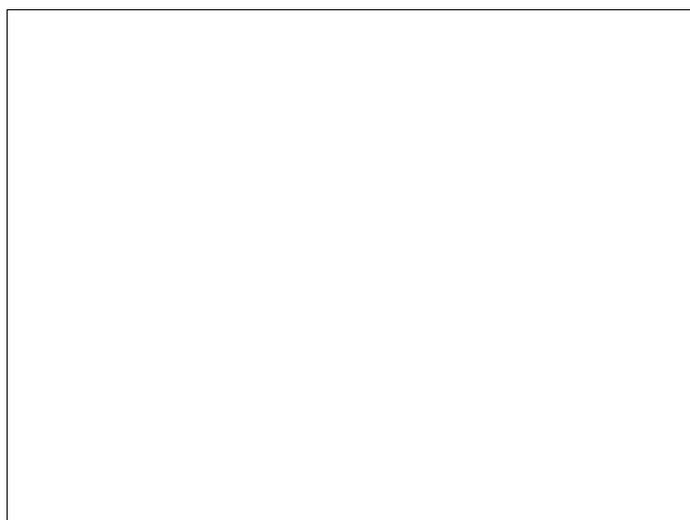
The world is certainly becoming increasingly ambiguous and volatile. But I believe people have probably always struggled with change. What is new is that the kind of things that are easy to teach and easy to test—the kind of routine cognitive skills—are also easy to digitize, automate and outsource. We find ourselves in the same situation that people with routine skills found themselves in during the Industrial Revolution. A lot of people are losing their jobs because the kind of ways we used to work and think are no longer relevant. That's what the digital revolution does to many of the skills that are very well established in education today.

The question is: how do we respond to this? How do we equip people with the skills that are essential in the modern world? Not as an alternative to disciplinary contexts, in my view. You can teach creativity in mathematics, problem-solving in mathematics, social skills in mathematics. We need to think about what kind of skills we want to develop—and how to use established disciplines to develop these skills.

Human beings are certainly connected in a way they have never been connected before, and I wonder if success in this day and age might require a form of empathy that hasn't been required before.

In the past, it was about building relationships with your family and immediate network. Today it's about building relationships with people who may think differently from you—who may look at the world in a very different way, who come from a different disciplinary specialization. Economic success today is very much about you being able to collaborate, compete and connect with people.

It requires the capacity to see the world through different lenses, to appreciate different value systems, to respect different cultures. And those people who are able to do that will find their way through this kind of world. Those people who struggle with this will see the world as threatening to them; they will see globalization as something happening to them, rather than them being part of it.



So how can we develop these kinds of essential skills systematically?

Think about curiosity, for example. How can you write that into a curriculum? Well, you can create the space in the curriculum to develop curiosity, but in the end, it's really about innovative teaching and innovative practice. It's about teachers understanding how students learn these skills—and how to support them to learn in their individual learning styles.

But that's very hard to institutionalize. It must come down to building teaching capacity. Building motivation. Giving the space and the support they need to learn from other great teachers. Making sure their ideas are feeding back to improve the system and shape professional practices. Building a much higher degree of professional autonomy, but in a collaborative culture.

Are there any countries that are leading the way with this type of approach to teaching?

In Shanghai, they have a platform where teachers share their lesson plans. You upload your lesson plans, and you get more and more popular the more other teachers comment on your lessons, criticize them, improve them, etc. So you're evaluated by the system, not only on your own work in the classroom, but by the contribution you make to the education system.

And in Japan and in parts of China, they have become very good at creating collaborative spaces, in which teachers work together to plan lessons and design lessons. Teachers become not only implementation agents, but also designers of instructional systems—and that creates a very different kind of mindset.

Is there also a need to change exam systems and university admissions policies, which exert such a strong influence on what happens in schools?

The gateways we have in education—whether it’s university admissions or school exams—have a huge influence on how we learn, how we teach and how schools operate. Even the world’s most advanced curriculum or innovative teaching practices won’t have a deep impact unless we align them with those kinds of gateways. Part of the problem today is that there’s a misalignment between the gateways that define success and the learning environments that teachers often aspire to.

We did an interesting survey of teachers, and most teachers have a pretty good sense of innovative pedagogies. But then you ask teachers what they do in the classroom, and you get a very different story. And the gap between what teachers feel is necessary and what they actually do is largely explained by the gap in work organization, learning environments and the gateways that we establish.

It’s common to hear that PISA is narrowing the focus of schools onto a small set of academic subjects. Is this why the OECD is putting greater emphasis on the assessment of social and emotional skills?

Social and emotional skills have always been important in the framework of PISA. But we’ve only recently become good enough to build assessment instruments around them. We’ve always aspired to assess social skills—collaborative problem-solving skills—but we weren’t able to do that in a way that was technically credible until 2009. And it’s taken us up to 2015 to build a reliable assessment framework to measure them.

It’s very hard to improve what you can’t capture and measure in some way. And that means that we may have to be ready to accept a broader range of assessment methods. We may have to rely more on professional judgment. There may be trade-offs between validity gains and efficiency gains in assessment, or between relevance and reliability. And we have to discuss those trade-offs to get the measures that encompass the kind of skills that we really value in education.

And we have to be aware that not everything that is important is easily assessable.

[Ross Hall](#) is Director of Education Strategy at Ashoka, leading Ashoka’s

efforts to transform education systems around the world.

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