



The Convergence of Learning and Citizenship

By Josh Fullan and Michael Fullan



Sometimes the alchemy of bad things can make for a radical good thing. The growing irrelevance of schooling in combination with the deterioration of the planet and social trust is potentially one of these mysterious processes.

With respect to the former, there is considerable evidence that schooling has become more and more irrelevant for students since about 1980. Research shows that as students go up the grade levels their disengagement deepens and, by the time they reach Grade 10 or 11, about 80 per cent feel alienated or bored, including many who do well on academic tests. Being good at learning and good at life, or finding meaning in either, seems elusive for increasing numbers of young people. In this same half-century, the climate crisis and social cohesion have worsened in real time. We can literally witness cause and effect of a crumbling world within our lifetimes.

As climate collapse lurched forward in the period between 1980 and present, it was always seen as an external-to-school problem. In 2018, at the age of 15, Greta Thunberg became a prominent climate activist protesting in front of the Swedish parliament. Notably, she had to skip school to do so. In the next five years, climate worsened, and schooling became even less relevant to the issues of the day as COVID-19 became the preoccupation. The biggest challenge of the pandemic for many young people, as reported by young people themselves, was not learning loss but social isolation and deeper disengagement. At the same time, many young people experienced an increase in feelings of empathy and citizenship as they watched the world rage and burn around them through events like

George Floyd's murder, COVID's unequal impacts and the invasion of Ukraine.

The very young have an intuitive and ever-conscious sense that disaster is upon us. Much like birds and animals prior to a tsunami or earthquake, the very young feel the early Rayleigh waves of impending disaster. They sense the imminent danger and existential threat more acutely since their bodies are vulnerable and their futures long. Soon thereafter (now we get to the research), many young people instinctively want to do something about the twin crises of climate disaster and social collapse.

In each of our domains of work we are finding spontaneous indicators that scores of kids are ready to serve, and that even more would do so if they saw pathways to learn how to make change happen relative to climate, racism and social justice. They are searching for avenues for creating a new and better world. What hasn't happened yet, and our research points to it, is that these dispositions potentially contain the seeds of transforming the learning system itself!

Learning and Citizenship

We will show in this section that there is no distinction between the new definition of learning and the equally new conception of citizenship that should govern schooling in the next phase of learning systems in the rest of this century. The purposeful combination of learning and citizenship is another kind of alchemy – this time of two powerful forces for good that together can elevate and transform traditional schooling and its failings.



Historically, schools have treated citizenship both poorly and as a separate category. In Ontario high schools, students are required to take a half credit in Civics and Citizenship. In recent years, between 15,000 and 20,000 students are choosing to complete this credit online, many asynchronously and in the summer. Their motivation? To simply get it over with. Inside schools, the course tends to get thrown at any teacher on the grounds that anyone can teach citizenship. What little support these teachers receive is declining or being outsourced. So instead of citizenship being the responsibility of the whole school or the whole system, it is no one's responsibility. In our best summation, this approach does as much intentional harm as it does accidental good; at worst, it is doing more to undermine students' innate sense of citizenship than doing nothing at all would.

In the fall of 2020, high school teacher Tim Langford challenged his students to design a solution to a long-standing problem for everyone in Toronto's Thorncliffe neighbourhood, a dense cluster of high-rises that are home to thousands of newcomers and low-income families. Overlea Bridge, which students crossed to reach school, was unsafe. Each morning and afternoon, kids crowded onto its narrow sidewalks, caught between speeding drivers and a precipitous drop into the valley below. Parents worried, but politicians dithered.

Over the course of the next two years, the broader community and elected officials coalesced around the student learning and advocacy sparked by their teacher's challenge. The teens worked as a class for months then presented their design solutions to city councillors, their MP and MPP, the media, and finally to the decision-making body at City Hall. Things started to get done. In the spring of 2021, a prominent architecture firm, inspired by the student ideas, designed a safer baluster for the bridge that was later installed. The following summer, the city itself was stirred to action and completed overdue repairs to the bridge, while committing to a complete infrastructure update.

More than a feel-good class project from a marginalized community, this is a story about the potential of what effective citizenship in school communities can accomplish, and, more deeply, how the convergence of learning and citizenship can help cure some of what ails our weakening democracy and fragile planet.

We offer two more school systems that work against the grain of traditional schooling because they know that a radical change in how and what students learn is key to saving both the future of children and the future of the planet. Ottawa Catholic School Board, with 45,000 students and 83 schools, has integrated citizenship with

learning because they know that citizenship-based learning is the sine qua non of survival. Here are two among many examples from OCSB:

Social Entrepreneurship Program (SEP) – deep learning opportunities for K-12 that develop global competencies to help students understand that they are global citizens and changemakers who have an impact on the world around them.

Samaritans on the Digital Road – a community resource to help develop digital citizenship skills, incorporated into the K-12 curriculum with five lessons created specifically for each grade and delivered yearly.

We also work in California’s Anaheim Union High School District, which has 20 schools and 28,000 students. 82 per cent of the district’s students live in poverty, including 1,650 students who are experiencing homelessness. The district’s core goal is about ‘compassion and citizenship.’ In addition to doing well in school relevant to their own futures, Assistant Superintendent Jaron Fried says, “We want our students to better the community that they live in.” And, “We have seen our students actively make impact on local community issues while they are students.” There are a growing number of community-minded students in action at Anaheim.

Some common threads across our examples: the centring and affirmation of students’ agency and democratic power; the guiding principle that everything is connected (the first law of ecology), and that connections in and around schools matter most for our purposes; and finally, the recognition that citizenship is not a narrow privilege but a broad responsibility for ongoing societal improvement. More than this, learning to improve oneself and one’s society through compassionate citizenship may be the holy grail that public education so badly needs to find its

place in our complex and troubled planet. Let’s be clear: good schools and good citizens are one and the same. Our prosperity and survival depend on it.

It is not far-fetched to say that, in the not-too-distant future, we could find large numbers of citizen-minded schools in all kinds of settings where the community is better off *because the schools make it so!* Of course, community schools is a two-way street and a commensurate response is required from the social

and built environments around schools. But we have no doubt that the new conception of citizenship baked into all schools in the district will *causally* improve the community – it will make the community, and thereby society, better.

Last year, Canada added a record one million people, mostly through immigration. Many of these newcomers come with their own interpretations and trauma around the term citizenship, and many will land in communities just like Toronto’s Thorncliffe with strong social ties but decaying infrastructure. These newcomers represent another potential pillar in the mission to reclaim

citizenship, not just in schools but across society as a national project. Redefining citizenship as something deeper, more coherent and diverse can be part of a new Canadian agenda for learning and living together better than we did as a nation in our first two centuries. [CP](#)



Josh Fullan
Director | Maximum City
maximumcity.ca
@CityMaximum

Michael Fullan
Global Leadership Director, New Pedagogies for Deep Learning and a worldwide authority on educational reform with a mandate of helping to achieve the moral purpose of all children learning.