

Schools as Social Responsibility

By Josh Fullan



Early in 2021, at the peak of coronavirus infections in Canada, a pattern emerged in the self-reported data on how students were responding emotionally to pandemic conditions. The pattern manifested as an inverse correlation between what seemed to be two countervailing forces: as many students' engagement in school decreased, their feelings of empathy and social responsibility went up. The data were telling us that kids were bored by school but compelled by life. Or in other words, as the world unraveled around them and the anchor of school was lifted, they felt a moral calling.

I saw this trend first in our research at Maximum City with thousands of children and youth across Canada (see <https://maximumcity.ca/wellbeing>), then in some international reports, and anecdotally in my own Toronto neighborhood when a kid I had never seen before came by our house in the middle of a school day to clear our sidewalk after a snowfall. Like a lot of young people during the pandemic, he had gained more freedom and wanted something to do. He wanted *to help*. And he was claiming a small bit of agency by canvassing strangers on nearby snow-covered streets with a shovel taller than him.

Now, late in 2023, schools have reverted to their old pre-pandemic ways except for some tinkering in the margins. A typical classroom in December of 2023 looks and sounds hardly different from a classroom of December 2019, and not radically different from a classroom of 50 or 100 years earlier for that matter. The return of school as we have known it for more than a century is both a comfort and additional evidence of one of modern society's most stubborn constants. The world turns, empires fall, disease kills, forests burn, innovations disrupt, school endures.

Something else that endures is the heightened sense of social responsibility in many young people. The instinct of that kid with the shovel to do good in adverse conditions is still percolating across a generation. I have seen it in persuasive action at the hyper-local level and at scale in districts, and share just two examples here.

This summer, I spent 10 days working with a cohort of 40 Canadian and German teenagers on a big question: how can public space in cities enhance democratic principles and enable civic participation? With democracy in crisis in many places around the world, and the fragile cohesion

of cities still recovering from years of neglect and a global pandemic, this was the kind of immediate and urgent problem that our cohort could see all around them in their daily life. They didn't need a classroom, a textbook or any special technology to investigate a challenge of this nature and magnitude. They needed to be out in the world walking around, immersed in the problem, taking public transit, observing and listening to people, hearing from experts and testing ideas with each other – which was precisely how they spent their time in Frankfurt, Germany (see: <https://maximumcity.ca/global>).

At the conclusion of the program, as the group presented their final design solutions, what struck me most was not their creativity (which was boundless and impressive), but their unwavering resolve to better the world around them. Each design intervention – from pop-up voting booths to participatory budgeting exercises to an inclusive reimagining of a modern agora – tackled the problem by unlocking the potential to do good for the collective. In the true spirit of citizenship, they were offering ways to leave the city better than they found it.

In Maximum City's district-level work in Ontario, which now includes six of the province's largest school boards, we hear two prevailing things from students when they talk about what they want from school in this decade. First and foremost, they want safe places to learn where everyone is included, valued and known. They want to be known by adults in schools as more than their grades and their behaviour. And while some adults in and around schools may debate the equity question, for students there is no question at all. Equitable, inclusive classrooms – where productive antagonism can still exist between peers and between teachers and students – are a non-negotiable starting point for whatever comes next.

Second, students want more than just desks and diplomas from their school experience. They want meaningful learning and weightier purpose. Too often, school feels like something that is happening to them, or like something apart from their lives that they fulfill as a series of routine actions and rote tasks. School should be field trips co-designed by students, guest speakers they help invite, service learning in places they recognize (where relationships can be built and replenished), investigating problems they see reflected in the world they live in, immersing themselves in those problems, testing and refining solutions, trying to change something that they think needs changing.

Social responsibility, in other words, is not part of school. It is school. In this decade, and in the next one, education's great function and duty might be how it meets students' appetite and resolve to better the world around them. This does not mean leaving literacy and numeracy behind, but bringing those priorities along in service of social and environmental change affected by students – an inversion of another kind and order that changes the fundamental *why* of schools. It will take more than tinkering in the margins to accomplish. School leaders must discover where we go from here. [CP](#)

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