

It's Time to Ask More From the Education System

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JOANNE MCEACHEN AND MATTHEW KANE
LEADERS AT THE LEARNER FIRST

Joanne McEachen and Matthew Kane are learner-centered leaders at The Learner First—an organization that is “putting the learner first by focusing all activity within our schools and school systems on the development of deeper learning outcomes: self-understanding, competency, knowledge, and connection.” In the first of a two-part series, McEachen and Kane highlight how these deeper learning outcomes were developed and why they are significant to every learner in every context.

While the deeper learning path takes distinct twists and turns within each unique context, the same question awaits every newcomer at the trailhead—“What do we want for our learners?”

Wherever we happen to be in the world, the same can be said for us all: compared with what we want for ourselves and one another, we ask education for far less. As a result, only a fraction of what we value as humans currently has a meaningful place in our schools.

The most glaring injustice of modern education is how little is revealed by its measures of success. People can succeed in many ways throughout their lives, while students can succeed in very few throughout their academic journeys. Right now, school systems look for the same light from every learner. Students need to be able to shine their own light—in ways that express the unique value they bring to the world. When students shine their own light, learning is deeper.

Which brings us back to the beginning: What do we want for our learners? Through our global research and experiences at The Learner First, four outcomes have emerged as universally valued: self-understanding, competency, knowledge, and connection. Together, these deeper learning outcomes give us meaning and fulfillment because they help us contribute to others' lives and to the world (Measuring Human Return: Understand and Assess What Really Matters for Deeper Learning, McEachen and Kane, 2018). That's what really matters in our lives—not what we know or understand or can do—but how it all comes together to make the world a better place.

Schools can take a purposeful approach to deeper learning—it's only a matter of committing to the journey. The first step down the path involves a deep dive into each of these interconnected outcomes and their importance on a universal scale.

Self-Understanding

Self-understanding is cultivated through deep engagement in experiences that reveal who a learner is and wants to become. What's your place in the world? What's your real purpose in life? Who are you? What are you capable of? How will your future pursuits positively impact others? How can you make a difference? If school doesn't help students answer these questions, whatever they do learn will lack meaning.

In our engagement with diverse schools and districts, we've seen how a focus on self-understanding elevates and accelerates learners' ability to make powerful connections with their peers, their communities, and the broader world. Given this impact, we want to see self-understanding approached with purpose—as an intentional outcome, not a secondary happenstance.

We like to introduce educators to self-understanding by inviting them to share what it means to them. What is self-understanding made of? Everywhere we go, we hear words like interests, strengths, challenges, beliefs, viewpoints, belonging, culture, history, potential, and motivation. We have found the descriptors fit in four key dimensions:

- Identity—Understanding who you are and how you learn as an individual.
- Place—Understanding how you impact and “fit into” others' lives and the world.
- Capacity—Understanding your potential for learning, progress, and success.
- Purpose—Understanding why you learn and how you can make a difference.

Using these dimensions as a guide for intentionally cultivating self-understanding within your environment, everyone will have the opportunity to develop a rounded understanding of who they really are and why that really matters.

Competency

Intentionality isn't only required to develop a learner's self-understanding. In fact, it's a thread throughout each of the four outcomes we're exploring. Coinciding with an advanced development of a learner's self-understanding is a higher-level assessment strategy that can artfully support each learner's unique growth, while also meeting the demands of Common Core State Standards and the accountability measures laid out in the Every Student Succeeds Act.

The demands of every state system are no less real than the demands of its learners. Even if the state asks less than you'd like it to, you can still ask more of your district or school. It comes down to finding the balance that's best for your learners.

One district in which we've seen this play out beautifully is Burlington-Edison School District (BESD). BESD is a district of six schools and some 3,700 learners located in Washington (state). In recent years, while developing a new "road map" to guide teaching, learning, and leadership practice, district leaders at BESD set out with the admirable aim of identifying what really mattered for their students. The mission guiding their work was similar to that of many other schools—"to educate each student for lifelong success"—and in turn, their developing District Road Map spoke to the uniqueness, diversity, and culture of each individual; the quest for academic proficiency; a focus on key learning competencies; and the importance of connecting with others. In short, their developing District Road Map spelled out components of each deeper learning outcome.

One of the most prominent threads across each section of the Road Map document is competency—the skills and capabilities that widen the reach, depth, and impact of our contributions. They recognized the importance of skills like communication and creativity, but the question was how to engage them more deeply, in a way that's meaningful and engaging for students.

BESD found their answer in New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL), a global partnership born from dissatisfaction with knowledge-driven measures and committed to measuring and developing "6Cs":

1. Character
2. Citizenship
3. Collaboration
4. Communication
5. Creativity
6. Critical Thinking

These six global competencies embody ways of behaving, thinking, and doing that are critical for success in all facets of our lives. While what students learn varies from country to country, school to school, and unit to unit; the character traits that make learning possible, the importance of acting as informed global citizens, the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively, and the power of creative and critical thinking are valued no matter the context.

That's universality—a quality inherent to each deeper learning outcome and best brought to light, in the case of the key competencies of the NPDL global partnership, through which learning partners in Australia, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Netherlands, New Zealand, United States, and Uruguay work together to develop competencies that know no borders.

Knowledge

Competencies set the stage for learners to, among other things, obtain high-value knowledge that is relevant to the cultural contexts in which they live. At the broadest level, knowledge is the factual, conceptual, and content-based understanding gathered from recorded or evidenced truths. Our knowledge is incredibly important in the makeup of who we are, what we're capable of doing, and the connections we form on academic, professional, and personal levels.

Everywhere around the world, teaching and learning is governed by a curriculum that outlines the foundation of what students need to know. What we have to remember is that while knowledge is important, knowledge isn't everything. The curricula are not the end-all, be-all of learning, but instead act as a frame for learners' broader learning experiences. Think of the curriculum as your springboard to deeper learning. When knowledge acquisition is aimed at the simultaneous development of other important outcomes (e.g. self-understanding and competency), then knowledge isn't only acquired but also enhanced, created, and used in meaningful, life-changing ways.

When education systems develop plans that promote deeper learning outcomes in name, it's critical they also provide the support to take academic knowledge off the pedestal in practice. Otherwise, key competencies, self-understanding, and connection inevitably fall by the wayside.

Think back to BESD's District Road Map. While developing their Road Map, the district noticed a stark incongruency. Of the outcomes brought to light in their new strategic messaging, none but academic knowledge had a real place at the table. They saw two options sitting in front of them:

1. Let their messaging serve as empty reinforcement of their mission to do right by their learners; or
2. Fully commit to the present and future wellbeing of their learners and embark down the path of deeper learning.

Awareness of the gap between where you are and where you want to be is one thing, but what set BESD apart was their decision to act. By introducing core learning competencies as a way to enhance students' knowledge and spark self-understanding and connection, BESD succeeded in shifting their ultimate outcome—from knowledge acquisition alone to applying that knowledge within transformative contexts that create meaning and fulfillment for each individual learner.

Connection

In many ways, connection is the outcome that ties it all together. We all think about our lives in relation to the connections we share with others and the world; and the strength and nature of those connections play a major role in determining how we feel about the world and our place in it. In this way, place is at least as much a function of our relationships as it is a function of our physical location. Simply put, human lives are more meaningful and fulfilling when they're shared with others and when they contribute to the general wholeness of humanity.

While the consequences of shortfalls in knowledge, competency, and self-understanding can be damaging—both to our personal and our professional lives—the absence of connection is categorically dangerous, not only for others but for ourselves and our environments. It permits the possibility of intentional harm. It's very possible the biggest challenge our own and future generations will face concerns the consequences of humans being physically closer and yet more emotionally disconnected. With emerging digital and other technological trends, what we're experiencing are new, accelerated ways of interacting that are actually distancing people from one another. The consequences are immediate, prevalent, and terrifying.

We all need to focus our schools toward the opposite—toward the beauty and meaning of human connection, realized in the following forms or dimensions:

- Interpersonal—Connecting with the people we know and interact with.
- Environmental—Connecting with (and within) natural and built environments.
- Conceptual—Connecting what we learn and with our learning.
- Universal—Connecting with all of humanity and the world.

A purposeful approach to connection in schools can give life not only to lasting connections but also to a lifelong capacity to connect. When students learn what it means to develop connections and experience their transformative power in their lives, then connection won't leave them when they leave your school. As educators, students, and members of our communities, we're all charged with answering the following question: Are students at school to be taught and corrected, or are they there to learn deeply, to teach, and to connect?

Now is the time to ask more of education.

Self-understanding, competency, knowledge, and connection—these are the outcomes that matter for learners. And, right now, our school systems only focus on one. If we can learn to shift our commitment in schools to the human capacity to contribute to the world, then the wonders that result will make the world a better place.

If you want to give these outcomes a real place at the table, you have to be able to measure them. You can—and Part II of The Deeper Learning Journey will dive into how. As already explored in the discussion above, knowledge of deeper learning won't make any difference if schools still can't bring it to life.

Our ask of education is as simple as this: to celebrate students as true lifelong learners who don't simply exist in relation to school but, instead, in the fullness of their being in the world.

Why should we ask it for anything less?



Joanne McEachen is originally from New Zealand and is now based in the USA. She is the CEO/Founder of The Learner First, co-founder of New Pedagogies for Deep Learning and is on the Executive Team of Karanga—The Global Alliance for Social Emotional Learning and Life Skills.

Joanne has been a teacher, principal, and education system leader, and she understands the complexity of teaching and leading in a school system. Drawing from rich and varied experiences at all levels of educational systems, and from a focus on students' and teachers' sense of wellbeing, connection, and self-understanding, Joanne offers tools, processes, and expertise that enable anyone learning and working in a school system to unlock their greatest contributions to humanity.

Matthew Kane is the Director of Research and Writing at The Learner First, where he focuses on the role and experiences of school systems in developing the learning outcomes that contribute to lifelong success, connect us with one another, and make a difference in our communities. He has partnered with diverse schools and school systems globally to develop deeper learning tools, language, and practices, and he works as a senior project manager with the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) global partnership.