

Positive ways to frame post-pandemic futures

How we frame our thinking has a big impact on how we experience life. Think of someone you know who approaches difficult situations with a *glass half full* outlook; then think of someone you know who would approach the same situation with a *glass half empty* outlook. People's ability to frame their experiences in a more positive light, to put things in perspective, can benefit their long-term wellbeing.

For young people, much of this framing comes from the language used by adults around them. So with this in mind, I would like to offer some positive ways to frame young people's post-pandemic futures, and to encourage others to avoid using the negative language (often seen in the media) about 'lost learning' and even a 'lost generation'.

I think it's important to first provide some perspective on the impact the last year has had on young people's education.

Young people's brains are living, growing, and changing throughout their lives

For me, the rhetoric around 'lost learning' makes it sound as though young people are nothing more than little empty buckets which educators need to fill up with identikit information. This just isn't what education is about.

As a senior lecturer in education at the University of Sussex outlined in a [TES blog](#), "We – as a community of politicians, teachers and education experts – decide what any child must know, understand or be able to do at each age, not some natural law of learning...".

Schools could never teach pupils about every period of history, literary genius, or scientific theory. There could never be enough time. But learning isn't supposed to end at 18 anyway; there's no deadline, unless you think the purpose of education is limited to ensuring young people emerge from school ready to slot into predestined roles to contribute to GDP. Don't we want more than that for our young people? We should instead think of young people's brains as living, growing, and changing throughout their lives. Their buckets will never, and should never, be full. So instead of worrying about any gaps in content, we should focus on setting the learning process off on the right course so that, throughout their lives, they acquire the skills and passions they need to pursue vastly different interests to each other.

It's also wrong to assume that time out of school must have been time wasted. For many children, their 'learning day' might have looked very different, but that doesn't mean they weren't thinking and learning all the same. What's more, with the possibility of more free time, many young people will have finally had a chance to

feel bored – and being bored has often been a useful prerequisite for curiosity and creativity.

For younger children, learning outside of school might have looked like exploring the garden and noticing more flowers or bugs; using their imaginations to make up stories; playing new games with siblings; or ‘helping’ Mum or Dad with tasks around the house. Just because it’s not a phonics lesson, it doesn’t mean they’re not learning and developing. In fact, simply by having more conversations about a range of topics, children’s language and cognitive skills will develop in leaps and bounds.

For teenagers, in addition to all of the live and independent learning they will have done, learning outside of school might have meant being able to invest time in mastering a sporting or instrumental technique; teaching themselves how to do something creative; or getting stuck in a good book for a whole weekend. It may well have meant perfecting a dance for TikTok or completing a difficult level in an online game... All of these (except the last couple) are things that my generation took for granted but that today’s young people find much more difficult to carve out time for, because of the number of distractions to contend with in their daily lives. As well as the specific practical skills they’re developing or the knowledge they’re gaining, having the time to develop determination, concentration and perseverance will have been beneficial too. And I wouldn’t be surprised – when things eventually return to normal – if some young people fondly remember the lockdowns, when the pace of life was slower.

Of course, if you’re really worried about the disruption of the last year on your child’s development of key skills, such as their reading, writing, comprehension, or critical thinking, let your child’s teacher know. But please be assured that these skills are exactly what teachers have been and will continue to be looking out for and addressing, as teachers and TAs work to make sure pupils will be able to continue with their learning over the coming years. Try not to be tempted to put your child in a hot classroom for intensive algebra or grammar catch up sessions over the summer, when all they really need is as much of a sense of normality as possible, time to socialise and (as far as I’m concerned) the chance of a camping trip. It may only serve to put them off those topics – or worse still learning in general – for the long term.

Reasons to be positive: a post-pandemic legacy

I also want to focus on some of the positive aspects of the past year not directly linked to learning. It may sound tone deaf to focus on positives when so many lives have been badly impacted by the pandemic, and in no way do I wish to lessen or ignore the difficulties families have experienced. But, particularly for young people, it is important to practise finding a balanced view, and a hopeful frame through which to shape their post-pandemic futures.

1. **Spending time with family.** This year has given many of us a chance to spend more time with our immediate families and, although I'm under no illusion that this would have been easy all the time, a survey of young people showed that they enjoyed this. Whether this was because of the strict lockdowns, or because there were fewer places to go even when restrictions eased, or because so many people stopped commuting to work or school – young people enjoyed simple pleasures like having more regular meals together with their families. Perhaps as a result of this year, more families will remember that young people don't need an overly full schedule to be happy; they just want to spend time with loved ones.
2. **Appreciation of the great outdoors.** I wrote in a [previous blog about the physical and mental benefits of spending time in nature](#) and how being outside regularly – noticing the seasons as they change and the differences from one year to the next – can be really meditative, helping you to feel less urgency and less worry about day to day life. Walks are a really good way to spend time with other people too, whether friends or strangers you bump into. So many people across the country have discovered a love of walking as a result of the lockdowns, as well as discovering for the first time some of the local parks, trails and beaches on their doorstep. I don't think time spent walking in nature can ever be wasted, and regular walking is a good habit for all of us to get into, including young people.
3. **Practising resilience.** Educators and parents have long debated how best to develop resilience in young people and, although we would never have wished for the suffering the pandemic has caused, it will have been beneficial for many young people to experience a certain amount of stress and to manage their emotional and physical responses to it. Our pupils responded incredibly well and slotted quickly back into life at school with their friends when they returned. Young people are more resilient than we tend to give them credit for.
4. **Individuality and responsibility.** The pandemic offered pupils a chance to get to know themselves better and to create and take responsibility for their own schedules – an essential skill for work as well as for managing your work-life balance. Many were able to create better sleeping patterns, find time and new ways to exercise, concentrate better without the distraction of classmates, enjoy a break from the social pressures of school, and to spend more time on projects they enjoyed. Identifying what schedule suits you best, and managing it effectively, is a real life skill – one that many adults in the UK sadly haven't mastered. We have a real cultural issue with 'presenteeism' – feeling under pressure to show up for work when we're ill, or to stay late even though we've stopped being productive, simply because we don't want to be seen by colleagues or employers as being less committed. In Australian

offices, if someone works later than 5pm they'd be scorned. Here, if someone leaves on time their colleagues are likely to quietly resent them. The more we can all do to create and stick to schedules that enable a positive work-life balance, the better – for both our wellbeing and our productivity.

5. **Community spirit.** Remember the spring time in 2020, clapping for the NHS and carers, old fashioned street parties for VE Day, neighbours regularly checking in and doing errands for each other? In many places, people spoke to their neighbours for the first time. Such an outpouring of community spirit must have left its mark on young people and, as they grow up, move out and have neighbours of their own, I'm sure they will find it more natural to strike up a conversation and build relationships. I have been encouraging young people for many years to find space in their lives for acts of service; my hope is that this year has provided such a brilliant window into what that looks like in practice that the idea of giving up your time to help someone else becomes completely normalised.
6. **Appreciation for those who keep society going.** We've never been more acutely aware of how much we rely on the people who care for our loved ones and teach our children, who run our emergency services, who work in supermarkets and on public transport, and many other essential roles to keep society going. Could one further positive legacy be that we collectively have a renewed appreciation for these people and professions? Choosing a career should be about more than maximising your earning potential, and this year has shown young people how valued these key roles are (and should always be) by society. Whether there's a surge in applications for key worker roles, or whether we see a generation reach voting age expectant of a higher level of political debate around valuing essential services, I would be pleased.

As we break up for the summer, after what has been a long 15 months for everyone, I hope it will be a bit easier to tune out any negativity about young people's futures. As far as I'm concerned, the only 'catching up' for families this summer should be catching up with family and friends, catching up on time spent outdoors, and catching up on sleep, so that when we see you in the autumn you feel fully recharged, ready for the new school year.