

# Enabling young people to thrive

The case for a broader definition of success in education and youth development

Summary report

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There is no one definition of success, of a life well-lived. So when it comes to young people's development, how we define 'good' is open to a wide range of interpretations and perspectives. Things that matter to young people and their parents are often broadly defined and commonly include doing well at school, finding and progressing in a career, developing strong relationships and having the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to pursue their passions now and in adult life.

Yet when it comes to policymaking, who gets to do the defining can have significant implications for what developmental opportunities are provided and consequently on how young people develop. Currently, the definition set from the centre focuses on a narrow understanding of academic attainment, reflecting only a small part of more widely-held conceptions of success. Although threshold measures have recently given way to metrics based on progress made, success is still fundamentally tied to, and defined by, certain assessments and qualifications.

Through talking to young people, parents, teachers and educational experts, together with a review of 40 youth development frameworks, this research makes the case for a broader, multi-dimensional understanding of success, and sets out how we might transform the education and youth sectors to bring this about. Below we present the case for change in the education and wider youth development sectors.

## **1. Within education policy, we have been aiming at that what's easy to measure, rather than what we really value**

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum and its accompanying policy instruments – such as performance tables and Ofsted – around 30 years ago, there has been constant movement towards one aim: educational attainment. This trend continued under the Coalition and current Government, whose curriculum-led reforms have served only to narrow the focus in schools around certain kinds of knowledge and skills.

Although academisation has enabled some schools to move beyond the confines of the National Curriculum, the EBacc has exerted a strong force in the opposite direction. A report by academics at King's College London, for example, found that the introduction of the EBacc and the new Progress 8 school performance measure is: 'having a profound effect on the hierarchy of subjects within schools, with creative, vocational and technology subject teachers reporting a decrease in examination entry rates, reduced resources and less time being allocated to their subjects'. Furthermore, the scrapping of coursework, and English speaking and listening assessment, at GCSE-level has

intensified the emphasis placed on written examinations.

Assessment itself exerts a strong influence on the kinds of skills developed in schools. Too often this leads to the prioritisation of skills that can be easily measured at the expense of equally (or more) important skills that are trickier to reliably assess. One way of thinking about this could be: having developed relatively valid and reliable measures of academic performance, education policy makers have fallen prey to what the organisational theorist Charles Handy called MacNamara's fallacy:

*The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes.*

*The second step is to disregard that which can't easily be measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading.*

*The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness.*

*The fourth step is to say that what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.<sup>1</sup>*

When applied to the education system, this has an impact on what schools, heads and teachers are considered 'good', and therefore eventually what happens in the classroom.

*But people don't understand success only in these terms.*

By consulting with young people, parents, teachers and educational experts we identified five broad 'domains' that constitute a good life:

- **Academic:** while achieving good grades was seen as important, parents and teachers, in particular, were keen to stress the value of education in developing a breadth of knowledge in young people both for their own personal development, and in supporting their ability to engage with society.
- **Economic:** there was little reported admiration of wealth for wealth's sake among young people and their parents. The majority instead spoke about success as being comfortable, stable and secure rather than explicitly wealthy. For the young people we spoke to, career represented a form of self-expression, being able to find and excel in a chosen profession.
- **Social:** relationships were seen as being a key component of a good life by the vast majority of the people we spoke to. Family

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<sup>1</sup> Handy, C. (1994) *The Empty Raincoat: Making Sense of the Future*, New York: Random House

was mentioned most often, while others mentioned the importance of long-term friendships.

- **Civic:** many of the teachers and other educational experts, in particular, emphasised the powerful impact of civic contribution on youth development. Young people when describing 'successful' people, often highlighted their selfless or giving approach.
- **Well-being:** personal happiness was often seen as synonymous with a successful life. Many people, however, were keen to stress a more nuanced understanding of happiness than the maximisation of gratification in the short-term, focusing instead on self-actualisation and a more long-term view of life satisfaction.

These findings are reinforced by large-scale research into public attitudes in the UK. In 2010/11, the Office for National Statistics conducted a 'national debate' on well-being, taking responses from 7,900 members of the public to the question 'what things in life matter to you?'. The consultation found that 'having good connections with friends and relatives' was the factor most commonly identified by people as being important for their lives (85 per cent), followed by physical health (83 per cent), job satisfaction (73 per cent), and economic security (68 per cent).

While current policy arguably does a good job of developing young people academically, and also expresses an interest in preparing them for the world of work – *it does not do enough on the other aspects identified as making life worthwhile.*

## 2. This has made those within the system dissatisfied and unhappy – there is a clear case for change.

The consequence of this increasing pressure on one success measure has been that those in the system – young people and teachers – are increasingly unhappy, and this dissatisfaction is matched by perennial complaints from employers about the work readiness of school leavers and graduates.

Numerous studies have shown that school children in the UK are less happy and more stressed than their counterparts in Europe and the wider world.<sup>2</sup> A recent international study of children's subjective well-being found that overall, England was ranked 14th out of 15 countries for life satisfaction among 12 year olds.<sup>3</sup> Research also suggests that one of the key drivers of student dissatisfaction in the UK

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Children's Worlds 2015; UNICEF 2007; WHO 2016; Children's Society 2015

<sup>3</sup> Rees, G. & Main, G. (eds) (2015) Children's views on their lives and well-being in 15 countries: An initial report on the Children's Worlds survey, 2013-14. York, UK: Children's Worlds Project

may be the pressure and stress associated with a focus on assessment. Another international study found that by the age of 15, some 73 per cent of girls and 52 per cent of boys in England felt some or a lot of pressure from school work, significantly above the European average.<sup>4</sup>

It is also taking its toll on teachers. DfE statistics show that the average full-time classroom teacher works between 48 and 59 hours per week, which is significantly higher than in many other countries.<sup>5</sup> Polling in March 2016 found that nearly all (98 per cent) of the 4,500 teachers surveyed said they were under increasing pressure, with over 80 per cent describing their workload as 'unmanageable'. High levels of work-related stress and dissatisfaction are both a cause and consequence of a recruitment crisis in teaching, which has become one of the most pressing challenges in the sector. Polling by YouGov found that 53 per cent of teachers were considering leaving in the next two years, citing workload and work/life balance as the main reasons.<sup>6</sup>

UK businesses, for their part, have long expressed concern about the effectiveness of the education system in developing the skills necessary for young people to successfully enter the labour market. This trend shows little sign of abating, with recent research by the British Chamber of Commerce finding that 88 per cent of employers surveyed believe school leavers are not prepared for work.<sup>7</sup> A decade ago the critique from employers focused on school leavers' basic skills, but more recently, business has become increasingly vocal about the need for more well-rounded individuals, and the failure of the current system to equip students with a broad range of capabilities and skills.

*'Underperformance is driven by narrow definitions of achievement that encourage a focus on the average... that says it is OK for a certain percentage of young people to fail. This must be challenged. A broader, bolder approach has the potential to be transformational.'*

*John Cridland, former Director of the CBI, 2012<sup>8</sup>*

*But it doesn't have to be this way. Instead we could broaden our understanding of what 'good' looks like while reducing the pressure of*

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<sup>4</sup> Inchley, J. et al (2016) Growing up unequal: gender and socioeconomic differences in young people's health and well-being, World Health Organisation

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education, Teachers' workload diary survey 2013, February 2014. Teachers in England's Secondary Schools: Evidence from TALIS 2013, June 2014.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/oct/04/half-of-teachers-consider-leaving-profession-shock-poll>

<sup>7</sup> BCC (2014) Workplace survey 2014

<sup>8</sup> CBI (2012) First steps a new approach for our schools.

*narrow accountability on professionals and young people.*

### **3. Despite differences in disciplinary language, there's actually a lot of consensus among experts on the kinds of attributes that support broad-based youth development**

There is a fast-developing evidence base on the importance of 'character', and social and emotional or non-cognitive skills – the traits, skills, habits of thought, attitudes and capabilities not captured through existing measures of cognitive ability – for a variety of later life outcomes. This includes skills that help with performance – like resilience, application and self-regulation – as well as social skills, like empathy, communication and leadership.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist, James Heckman, and colleagues have compiled evidence as to the importance of various character attributes – not only on later life outcomes but also on academic attainment, sometimes demonstrating a more powerful effect on grades than IQ. As he puts it:

*'Completing high school requires many other skills besides those measured by achievement tests, including showing up in school, paying attention, and behaving in class.'*<sup>9</sup>

This growing evidence base on educational outcomes has led to a proliferation of frameworks that aim to establish the key attributes required to become a successful student, employee, and/or member of society. These frameworks are diverse in their shape and origin and reflect distinct traditions of research and practice – our research reviewed 40 frameworks that reflect five distinct disciplinary areas (21st Century Skills, Character, Social and Emotional Learning, Non-cognitive Skills, and Positive Youth Development). Taken together, however, they help to define the boundaries and contours of expert opinion on what constitutes successful youth development.

The proliferation of youth development frameworks has been matched by a varied and growing range of terms to describe key developmental attributes. Across, and even within, disciplinary boundaries practitioners and researchers use all kinds of different language to refer to aspects of people's skills and traits.

*However, despite this terminological divergence, there's actually a remarkable degree of agreement and conceptual overlap as to what skills matter for a happy and successful life.*

These attributes and assets can be broadly grouped into four main areas acknowledged, in some form or another, by many of the

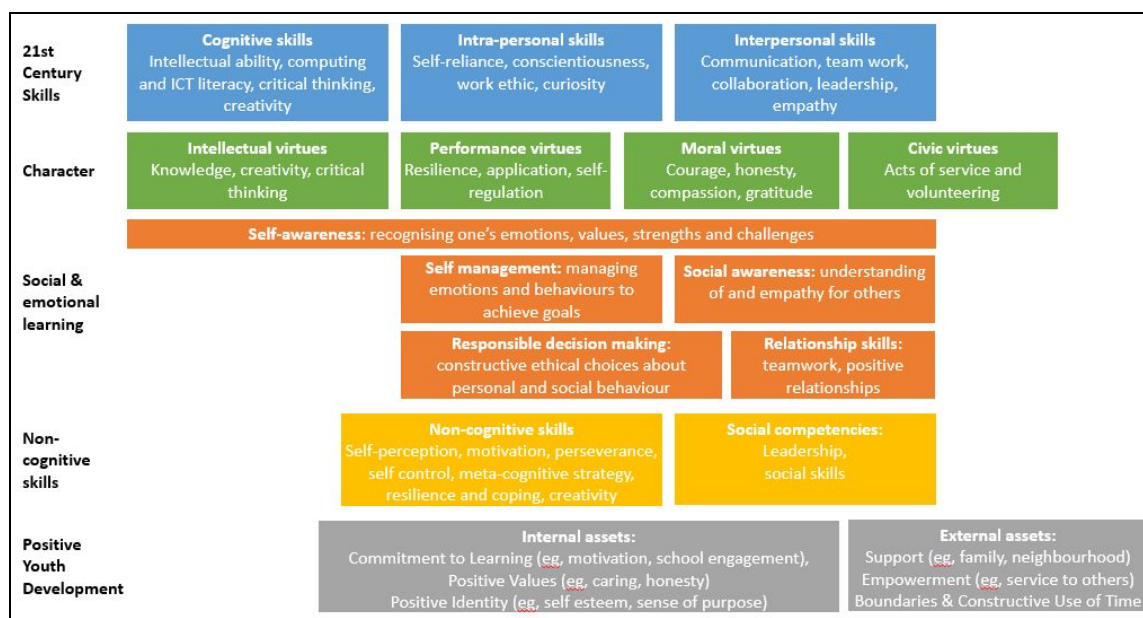
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<sup>9</sup> Heckman, J. J. and Kautz, T. (2013) Fostering and Measuring Skills: Interventions that Improve Character and Cognition, December 2013.

frameworks we reviewed:

- **Intellectual attributes:** the core skills used to think, learn, and acquire and apply knowledge. Includes intellectual ability, critical thinking, problem solving and creativity.
- **Intra-personal attributes:** the attributes or competencies that reside within an individual that enable them to perform well in a given setting. Includes self-management, conscientiousness, resilience, and motivation.
- **Interpersonal attributes:** the social and emotional skills needed to build and sustain relationships, both in the short- and long-term. Includes communication and team working skills, as well as emotional attributes such as empathy and compassion.
- **Civic attributes and external factors:** a looser grouping of skills and ecological factors that influence the developmental interaction between an individual and their external environment. This includes the external assets and support common in Positive Youth Development frameworks, as well as attributes which foster civic engagement.

**Figure 1: Attributes for success**



Adapted from Tooley, M. and Bornfreud, L. (2014) *Skills for success: supporting and assessing key habits, mindsets, and skills in PreK-12*. New America Report. p.8.

**4. Educational pioneers are developing initiatives to support broader youth development outcomes. However, only through better collaboration, within and across learning environments, can outcomes be maximised.**



It is clear from our review of developmental frameworks, and consultations with young people, parents and teachers, that good development is multi-dimensional, and includes a range of factors that for the most part are not accounted for by existing policy structures. Yet the evidence on what works to develop these attributes and contribute to achieving success is still limited. There are, however, a number of pioneering initiatives, both within and beyond the school setting, that are beginning to provide promising and, in some cases, increasingly robust evidence into the mechanisms that support broader youth development outcomes.

Promoting a broader definition of success within the school setting requires change across the curriculum, assessment and monitoring, and the school environment, and there are examples of individual schools, assessors, and other educational actors working to introduce innovative practice in these areas:

- **Curriculum design** that enables broad-based knowledge and skills development.

*E.g., School 21, in Stratford East London, which has pioneered the development of an oracy curriculum. The focus on oracy aims to give students the communication skills that employers value, as well as closing the gap in oracy skills that have traditionally been given a greater prominence within the independent and public school sector.*

- **An assessment system** that doesn't just assess what's easy to measure, but develops ways of assessing a wider range of skills.

*E.g., PISA's collaborative problem solving assessment (introduced in the 2015 round of assessments, due to be published in 2017), which uses a simulated collaborative exercise, where students respond to pre-programme AI 'agents', who take the place of fellow students.*

- **Internal school-level monitoring** that records outcomes data beyond those directly linked to attainment.

*E.g., KIPP Schools, Character Growth Card, encourages young people to reflect on their behaviour, and strengths and weakness across seven aspects of character. The focus is therefore on using school-level monitoring to foster self-reflection without fear of failure or punishment.*

- **A school environment** that promotes the well-being of students and teachers.

*E.g., Nurturing Schools Network is a programme run by emotional health charity Family Links, which aims to foster school environments that maximise the social and emotional well-being of students and teachers. A core component of the programme involves training teachers and wider school staff in approaches and techniques which support improved school-wide outcomes around empathy, positive relationships, resilience and emotional health.*

Ensuring that the out-of-school setting also provides opportunities for learning and development is important both to maintain the skills young people have developed in school and to provide an opportunity to target those developmental outcomes that have been underdeveloped by the school system.<sup>10</sup> As with the examples referenced in the school environment, in the out-of-school setting there are a range of pioneering initiatives in youth work, parental interventions, and employer-supported schemes that are growing the evidence base on what works across a variety of contexts.

- **Youth provision** that: a) engages young people falling behind in school; b) provides social learning and social action opportunities for all; c) provides leadership opportunities and networks to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds

*E.g., Chance UK pairs primary school children with behavioural issues with trained adult mentors. The year-long mentoring relationship aims to take a solutions-focused and goal-oriented approach reducing negative behaviours and supporting self-actualisation.*

- **Home setting interventions** that support: a) early years development; b) parental engagement in school

*E.g., EasyPeasy is a smartphone app for parents of preschool aged children, which improves early child development and reduces the 'school readiness gap' through increasing positive parent-child interactions and learning at home.*

- **Employer-led initiatives** which support employability and wider life skills development.

*E.g., Barclay's Life Skills provides 11 to 19 year olds with access to advice, support and opportunities to build their employment readiness. The programme aims to reach a large number of young people through partnerships with schools, volunteers and other businesses.*

A **collective impact approach** is a potentially fruitful method to align all

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<sup>10</sup> Education Without Failure , Tim Brighouse , RSA , 2008

of these actors to maximise and reinforce positive developmental outcomes. A number of recent initiatives have been established to deliver these collective impact approaches within the education system, including West London Zone, near White City, and Right to Succeed in Blackpool. Both initiatives promote a broad conception of developmental success that is shared by all the project stakeholders (schools, parents, social workers, employers). The schemes apply this broad definition to a rigorous and systematic approach to programme monitoring and evaluation, through the measurement a suite of performance and outcome indicators (including attainment, behaviour, attendance, and social/emotional measures). While these initiatives are still in their early stages of piloting and delivery, they provide an innovative route forward to developing a holistic and evidence-driven approach to maximising youth outcomes.

### **Final thought**

It is clearly important that policy, practice and their guiding principles are based solidly on evidence. But it is surely also right that the public plays a role in setting priorities, and that the objectives of policy align with these. For both of these reasons, there is a clear case for change in terms of the objectives of education policy, *to enable young people to thrive in life, not just exams.*

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