

The My School Principles

Advancing compassion, choice, community, creativity and courage in education

AN OVERVIEW

'My School' is an educational framework and environment for learning that *focuses* and *actively develops* CREATIVITY, COMPASSION, CHOICE, COMMUNITY and COURAGE (the 5C's) by fostering in learners the ability to 'SEE MYSELF SEE'. The My School framework includes architecture with the aim of creating site-specific spaces that facilitate the culture of the 5C's. Though developed for primary schools, the programme is applicable to all forms of learning nationally and internationally.

THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

There's nothing more basic than 'seeing light'. Neuroscience research on the perception of light tells us that we do not see the world as it is, but a world that was useful to see. This is because the patterns of light that fall onto the eye are inherently meaningless. Which means to survive the brain evolved to *make sense* of the world by continually *redefining normality*, a normality that is necessarily grounded in relationships, interactions and histories. What is true for the simplest thing the brain does is true about everything the brain does. Making us indivisible from nature, undefined in isolation, but defined instead by the trial and error successes and failures of the interpretation of an interaction. This essential point about perception transcends neuroscience research as it speaks to all aspects of human thought. Indeed, it provides a clear and powerful framework for teaching and learning:

To see is to respond; to see oneself see is to choose.

Our framework of Seeing Myself See recognises the importance of perception, of experience and imagination in shaping who we are as an individual. There is always one person present when we make a mistake or do something great. If we are responsible for our world then by understanding our perceptions of that world not as truths but mirrors of our past interactions it is easier to find ways forward. If I have constructed this, I can imagine another constructing it differently, and in doing so begin the process of creating a different future. This process of creation and re-affirmation can lead to irrational, but very real, fears that stop us from attempting new experiences, of seeing things differently. Instead one adopts strategies for dealing with these fears. For example, children are often amazed when they learn that others in the class use all kinds of strategies to avoid the challenge of a difficult task: when we are really learning it is often uncomfortable, since our view of the world is being challenged!

The importance of seeing myself see in breaking negative pattern-matching has tremendous potential. It has the capacity to foster a different kind of learning: "this is how you see it now, but with a bit of courage it is possible to see it differently". By supporting and guiding children in the idea of that the same object can be perceived differently, children can be lead away from the admittedly more comfortable black and white view of the world, to the more challenging, but a more enlightening realisation of the greys in between. The learner can be shown in real terms that one's perceived truths are not necessarily **the** reality, but **one** reality among others. In this way, 'seeing myself see' can help learners to become positively excited about getting things wrong, since it is in 'getting things wrong' that we begin to see things differently, or at least more wholly. By going beyond the '*refrigerated facts*' of the black and white, towards the more open-ended view of relationships, children can develop the ability to respond empathetically to others by considering the potential meanings of an event, action or object that is outside of their own histories.

THE FRAMEWORK

Here we have distilled the idea of 'See Myself See' in the context of education into five principles. These principles provide a framework for creating new possibilities in education.

Compassion: Only by accepting one's own humanity can we accept the humanity of others. The barrier to this acceptance is the overriding impression that what we see, hear and know is the world *as it really is*. But if I have no direct access to the way things are, then what I see must not be an absolute, but a function of relationships grounded in history. By understanding how thoughts, feelings and beliefs are necessarily relative to one's own physical, social and cultural ecology, one can better understand the source of coherence and conflict within and between individuals. Therein lies the route

to a more compassionate view of nature and human nature. “What you are looking for is who is looking” St. Francis of Assisi

Community: Community here includes the collection of all systems with which one interacts directly or indirectly (from bees to flowers to urban landscapes to people). Nature isn't hierarchical but a convoluted web of interdependent relationships, where linear causality (A causes B causes C) doesn't exist, but instead where cause is an emergent property of a system of interactions. As an evolved system in the natural world, humans are not only integral to that web, but are indivisible from it. Which means our reliance on our community is beyond resource; community – in its more general sense – is the defining basis of who we are as individuals. By re-seeing the process by which we are shaped by our communities, we feel a stronger sense of belonging, of connectedness, and thus confidence and respect in ourselves and those around us.

Choice: Choice requires options: without *viable* alternatives, there is nothing to decide between. When I touch a hot stove, I do not choose to withdraw my hand. I do so reflexively, automatically, without thinking, simply because it was useful to do so in the past – ‘my’ past experiences including those of my ancestors wired me that way through the process of learning, development and evolution. What is true about one's response to a hot stove is true about what one sees, believes and even thinks. Because the mind evolved in an ambiguous world, it survives only because it generates meanings and behaviours that literally represent its full history of past successes and failures in similar situations. More than filters onto the world, these *meanings* are our world: what I do now is shaped by what I did *before*. Which means in a very real way that most behaviours are not choices, since there weren't options. Only by becoming aware of this – to see myself see – is to create the possibility of choice, since only then is there the option to respond differently.

Creativity: Because our brain has no direct access to the physical world (much less to the subjective minds of others in that world), it must generate behaviour by *continually redefining normality*. By finding relationships within sensory information that at least seemed causally related to past behaviours, these associations become the meanings we see, hear and feel. They in turn determine our sense of self in relation to our environment. This creative process is an innate capacity of the brain (the brain is necessarily scientific/artistic). Which is why discovering patterns and imbuing those patterns with significance is often reflexively – without conscious thought. To innovate, however, indeed to do anything new, requires doing things differently *from the way things have been done before*. Thus, by building upon the brain's innately creative capacity, by seeing yourself see, we can become an *active* agent in our own creative process. Only then can we have the agility of thought that enables us to find (interpret) new relationships within oneself, and within one's natural world and society that lead to more enlightened ways of seeing and being.

Courage: Life is so much easier when we do what we're told, when we conform to our local or global norms. When the future is clearly defined, we feel secure (but also a bit restless). Hence why the forest is so much more frightening at night, because it's unseen and thus unknown. And we just hate the unknown. A loathing that runs so deep because resolving uncertainty has been a matter of life and death in the evolution of our brain. During evolution, being better at predicting where to find food meant we were less likely to starve; being better at predicting the speed and direction in which an object is moving, meant we would have been better and catch or avoid that object. Thus, our ability to resolve uncertainty – to effectively create meaning from meaningless sensory information, which underpins our ability to create, also underpins our innate need to eliminate uncertainty from all aspects of our lives. And the ‘best’ way to do this is to be a factory designer. Because modern robots are so poor at resolving ambiguity, production factories that use them are specifically designed to eliminate ambiguity from the robot's environment, lest the robot fail. Many of us do the same thing; we create factory-like lives where tomorrow is just like today, where ‘life’ is fully predictable. But because we can't fully control the world – our home might accidentally burn down, someone close to us may die or we might meet someone living a different factor-like life that's fundamentally different to our own, we also strive to ensure that our perceptions of that world remains constant. To do otherwise would require asking questions, And question that creates the most uncertainty – and thus the one that is most avoided – is one asked (honestly) of oneself (individually or collectively). But of course it's only by questioning ourselves that can we create, feel compassion, shape and be shaped by our community and exercise active choice. In fact nothing interesting or useful is ever created or discovered from a position of stability, because nothing new is ever needed there. So, at the heart of seeing myself see is courage, courage to occupy spaces of uncertainty. Because this purely human capacity to make such a choice is

also anathema to being human, a key aim of the My School programme is to foster courage (not confidence, since confidence is unquestioning). Joseph Campbell – the late, brilliant comparative theologian – said that the key to happiness is to follow one’s bliss. The challenge, then, is to figure out what one’s bliss is, a question that can only be answered by having the courage to be uncertain of one’s fundamental perceptions of the world and most importantly of oneself.

These five principles provide the intertwined threads of a tapestry. But the actual colours and textures of the tapestry must be woven by the individual, school, community, etc. In the context of education, we argue that these principles *must be* the aims of education, which can only be achieved if they are the *culture* of education. They are as much about ‘teaching’ as ‘learning’ since teaching compassionately teaches compassion; teaching creatively teaches creativity; by guiding rather than instructing, one learns freedom and responsibility to choose; and situating one’s students in the context of a community enable the learner to become a unique part of a whole.