

Rethinking Excellence in School

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Abstract

Many schools mention excellence as a key objective, yet the frequent use of this term has diminished its clarity. In other words, its meaning and significance have been altered, transformed, and modified depending on the educational contexts to which it has been applied. Moreover, in education, excellence is often associated with measurable outcomes, such as tests, rankings, and criterion-based classifications. However, such an approach fails to capture the full complexity of the educational process. In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the concept of excellence by considering its impact on students and to propose new perspectives on it in relation to a series of educational policies adopted and implemented at both national and international levels. From the perspective of transformative pedagogy, we aim to demonstrate that a more authentic view of excellence emphasizes continuous learning, curiosity, and personal development.

Keywords: *Excellence; teaching; learning; transformative pedagogy.*

Introduction

Excellence in education is not limited to high academic achievements but entails the holistic development of students, the creation of an inclusive educational environment, and their preparation for social and professional challenges. Transformative pedagogy contributes to achieving educational excellence by fostering deep learning, encouraging student autonomy, and strengthening teacher-student relationships. (Ukpokodu, 2009, 33-67) Rather than being exclusively tied to individual success, excellence can also reflect students' contributions to their communities.

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An excellent school promotes equity and inclusion, offering every student the opportunity to reach their full potential. When discussing education, the word that encapsulates thoughts, emotions, attitudes, projects, and practical initiatives is "responsibility." (Jeder, 2014, 2125-2130) This is a profound sentiment that must not lose its intensity, whether referring to teachers or students. An ideal school teaches students how to learn so that they can integrate, improve, and surpass themselves, stimulating their creative resources by encouraging study, inquiry, research, creation, and self-education. In this context, the role of the teacher is being redefined. (Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009, 273-289).

As we live in a constantly changing society, and as students and parents increasingly demand changes in the education system, it is imperative to join efforts in defining what an ideal school should look like and, more importantly, what kind of teacher is needed. A teacher must act as a mentor, guiding students toward academic excellence while also supporting them in their preparation for life. A new approach to the learning process is more necessary than ever, considering the shift in students' perceptions of traditional teaching methods and the language they encounter or use in the classroom. (Richards, 1996, 281-296). Recalibrating educational frameworks is essential for redefining excellence in education. The current generation responds more effectively to a dynamic, creative, and digitalized teaching style. In a world where information is readily accessible, students can no longer be passive recipients; they need to develop critical thinking skills, make connections, and apply knowledge naturally. Rather than seeking answers from the teacher, they must learn how to acquire knowledge independently. (Lund & Erikson, 2016, 53-72).

In this context, the role of the teacher becomes fundamentally important. Change begins with how educators define their mission, their relationship with students, and their vision of education. (Collinson, 1999, 4-11) Increasingly, teachers are becoming aware of this reality and are calling for a profound transformation essential to providing children with the opportunity for a successful future. (Grieve, 2010, 265-277) Lifelong learning is built from the early years of schooling by developing essential skills that prepare students for the challenges of the future.

In a modern school, teachers are the first to need to be aware of the students' needs and adapt their teaching methods accordingly (Best, 2008; Chiosso, 2007). They have the responsibility to cultivate the most important skill – the ability to learn. It is necessary to move away from traditional patterns, to look beyond the board, towards each student, and step out of their comfort zone. Furthermore, they must overcome the role of victims of a rigid system and embrace the role of mentors. An authentic teacher-student relationship is based on respect earned through admiration, not imposed authority. Building a real connection involves understanding the challenges students face and finding an accessible language that can improve the quality of education and turn learning into a meaningful experience.

The education as a facilitator in the shaping and the development of the human personality

The education is extremely useful in shaping the human personality and it plays a vital role in the development of the individual in multiple aspects. Here are some reasons that highlight the importance of education. The education provides opportunities for acquiring the knowledge, the skills and the competencies necessary for successful personal and professional development. (Berger, 1973). Through education, the individual learns to read, write, calculate, think critically, solve problems and communicate effectively. (Șchiopu, Verza, 1981). These skills are fundamental for interacting with the world and for one's personality development.

Thus, we believe the first argument is that the education plays a key role in the shaping of the values and the thinking system of an individual. Through education, ethical and moral principles are promoted and the respect, tolerance, responsibility and equity are instilled. (Nicola, 1973) The education contributes to the shaping of a vision of the world and the development of a set of personal values which guide one's behavior and decision-making.

Furthermore, our second argument is that the education plays a significant role in the development of an individual's social and emotional skills. Through the interaction with other students and teachers, the communication, the collaboration and the empathy as well as conflict resolution skills are learned. (Mialaret, 1981). The

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education promotes the development of healthy emotional intelligence, which enables the individual to understand him and the others, to manage his emotions and to establish healthy and harmonious relationships.

The third argument can be given by the fact that the education encourages the critical and creative thinking, which are essential skills in the development of the human personality. Through the learning process, the individual learns to evaluate and analyze information, to express his ideas and to find innovative solutions to the problems encountered. These skills develop the critical thinking, the intellectual curiosity and the adaptability. The education plays a crucial role in the formation of values and ethical conduct. (Văideanu, 1988) Through education, the principles of morality, respect, responsibility and equality are promoted. These core values help one to build a strong personality and they guide the individual towards taking ethical actions and making ethical decisions.

The education offers the possibility of self-development and personal fulfillment. By exploring various fields of knowledge and developing skills, the individual discovers his passions and interests, he develops his potential and he builds his own identity. The education encourages one's self-discovery and expression, providing opportunities for growth. Through education, individuals have access to greater opportunities for personal and professional development. The education opens doors to careers, it improves employment prospects and it increases the level of financial independence. The education also provides personal satisfaction and fulfillment by developing passions and achieving one's potential. Therefore, the education is paramount in the shaping of the human personality with a significant impact on the individual development, cognitive growth, social and emotional skills, value formation and access to opportunities.

The meta-learning itself is a contextualized approach that, from our viewpoint, must take into account the centralization/decentralization of the learning process. That is precisely why, from our standpoint, it is necessary to reformat and reset in conceptual terms the distinction and, implicitly, the relationship between the meta-learning and the meta-cognition.

The very idea of meta-learning involves a number of aspects related to the dimension of the critical thinking and the self-reflection. (Winters, 2011) But today's society, as we previously showed, is also deeply marked by the creativity. In other words, the human being must always be present by himself in what we like to call the self-knowledge and the experiential knowledge. Through self-knowledge, the human being acquires new ontological, epistemological and axiological meanings intended to reformat the very idea of self-learning in today's society.

On the one hand, the awareness of the self-learning process can be correlated with the professional and personal performance of individuals. On the other hand, the emergence and development of the AI allows for a resettlement in structural terms of what education itself stands for in today's society.

Educational excellence in the socio-cultural environment

Communication, values, and educational practices influence how excellence is perceived in an educational institution. Clear, goal-oriented language can guide both students and teachers toward reaching their full potential. The words used in education must inspire curiosity and determination (Richards, 2012, 45-59), without fostering unhealthy competition (Rasmussen & Ydesen, 2020). Promoting self-assessment and constructive feedback contributes to the development of a growth mindset and improves relationships between teachers and students.

Thus, excellence becomes a continuous process of progress and collaboration. What has the greatest impact on learning? This difficult question is addressed by thousands of studies. Measuring the impact in education is one of the most challenging tasks for those who create or evaluate any project aimed at producing learning, and thus, authentic change in someone's mind.

We know that student outcomes are influenced by personal characteristics, family background, and economic and cultural factors (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw & Eklund, 2015, 142-157). However, we have enough evidence pointing to an independent element that significantly contributes to learning and that we can control: the

quality of teaching. We often use phrases like "excellent teachers" or "quality education," but without having the same understanding of them. Exploratory studies reveal that, although there is no universal recipe for quality teaching, there are clear indicators that can operationalize and improve teaching practices (Johnson-Farmer & Frenn, 2009, 267-272).

It all begins with a proper assessment of "excellent teaching," thus identifying those elements that can be controlled and improved, starting with indicators that measure success. Repeated practice is not enough. As with students, learning for teachers involves good self-assessment, deliberate practice, clear objectives, and steps for improvement, as well as correcting mistakes with the help of students, colleagues, and mentors.

Excellence in teaching

An educational paradigm solely focused on academic results can limit the authenticity of the learning process. Teaching should not only focus on achieving high grades but on shaping individuals capable of thinking critically and adapting to the realities of society. Teachers must act as facilitators of learning, providing students with the tools they need to develop their thinking and creativity. Quality education involves not just the transmission of information but also the development of character, responsibility, and social engagement.

Palmer (1998) analyzes the concept of identity and integrity of the teacher within the educational process. Beyond teaching methods and lesson content, the essence of authentic learning comes from who the teacher is and how they relate to students and their own vocation. Palmer argues that effective teaching is not limited to technique but stems from the authenticity and integrity of the teacher. Teachers who emotionally distance themselves from the subject matter and students create an uninspiring environment. Teachers who fear failure or vulnerability tend to hide their fears behind a rigid attitude, thus preventing authentic connection with students. Accepting contradictions in education is essential: theory and practice, reason and emotion, authority and freedom. A healthy educational environment requires collaboration and mutual support among

teachers, with the internal aspects of teaching being reflection, authenticity, and a deep connection with students.

Furthermore, the positioning of the teacher in the classroom significantly influences the educational process (Restuningrum, 2018, 1-13). A teacher can either deliver the lesson exactly as it appears in the textbook or adapt it, enhancing the content to better meet the needs of the students. The textbook is merely the author's interpretation of the curriculum, and the teacher has the opportunity to build their own approach, based on it, while also adding additional elements. By going beyond the simple use of the textbook, the teacher can design a comprehensive, personalized educational program, tailored to the class and the learning context. From our perspective, such an approach adds depth, diversity, and dynamism to lessons, stimulating student interest and facilitating authentic learning.

In such a context, we can affirm that teaching should be a fulfilling profession. Although the goal was noble, the measurement and classification of institutional performance (Karande, 2025, 961-967) and individual performance (Danili & Reid, 2006, 64-83) have been correlated with increased accountability and reduced variability by reference even to aspects related to the person's health. (Vizitiu, Costea & Silişteanu, 2023, 1-14)

The simple principle underlying most of the syntheses examined by John Hattie in his book *Visible Learning* is that of "visible teaching and learning." This work presents arguments showing that the greatest impact on student learning occurs when teachers learn from and about their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers. The more the student becomes the teacher, and the teacher becomes the student, the more effective the results (Hattie, 2012). Visible teaching and learning occur when learning is the explicit goal, when there is appropriate motivation, and when both the teacher and the student seek to determine whether, and to what extent, the proposed goal has been achieved. Learning takes place when we carefully reflect on our practice and fully take responsibility for it, with teaching being centered on the teacher, the student, and the knowledge (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016).

Excellence in learning

Authentic learning involves more than just the accumulation of knowledge; it requires humility, responsibility, and courage. Students must be encouraged to take responsibility for their own development, collaborate effectively, and overcome obstacles with perseverance (Regier, 2011, 1-2). A culture of excellence in education necessitates realistic expectations and assessments tailored to the needs of each student, so that progress is measured based on effort and engagement, not just academic results (Nachbauer & Kyriakides, 2020, 306-331).

A balanced approach to assessment and feedback (Garibay & Teasdale, 2019, 87-106) provides students with the safety to experiment and learn from mistakes, thus strengthening the educational process. Before discussing excellence in learning, it is important to distinguish between learning and performance. Although performance is often used to measure learning, the educational process is complex and dynamic.

Excellence in learning is based on three essential pillars: humility, responsibility, and courage. Excellent students demonstrate humility by recognizing their need to learn and accepting the support of those around them. They view learning as a tool for personal development, not as a means of impressing others. Additionally, excellence in learning involves taking individual responsibility (Peters, 1973). While collaboration is valuable, each student must take ownership of their own educational journey and contribute to the progress of others. (Posteucă-Ești, 2020, 76-82) Courage also plays an essential role, as exploring new concepts, embracing the unknown, and pushing beyond one's own limits requires determination and perseverance.

Supporting excellence in learning means setting high expectations that are tailored to each student. Standardizing expectations can be ineffective or even unfair. Instead of identical requirements for all, it is crucial that they be differentiated, focusing on effort and engagement rather than solely on outcomes.

In addition to clear expectations, students need support to progress. Providing structured guidance and gradually withdrawing it helps them become autonomous. Taking risks and learning from mistakes are natural stages of the educational process, and students must be encouraged to express their ideas without the fear of ridicule.

Responsibility remains a fundamental aspect (McLeod, 2017, 43-56). Each student must take ownership of their learning process, benefiting from constructive and motivating feedback. Assessment should reflect individual progress, considering realistic and tailored expectations for each student, rather than relying solely on comparisons with others. In an educational context marked by standardization and conformity, schools are called to go beyond simple imposed requirements and cultivate a profound sense of responsibility that supports the authentic development of each student.

Excellence and transformative pedagogy

Transformative education goes beyond traditional models and promotes authentic learning, centered on the real needs of students. Rather than relying on standardized performance measures, this approach values collaboration, critical reflection, and social responsibility. Teacher preparation must include the development of adaptable pedagogical skills, the formation of an inclusive mindset, and the integration of innovative teaching methods. Investment in education should focus on the quality of the teaching process and support for continuous professional development. By implementing transformative pedagogy, excellence in education becomes an inclusive concept that ensures the success of every student and contributes to the formation of a more equitable and innovative society.

Thus, teaching and learning require a commitment to seek new stimuli and challenges, both for teachers and students, and in this lies the main connection between challenge and feedback—two essential ingredients of learning (Avalos, 2011, 10-20). The most relevant indicators of excellence in education are student progress and performance, teacher competence, and, not least, the educational environment. The current educational society is going through a period of major changes, and such changes are fundamental to achieving excellence in education. (Eşi, 2015, 93-98)

An example of such an educational approach can be found at Filadelfia Theoretical High School of Suceava, Romania, which stands out due to its constant commitment to academic excellence, offering a stimulating educational environment and high-quality

teaching resources. This school implements modern educational programs that integrate innovative teaching methods aimed at developing students' critical thinking and creativity.

Within this school, there are highly qualified teachers who address educational needs effectively. Moreover, this institution is also focused on developing managerial skills and fostering educational as well as social responsibility. It is important to highlight that everything happening within this school is the result of a well-defined mission and vision aligned with social and educational realities. A relevant example in this regard is the involvement of most teachers in the Visible Learning program. Furthermore, the school supports students throughout their educational journey by engaging them in various activities that promote competition and excellence. Academic performance is also enhanced by recalibrating the curriculum and adapting content to contemporary realities. The partnerships and projects undertaken with other educational and social organizations stand as proof of this commitment.

Conclusions and proposals

In an effort to draw conclusions from the previously presented and argued ideas, we can assert that achieving excellence can also be possible through the adoption of specific principles of transformative pedagogy. On the other hand, we can acknowledge that critical thinking can be correlated with such principles to embrace innovative and creative ideas in the field of education. Therefore, we support the assumption that the very concept of excellence should be reconsidered and recalibrated in alignment with new social realities as well as with the latest scientific advancements in AI technologies.

In this regard, we propose that any discursive framework addressing the idea of excellence should also integrate the development of new AI technologies to enhance scientific knowledge. Of course, such an approach must remain within the boundaries of human morality, with transformative pedagogy playing a crucial role, particularly in maintaining epistemic balance.

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