



***Sharing a Personal Reflective Essay on the International Day of Education
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Education is my passion but defining it is complex. It is broader than schools and teaching and includes all ages, genders, ethnicities, and topics, training and skills. I am celebrating this International Day of Education with a reflection on how the many strands of education have impacted my life. This includes theories and philosophies of education, cultural influences, the role of teachers, and a little of the contemporary fast advancing influence of AI. (the theme of International Day of Education 2026).

From a personal standpoint my mother, who grew up in the far north of New Zealand, on a farm in a remote setting, and left school at fourteen put all her determination into our education with many books in the house including the Arthur Mees encyclopedias,¹ a monthly magazine called "Look and Learn"² and getting us into what was at the time, NZs biggest grammar school which was very British in style and curriculum. From this I gained a love of the value of education and the importance this has on lives and outcomes.

For many years at the University of Otago, New Zealand I taught a number of papers including 'Social Foundations of Education', 'Human Development', 'How People Learn' and 'Research Methods'. At the same time I have been a primary school classroom teacher and am still doing a little of both.

Some of the philosophers and theorists of education I have taught and love include Plato, where his allegory of the caves colourfully represents how learning is enlightening as we are led from darkness towards the light through learning. Piaget, whose emphasis is on engaging with the environment through which accommodation and assimilation occur as mental processes leading the child to naturally develop and progress cognitively is another. Vygotsky's neuropsychological theory moves culture and language to centre stage in thinking and learning. Descartes said, "I think therefore I am" Vygotsky, however, would say, "I speak (including private speech) therefore I am", pointing us to the impact of language usage and culture on early learning and long-term human development. Piaget and Vygotsky's ideas and research plus my own observations led to my belief in the influence of learning and education in early childhood.

Dewey revolutionised pedagogy by removing the teacher as the source of knowledge and information and redescribed classroom learning as a social process focusing on group learning and democracy in classrooms. No longer was the child's mind an "empty vessel" or a "blank slate" (*tabula rasa*) to be filled by teachers which was a banking model rather knowledge was socially constructed. This pedagogical style dramatically influenced New Zealand education when I was training.

¹ Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia* crossed the boundaries of home and school and was (including private speech) sold in New Zealand by door to door sales.

² The Look and Learn was a British magazine



What can I say about the importance of the role of teacher since I am a teacher! There are many views however Hattie's research across thousands of learners in secondary schools showed the most important influence on student achievement was collective teacher efficacy and immediate feedback (Hattie, 2003).

And importantly, Freire from Brazil who invented the concepts of conscientisation (awareness of political positioning through education), critical thinking and critical literacy and showed that education is more than attending school: it was about being taught to question and think.

Freire's work coincides with three major intellectual influences in my own adult learning journey which are: a shift from quantitative to qualitative research; Postmodernism and Foucault; and feminist philosophy including the validity of lived experiences and women's ways of knowing.³ This shows how we learn beyond our school years and these learnings reciprocally influence my own life and teaching and personal values in relation to education.

Heading back to Vygotsky the importance of culture in educating is why as GWI VP Education writing the theme for the Zambian conference I included "culture". Culture is an intricate part of education and after visiting both rural secondary and primary schools in Lusaka, Zambia the variation at grass roots in schooling in different countries was clear and why cultural international exchanges are seen as learning opportunities.

Another value is accepting diversity in educational providers and classrooms, for example disability, ethnic variation, age and so on. It is a long-overlooked factor in education outcomes, particularly for those students who are not well represented by their teachers. Certain population demographics tend to be overrepresented in teaching, and particularly in postcolonial nations this typically reflects societal power dynamics. Research shows that having diverse voices in the classroom improves the education of all children and not only is this of benefit to the individual but also to community harmony (GWI resolution 2016).

Another sense of culture and diversity is biculturalism⁴: For myself, being a New Zealander, important Māori concepts in teaching contexts are 'ako' which means reciprocal teaching and learning between teacher and learner and of 'Manaakitanga' which is a core Māori cultural concept meaning kindness, generosity, hospitality, and mutual support.

As we all know and it is much discussed AI with tools such as GBChat are profoundly influential in our global world currently and we all are being "educated" fast. Some say we are living through a historic moment in education as big as the industrial revolution. AI on google tells me that "AI tools now allow anyone to summarize entire YouTube channels, generate custom books and audiobooks from deep research, and even build their own learning applications — without writing a line of code" (January, 2026). I presented a workshop at an international conference of learning nearly two years ago and even then IT was the main thrust and discourse.

³ I could write much more on these but space is limited

⁴ New Zealand is officially a bicultural country



Interestingly, the benefits of learning go well beyond formal achievements and point to another reason why educational achievement is so important. “Years of adult education, and educational attainment generally, have a powerful positive influence on longevity, with each additional year of schooling estimated to reduce the risk of mortality by approximately **2%**. A comprehensive 2024 meta-analysis found that completing 18 years of education (roughly a master's degree) reduces the risk of death by 34% compared to no education, a benefit comparable to eating an ideal diet” (2024 meta-analysis published in *The Lancet Public Health*).⁵

I feel very lucky in my life to have been a teacher and to have had children and students to teach in a number of countries and contexts. I love children and am always amazed at how each one has talents and is just so uniquely clever and it is just a matter of providing opportunities and learning resources.

The word 'education' derives from the Latin root 'educare'. meaning 'to lead out or bring forth'. As an educator my pedagogy is nonauthoritarian, child centred, emphasizing thematic and project learning though not quite to the liberal extreme of A.S. Neil whose key philosophy was total freedom! I see the learner as a flower or tree blossoming with the care and attention of a teacher and scaffolding from peers.

In conclusion, there are many questions around methods of learning and teaching. What is a classroom? and where will educational structures develop in the future? However, for certain we will all continue learning through our whole life and not just through formal education. In relation to this, GWI's logo the oil filled lamp of learning, and the key value, Empowering women through life long learning, are close to my heart.

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⁵ The study, which analyzed over 600 studies from 59 countries, argues that education should be considered a "super determinant" of health, with benefits that persist across different countries, ages, and genders.



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