# Transcript

## Student Engagement with Yong Zhao

INTRODUCTION:

You’re listening to the Victorian Academy Teaching and Leadership podcast series where we explore all things education. This episode has been created using a video recording. While the audio quality may not be to the same standard that you are used to in our channel, we know the ideas raised will help challenge and advance your capabilities as an educator and improve student outcomes.

KENDRA PARKER:
I just like to start with an Acknowledgement of Country. So we're coming to you from our beautiful building at 41 St Andrews Place. If you haven't been to the new Academy, Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, it's well worth coming in and visiting and having a look around if you've got an opportunity to do some professional learning here. But it's a beautiful building designed specifically for professional learning and acknowledging teachers as such important people in such an important profession that that we deserve a building such as this to do our professional learning in. So our building is on the Land of the Wurundjeri People, which is part of the Kulin Nation. And I think having such a beautiful building that pays respects to its heritage as well, really acknowledges that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as our First Nations people really were the traditional and the very first teachers and the very first learners that we had in Australia hundreds of thousands of years ago. So we're being here tonight. I would like to Pay my Respects and Acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are in the room or online with us tonight and welcome you from wherever you're joining us from all over Melbourne and Victoria.

Alright. Thank you. We can stop the slides there because we've got a bit of a different session tonight. First of all, I'll introduce myself. So I'm Kendra Parker for many names on here that I recognize. I'm a principal in residence here at the academy, so I was principal of the Lysterfield Primary School and Mentone Park Primary School for about 11 years before I took a bit of a change and came into work at the academy and just to have an opportunity to be involved in school leadership with a little bit of a different influence where rather than being a leader in a school now helping develop other leaders and inspiring leaders in schools around Victoria. So it's a fantastic role that I'm really, really loving. So welcome from me. But of course, you're not here to listen to me. You're here to listen to our very special guest tonight who is Professor Yong Zhao. And just a little bit about Yong. I'm sure most of you, a lot of you would know who he is. But he was a foundation, distinguished professor in the School of Education at the University of Kansas, and he's also a professor in educational leadership at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in Australia.

He previously served as the Presidential Chair, associate dean and director of the Institute for Global and Online Education in the College of Education, University of Oregon. And the list goes on and on. Yong, It's a very long bio I've got here, and I know we've got some really exciting things to talk about. A lot of Yong's work has focused on the implications of globalisation and technology on education. He's published over 100 articles and 30 books, two of particularly, which have great interest to me, which was my first connection to Yong back in 2012 when you came and delivered at a conference for us when we were talking about globalisation, education in the 21st century, and particularly around entrepreneurialism and how to create entrepreneurial students. So I'm very excited to see you back in Melbourne and to be hosting you again for this event tonight.

YONG ZHAO:
Well, thank you, Kendra. Happy to be here.

KENDRA PARKER:
Alright. So tonight we're talking about student engagement, but we're really looking at it in a bit more context of what does it mean in a globalized world? What's the role of teachers and what are the issues that hinder and facilitate student engagement? So working in schools right now, you appreciate that the impacts of COVID and remote learning have really... is we're really still seeing the effects of that in our teachers and our students. And so we really have to harness some of the learnings from that time and moving forward into how we can deal and manage with this to keep our students engaged in school. So tonight we're gonna explore three things, three themes with Yong. We're gonna look firstly at teacher mindsets and their impact on how learning happens. So you're gonna reflect on your beliefs around schooling, around education and around learning. Then we're gonna look at students and how we can engage them as designers of their own learning. So considering the role that students play in designing their own learning experiences and the decisions that they can make in your schools.

And then finally, we'll do a bit of out-there thinking and rethinking school and education. So how do we really challenge the traditional constructs of school and learning to engage our students? So we're gonna start with our first theme. And I want you to start thinking about this. And please put your responses to this in the chat. As we launch into our conversation around teacher mindsets, what is education or learning? How would you describe or define education? Or how would you define learning and how do you believe it happens? How does learning happen in your classrooms and your schools and in your homes for many of you as well. So please add that to the chat and we will come back to that later on in our webinar. So first of all, I'm gonna ask you, Yong, to give us a bit of a snapshot of your own journey and experience of education and learning. And I know from listening to you previously in your own words, you said that you really had a great education in disguise. So could you share your story with us to get us started and maybe reflect on that description of a great education in disguise?

YONG ZHAO:
Sure. I want to thank you, Kendra and thank you for all the teachers. You have done a whole day of work and are still doing this webinar. I really appreciate that. And for those of you who don't have your camera on, if it's possible, turn your camera on. You look much more beautiful. And this is why we are moving online. Doing remote learning makes everybody look beautiful. That's very nice. So thank you for joining us. Well, my education was barely an education. I was born and raised in a rural village in China, a tiny village. And about 1972, when I was about seven years old, we had a woman coming to my village. She talked to my father, said she was recruiting students. That's at the time Chairman Mao suddenly decided to run rural schools where he destroyed every school in the city and said that the inner villages should have schools. So this woman came and my father basically said that, "You are so bad at farming, why don't you go to school?" So I was just basically a bad farm kid.

He did not force me to do remediation, to ride the water buffaloes. So I went to school. And funny thing is that I got a good education in disguise because there was really no pressure on me to pass NAPLAN or to get good score on ATAR. Nothing like that. I just went to school and, when I went to school another good thing is that there was nothing, there was no textbook. And there was no textbook, literally. And there was no curriculum. The teacher was the principal, was the art teacher, the music teacher, everything. She was everything. And more important, we had a lot of kids, 60 kids of all ages. So you can be there, just is basically is a collection of kids doing nothing in school. That was the beautiful. So it allowed me to pursue an education really following my own interest because as I said, I was so bad at everything the village wants me to do. So I said I wanna hang out in school. So I learned to read, and being able to read gives me advantage because I could then outsource my personal protection.

I was very tiny. I was a little kid. I was bullied all the time, so I did the homework for the big guy and he did my fighting. So everything was just wonderful. Everything worked out so beautifully, no requirement, no pressure, learning pursuing your own interest and the interest is of great value to me. So if you look at this education, if we can deliver some education like that, I think you'll be wonderful. Anyway, that's it. My lack of education is my best education. But I don't mean to make every Victoria School like that, but what I'm thinking about the spirit out of that might be quite valuable.

KENDRA PARKER:
I really love that and think that highlights that education really is contextual to the community and what they value and to family and what it values. And it really highlights for us engaging students, you know, what is it that our communities and our parents are valuing that we need to make sure we're building it into our curriculum, which will lead to that increased student engagement. And also you said following your own interests and it had value to you. So in thinking about that, how is your perspective of education and learning changed over time? Not right back to when you were that boy in the village and you couldn't ride the water buffalo, so you read books instead. But since you've started this journey of education and looking at the way education is and globalisation, how is your perspective changed through that time?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, some have changed, but the fundamentals haven't. I think the first thing is really to help every child find their interest. I think our schools have moved away from that. It’s that if everybody has some interests and they want to pursue, that's important. Another thing that has not changed is not to fix everybody. I am really grateful to all teachers who saw the strength in me, but instead of trying to fix me. There are so many things I'm horrible at, but I was not fixed. I think in one of the things in our education, we try to fix people. And if you cannot read, let me fix you so you can go do something else. I don't think that's important. You know, like for example, I know teachers have this belief I can teach you anything. But why? Why do you want to teach me anything? There are some things I'm just horrible at. I'm not good at. That's why sometimes I say, the growth mindset everybody loves is just stupidity. Why do you want to do it? You should learn to quit, if you are no good.

You should quit. Like everybody tried to teach me play football. The thing about Australian football, how many agents have you seen like mine on the football field? I'll be dead right away. Why would I want to improve? I'm sure I can, but why should I? I think that's very important thing about teaching is that are we really helping people to grow or are we become a bureaucrat to implement the state curriculum? I think the humanity of that is very significant. The third thing that has not changed is trust. Do I have the trust from my teacher? I may be really bad at the subject, but does the teacher like me? Does the teacher trust me? That is very significant. You may have some student who is just not good at subject. Even now, like I'm teaching, I always ask actually, my students that, is this course necessary for you? Do you really like it? If you don't, we just pass you, we need just to forget about it. In human life, there are a lot of things that's not worth pursuing. In human life you should really pursue something you will be good at and you can make use of it.

KENDRA PARKER:
You've just triggered so many things in my mind with what you said there, and I'm probably pushing back a little bit as a primary school principal, because I've always said that in primary school you don't always know what you do and don't know and like and what you're good at. So I think we have a right to make sure students have every experience to try everything. And I know you're teaching experiences probably with older students who have a bit more choice over subjects and things that they choose along the way. So it's an interesting point (UNKNOWN).

YONG ZHAO:
I don't think Kendra you are pushing me back. You are actually supporting the message. In primary school, you should provide as broad and experience as possible. But then it is out of those broad experiences you trigger people's interest and passion. So I think you are just adding to the point to say because in many other countries like East Asian countries, the curriculum is very narrow. I think in Australia, you have the same problem because you're not focused on reading and math and the other subjects were taken out of it. So children do not have the opportunity to be triggered of their interest, of the passion of their strength. I think you're actually adding to the same message.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yes. Thank you. I'm glad that I'm adding to your message. And and I can add some more because I do often think about that. I left teaching for a while and went off and worked in a corporate environment. Then I came back to teaching and I was teaching grade five maths, and I had to teach the different types of triangles, which I had no idea. And I spent the whole night before studying them up again because I hadn't been teaching them for quite a while. And it made me think, why am I teaching this to ten-year-old kids? And I can't remember it as a mature adult because it's of no relevance to me. And I agree. And if I wanted to, to be relevant, I was being an engineer or a mathematician. I probably would recall it and remember it. So that interest piece is really important around student engagement.

So thinking about mindsets, because you talked about growth mindset, which is a lot of us in our schools have an approach to education for students to create their mindsets. But thinking about teacher mindsets, you talk about teachers having the mindset of doing the work and controlling the classroom.

So how do you think teacher mindset impacts on what happens in the classroom and how learning happens?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, I think a teacher's mindset doesn't dominate children's educational experiences. When they come to school, they are with a teacher, or with two teachers. A big part in teacher's mindset about learning is to rethink. Do you consider what children learn as learning? I think sometimes when elementary school is different from secondary school, but overall, we view so much of what we want to teach children as learning and not them as a person who grows, who learns as learning. I think we are sometimes our two faithful as implementers of the curriculum of the assessment, so we forget we're actually dealing with children. My argument has always been you are a teacher, you are the personal coach, you are working with individual students. You won't see them grow into a good person rather than just taking the curriculum what you want to help teach them. I know everybody teachers... tries to teach valuable things but a lot of times that value does not necessarily transfer to individual students. We need to understand our children and it is precious when, you know, when you are an elementary school principal and a teacher you understand. It is very precious when a parent send their child to you, you have spent one year with them, it is rare and precious. After COVID, after so many uncertain death, short-term lives, I really feel how powerful it is you have to spend time with somebody, anybody, especially young children with you for a year, it's a privilege and we need to help them. Each person should feel happy, you sure each person should feel valued by us.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yeah. I, I really like that, that thinking about, you know, parents give us their most precious, their most precious thing, really and say, 'Here you go, we trust you for six hours a day and 40 weeks of the year to look after and educate our child.' Where do you think it starts this mindset that teachers have around classroom and how we manage classrooms and how we manage the curriculum and, and how can we really get to thinking about how we shift that for teachers, to shift away from that thought of the control that they need to have?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, if you take it from a human perspective, if you think you are growing human beings first, you look at the children coming to a classroom, how they interact with you, how they interact amongst themselves. So, I think, you know, the, the, the, the first big, big question for you is to not to set what you are trying to teach from the curriculum or from the book, especially nowadays with ChatGPT and the Bard and other artificial intelligence tools. It is not so much what you are teaching them, it is how you inspire learning. Do they want to learn, do they want to be engaged with you, are they socially adaptable with other children? So, I think are you creating an environment? You know, to me curriculum is not prescribed (INAUDIBLE) subjects, it is an experience, the whole experience they have with you, they have in the school that helps them develop. I think that's a big change. If, when I look at my class, I always want to help my students to say, 'How does it help you develop into a better person, how does this help you solve a problem?' I think that would go with that.

(AUDIO DISTORTS) It can be a good guideline, can be supportive, can be somewhat a base for you to create and experience.

KENDRA PARKER:
And I think that many people out who are listening would be agreeing and I can just see a couple of quotes up here that we know I asked that question at that start, what is learning and how does it happen? And thinking about what Yong has just said, someone's written it through trusting relationships, through partnerships, relationships, listening to voices. So, really about that, you know, building relationships with students, how do you think that's best done?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, I think, you know, understand students is best. I think our teachers, I don't know about your work today those people who join this webinar but, but I've seen too many schools, teachers focused overly on the content, on what they want to teach but I would say we should start understanding the children. For example, I've suggested, I say in schools, you are going to teach second grade next year, your last two weeks of previous year you should be spending time with your future students. So, in the summer you will be thinking about, who am I teaching, who are these people, do you really know your children, do they, do they feel like you want to know them, do you respect them? I think really knowing your children, understanding them, give them a sense of love, of, of seeing that you care about them, that's very significant, that that is probably the first part. I would have encouraged all teachers to know your students before your semester begin, instead of looking at the curriculum, look at the content, look at hard at your children, which 25 children will be spending next year with you.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yeah. And I was having a joke about this at lunchtime with a teacher here at the academy today, actually, that one of the things that we did at my school was that teachers wrote to their students at the, in the holidays, so that they received a letter in the holidays ready to, for the year to begin. And we did, we did, we had quite a good transition and an orientation program which is fantastic. But one of the teachers always used the same photo, so even though she'd been teaching for, you know, 15 or 18 years, she still had a photo from about her second or third year out 'cause she thought she looked better. And I said, one day you're preps are gonna walk in and say, 'You're not my teacher, haven't seen, only seen the photo of them.' But, yeah, definitely relationships is the, is the key to all of the things that we've been talking about. We're gonna ask you to have a think about some of the things that Yong's been talking about. And think about yourself now, how can teachers change and grow their own mindsets around education and learning?

So, while you're thinking about that, I'm not just asking Yong to give us a response to that and then we're gonna get you to add your responses to a Padlet in, in a breakout room and have some conversation. So, how do teachers grow their own mindsets?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, I think the teachers, you know, we need to first become human beings. I, I think teachers is a profession but ultimately every one of you is a human being. You know, I, I, I really feel bad for teachers all over the world, we are not paid well, we're not treated well, you know, we are, there's a lot of problems but since we chose to be in this position, we really have to respect ourselves. I think no matter how much pressure you have, your principal may be a good, may be a good principal, may not be so good a principal, your parental pressure, maybe unreasonable things they expect out of you but I think whatever happens, you should feel very happy being in this job as a human being. The second thing, if you as a human being, what makes you happy, what makes you happy? I think actually continuous improvement makes you happy, creativity actually makes you happy and relationship makes you happy. You are improving and also you have autonomy in your classroom and those things, I think, are very important for a human being to feel meaningful.

Your work is meaningful, you have autonomy, you're growing and you have relationships with your students and with your colleagues. And then, of course, then at the same time, I think, you know, join a webinar, reading an article, reading a book, you know, whatever makes you happy as a human being because we're in education. You know, reading books is good or watch some YouTube video, there are great YouTube videos or webinars like this, whatever triggers you because we have to improve, human beings have to improve. It's very difficult to, to do the same thing for a year, for two years, three years, you have to improve. So, keep a growth mindset, here as a growth mindset it's called smart growth mindset. You are improving in the domains you can improve, you are improving in the domains that you feel like it's powerful. So, I think that's very important to grow yourself.

KENDRA PARKER:
It's, it's so important and I think we're lucky we've got an audience tonight who obviously have that mindset of growth and continuous improvement just by the fact that they're here after work and, as you said, a long day of teaching and, and linking schools. And thinking about growing our mindsets and, and its impact on education too, I think, you know, it's about that, that piece around how do we start seeing that we can release responsibility up for learning in our classrooms. And teachers we do have this mindset and, you know, it's a joke with my friends and my family about how I like to control things and I'm sure for many of you out there, you've got similar jokes with your friends and families, I think it's a teacher trait. But in growing our mindset, how can we, you know, think about that, what is our role in the classroom and, and how do we release that responsibility of learning? Have you seen that done well?

YONG ZHAO:
You know, Kendra, that what you quoted is very interesting, that, that quoted you said about teachers have a control mindset. Many years ago, I heard that if you psychologically speaking teachers control mindset, it's just second to police and the (INAUDIBLE) and soldiers. It's, and, I think, you know, we truly need to relax that, there are several things we need to know. Number one, if we want to control every student wants to control, we are all human beings, we won't have that autonomy, you know, in that sense. So, no matter what control you want to have, it has to be negotiated with students, you cannot... The, I mean, why there are so many people who are disengaged, why are so many students? Because they don't feel like they have a sense of engagement and have a sense of autonomy to work with you. The second thing we need to truly trust is every human being is a natural-born learner. They really want to learn and they may want to not learn something different but they want to learn.

You need to find a way to help them learn what you want to teach them, so that this requires certain release of, of power, so that students can explore, can take a while to arrive at that. And we also need to believe students are socially capable, they want to connect. I think a lot of times, you know, I, by the way I really hate those books about classroom discipline. If a student is autonomous, is engaged in something, they typically do not try to come there to disrupt your class. I think those who disrupt the class are basically not engaged, not interested, they just want attention. So, so, I think, you need to give them that power, so they can drive their own learning. Ultimately, I think, the question is that, do we give the power of learning or do we give the ownership of learning to students or do you want to occupy that position, be responsible for all your children? I'd rather have every child to be the owners of their own learning, so I'm helping them rather than I'm trying to force them.

I think we need to shift their mindset, we're not forcing anybody, we are helping everybody. I think that is a big change.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yeah. And that's great, a great example. I used to ask that question when we were hiring teachers about, you know, ultimately about how you engage students and whatever but it was always interesting to see the teachers that would respond with giving me their discipline procedures that they use in their classroom. Compared to teachers who would give answers like, "Oh, I don't have those issues because my classroom is so engaging and students feel like they belong and they share the environment." So, you know, very clear indication there. So, what I'm gonna do now is we're gonna put you into breakout rooms and to have a think about that question of how can teachers change and grow their own mindsets around education and learning. And there's a couple of prompts there, think about, you know, if you're a teacher or if you're a school leader, how much do you have to teach? You know, to Yong's point of how about, you know, how do we redistribute time or how do we, how do you, how could you release the responsibility of learning and give students a bit more autonomy over their learning?

And what does that mean for how, you know, what's the culture of teaching and learning in your school and how might that switch thinking about some of these ideas? So, (UNKNOWN) is very patiently in the background doing some amazing work and I can see that she's locked Yong and I to the big screen 'cause now we're just staring at a picture of ourselves rather than seeing all your beautiful faces, as Yong said earlier in the session. But there's a link in the chat now, we're gonna put everyone into a breakout room and we're gonna ask you to go to this particular Padlet and just think, share some ideas around that question. How can teachers change and grow their own mindsets around education and learning? And while you're doing that, we'll have (INAUDIBLE), we'll be able to see the responses that you're putting in and we'll come back and we'll ask a few of you if you'd like to share some of your ideas and Yong will respond to them. Alright. Welcome back. Hopefully, you had a chance to meet someone different and have a bit of a conversation around, this is some really terrific things on the Padlet.

So, thank you for those of you that got around to putting those on, it's fantastic. But certainly, some common themes that we noticed around that concept of power and push and pull and, and how do we give students more autonomy. But there was a really lovely one, I'm just gonna move, move through the Padlet here and really lovely one around how the teacher perceives themselves and how they, you know, see themselves as the holder of knowledge and it's their role to teach. And that's what we're taught at Uni and it's, you know, that's still what's happening in the universities and there's a bit of piece of work to do there too, I'm sure. But that real, you know, building trust and providing a learner environment that nurtures trust, so thank you to whoever put that one up there. But while we're back in this plenary rather than me read them out, is there anyone who would like to just unmute and share the conversation and maybe what you did or didn't get chance to put up there and ask Yong any particular question around this idea of teacher mindsets?

Very good at wait time, I am a teacher at heart.

YONG ZHAO:
That's the hand.

KENDRA PARKER:
Oh, someone's gone up. Yes. Terrific. Let me have a look who we've got here. Michelle. Thank you, Michelle.

MICHELLE D’SOUZA:
I thought to myself, if nobody talks we will be waiting here forever. (LAUGHS)

KENDRA PARKER:
Yes. It takes one to be brave.

MICHELLE D’SOUZA:
One of the wonderings around the role of the leadership in creating the authorizing environment that allows for a growth mindset to, to be built on and we know managing down is much more easier than managing upwards. But I think it's extremely heartening that in the environment of education for all, the opportunity to be lifelong learners and to be agents of change has, has increased exponentially and I think COVID has been a really good catalyst for us to look at our operational environments differently and be able to, to, you know, really plug into it with respect to our individual interests and grow it from the... It's, it's not a curriculum, it's a framework that allows for each one to branch out and do their own things but within a very nurturing growth. We acknowledge the challenges, they are plenty we are not blind to them and we know that dysregulated behaviours are on the increase for multiple reasons but that also has provided a catalyst for us to be able to learn more around how this environment can be navigated.

And going back to the question of how can we really be in that space, I think it's primarily, we often join this profession because we have a sense of moral purpose and there are intrinsic motivators that are already there within us to be even to want to be in this space. And from so many of my colleagues here who've managed to make the time and for many others who wanted to but could not make the time to be here in itself shows that moral purpose is well into their life and those intrinsic motivators are well into their life.

YONG ZHAO:
You know, I want to read it. Thank you again. Because from what I see on the padlet, you guys have really wonderful ideas. You do not need this webinar to get those ideas. I don't feel like I'm teaching you anything, but I'm here to reinforce some of your ideas. There is one challenge, I think Michelle, thanks for sharing that. Right now we are facing really big, big social problems. You know, when I talk about ChatGPT and artificial intelligence, we really don't know what to do with it. Schools don't know what to do with how do we teach students re-globalization, the, you know, Russia, invasion of Ukraine, all this China is not part of the globalization. You know, all those and then end of Covid. These are all big challenges. But also at the same time, the failure of school reform. If you think of over the last 30 years, Australia, Victoria, everybody's reforming their education, but education has not got better. And the achievement gap between the disadvantaged Aboriginal and has not narrowed.

Why is that? You know, a big problem is we have not enabled students to be on their own learning journey. We have changed the assessment, we've changed the curriculum, we've changed teachers, but we have not changed the atmosphere, the environment where students can take the lead. And another point is that we have done is, you know, in the name of trying to close the achievement gap to help the disadvantaged students, we actually have used test scores to define students. We tell them, if you are not good at this, you are no good. You know, this is a very honest view of education. So I want to appreciate thank you so much for all of you to be part of this.

MICHELLE D’SOUZA:
Thank you. Just if I might just respond with one word, Professor, and that I agree with everything, but add the word yet to it all. We haven't changed yet.

YONG ZHAO:
I like how positive you are. Thank you. There's another person.

KENDRA PARKER:
Thank you Michelle. Someone else has got their hand up. Thank you. Oh, you still not got your name on just a number.

YONG ZHAO:
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PAUL KENNA:

I'd like to be anonymous. Yeah, I wrote that little bit in the padlet about, you know, teacher mindsets, and you are how you were taught. I've been working with another principal for ten, 12 years, developing self-organized learning environments in our schools based on some of the teachings of Professor Sugata Mitra. And we've found that over time when kids and teachers learn that kids can do it the kids take over. The kids become better at collaboration and sharing information. They become more confident speakers when they're reporting back to their teams. And they actually when they co-create the curriculum and have an opportunity to have input on what they're gonna be learning about and how they're going to be assessed, they do drive the learning themselves. The only thing that stops them, in my opinion, is the person who has all the power. So the better teachers, in my opinion, are the ones that understand neuroscience and what pushes kids towards learning or pushes them away from learning.

And it is generally the people who have a positive outlook where they see possibilities as opposed to people who crave and micromanage, crave the control and the power. They're the ones that are usually stressed in classrooms, and they're the ones that usually report to principals that are they've got a tough bunch of kids and they're hard to control. Well, if you're brain-dead because you're not allowed to learn for yourself, what else can you expect to happen? So, yeah, think the stuff you've been talking about for years, Professor, is starting to resonate now across lots of systems, especially with the pushback that we're seeing from students who come to school with anxiety and nervousness and stress in their lives since Covid.

YONG ZHAO:
Thank you. What's your name? We got to share so people can come to talk to you about the Sugata Mitra's work.

PAUL KENNA:

Yeah. I'm Paul Kenna.

YONG ZHAO:

OK thank you so much. I think you touched upon another issue. I Want to say a little bit. You know, the student anxiety and student well-being, you know, we every school, every is facing that why aren't our students feeling better? So they are bringing their social and emotional learning. It has nothing to do with that. It's basically are they doing meaningful work? So what you said is so powerful. If students are engaged in meaningful work that's of purpose to them, you don't feel bad, basically when do you feel bad is when you are not doing anything meaningful. You know, I've joked about this. How many students are gonna leave their homework as family legacies for their children? Nobody will do that. Right. And because it's not meaningful, if they're doing something meaningful, you should. Right. So thank you so much for that. I think Sugata Mitra's work definitely is worth looking at.

KENDRA PARKER:
Alright. Thank you. I think that really leads us beautifully to thinking about the next piece. How do we make this happen And there's been it's been great recently. We see in Pfizer 2.0 that we've got learning and well-being at the centre of the work that we're doing now, which is so important. And I think it leads to that point to, you know, our definition in the 502.0 of wellbeing is about how do we teach students the skills, the capabilities, the knowledge to be successful and productive in their lives, which is that purpose to it. It's not just about the all, you know, everyone being happy and living in that perfect space. So I think that's a really nice that is a great point about, you know, how are we building in wellbeing and wellbeing being that sense of autonomy, purpose, mastery. And you know, I have a bit of my own control over my own life and my own learning.

YONG ZHAO:
Can I add something to that? I think there's something very important because in your education there's another fine point about we are preparing children for the future. We're not as if you've got to suffer now, so you are ready for when you graduate. But school actually is a long time. You don't get children ready for the future. They're ready now. So well-being now, meaningful learning now skills now is important. It's not only the skills for life. They have a life right now. I think that's very important to think about.

KENDRA PARKER:
I think Ken Robinson always said that, you know, you don't start them in kindergarten preparing them for university. We start them in kindergarten as five-year-olds enjoying life.

YONG ZHAO:
Exactly. Yeah.

KENDRA PARKER:
So we talked a bit about autonomy and trust came up and I think there was both of those messages sort of brought that point home about the role of school leadership in this, you know, and how do we make this happen. And Yong You said, you know, we played with curriculum, we played the timetable. We've played with so many things, but we haven't you know, we haven't looked at students. So how do educators get students more involved in decision-making? You know, if I'm a teacher in a school and this is my very strong belief, how do I make that happen in my school?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, I think there are different versions of, you know, for example, if you are a school leader, you can do a lot more than an individual teacher. So they start with the individual teacher. So if you cannot change your school, you have to teach your grade level, you have to teach this course and you have only 45 minutes. You have 25 students or 40 students. That's one area. So I there are some simple things you can do. For example, in my class, I try to teach, OK well, what about one-third is something you have to teach, one-third something you have to teach. What if there's another third? You let students as a class to decide. You give them a curriculum. It's OK. You know, if you're teaching English, for example, for year nine, what novels do you want to read? Can students negotiate? You said, I have to teach you this novel, but then another one, everybody can come vote and debate. Now, what if another third is decided by individual students? So every student I would like to read this and I can give you this reason.

So that's something simple. You can do the same for math. This is assuming you cannot change anything else. OK, so this is and then you could have autonomy, your own class, but you go to a level higher. So if you have a colleague so you are teaching math, and your colleagues teaching English, you said, can we connect? Can we become English and math? We combine our courses, we have the same class. You can begin to say, OK, in our last class, it's all about student interest. So you can ask students, what would you be interested in doing? And again, you can say, there's something I have to teach, but there's other free things you can choose. Can students get engaged in projects and things they want to do? But if you had change, if you could change the entire school, what if you organize school differently that you don't have to do year one, year two, you can year one, through year five can be one group. You do vertical, you know, a connection. And then you began by projects to say, you ask students, what are you interested in?

You start with that you know, what are you interested in and what would you like to do? How would you like to solve problem? Because I think the future has a lot to do with solving problems. If you can propose a problem worth solving it's very valuable. You can make machines to solve your problem, so you have to be the human being to find the problem that's worth solving. If you know what problem is worth solving, you have a great future.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yeah. And the key thing you said there is find the problem. I think that's really important. It's part of that whole concept of, you know, what can be better? How can I make the world a better place? Can I do better?

YONG ZHAO:
Exactly. Yeah. Well, I, think right now a lot of our project-based learning big problem with that is we give students the problem. We want students to be able to identify problems. Problem solving can be much easier than problem-identification. So like, you know, when you elect politicians or societal leaders or big corporations, they're big things. What's the next problem? I mean, if you're running Apple Computers, what's my next problem? IPhone is so good now, but what's my next problem? Yeah, How do I make the iPhone better? It's a very different thing. Or how do I abandon the iPhone? I'm sure the iPhone will be abandoned in a few years, but someone has to come with the problem that's worth solving.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yeah. Yeah. And how do we incubate that in our schools is such a challenging thing for us to do. Yeah. Excuse me. Having said that, I do think I've a lot of faith in the people that are online in schools that I know and that I've worked in, that I've led, that we are moving towards this. You know, there's a lot of great things happening out in our schools. At my school, we use the United Nations Sustainability Goals and development goals as our inquiry units that have a lot of choice for students to work in. I know in other schools there's a lot of great things happening around curiosity and passion, learning and passion projects and things like that. I'm wondering, have you seen something really fantastic in a school either in Melbourne or I know you've been working in, you know, all around Australia and South Australia and others in other jurisdictions or overseas that you've seen this really successful?

YONG ZHAO:
Well, there are a lot of schools, I would like to say I think absolutely schools are making changes, teachers are making changes. If we invite all the people today on the webinar, everybody probably is able to give you some examples how it's happening. I think, you know, I was just in Perth two months ago. There was a school all since college. They have built a school within the school they called the studio school. Actually, Fremantle market was beautiful. The 4th year students, another school I've been working with, the Scots College in Sydney, has built the Sydney X model. I'm sure some of you have heard about Templestowe College here of several years ago excuse me, with Peter Hutton. And in China we work with a school. A lot of schools are doing this. Yeah. Excuse me. Sorry, I got hit a cold.

KENDRA PARKER:
Yeah, there was a lot of great practice out there, so really, you know, I think there's a shift in how we think about the mind shift for teachers and how we think about planning, learning, and planning teaching. And we used to talk about planning, teaching, and I know that now we've really shifted the idea to designing learning experiences. So I'm gonna put a question out to our group again and I'm gonna ask you to think about how could you involve students in learning design in your school? How are they involved at all? You know, what would need to change or who would need to change? What sort of decisions do you involve students in now in terms of having choice over their own learning? We're just gonna give you about seven minutes in your breakout rooms to have a conversation around that, to think about how are students involved in designing the learning that they that they are experiencing in your school? And if they're not, if there's better ways you otherwise you wanna do it, what are some of the things that you need to do or to think about what needs to change or who needs to change to make that happen?

So there's a link to the padlet back in the chat to a second padlet. I've only got about seven minutes this time because we wanna allow time at the end for questions and a bit more conversation with Yong. So about seven minutes to have a think about that and then we'll come back in our plenary and share the ideas again. Thank you.

Alright. Thank you. Welcome back again. Back in the plenary session here. And once again, I'm just gonna invite anyone who would like to have the opportunity to comment on what was discussed in your breakout room or any of the comments that you've put up on the padlet while you've got the opportunity to speak with Yong Zhao about this issue?

And I think it's really I just want to make a comment, though, before we move on about what we just started to hear about because I think this is a challenge that we've had for a long time. And we know that there's some restrictions around expectations of what we want to do.

But I do, as I said earlier, I like to always be positive and think about the things that we are doing differently. And there's a lot of work going on around Victoria and around Australia and around the world about really thinking about measuring what matters. I know recently our secondary reforms, for example, in Victoria, are part of this work of relooking at it. I know that ATAR scores now aren't the only way to get into university, so very small steps. But just want to like to point out some of the positive things as well and knowing that we have those restrictions. But Debbie, over to you. Thank you.

DEBBIE GEISLER:

I've tapped into actually what the speaker was just talking about before was curiosity. I've done a lot of PD of late talking about that (UNKNOWN) mile deep that quality more than quantity and really depth in children's understanding, depth and their thinking, getting them to I suppose that we've at our school tapped in a lot of focusing on the capabilities and getting them to reason, to problem solve to justify their understandings, their thinking.

And I've got a grandson who's seven in grade one. His natural curiosity is off the chart and he wants to be a scientist one day, a magician the next day. He wants to know how do you bounce that AFL football so it comes perfectly back to your hand. And he will practice and practice until he gets it right. And I've read research that as and I'm sorry, I'm a primary school deputy principal, but as a primary school teacher, I can see how as adults we naturally lose a bit of that curiosity along the way and we don't see through the eyes of our students. And I think we lose a lot by not tapping into their interest, to their curiosity, their questions and following that natural curiosity and showing them how we can learn and the strategies we can use and the thinking skills and tools that we can implement to find out the answers to those questions. And hence tapping into their engagement and their thirst for knowledge. And I suppose, yeah, I'm just concerned from my own perspective and seeing my own grandson.

And my history being a primary school teacher is to how do we harness that and how do we get teachers to see it through their eyes as well.

KENDRA PARKER:

Thanks for your comment, Debbie. And yeah, how do we harness it? It's so true. Kids ask 100 questions a day when they're five, six, seven years old and there is some research around how much it reduces. But I do know there's also research that shows that when you're over 70, it increases again. So, it's coming back to all of us at some stage.

YONG ZHAO:

So, I know we have another comment, but I just want to come back to several things. First of all, I really think the future of education, whether governments or systems like it or not, has to be personalization. And the personalization has to be done by students like Debbie and others commented on this one. I don't think a curriculum well structured based on age makes sense at all, but that's what we have now. But I think again, I will talk about technology that's going to disrupt jobs. We cannot compete with smart machines.

In the age of AI, in the age of smart machines, human beings have to be more human beings. Machines can be more machines. We cannot make human beings more machines. So, curiosity, creativity, individual intention, those are very key personalization. I think all teachers you may not be in a school that can do this now, but it can be done. It has been done globally. I want to encourage all of you to think that way, to prompt your school leaders to think that way, I think is a personalization and personalization by students, not personalization by adults. That's tracking. If it's done by adults, that's tracking. It is by students. I think that's key. To maintain your curiosity, like Kendra was saying curiosity, creativity come back after you retire because then you can be free. And so we need to know creativity is not an ability. It is actually more of a confidence. It is about curiosity. Like do you feel you're being rewarded for creativity? Do you feel you can be creative? Are you confident you can be creative?

We've seen too many children honestly going through the whole system. When they graduate from uni, they feel less confident. They don't feel they can be creative because they have been punished. They have been laughed at. So, those are very important. So, personalization is the future of education, can be the only future of education. I think Alana, you have a comment?

ALANA:

Yeah, I just wanted to follow on from all of that and just say I think teachers also really need to be willing to put in the work that comes with student creativity and curiosity. I think a lot of teachers shy away from those sideways questions and those tangents that students want to take because it takes work for the teacher to step outside of a curriculum that they've potentially been teaching for 15, 20-plus years. That knowledge is ingrained in them. But if a student asks you why is Mars always red in the pictures, you've got to go back and go through the information and find the answer for that question or show them how to find it and think it's that letting go of I need to hold all the information, letting go of the control in the classroom and go, I don't know the answer. Let's find it together. And I think for a lot of teachers, that can be a scary prospect. But it's something that needs to happen for education to become more personalized and more targeted.

KENDRA PARKER:

Excellent.

YONG ZHAO:

Absolutely, Alana. I think Taylor has asked me for a reference. I wrote a book about this before COVID, it's called 'Reach for Greatness'. It's a very small book. It's 'Reach for Greatness' about personalization and in which I called education needs to be personalizable by students. Not personalized learning. It's personalizable education for all children. Because I really believe every child can be great and needs to be great in their own way. And so education needs to not help people to catch up with others, but each person be great in their own domains. So, the book is called 'Reach for Greatness: Personalizable Education for All Children'.

KENDRA PARKER:
What a great resource. I'll be looking that up and we might be able to find a link for that while we've got some more questions coming. Anyway, we're just going to throw it open now.

We've only got a little bit of time left. Is there anyone else who would like to ask a question or make a comment about what we've heard tonight?

PAUL KENNA:
I think just on reflection, I think the systems that we have in education at the moment, it's all about compliance and conformity. The curriculum's set up pretty much in that way. And as you said, Yong, kids in eight year old are doing grade three or whatever. And it's the easiest way to measure is by compliance and uniformity. I think that's the thing that makes it difficult for systems and schools to move ahead down personalized learning track because of the requirements that are built into the system that reflect what we're teaching.

It's more of a challenge for the political minds. I mean, I think every school would love to do that. But it's not the system we're in. So, I think it's a matter of each school teacher and principal pushing the boundaries in their own sphere to deliver what they have a gut feeling is the best way to teach and the best way for kids to learn. I think that's our biggest challenge.

YONG ZHAO:
I think, Paul, you're right, but I think this is my view. So, this will be my last big comment, is that I don't think we can wait for systems to change. Systems is too large and systems have to worry about policies for every child, every class, every school and the entire system. I don't think we can wait. So, they have to do something that's really for the baseline, for equity, for whatever makes sense. So, this is why it's significant for teachers like you to make the change. When we're talking about the moral obligation or moral courage, it's not so much that we want you to be the models or the heroes is that you have the space to make the change.

I think it's like in business. Businesses don't say mandate or everybody has to go online the change. It is individuals make the change and whoever gets there, that's going to take over. So, I've been arguing for schools, not trying to change 100%. You change who is willing to change, you make the changes possible. I think all of you has really two jobs. One is you change what you can within your context as a deputy principal like Debbie, as Paul in your school, you're doing personalized in your student learning design. At the same time, you as a public citizen, you make an argument for the change.

So, when you change the public opinion, maybe in five or 10 years that pressure may be reduced. But at the same time you win individually, you have to make the change. I hope all of you who are here today and those who will watch the recording that take the courage to say, I want to make change for my own life, for my own children, for my own community and for the entire world. Because I want to leave with you that message to say you don't prepare children for their future. There is no their future. Their future is made by them. So, any school said, we get our children ready for the future, no, you can't. Children make their future. And their future is your retirement. You better be careful. If you want a better retirement, you want them to create a better future for you.

KENDRA PARKER:
Alright. That's a lovely note to end on. I really like that. We want them to create a great future for us.

YONG ZHAO:
A better future.

KENDRA PARKER:
When were they preparing them to prepare us for the future?

YONG ZHAO
Our retirement. Exactly. Yes. Yes.

KENDRA PARKER:
That's when our curiosity comes back as well so it's going to be a perfect storm. Fantastic.

Well, thank you, Yong, for your time tonight. And it really was lovely to sit here in person on the couch rather than be on screen together.

This is called the Thought Leadership series, and it is part of some of our other programs innovating for student engagement or leading school improvement.

But I think one of the lovely things about these webinars is it is about thought leadership and it's also about getting your thinking going and creating some new ideas for you out there.

So, I'd like to say thank you to Yong for your time tonight, and I'm hoping that maybe you could all just share something that you might think, thinking of what Yong said about that small step, what can you do in your context?

And we started there at the very start of this webinar. We talked about context because poor Yong couldn't ride a water buffalo so he ended up having to go to school instead and look how well it turned out for you. So, what's something small? Think about that small step that you can take away that can help you think about what's your mindset around teaching. How can you engage students more in their learning? What's in your control and what's in your capacity that you can make a difference to that will build up to that system change that is so big?

Love to hear some thoughts in the chat, but thank you. Again, such a big deal to give up your time at the end of a busy day and we really, really appreciate it. Here at the Academy, we have some amazing professional learning programs and we know how hard it is to prioritize that in school calendars at the moment.

But also just knowing that by doing this, hopefully, it's part of your well-being. It's part of you being able to do your job better. It's part of you and that continuous growth and feeling empowered and having purpose and autonomy by being able to choose what you listen to and what you do with that from these programs.

So, a big thank you to everybody for attending. Once again, thank you to Professor Yong Zhao for spending this time with us. Thanks, everyone.

OUTRO:
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