



Education must reform to prevent the system churning out “second-class robots and not first-class humans” says leading economist

What happens when Artificial Intelligence (AI) gradually takes over many of the jobs that keep us busy now, appropriating our livelihoods and purpose, and leaving us stranded in our own comparative deficiency?

The solution, say leading economists, lies in actively cultivating in our children that special thing that sets us apart from AI, the very thing that makes us uniquely human – our capacity for empathy and creativity. If we don't, says German data scientist **Andreas Schleicher** who heads the Education Division at the **Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)**, the world will be educating “second-class robots and not first-class humans.”



Schleicher believes our education system is a relic of the industrial age. He explains: “The kind of things that are easy to teach, and maybe easy to test, are precisely the kinds of things that are easy to digitize and to automate. The advent of AI should push us to think harder about what makes us human... our capacity to take responsibility, to mobilize our cognitive and social and emotional resources to do something that is of benefit to society.”

Schleicher's call is supported by business mogul **Jack Ma**, former head of the Chinese e-commerce giant *Alibaba*. At the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland in 2018, Ma predicted “big trouble for the world 30 years from now” if education continues along its current path.



Giancarlo Brotto, global education strategist for *Smarttech.com*, added his voice during the *LearnIt* conference held in London in January this year. The audience applauded when he said: “I want my son to come home complaining about his empathy mark!”



Social Scientists agree



Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, would agree. In his book, *The Science of Evil*, he suggests that there is growing evidence “that instead of using the term evil, we should

talk about reduced (or even absent) empathy.” He continues: “The critical role of empathy in our society has been overlooked. Empathy is the most valuable social resource in our world... It is puzzling that in school or parenting curricula, empathy figures hardly at all, and in politics, business, the courts, or policing, it is rarely, if ever, on the agenda. The erosion of empathy is a critical global issue of our time.”



South African social worker **Dr Magdie van Heerden** believes that animals have a crucial role to play in the nurturing and development of empathy. “In today's age of technology,” says Dr van Heerden, who specialises

in the Human-Animal Bond, “animals have a greater role to play than ever before in the well-being of people.”

She adds: “Technology has a real down-side. It is ironic that while people around the world have never been more connected through social media, they have also never felt more isolated and disconnected from each other. If you think about it, one little emoji with hands and a smiling face often replaces our very deep need for the real thing – the physical contact of a big hug.” Dr van Heerden suggests that the erosion of empathy in society is a major factor in the prevailing epidemic of anxiety and depression. “Humans have a deep-rooted need to care, and to be cared for, and this is why the nurturing and development of empathy should be a focal point in education.”

"It starts with the teddy bear in the cot and with the companion animals in our homes. Most children relate easily to companion animals because they are not judgmental and if treated well, they are positive role-models for companionship, play, laughter, love, and having fun. Child welfare and animal welfare are intertwined and we cannot split the one from the other if we want to heal our communities and strive towards emotional health."



South African education reformist **Louise van der Merwe**, managing trustee of The Humane Education Trust, agrees. "Ours is the first era that cannot escape responsibility for its reckless abuse of nature, each other, and the beings that share this earth with us because for the first time, everything is on record," she says. "Society mistook for soft or weak, some of the most powerful and unique aspects of the human experience. Historically these innate skills and qualities – empathy, compassion, kindness - have been overlooked, dismissed and even ridiculed in education."



Sources of information:

- + Quartz: 'The Unlikely champion for testing kids around the world on empathy and creativity', by Jenny Anderson, February 22, 2019
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- + <https://qz.com/1557308/psychoterratica-is-the-trauma-caused-by-distance-from-nature/>
- + The Science of Evil by Simon Baron-Cohen published by Basic Books

