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WHAT IF THIS IS THE END OF *Secondary Education* AS WE KNOW IT?

An insightful essay from Poland.

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WHAT IF THIS IS THE END OF SECONDARY EDUCATION AS WE KNOW IT?

Emilia Bielawa & Karolina Cywa

We are currently in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, driven by rapid technological advancements. Each industrial era has required significant adjustments in multiple sectors, and today's transformation is no different. This revolution calls for drastic changes in the educational sector, as the future job market becomes increasingly uncertain — particularly due to the rise of artificial intelligence and its impact on the economy, education, and business. Standardized curricula, rigid class structures, and one-size-fits-all approaches no longer serve the needs of a generation facing automation, climate change, and evolving skill demands.

According to McKinsey & Company, by 2030 between 400 and 800 million jobs worldwide could be displaced by automation, forcing workers to transition into new roles and develop entirely new skill sets. Therefore, students must be prepared for lifelong learning, flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changing environments and career paths. The question is— how can they acquire these skills?

Some changes need to be introduced to get the students ready for the constantly changing job market. Education should prioritize the well-being of the student — supporting their motivation, self-worth, and emotional resilience. Schools will need to offer psychoeducation, mindfulness programs, emotional regulation strategies, and strength-based career counselling. One of the key steps is the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs — teaching students how to recognize and regulate their emotions, set goals, show empathy, build healthy relationships, and make conscious decisions. This shift also redefines the role of the teacher. No longer just a source of information, the teacher becomes a mentor and emotional guide — someone who supports the student's development not only intellectually, but also mentally and emotionally. For that reason, teachers need preparation that goes beyond pedagogy. They must be equipped with knowledge in emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practices, and the psychology of student well-being, so they can create a learning environment where every student feels seen, valued, and safe to grow. As Daniel Goleman wrote in Emotional Intelligence: "People with well-developed emotional skills are also more likely to be content and effective in their lives, mastering the habits of mind that foster their own productivity."(Goleman, 1995, p. 36)

Moreover, the contemporary system with classes is deeply flawed. It assumes that we all learn at the same pace and in the same way, which is simply not true. Students are grouped by age, as if the number of years lived determines competence, curiosity, or readiness. The program should be adjusted individually — based on each student's

capacity, their field of interest, and their personal learning style: whether visual, auditory, reading/writing, or kinesthetic. "The notion that there's a single form of intelligence that we all share, and that education should proceed in lockstep for everyone, is simply misguided. People learn in different ways, and education must reflect this diversity." (Gardner, 1983)

In a personalized system, learning would no longer be confined to rigid timetables and one-size-fits-all curricula. Instead, students would move forward at their own pace, supported by mentors and adaptive tools that respond to their needs. They wouldn't feel like they're falling behind, simply because they process things differently. A lot of the pressure, stress, and comparison would disappear. "Personalized learning empowers students to take control of their education, progressing at their own pace, pursuing their interests, and collaborating across boundaries of age or grade. This is the key to cultivating motivation, reducing stress, and nurturing creativity in an age that demands adaptability and innovation." (Zhao, 2012)

Another important issue is mental health and the way our current school system affects it. The pressure to get high scores on standardized tests and fit into one academic mold often causes chronic stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Students are judged based on narrow criteria that completely ignore emotional intelligence, creativity, and individual potential. According to the World Health Organization, around 14% of 10–19-year-olds globally struggle with mental health problems — and a large part of that, I believe, is shaped by how the system functions. Schools rarely offer space for emotional development, and most programs still don't include proper social-emotional learning. Yet skills like emotional awareness, resilience, and stress regulation are essential for life.

If schools start focusing more on well-being, we could lower the risks of anxiety, depression, addiction, and disconnection among young people. As Daniel Goleman said, "Helping people better manage their upsetting feelings - anger, anxiety, depression, pessimism, and loneliness - is a form of disease prevention." (Goleman, 1995, p. 13)

Artificial intelligence may help in the process of teaching in the future. First of all, we should focus how AI may help in a process of transforming secondary education. Changes which occurred in last few years are significant and helpful in the process of learning. Schools are not prepared how to use artificial intelligence in its beneficial way. Teachers are afraid of AI and its impact on education, instead they should try to face with that. Implementing artificial intelligence into teaching may become beneficial for students and teachers, but firstly we should learn how to use it properly.

“AI tools e.g. those that provide data analytics and gamified learning – have long been part of the educational landscape. While developments in generative AI offer new opportunities to leverage AI tools, it becomes increasingly evident that teaching about AI in schools is vital. This education should prioritize imparting skills related to AI development and understanding its potential risks. These skills are critical for shaping future talent capable of ethically designing and developing AI tools that benefit economies and societies.” (World Economic Forum, 2024)

Artificial Intelligence offers personalize learning. AI can tailor educational content to suit their unique needs. For instance, an AI-powered learning app can identify areas where a student struggles and provide additional resources or practice exercises, while also offering more advanced materials to students who are ahead.

Secondary schools experience major changes as new technologies become more embedded in education. Tools like Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are reshaping hands-on learning by offering interactive and immersive environments that let students go beyond the limitations of traditional classrooms. For example, learners can perform virtual science experiments, witness historical events as if they were there, or practice real-world scenarios in a risk-free virtual space. Furthermore, AI-driven platforms and internet access open up global educational resources, removing geographic constraints and giving students access to top-tier content and experts worldwide. As a result, secondary education is evolving from a rigid, location-dependent system into a more flexible, customized, and globally integrated learning experience.

As secondary education continues to evolve through digital transformation, it is crucial to recognize and address a number of significant challenges and risks to create a fair and secure learning space for all learners. A major issue is digital exclusion. While technology is advancing rapidly, many students still face barriers to accessing essential digital tools or stable internet connections. This divide particularly impacts those from underprivileged or rural communities and threatens to widen existing disparities in education.

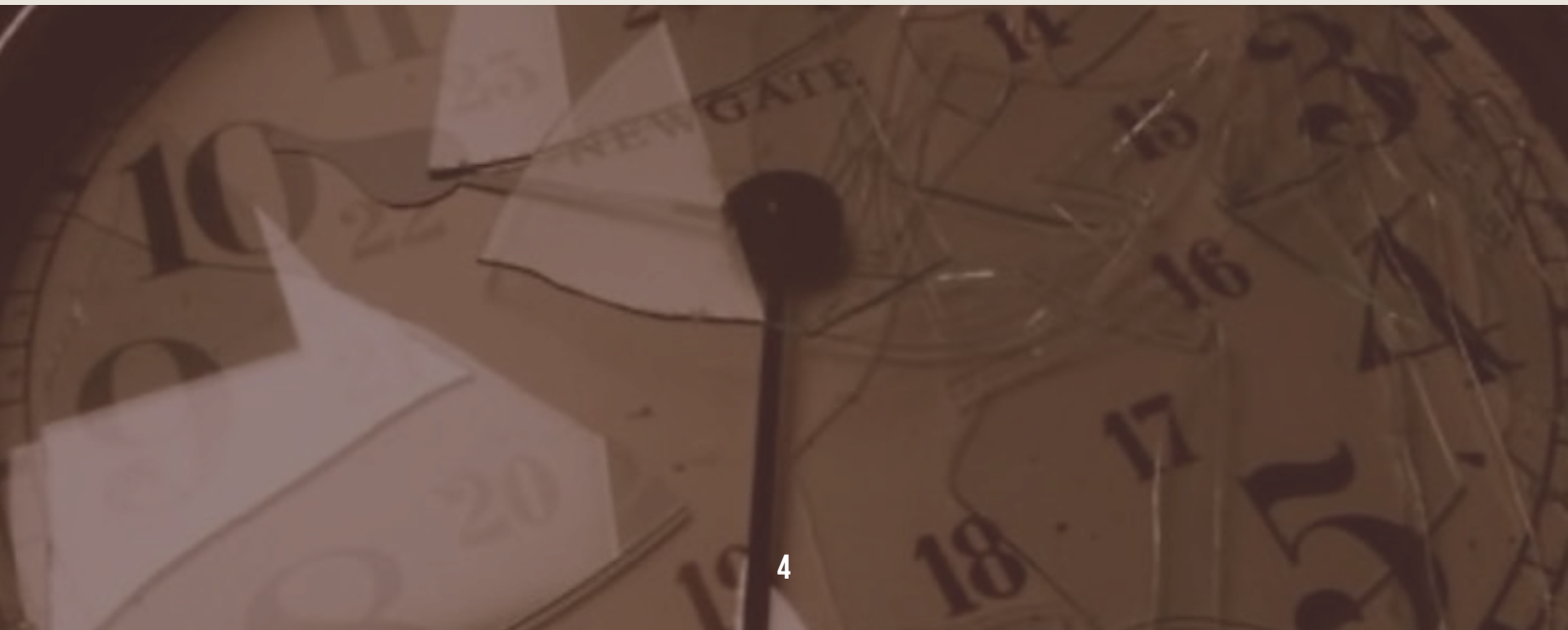
Another significant obstacle is the need for a cultural and professional shift among educators and academic institutions. Integrating technology into education is not simply about adopting new tools—it demands a deeper re-evaluation of teaching strategies, curricular design, and the overall teacher-student relationship. Some educators may feel unequipped or hesitant to make these adjustments, highlighting the importance of ongoing training and institutional backing.

Moreover, the growing use of digital learning environments raises serious privacy and data security concerns. As personal student data—such as identities, locations, and learning activities—is collected and stored, strict compliance with data protection laws becomes essential. Collaboration between schools and technology providers is needed to enforce strong cybersecurity protocols and safeguard students' privacy rights.

Unless these challenges are carefully addressed, technological advancements in education could fail to benefit all students equally. Thus, the move toward digital education must be guided by inclusive strategies, ethical use of technology, and long-term planning.

The future of education must be more flexible, supportive, and genuinely human. It should finally reflect what we already understand — that people grow and learn in different ways, and that is perfectly valid. School should not be a source of stress or pressure, but a place where students feel safe to explore who they are and what they care about. What convinces me the most is the shift from a uniform system to something more personal and meaningful. An environment where mental health is just as important as academic success, and where curiosity and creativity are valued more than memorization.

Artificial intelligence can be part of this transformation — not to replace teachers, but to support them in guiding each student's individual path. It can assist with repetitive tasks, identify learning patterns, and create space for deeper, more authentic relationships in the classroom.



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