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What Lies Beyond ‘Basic’ Literacy? An Opinion Paper on the Broader Developmental Value of Compulsory and Post-Elementary Education

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Abstract

Technological advances, changing labour markets, and the growing accessibility of online learning have renewed debate over the value of education beyond the compulsory (elementary) school years. This opinion paper examines the contribution of education once basic literacy and foundational knowledge have been established, particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood. We argue that its value extends beyond academic and vocational preparation: educational institutions across elementary, secondary, vocational, and higher education can support character development, social and ethical development, civic responsibility, and the acquisition of transferable competencies. In addition, it provides social, mentoring, and developmental experiences that are difficult to replicate through independent learning or early employment. While acknowledging concerns about costs, curriculum relevance, and employability, we conclude that these challenges call for reform rather than reduced participation. Education should therefore strengthen character and transferable competencies alongside academic learning, preparing not only knowledgeable individuals but also adaptable, responsible, and socially engaged people capable of becoming the best versions of themselves and navigating the challenges of ‘real’ life.

Keywords: post-elementary education, compulsory education, adolescents, youth development, character development, transferable competencies

1. Introduction

Although education beyond elementary school (including secondary, vocational, and higher education) has long played a fundamental role in educating professionals and future leaders

who shape society (Brooks et al., 2019), its value has increasingly been questioned (Fellows, 2024; Németh et al., 2021; Tóth et al., 2021; Varghese & Musthafa, 2021). Advances in artificial intelligence, accessible online learning, and skills-based hiring have further challenged whether investing additional years in formal education remains worthwhile. In a related context, compulsory education in Hungary, as in many other European countries, currently covers the school years from approximately ages 6 to 16 (covering mostly elementary education), however, the appropriate length of compulsory schooling remains subject to debate, with reform proposals for the upper age limit ranging from 12 to 18 years. These concerns regarding schooling often overlook the broader developmental purpose of education. Beyond academic knowledge, educational institutions provide environments in which adolescents shape their character, values, relationships, and future aspirations—the non-academic dimension that Berkowitz and Bier (2005) described as “the other side of the report card” (p. 64). This is particularly relevant amid rapid technological and societal disruptions, which increasingly require young people to navigate uncertainty and continuous change (Shtaltovna, 2026). Against this background, this opinion paper contends that, despite legitimate criticisms, education after the compulsory elementary school years remains valuable because it supports character development, provides a unique social and developmental environment, and cultivates transferable competencies needed in an increasingly complex world.

2. To Learn or Not to Learn Further?

We argue that one of the strongest justifications for education beyond compulsory schooling lies in its contribution to character development. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are formative stages during which individuals establish their identity, values, and moral judgement (Erikson, 1956; Griszbacher & Griszbacher, 2025; Lamb et al., 2021; Lerner, 2017), while experimenting with new roles, relationships, and aspirations and asking fundamental questions such as “What kind of person do I want to become?” (Brooks et al., 2019, p. 176). As young people prepare for adult responsibilities, educational institutions inevitably influence their development, whether intentionally or not (Arthur, 2024). Their responsibility therefore extends beyond academic metrics to include developing the ‘whole child’ (Wiley, 2000) and preparing students for citizenship, ethical decision-making, and the common good (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Indeed, schools have long recognised their role in shaping future generations of citizens (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). As Dalton and Crosby (2010) observed, “Whether it is concern about academic cheating, sports scandals, racial bias, research and professional ethics, or increasing materialism and consumerism, the college campus is often at the crossroads of moral issues and ethical conflicts” (p. 1). Educational institutions therefore support students’ moral and civic development and helping them translate values and social competencies into everyday behaviour (Dena & Darmawan, 2024; Kuh, 2000).

Equally important is the social environment educational institutions provide. For example, Ryan and Lickona (1992) described universities as an ‘adult culture’ that mirrors wider society, exposing students to role models, diverse perspectives, and real-life dilemmas. Through daily interaction with peers, teachers, mentors, coaches, and other supportive adults, students develop communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Griszbacher & Griszbacher, 2025; Kuh & Umbach, 2004; Lerner, 2017). Exposure to peers from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds can further challenge students’ assumptions and strengthen their ability to engage constructively with

different perspectives, building competencies that are becoming increasingly valuable in multicultural societies and workplaces (Rockenbach, 2020). Extracurricular activities, sports, volunteering, and student organisations similarly foster responsibility, belonging, and civic engagement (Dena & Darmawan, 2024; Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Similarly, Lerner (2017) identified supportive adult relationships, life-skill development, and meaningful participation as central to positive youth development. Although institutional effects vary considerably (Kuh, 2000; Kuh & Umbach, 2004), educational institutions can provide relatively safe environments for encountering different perspectives, and developing the capacities required for responsible participation in society.

Beyond formal instruction, educational institutions also offer resources and experiences that may be difficult to access independently, including libraries, laboratories, sports facilities, mentoring, mental health services, international opportunities, student organisations, and residential communities (Gács et al., 2025; Karner, 2024; Kuh, 2000; Reynolds, 2020). Such opportunities reflect Ryan and Lickona's (1992) 'multiversity' notion and provide a safe space for exploration during the transition into adulthood. This resembles Arnett's (2007) developmental moratorium, during which emerging adults can explore identities, ambitions, and relationships before assuming full adult responsibilities. Such opportunities contribute not only to academic achievement but also to students' social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Javed et al., 2016), thereby providing support during one of the most formative and psychologically demanding stages of life (Griszbacher & Griszbacher, 2025).

Nevertheless, education beyond compulsory schooling—and to some extent, compulsory education itself—may demand substantial financial and time investment. Furthermore, access may be limited, curricula may lag behind societal needs, and acquired knowledge can quickly become outdated without guaranteeing employment. These concerns highlight flaws in educational design rather than dismiss its broader developmental value. In increasingly dynamic labour markets, Kuh's (2000) concept of 'just-in-time learning' highlights the importance of preparing individuals for continuous learning and career transitions. Educational priorities should therefore extend beyond knowledge transmission towards transferable competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, collaboration, communication, digital literacy, resilience, and lifelong learning (see also Fellows, 2024; Németh et al., 2021; Shtaltovna, 2026; Tóth et al., 2021; Varghese & Musthafa, 2021). Unlike specific knowledge, these competencies can retain their value as technologies, professions, and societies continue to change.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The debate surrounding education after completing the required 'elementary' years often focuses on whether acquired knowledge justifies the considerable investment of time, effort, and financial resources. While subject-specific knowledge may become outdated, personal qualities, values, and transferable competencies can remain valuable long after graduation. Education should therefore address the development of the whole person rather than academic achievement alone. We conclude that education should be viewed not merely as vocational preparation, but as a broader investment in human development, particularly during the formative years of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Educational institutions can act as agents of character development, helping young people cultivate resilience, ethical judgement, critical thinking, social responsibility, and openness to diverse perspectives (e.g., Arthur, 2024;

Dena & Darmawan, 2024; Kuh & Umbach, 2004; Rockenbach, 2020; Wiley, 2000). Still, as discussed above, institutional effects may vary (Kuh, 2000; Kuh & Umbach, 2004), these differences underscore the need for educational environments that match students' individual needs and aspirations. Just as seeds require fertile soil to flourish, young people need supportive environments that encourage exploration, reflection, personal growth and learning from failure. Notably, these human-centred functions of education remain difficult to replace in an increasingly complex world.

In line with Fellows (2024) and Shtaltovna (2026), we would like to highlight that, to remain relevant, educational institutions should modernise curricula while strengthening character education, mentoring, interdisciplinary and experiential learning, community engagement, and transferable competencies. Instead of questioning the value of education beyond the elementary years, policymakers and educators should focus on maximising its developmental impact, particularly during the formative years of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Indeed, despite being published nearly three decades apart, Ryan and Lickona (1992) and Rockenbach (2020) similarly recognised the potential of higher education to positively transform society through its graduates. Ultimately, education should not be judged solely by what students know at graduation, but also by who they become through it, because the future of society rests with these individuals. As growing numbers of young people leave education early (post- or even during elementary years) in favour of what they perceive as 'real life' and other pursuits, often employment from which they can 'actually profit,' reflecting on the broader developmental purpose of education becomes increasingly vital. This concise Food for Thought paper provides a timely and novel opportunity to examine the value of education and its role in shaping future generations—not by criticising or unnecessarily limiting the years of mandatory schooling, but by considering what valuable opportunities education can and should provide.

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For studies involving human participants, the Authors confirm that the research complied with relevant institutional and national ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained where required, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. If ethical approval was not required, the Authors confirm that the study adhered to applicable ethical guidelines.

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