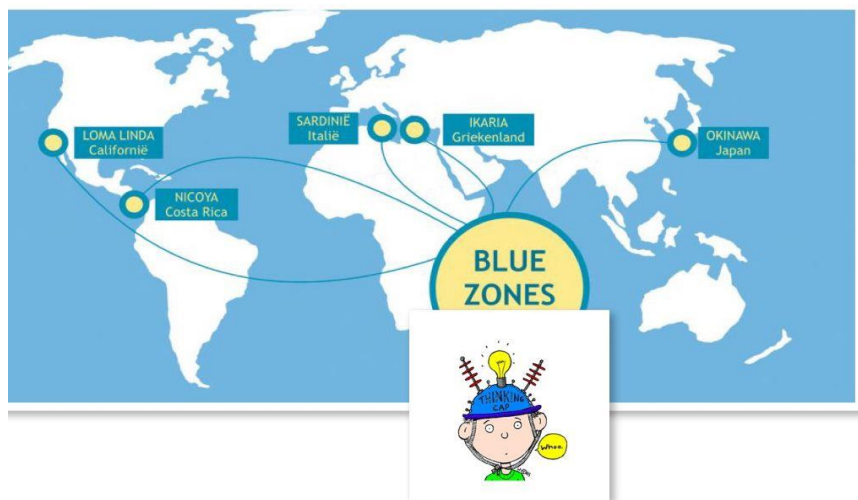# CREATING 'BLUE LEARNING ZONES'

Summary

This paper is about the Blue Zones, five places around the world where people live happier, healthier and longer lives. The author asks whether we can apply similar characteristics in places of learning and growth such as schools and organisations. The paper discusses seven principles of "Blue Learning Zones" that can be applied to teaching and learning environments.

-Know your purpose: growing towards a sustainable society This principle implies that education should strive towards a sustainable society in which economic growth, social progress and environmental protection are balanced. It is not only about acquiring knowledge and skills, but also about developing an attitude and moral compass to bring about positive change.

- Natural movement; this principle means that learning environments should be designed to encourage natural movement. Play and physical activities should play an important role in learning, similar to the 'Emdrups playgrounds' in Denmark.

- Minimal stress; learning environments should promote a positive learning mode and learning strategies should reduce stress and make it more manageable. Professor Guy Claxton's Building Learning Power concept can help with this.

- 80% rule; just as people in Blue Zones stop eating when they are about 80% full, learning processes should also not be overloaded. Breaks and time for reflection are important to let what has been learnt sink in.

- 'Care for me' and 'Care for me and you'; healthy eating and drinking play a role in the Blue Zones, and this can be translated into creating healthy school environments. Taking care of yourself, daily exercise and sufficient sleep are important. In addition, promoting self-efficacy and creating social connections are essential in education.

The author also discusses the application of these principles in education, emphasising the importance of engagement, ownership and social interaction in learning processes.

In essence, the author suggests applying Blue Zones principles in education so that learning and growth contexts can become healthier, happier and more sustainable.

To encourage reflection, a questionnaire is included.

Contents page

Introduction

There are 5 places in the world where people live happy, healthier and longer lives; the so-called 'Blue Zones' (Buettner, 2015). What can the characteristics of these Blue Zones mean for places of learning and growth in schools and organisations? In answering big world changes and our 'why' of the purpose of education, I framed the following question: 'Can we create *'Blue Learning Zones'*? A 'could be' exploration.

The world is in motion: climate change, migration, robotization, artificial intelligence, etc. Complex systems are changing. What if tomorrow you were allowed to completely transform the entire educational system; you are not bound by anything. This led me to the following questions: 'How can we take a fundamental approach from a positive perspective, where education is the lever for change? What can we learn from the 'Blue Zones', places on earth where people live healthier, happier and longer? How can we create a more sustainable world?'

In five places in the world people live longer and healthier than anywhere else in the world. These places are called the Blue Zones. On average people who live in one of these places live to be 90 or even 100 years old, in good health and without medication or a disability. These five blue zones are: Sardinia (Italy), Okinawa (Japan), Loma Linda (California), Nicoya (Costa Rica), Ikaria (Greece).

The following recurring nine factors are involved:
1 Know your goal: knowing what you want to wake up for in the morning.
2 Move naturally: living in an environment that stimulates you to move without thinking;
3 Minimize stress: taking the time for relaxation on a daily basis;
4 The 80% rule: reducing your calory intake by 20%;
5 Vegetable food: growing food yourself, especially beans are part of the daily diet of most centenarians;
6 Wine: drinking regularly but in moderation, when having meals or when socializing with friends;
7 Like-minded people: belonging to a group that regularly meets up, has a positive influence on your health;
8 Family: putting family and loved ones first;
9 Circle of friends: having a good circle of friends and sufficient social contacts

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Seven principles of Blue Learning Zones

In the following I am going to revise the nine factors of the Blue Zones to seven, and linking a number of factors together. I am also going to try to translate these seven factors into some models and learning principles which I have been applying to teams as a trainer/advisor.

1. Know your goal: to grow towards a sustainable society

From the value level, the creation of a sustainable society comes first. A responsible economic growth (care for me), fair social progress (care for me and you) and effective protection of the environment (care for all; from 'Three levels of sustainability', Cavagnaro 2011) are balanced out. From the perspective of learning, this means that you not only acquire important knowledge (core objectives/subjects) and skills, but above all to have the attitude and the moral compass to implement essential changes.

The 'mobilization of the will' is visible in the 'Learning River' below (Claxton and Carlzon, 2018). Linking the upper two currents with the slower undercurrent means that within the education sector, curiosity, and inquisitive, reflective, creative and collaborative attitude are more appreciated and connected. Strategies that can help with this are applied in daily teaching. It finds its expression in learning language, visualisations and expectations arising from a growth mindset.
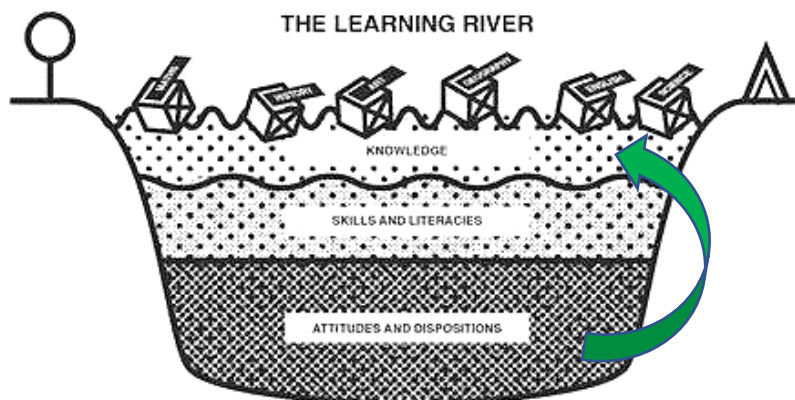

Figure 2.2: The Layers of Learning in the Classroom
Source: By kind permission of Juan and Becky Carlzon

 The terms *qualification* - the role of education in acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes, *socialization* - involves the way in which, through education, children and young people become part of traditions and practices and *subjectification* - in which the formation of the person is central and the development of his own identity and uniqueness, his autonomy and responsibility and the discovery of his motives and passions, are at the core of education (Biesta, 2015). The moral compass lies more in questions such as 'what can I, as a teacher (as a leader), contribute to the personal development of pupils/students, the team, the society? What do I model as a professional, as a human being? Do I encourage the emancipation and responsibility of the other? Do I take care for all?'

It is an approach that does not come extra, but could connect much more with existing content and subjects. It is making yourself and the other person think about "what if..", "how could you do this differently", "how could you help another person" and "what could I have done differently/better"? It is *'talking learnish'* as professor Guy Claxton would put it.

2. Move naturally

The Blue Zones indicate that people find themselves in an environment where natural movement is stimulated. How can we transform our learning environments in such a way that this no longer stems from the 'car wash idea' (everyone taking part the same year system with more or less the same programs), but comes inspiring physical learning environments that already being used at various companies and schools.

How can we make 'play' an important role in learning? Michael Hall Larsen (superintendent Early Childhood and Care, Denmark) summarizes that play has something magical.

a. For children, it is natural to play, in play, new experiences are processed and internalized. In play, the child has the opportunity to try and test new experiences in an environment that is meaningful, so that quietly but stable an expanded network of new skills and insights is formed. Play is Inner motivated, the motive of play lies in the process itself, the child decides what to play and when to play - "So if you try to force play, children will stop playing"

b. Children's interaction with the Play Culture.
A qualitative play culture is a dynamic environment that, based on the teachers' reflections, embraces the children's perspectives and at the same time ensures that all children achieve participation opportunities. A strong play culture promotes, among other things, the child's opportunity to play undisturbed in everyday life, including the opportunity to support spontaneous activities. A play culture supports and includes the child's own self-initiated play that support the child's motivation and curiosity.

c. Holistic development.
Play is the most important source for the child to develop many personal skills, establish friendships and feel comfortable. At the same time, the child's own initiated play in the context of a qualitative play culture contributes to essential 21st century skills.

Around 1930 there were so called 'Emdrups playgrounds'. These adventure playgrounds began in the 1930s in Denmark when C.T.Sorenson noticed that children preferred playing everywhere but on the traditional playgrounds he built. He imagined "A junk playground in which children could create and shape, dream and imagine a reality." Later the spread around the world.

Below is a playful learning design example of the so-called *Vittra schools* in Sweden. So if we know from the Blue Zones that 'naturally exercise' is good, we will give sports, (outdoor)playtime, dance, drama, excursions, etc. a greater status within the 'Blue Learning Zones'. Research shows that involvement in sports, but also not non-sport activities such as music or art, is related to greater hippocampal volume in both boys and girls, and is related to reduced depression in boys (Lisa S. Gorham, Terry Jernigan, Jim Hudziak, Deanna M. Barch. Involvement in Sports, Hippocampal Volume, and Depressive Symptoms in Children. Biological Psychiatry: Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging, 2019)

3. Minimal stress

Stepping out of your comfort zone is also a form of movement. The attitude of wanting to be challenged, wanting to enter the learning mode, being able to deal with uncertainty and showing resilience, are part of the learning principles within the Blue Learning Zones. This means that learning strategies that help to get into the flow, to keep attention, to understand something and to be able to handle your distractions, are elements to reduce stress and frustration and to make them more manageable.

Professor Guy Claxton's well thought-out and well-founded *Building Learning Power* concept can be helpful. Training different learning capacities (for pupils ' learning muscles'; you can train your capacities, as in sports) according to good learning habits are key skills. This requires from the teacher, the school, parents, the system in general a different view on how we look at learning in conjunction to a knowledge base, how we teach, test, supervise and (re)design the curriculum.
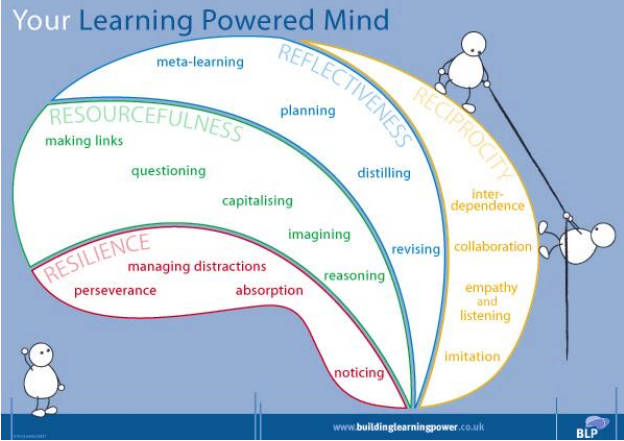
4. 80% rule

Within The Blue Zones it is indicated not to eat until you're stuffed, but stop eating at about 80% full. Most of the time one doesn't eat in the evening. If we were to translate this into learning, then it seems a clear signal not to overload the brain, to take short breaks on time and let what was learned sink in. *The Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)* or cognitive load theory of John Sweller and his 1988 article is considered its birth. Since then, the CLT has grown into a widely embraced and time-proven theory with principles that are directly applicable in the classroom. What to consider?

- Working memory has a limited capacity.
- If working memory is overloaded, students/people do not get around to learning.
- Viewing worked-out examples is more effective than doing assignments yourself.
- Doing supplementary exercises is more effective than doing the exercises yourself.
- Students/people who work hard are not necessarily learning hard.

Ask yourself reflective questions like: 'What significance does this have for me? What is the essence, what are my steering convictions and do I have something to revise?'
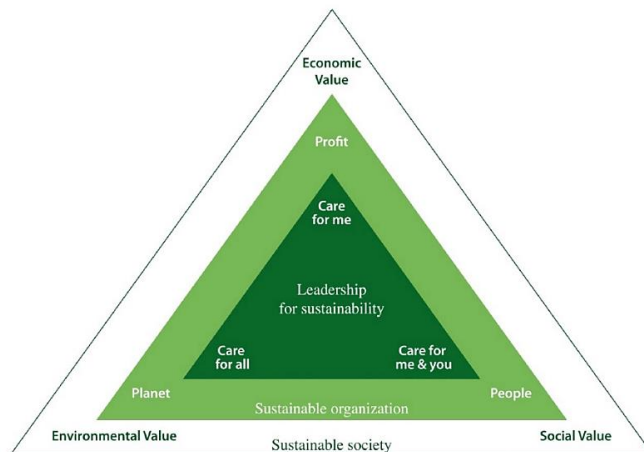
5. Care for me

The Blue Zones factors include elements that have to do with healthy eating and drinking. In the Blue Zones people consuming more vegetable food instead of meat for instance. Drinking a glass of organic wine is not forbidden, but it is recommended to do so moderately and by all means, to do so in the company of friends or family. Translated to the Blue Learning Zones it's my opinion, when it comes to eating and drinking, that you have to take good care of yourself, to exercise daily and to get enough sleep. For school environments this also means for example replacing candy and vending machines with healthier sandwiches and drinks.
Well-known British chef Jamie Oliver has been battling to get better school meals for pupils since 2005 (*Schools Dinner)*. it is also known that more and more pupils are arriving at school without breakfast; so how can they achieve good learning? (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmqomAmPaLU)

Care for me is also believing in *self-efficacy* (Bandura,1977) , which is a person's confidence in their own ability to successfully influence their environment, for example by completing a certain task or solving a problem. Teachers, parents and trainers at a (sports) club, can be stimulating models for this. It is not only about 'technical/skills dimensions', but also about the moral and emotional dimensions in education and parenting. It also has to do with how much real ownership students have. In education, teachers would like students to take more responsibility for their learning, but do they get real ownership over things that are important to them at school? For example, do they get to have a say in matters concerning the curriculum?

6. Care for me and you

The social component matters. From The Blue Zones it is clearly indicated that belonging to a group that meets regularly, for instance family, partners and friends, has a positive influence on health. Translating this to the Blue Learning Zones, it means that the social side of learning is an important element. How can we create learning communities with an attitude that information will be shared, that you are mutually dependent and that this is regarded as valuable? That there is a basic attitude of sincere listening and empathy for each other (even if you do not agree with the other person)? Schoolgardening, team sports events, interest/research/debate groups, playing music together etc., they are all (pedagogical and didactical) ways of stimulating implicit and explicit the social 'learning muscles'

'Care for all', Cavagnaro, 2011

7. Care for all; leadership

Transformation to a sustainable world requires (transformative) leadership. Entering into (temporary) chaos before something new is created requires courage, time, safe environment to make mistakes, the creation of experimentation space and a change strategy that fits in with this. On a personal level, it takes a lot of one's own ability to learn from experiences and apply them in new situations. But also, being curious, having confidence in yourself and others, being able to see threats as an opportunity. Furthermore, not offering cut and dried solutions, but asking you to look for them and accept the uncertainty. The keyword seems to be to take a lot of time for reflection. It is also wise to start small, but coming from a higher goal. Do we dare to change our learning communities in such a way that they make a substantial contribution to a better and more sustainable world?
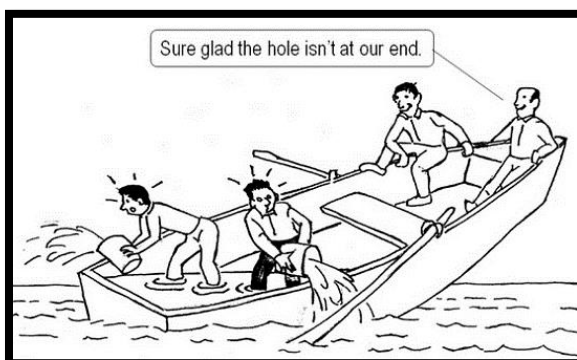
Conclusion

'What can we learn from the so-called 'Blue Zones', places on earth where people live healthier, happier and longer lives? How can we create a more sustainable world?' That was the starting question of this white paper. I conclude that there are (sometimes) simple adjustments that can be made in all kinds of learning contexts, which we can derive from the so-called Blue Zones. Instead of implicit improvements, we should have the courage to initiate changes more explicitly. We should dare to ask ourselves the (leadership) question of being more of a *'clockbuilder'*.

Jim Collens (2002) poses question and metaphor; do you dare to be a 'time counter' or a 'clockbuilder'? To lead as a charismatic visionary - a "genius with a thousand helpers" - is to "read time"; to shape a culture that can grow far beyond a single leader is to build clocks. Searching for a single big idea on which to build success is timetelling; building an organisation that can generate many big ideas over a long period of time is clockbuilding. Lasting greatness requires clock building'.

Let's build clocks, let's create Blue Learning Zones!

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Used literature:

1. "Het prachtige risico van onderwijs" (The Beautiful Risk of Education) by Gert Biesta (2015): This book explores the concept of education as a risky endeavor, emphasizing the importance of embracing uncertainty and ambiguity in the educational process.
2. "Blue zones" by Dan Buettner (2015): In this book, Dan Buettner investigates regions in the world where people live longer and healthier lives, known as "Blue Zones." He identifies common factors contributing to their longevity and provides insights on how to incorporate these practices into our own lives.
3. "Powering Up Children" by Becky Carlzon and Guy Claxton (2018): This book focuses on empowering children to become effective learners and develop essential skills such as resilience, curiosity, and creativity. It offers practical strategies for parents and educators to support children's growth and development.
4. "Built to Last" by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras (2002): This influential business book examines the characteristics and strategies of successful long-lasting companies. It identifies key principles and practices that contribute to their sustained success over time.
5. "The Three Levels of Sustainability" by Curiel and Cavagnaro (2011): This book explores the concept of sustainability from three interconnected levels: ecological, social, and economic. It delves into the complexities of achieving sustainable development and provides insights into fostering a more sustainable world.
6. "Omwenteling van mensen, organisaties en samenleving" (Transformation of People, Organizations, and Society) by Jan Rotmans (2019): Jan Rotmans discusses the need for a transition toward a more sustainable and resilient society. He examines the challenges and opportunities associated with societal transformation and offers perspectives on how individuals, organizations, and society can drive positive change.
7. "Begin met het waarom" (Start with Why) by Simon Sinek (2012): Simon Sinek explores the importance of starting with a clear sense of purpose, or "why," in individual and organizational endeavors. He argues that understanding and communicating the underlying motivations and values is crucial for inspiring others and achieving success.
8. "Op schouders van reuzen" (On the Shoulders of Giants) by Paul Kirschner et al. (2018): This book discusses the role of research and evidence-based practices in education. It explores how knowledge and insights from previous educational research can inform teaching and learning approaches to improve educational outcomes.
9. John Hattie: John Hattie is an education researcher known for his work on visible learning and educational effectiveness. His research synthesizes the findings from various educational studies and identifies factors that have the most significant impact on student learning. The link provided leads to his website, where he shares resources and insights related to his research.

These resources cover a range of topics, including education, longevity, child development, business success, sustainability, societal transformation, purpose-driven leadership, and evidence-based teaching practices.

Some questions:

- What's your 'why'? What is your 'plus' in your school or organisation? Is it not only to read in documents, but also visible, tangible and hearable on the work floor and in the way you lead?
- How much of 'the why' can be directly linked to sustainability and healthy living in your school or organisation?
- How is naturaly movement visible in daily lessons and in the curriculum? Has play an important role in it? Is the environment challenging for pupils?
- How does stress reduction take shape in your organisation/school?
- Gives the approach to students also targeted strategies to become more resilient, resourceful, reflective and reciprocal?
- How much time is really visible in your organisation/school to reflect on content, skills and attitudes? How do you protect pupils/ colleagues from overload?
- If you provide food to students/colleagues, how healthy is it? How can you improve it?
- Self-efficacy is a key pillar in being able to be successful. What can you and colleagues/parents do (more) to further enhance this?
- How much real ownership have your students/colleagues? What can you do to grow this phased? What role and place will students/colleagues have in this process?
- How explicitly is the social component visible in the curriculum and daily practice? What opportunities do you see to develop this further?
- Are you willing to enter into (temporary) chaos to create a 'Blue Learning Zone'?
- If you are imaginatively flying above the process of creating a Blue Learning Zone, what do you think are the levers to success? Who and what do you need in the process?