
The Relevance of Primary Education

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ABSTRACT This article sketches a vision of how primary education needs to be re-shaped to let schools focus more sharply on the development of children as individuals. Rapid social change requires a fundamental re-thinking of formal education and assessment. High-stakes testing must end. Greater weight must be given to the application of knowledge and skills. The parent-teacher partnership must be re-vitalised.

We live in the third Industrial Revolution, which is rapidly morphing into the fourth. The eighteenth century ushered in the first, which began to shape the modern world through the introduction of machine tools to replace manufacture by hand. Since then, change has accelerated faster and faster, culminating in revolution which substitutes digital technology for analogue, electronic and mechanical devices. And now the digital world is fused with the physical and the biological to make a life-changing impact upon all our lives.[1] Yet our education system remains rooted in assumptions and methods of practice which are more applicable to the nineteenth century than to today or the needs of tomorrow. We remain wedded to the memorisation of facts and techniques and the regurgitation of what is committed to memory through examinations. Despite the rhetoric, performance in examinations is seen as the predominant aim of education at both the primary and the secondary stages of schooling. Tricks to defeat the examiner replace a search for understanding. There is too much for the test and not enough for the learner and the changed world in which we live.

The Impact of Automation

Increasingly our world is one of automation. Robots are replacing people when there is routine work to be undertaken. It is estimated that a third of the workforce, 10 million workers, will be replaced over the next 15 years. Manual and routine tasks will be the first to yield to automation.[2] But the old saw 'Garbage in, garbage out' remains true, and the educational need is no longer to

prepare children for an unthinking use of the new technology but to equip them personally to command not only the design but also the application of the computing power which we now possess. Already the international world of industry and commerce is calling for greater attention to be given in education to personal qualities such as confidence, reliability, adaptability, perseverance and curiosity and less to be paid to examination results which require rote learning. A survey by the Confederation of British Industry in 2016 [3] revealed a finding, startling to recent UK governments, that 89% of employers considered that the personal attitudes of the worker were essential to productive employment, 66% indicated personal aptitude and only 23% indicated formal qualifications. Self-management and personal behaviour were identified as important factors. Of the conventional school curriculum, the skill which was given the highest priority was that of communication. An analysis of the skills required for successful work in information technology ranks multi-tasking, problem solving, attention to detail and personal commitment alongside aptitude for mathematics.

Balancing Examinable Skills and Personal Qualities

Our first move in seeking greater relevance to contemporary life must be to create a more appropriate balance between examinable skills and personal qualities. It simply isn't sufficient to achieve knowledge and skill in order to reproduce these when they are tested. Such cognitive gains are all too readily abandoned when not required for the examination. What matters more is the application of such knowledge and skill in the realities of life. Involvement in the applicability of a skill such as reading or writing creates relevance for children and consequently a stronger incentive to learn.

The dominance of testing in our education system, together with the high stakes attached to the results, must be ended. The emphasis should be on the development of the individual child and not upon the examination performance of cohorts of children as a way of holding schools accountable to the communities they serve.

Primary Schools and National Assessment

As always, changes of this kind must have their roots in the primary school. It is in the early and primary years that children, born eager to learn, begin to acquire the personal qualities which will characterise them in secondary school and later life. Yet it is the primary school which has suffered the greatest damage to the quality of learning. National testing confined to only two, admittedly important, areas of the curriculum as a measure of the success of primary education has led to the narrowing and the distortion of children's experience in school and a neglect of applicability beyond achieving a correct answer in the test. Elementary schooling rather than primary education has been the aim of successive governments. We should not blame the hard-pressed

practitioner, whether teacher, teaching assistant or head. Substantial failure to meet the 'expected' results has severe consequences. There is poor mental health among too many children and adults who are caught up in this rat race and there is a dull emphasis upon teaching methods characteristic of instruction rather than learning more powerfully from experience. Successive governments have been open in their affirmation that the purpose of early and primary schooling is to prepare children for the next stage, that of secondary education. Are they secondary ready? This is a far too limited view of the potential of young children and it is time for radical change.

The restoration of a more balanced approach to primary teaching prefaced by a move to local rather than national accountability would enable schools to sharpen their focus on the development of children as individuals. Such a profound change would be welcomed by primary specialists, but it is unlikely to be achieved quickly. A finding from the Keycolab UK research project [4] concerned with the teaching of the European learning competences indicates that, despite a firm commitment to personal development, the teachers concerned found it difficult to appraise their work from the standpoint of the individual. The damage wreaked by decades of national testing runs deep; the progressive increase in the quality of primary education signalled by the Plowden report [5] has been halted and too often reversed in a majority of schools.

The Role of Parents

One of the far-sighted recommendations made by Plowden was that concerned with the parents' role in education. There was a call for a closer partnership between teachers and parents, and this was considered to be one of the essentials for educational advance. This recognised the steady rise in the level of parental skills over the hundred years of education as an entitlement for all. In 1870, the year of the education act which really began state education, a quarter of people in London couldn't even sign their own names. The last 50 years have seen an accelerating rise in the educational levels of the population and an increasing recognition of the crucially important contribution which parents make to their children's success. Research by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2003 [6] reported that parents have a significant positive effect on children's achievement *even after all other factors affecting attainment have been taken into account*. So much for test results. The research stressed the parental influence upon the shaping of the child's self-concept as a learner alongside factors such as a secure and stable home environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child dialogue, constructive values and high aspirations regarding personal fulfilment. It is beyond question that as we seek a higher priority for personal qualities we must turn to the family which nurtures them and the partnership with the schools which strengthens the impact upon children as they grow up. The early and primary years are of the greatest

importance since it is in the first decade of life that parental involvement in children's lives day by day is at its highest.

Partners not Consumers

Currently, however, there is a powerful deterrent to the closer involvement of parents in education. We are failing to draw on the most promising way of raising all-round standards of achievement and equipping our children for the rapidly changing world. Since 1988, successive governments have persisted and continue to persist in the view that parents are consumers of education rather than partners who by their very nature are equipped to make a decisive contribution. Competition is considered the defining characteristic of human relations and democratic choices are best exercised through buying and selling – a doctrine even applied to essential community services such as health and education. This is at the heart of governmental reliance on the measurement of educational 'standards' through national testing. It is argued that the publication of results will enable parental choice of school, so rewarding good teaching. But the political view and the measures based upon it have had baleful results. We should not blame them, but many parents, once cast in the role of consumer, set out to get the competitive best out of the system, perhaps by purchasing a house served by the 'successful' school or by buying additional tutoring to meet the demands of national testing. One of the most seriously damaging effects of the parent-as-consumer view is upon the working relationship between teachers and parents. Too often this becomes a judgemental, even adversarial, arena for complaining rather than partnership. The teacher, under pressure to deliver results, begins to see parents as a threat, and the parent, absolved from responsibility for the development of the child, begins to hold the teacher wholly responsible for progress.

It is government which must take the first initiatives in the revitalising of the parent-teacher partnership. The reform of national assessment must be accompanied by a radically changed consideration of the work of schools by Ofsted. The child rather than the parent must rightfully be seen as the consumer of education. England must keep pace with other countries in the developed world. Internationally there are now clear signs of a retreat from a narrow emphasis upon examination performance and its damaging effects upon the curriculum and children's well-being. More balanced approaches are being introduced, notably in Southeast Asia, where examination systems have long provided a benchmark of attainment. In 2015, assessments made by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) through the influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) began to include problem solving and the contribution of parents in the rubric which determines educational performance.[7] The inclusion of 'what they can *do* with what they know' is deeply significant. In some countries, questionnaires were distributed to parents, who were asked to provide information on their perceptions of and involvement in their child's school and their support for

learning in the home. In the USA and England, a grassroots movement, 'More Than a Score', composed of parents partnering teachers in seeking change, is expanding rapidly and playing a prominent part in the debate concerning education. Parents, concerned for the quality of their children's lives, are rebelling against the sterility of a test-based school curriculum. A sign of shifting UK government opinion was given by Amanda Spielman, the recently appointed Chief Inspector of Schools, when she called for broad and balanced teaching which did not neglect the arts and warned against the loss of the real substance of education.

Conclusion

The movement of ideas towards the individual child and his or her personal qualities has been a long time coming but there will be no lack of pioneering head teachers who are impatient to frame the future. No longer should schools be seen as closed institutions reporting on progress through hurried annual conversations. School hours should be changed to allow the involvement of working parents and there should be rooms where the partnership is made real through shared experience. Learning will be fostered as much in the outside environment as within the school building. School staffs should include appointees with a specific responsibility for the encouragement and fostering of the new links. Teachers should be as ready to accept invitations to homes as parents are to be in the school. There should be absolute respect on both sides for the two differing but complementary sides to the partnership.

This is the future of a more relevant primary education. For the first time we will release the full potential of our children as we realise the power and success which can stem from teachers and parents working together.

Notes

- [1] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution>
- [2] www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/skills-2030_Feb2017.pdf
- [3] www.cbi.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/pdf/cbi-education-and-skills-survey2016.pdf
- [4] Keycolab: Key Competences in Primary School Education (keycolab.nieikastolak.com).
- [5] www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/plowden/plowden1967
- [6] C. Desforges with A. Abouchaar, DfES Research Report (2003).
- [7] <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>

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