FORUM
Volume 62, Number 3, 2020
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2020.62.3.373

Could This Be the End of Schools as We Know Them? Another Way Is Needed

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ABSTRACT The crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic opens an opportunity to reconsider fundamental questions about education and society, and to remake schools as more vital, life-enhancing, humane and creative places dedicated to benefitting the child rather than fitting the child to the system. What is education's purpose? What are the best learning environments for our children and young people? How should we understand equity in relation to our education system?

The United Kingdom is breaking the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – not just Article 28, their right to an education, but, more fundamentally, Article 29, the right to an education which develops their personality, talents and abilities to the full.

The interruption to schooling as we know it which the COVID-19 crisis has caused offers an opportunity to rethink education. We have learnt the extent to which society is greatly reliant on schools looking after children whilst their parents are needed elsewhere, and have been reminded in extreme cases of the level of deprivation children endure. For some people, this reinforces an unspoken belief that the principal value of schools is as care centres. But, for most children, the question that needs to be asked is to what extent, if at all, has their education suffered because of being moved online?

And what of our teachers? We need our best minds to be attracted into the profession, to have a significant understanding of the history, philosophy and psychology of education, and thereby to regard teaching as a vocation as well as good money. In some schools, mechanistic teaching and zero-tolerance codes of behaviour erode the relationship between pupil and teacher, diminishing teachers' role in their own eyes and that of the public. In a profession that is already short of confidence, this is nothing less than a disaster, and is being reflected by poor recruitment and retention at all levels.

The long-term effects of a protracted deprivation of classroom teaching on pupils' development and life opportunities are debatable. Until recently, many argued that a week of holiday in term time could irreparably damage children's education, with thousands of parents fined for such behaviour. Politicians even advised young people *not to go* on climate demonstrations because by doing so they were damaging their education. But perhaps they learned more from a Greta Thunberg protest, which had current and future relevance to their lives, than being at school experiencing a lesson as mute receivers rather than proactive participants. Some children may be benefiting from having their parents as tutors, who can devote their entire attention to them, rather than being required to wait alongside 29 others for a teacher's response. The longer this situation goes on, the more questions it raises about the value of schooling and the way we go about it.

The late Lord Avebury, Eric Lubbock, wrote:

> Our great mistake in education is ... the worship of book learning – the confusion of instruction and education. We strain the memory instead of cultivating the mind. The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wish to learn. If we succeed in giving the love of learning, learning itself will surely follow.[1]

This hiatus gives us a real chance to do those things which we know enhance and enrich children's learning – to spend time on the arts, to read at length, to enjoy physical activity, to encourage leadership skills, to reflect on learning, to grow friendships, to develop curious minds, to become an individual and to be happy doing it. Many schools have vision statements which aim for these goals, but how many have been able to achieve them while being shackled by the twin restraints of a constricting curriculum and a crippling assessment system, held in place by means of a harsh accountability regime?

Educational philosopher A.N. Whitehead suggests that 'education is the acquisition of the art of the utilisation of knowledge'. He warns to beware of 'inert ideas', pedantry and routine. How well does that describe what goes on in many schools? He would have strongly objected to the impositions of recent governments and Ofsted, which seems to fall neatly into his category of 'external machinery which kills its [education's] vitality'. Furthermore, he asserts that 'no system of external tests which aims at examining individual pupils can result in anything but educational waste' (Whitehead, 1932, p. 6). There have been many other brave attempts over the years to break down the barriers to reform, which other countries such as Finland saw as the way forward, but in the United Kingdom this was choked by governmental determination to remain in control of the curriculum.

Society should always require our schools to look after children, but we should seize the possibilities this crisis offers us to create a way of educating which is designed for the benefit of the children we are trying to teach. At the moment, we have a system which is designed for the benefit of the system, and

any child who does not fit must be shaped to the structures that have been created for them. Consider, for example, these following thoughts, which are not new ideas to those in education but have for the most part been ignored by those in charge: Why does schooling have to involve children learning to the ring of a bell or the tyranny of a timetable? Why do so many schools insist on the separation of subjects and not how they are interconnected? Why has the system dictated that good practice stems from an outdated secondary school approach which detrimentally affects primary education, instead of what we know to be the more effective and progressive methods to be found in early years education? Why do we continue to teach in year groups instead of recognising that children have different learning speeds, and different strengths and abilities?

The answers, of course, are to be found in classrooms built with sufficient room for 30 pupils; a national curriculum that implies lots of subjects that have to be taught without any depth or real purpose; a system that prepares its young people for examinations rather than for life; and the policies of politicians who say that what was good enough for them 30, 40 or even 50 years ago in their secondary education is good enough for our children now.

It has been noticeable that all requirements to return children to schools have been predicated on economic and pseudo-scientific drivers rather than any particular value being placed on the virtues of education. Some have suggested that this is for the benefit of those children who are most vulnerable, while conveniently forgetting that schools in the United Kingdom have remained open for these children throughout the pandemic, often including school holidays. The problem is not the provision; it is removing the drivers which ensure that children go to school. The COVID-19 crisis has left many children, particularly the most vulnerable, to depend on their own drive for learning. For those not able or not wishing to attend school, this requires considerable discipline to ensure that what society requires for future citizenship is what is learnt.

It has been accepted by the former Coalition education minister, David Laws, that the years of austerity have widened the learning gap between social groups. 'When poverty and the out-of-school environment are deteriorating, it becomes much more difficult to improve outcomes for poor children', he says. 'The choice is not between tackling poverty or improving schools – both are necessary if the gap is to be shrunk' (Millar, 2020).

In addition, fundamental reform of the exam system is needed and will only happen when universities stop insisting on A level qualifications. Many have already moved to an interview entry process, which gives a much more rounded view of candidates. An end to A levels would obviate the need for GCSEs. In addition, as Ofqual has recently stated that teachers' assessments and predictions are equally valid, why continue with exams when coursework is a fairer representation of commitment and ability? This acceptance that teachers are professionals and can be trusted can then lead to sweeping away the national testing imposed on primary-age children – a measure which offers

them very little benefit. Research has shown that in order to bring about improvements in test scores, teaching is unsurprisingly often focused on the narrow requirements of test performance. This is a deeply flawed approach which could easily be replaced by assessment for learning, encouraging greater and more meaningful dialogue between teachers, children and parents. Many studies have shown that it would still be possible to monitor children's progress but also, through the use of sample testing, make comparisons across the school system. This could even be structured to include different curriculum areas over time and result in a more cohesive measure of schools than the imposition of high-stakes testing on all children. A revised inspection regime could become supportive rather than punitive, and return to the high standards previously set by HMI. Who thinks school would not then be a happier place for all?

Once defined as a unit of attainment, a child is easy to measure. It is easy to give an account of progress made and allocate a pathway. In contrast, if we treat children as individuals who are all different, they are more likely to bring their own unique and creative contributions to society.

If we are addressing what we believe is the purpose of education, then it is necessary to consider the relationship between schooling and work. The Victorian reformers who started the state school system exactly 150 years ago saw it as a way to improve the lot of the many; those holding the levers of power saw it more as an advantage for industry and commerce if workers had a basic education – a short-term cost for long-term gain. By the middle of the twentieth century, education had become an industry of its own, developing its own philosophies. Now presents an opportunity to see education's true value as a social driver, and embrace this with a debate about the value and purpose of education.

It is time to address two fundamental questions: What is the purpose of education and what are the best learning environments for our children? The answer was easier when everyone agreed that life consisted of school, a job and a pension. Twenty-first-century society has developed far more complex characteristics, with competing needs going well beyond the world of work. The expectation is that schooling should prepare all children for all aspects of life, but highly unequal access to education in this country, and the sharp divisions between state schools and private schools, and between graduates and non-graduates, has helped to produce an unequal society where the divide between rich and poor has never been greater. It is now generally recognised that this leads to ever greater inequity and a consequent lack of prosperity for the whole nation. The goal should be not only greater equality, but also an understanding of the meaning of equity in our education system, which leads to greater opportunities, especially for the disadvantaged.

Now is a good time to grasp the nettle and for those who understand education to come together with policymakers, employers and parents to establish a different way of thinking which helps governments to reform schooling to better reflect the needs of the children within our communities, and to benefit society itself.

Note

[1] This quotation came from papers left by the father of one of the authors.

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