

‘Why would you?’

A personal reflection on the purposes of education

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Abstract

Combining my personal experiences of education with educational research, the paper argues that social mobility and preparation for the labour market are both inadequate and unrealised goals of education. It attempts to answer the question of what education should be for, drawing on the radical philosophy of Theodore Brameld. Whilst recognising that transformation is much harder to achieve than reproduction, the paper concludes that a good educational system is one that educates and empowers in service of the common good.

Keywords: the purposes of education; reproduction; educational inequalities; Theodore Brameld; transformation

Introduction

I started teaching over 50 years ago in 1971. I was very clear then about the purpose of education. It should focus on fulfilment, flourishing, giving voice to the unheard and developing participatory citizenship, allowing children to become the best version of themselves possible, the antithesis of my own education. That had focused on inculcating uniformity, conformity, a narrow model of correct behaviour and a limited traditionalist view of knowledge. The acceptable learner was either middle class or working very hard to become middle class. For working-class girls like myself, school had resulted in a sense that we did not belong in education, that we were not really welcome in the classroom. I was also convinced that the best way of achieving such educational goals was through love, empathy and a reflexive awareness of children's individual interests, cultural backgrounds and learning needs. Many contemporary teachers would be bemused by my pedagogic approach. As a reception class teacher, I rarely taught maths and English directly but through a host of design technology, art, PE, history and geography projects. My class of over 40 four- and five-year olds all read mainly though making their own books or joining in when I read them a story. When I did hear individual children read we jointly used a variety of strategies to understand and decode words, on the basis that children learn in different ways and have different strengths and weaknesses. Above all, I wanted learning to be exciting and challenging, in comparison with my own childhood learning, a remorseless diet of facts that I spent many evenings banging into my head against my bedroom wall.

I did love the children, and for the first three years I loved teaching them. But then the Black Papers gained increasing influence over educational practice.¹ Written in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the Black Papers were a collection of polemical pamphlets authored by a group of white, male academics, educationalists and politicians. The papers took a traditional position on education policy, lambasting progressive, child-centred, educational practices. The result was a growing torrent of criticism about primary school teaching from white powerful men who had never taught in a primary classroom. I, and many other female primary school teachers, were intimidated, internalising a sense we were wrong and misguided. The feeling I had had as a five-year-old when I was put on the council estate (and bottom set) table in my own primary school came back. The sense that school was not a good place for me, that I was getting it all wrong. At least as a five-year-old I had the knowledge that I was already a fluent reader who was teaching my younger siblings to read. That knowledge fuelled a righteous indignation that enabled me to challenge my teachers’ judgments. As a young female primary school teacher, I lacked such certainty that it was others rather than myself who were making the wrong call. My over-riding sense was that I just did not know enough to be a good teacher for the working-class children I had set out to love, listen to and empower.

What followed were decades of primarily being a learner rather than a teacher, trying to gather enough information, and acquire sufficient knowledge to understand how and why inequalities and injustices happen in the educational system, and how I might contribute to the transformation of working-class children’s lives through education.

What I increasingly came to learn was that my goals were akin to trying to turn the tide. While I wanted to use the educational system and my skills as a teacher to improve and enhance ethnically diverse working-class children’s and young people’s lives, the educational system appeared to be inherently and irredeemably reproductive, operating to fix the working classes in place. In contrast, conventional rhetoric appears to be more positive and progressive. So, for example, Wikipedia tells us that on a societal level education plays a pivotal role in equipping a country to adapt to changes and effectively confront new challenges, raising awareness and contributing to addressing contemporary global issues, including climate change, sustainability and the widening disparities between the rich and the poor. On an individual level, it instils in students an understanding of how their lives and actions impact others, inspiring individuals to strive towards realising a more sustainable and equitable world. Yet, regardless, of the often-lofty rhetoric around the purposes of education, as Jackson and Marsden asserted in the 1960s, our educational system still operates primarily on the hereditary principle, enabling the transmission of social status and economic and cultural resources across generations.² It remains inherently and irredeemably reproductive.

Still selecting and rejecting in order to rear an elite

The progressive rhetoric around the purposes of education remains at the level of rhetoric. There is little, if any, realisation. Even the instrumental, unambitious educational objectives of social mobility and preparation for the labour market, which both work to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo, remain largely unmet. So Nick Gibb as education secretary in 2016 was advocating that schools were engines for social mobility, while in 2023 Keir Starmer was promising that schools under a Labour government would give young people the skills in communication, teamwork and problem solving that employers want.³ Yet, despite being the most repeated educational objectives, they are also unrealised.

Part of the reason lies in deeply entrenched policies and practices which ensure that the most money is spent on the most affluent students. This is evident when we examine spending levels across the public and private sectors of education. There is a wide disparity between private school fees and state school spending per pupil, with private school fees 90 per cent higher than state school spending, having more than doubled since 2010, when the gap was about 40 per cent.⁴ But more affluent middle-class schools in the state sector are also better funded than those in disadvantaged areas. Recent educational funding decisions have redistributed funding upwards away from schools with deprived intakes to schools with more affluent intakes.⁵ This differential is compounded by schools' ability to draw on parental contributions.⁶ While schools in affluent areas benefit from the relative affluence of the families attending those schools, for example through highly successful fundraising and parental donations, schools in the poorest areas are frequently unable to even raise funds for local school trips.⁷

We have a highly discriminatory funding system that privileges the already privileged. Compensatory measures have had little impact, and that impact is reducing. Pupil premium funding for free school meal (FSM) children (£1345 per primary pupil and £955 per secondary pupil) has proved to be less effective than expected, with a freeze in per-pupil rates meaning the rate fell in real terms between 2015 and 2020.⁸ By 2023-24, pupil premium had fallen even further, and was 14 per cent lower in real terms than it had been in 2015. Compounding its inadequacy as a measure to improve the education of children growing up in poverty, pupil premium funding is increasingly used for more general purposes as schools serving working-class communities find themselves with inadequate income to cover their costs.⁹ Our educational system still operates on the principle of 'to him who has most yet more shall be given', the same principle that governed its operation over a century ago.

The most rehearsed mainstream educational objective spouted by our political elites coalesces around social mobility and aspiration. We are to become 'an aspiration nation'.¹⁰

Yet, while aspiration abounds, social mobility stagnates. Also, the consequences, for the experiences of the vast majority of the working classes, of designating social mobility as a principal aim of education are rarely recognised. In selecting out the ‘bright’ few working-class students, the ‘left-behind’ majority are positioned as failures, and their skills and potentials neglected. As I have written elsewhere, this is a policy of asset-stripping the working classes rather than any attempt to recognise, let alone fulfil, working-class potential.¹¹ As R. H. Tawney was warning over 50 years ago, the purposes of education should be much braver and far more ambitious than goals which included social mobility as one of the main aims.¹² For Tawney, education should be seen as an end in itself, a space that ‘people seek out not in order that they may become something else but because they are what they are’.¹³ In contrast, he argued that social mobility was ‘merely converting into doctors, barristers and professors a certain number of people who would otherwise have been manual workers’.¹⁴ This translates into a crude means of getting ahead of others, of stealing a competitive edge. It has resulted in an individualised, overly competitive educational system that damages all children, but particularly the majority it positions as educational failures.

Yet in the 2020s, even this narrow, elitist aim of education is rapidly becoming a meaningless mantra as social mobility in the UK (but in England in particular) deteriorates. Over the last 50 years social mobility has progressively declined in the UK, while in-depth historical research on the inheritance of social status in England shows that viewing education as a vehicle for social mobility is inaccurate and misplaced.¹⁵ Research spanning the period from 1600 to 2022 suggests social interventions such as the public provision of education have had surprisingly little effect. The research found that since 1920, when there have been increasing levels of public provision of education, that same education has largely failed to make a positive contribution to the life chances of poorer families. Rather, over a period of four centuries, there has been no significant increase in rates of social mobility.¹⁶ Far from acting as an engine of social mobility, the education system has contributed to social and economic reproduction, perpetuating advantage from one generation to another.

Alongside social mobility, the other most-repeated purpose of education among the political elites is preparation for the labour market. More collective political, civic, public and humanistic purposes of public schooling are set aside in favour of individualistic economic justifications for schooling to make workers and consumers.¹⁷ Yet, their unsubstantiated claim that our current narrow, traditionalist curriculum is preparing young people for the labour market of the future is another fantasised folly. In England 65 per cent of students expect to become professionals, when only 20 per cent of employees in the labour market are in professional jobs.¹⁸ As Saltmann argues, ‘learning is reduced to the false promise of earning, rather than learning being seen as the basis for knowledge for social and political agency’.¹⁹ While the Organisation for

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recognises that 'schooling should be about more than preparation for work', that recognition is followed in the text by a 'but', before it focuses on career readiness.²⁰ Yet, if we examine how students feel about the efficacy of their school experience, 50 per cent of UK students feel school has done little to prepare them for adult life, while 25 per cent felt school had been a waste of time.²¹ Both social mobility and readiness for the labour market are unambitious aims of education, yet we have failed to achieve even these limited objectives.

What should education be for?

So, with over 70 years' experience of the educational system, first as a pupil, then as a teacher, lecturer and, more recently, as professor of education, what in retrospect, do I think education should be for? Well, I don't think I, or any other individual, should personally be deciding. I think we need a national conversation about what education should be for that involves listening, discussion, negotiation and compromise. It is obvious we need an educational system that tries as hard as possible to prepare the next generation for an uncertain, increasingly insecure, crisis-laden, unpredictable future. I am not sure that the litany of names of past kings and queens, and their dates, that I had to learn off by heart will help, any more than the aspirational mantras parroted in many contemporary academy schools.

It might be easier to start with what education should not be for. It should not be focused on perpetuating elitism, maintaining gender, race, ableist and class hierarchies of worth. Neither should it be about imposing uniformity and compliance. Schooling should never be about silence, docility and conformity, nor preparation for an obsolete, outdated vision of future labour markets. Its purpose should not be sifting and sorting out the winners from the losers at the expense of striving to encourage success in all students. Such purposes are all about reproduction and the continuation of a very inequitable status quo. They do not just underestimate and devalue the working classes, they underestimate the potential of all students, and their capacity to care for the world and each other. They result in an extremely limited vision of the future world: the transactional, instrumentalised and acquisitive world of Donald Trump and the tech billionaires, where everyone is looking out for themselves. We are already living in a world where some of the most powerful among our elites see 'empathy as the fundamental weakness of humankind'.²² Part of the reason for the growing inability to empathise with and value those who are different to ourselves lies in the growing levels of inequalities, and the social and economic segregation it generates.²³

Education should be the most effective means of countering division, mistrust and intolerance of those who are different to ourselves. Yet currently the educational system operates as a powerful mechanism of segregation, where different classes are

increasingly ghettoised in educational silos. An over-riding principle of ‘divide and rule’ applies as the upper classes are educated separately in private schools, the middle and working classes are largely found in schools that are predominantly middle or working class, and even when they are found in the same schools, they are set apart in top sets that are mainly middle class, and bottom sets that are mostly working class. Such processes of division are compounded by race. The predominantly working-class schools and sets are far more ethnically diverse than either the private schools or the top sets. Such segregation is one of the most formidable obstacles to common life and the common good that a good education should enable.²⁴ Social mixing both within schools and in their classrooms is vital to learning about difference and diversity, increasing tolerance and understanding of the other. Michael Sandel writes that ‘Democracy requires that citizens from different walks of life encounter one another in common spaces and public places’.²⁵ School should be the obvious place for such social encounters, but it rarely is.

Theodore Brameld’s radical philosophy of education

As a young primary school teacher my own educational philosophy was powerfully influenced by the work of Theodore Brameld. I wrote my postgraduate thesis on his theory of reconstructionism.²⁶ The underlying rationale of reconstructionism is that society is failing, and its continuation is in jeopardy because of the inadequacy of conventional methods in addressing social problems.²⁷ Writing in a period just before and after World War II, Brameld recognised the potential for human devastation. He saw a world fraught with ominous threats of moral, political, economic, environmental and social destruction.²⁸ These, he argued, required audacious agendas of political-educational action in order to prepare future generations with the skills, aptitudes and knowledge to tackle a wide range of social problems such as racism, classism, climate crises, poverty, violence and war. Education needed to be able to deal with global challenges, including moral, social and environmental issues, and should have a key role in dealing with global crises. He argued that education is not only responsible for shaping individuals, but also plays a role in building a just and equal society. School, first and foremost, should operate as an agent of cultural transformation rather than as a reproductive institution concerned pre-eminently with the transmission of dominant culture.²⁹ Brameld argued that prevailing values of inequality, self-interest and nationalism, evident throughout the educational system, were dehumanising and degrading of humanity, while values such as equality and social interest represented the best in human thinking, and should be actively encouraged in students.³⁰

The current narrow traditional curriculum and pedagogy grind the humanity out of students, often reducing them to empty vessels and docile subjects.³¹ In contrast,

Brameld argued that students learn through active participation in a democratic process, which includes a problem-based context and cooperative investigation.³² He placed a much stronger emphasis on critical theory and analytical thinking skills than does contemporary education. Teachers needed to be viewed as, and educated to be, agents of change who could play an important role in guiding students to face the challenges of the times, as well as designing a curriculum that prioritises social- over self-interests. His approach emphasised all the teaching methods I tried to employ in my own classroom: collaborative learning; problem-based learning; discussion and debate; self- and peer-assessment; and experiential learning. Teachers ought to be challenging traditional structures of authority rather than reinforcing them. Like Brameld, I believed that with the right learning environment – one that encouraged, respected, valued and empowered them – students could collectively contribute to a better, fairer future. Brameld stressed the mutuality of self and society through his concept of social-self-realisation, which he argued ‘symbolized the highest value of human life as a fulfilling of people of all classes, races and nations by the transactional effect of self on society and of society on self.’³³ As such, one of the main purposes of education is to equip and mobilise future generations to bring about the positive transformation of society.

Transformation is much harder to achieve than reproduction. But transformation of our educational system, and the wider society are what we desperately need if education is going to contribute to our continuation, rather than to the looming extinction Collet-Sabe and Ball warn of.³⁴ The education of our young people should enable them to challenge the dangerously low expectations of what humanity is capable of that emanate from rich powerful men like Donald Trump and Elon Musk in the US, and Nigel Farage and Richard Tice in the UK. As I wrote in the latest edition of *Miseducation*, one key purpose of our educational system should be to facilitate and grow the creativity, imagination, criticality, care, compassion and sense of agency necessary for a world that will enable all its citizens to flourish.³⁵

Conclusion

Early in 2025, as I was walking home with the 12-year-old daughter of a friend, she asked me what I thought would destroy the planet first, climate catastrophe or nuclear war. She said she and her best friend had already decided not to have children. She explained: ‘Why would you, if they are either going to be blown up or swept away?’. My generation, and her parents’ generation, have failed children like her, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with the global crises they will have to confront. English school children are more unhappy in the 2020s than they have been for decades, and most of their unhappiness is a result of their school experience.³⁶ We need to ask how we have ended up with an educational system that fails to provide children and young

people with the knowledge, skills and ethical guidance to make sense of the incredibly complex problems the world is, and will increasingly be, facing. For the vast majority of children, their feelings of helplessness are compounded by a schooling that has failed to instil a sufficient sense of agency and a belief that they can make a difference. Instead of a preoccupation with developing ‘self-reliant, self-realised individuals who leave society to look after itself’,³⁷ a good educational system would enable and empower students to care for themselves, others, wider society and the planet. The challenge is how we might come together, across our social differences, to develop a vision of education that empowers; not for individual aggrandisement, as much elite schooling does, but in service of the common good.

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Notes

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