



The Great Education Debate: Setting the Scene

July 2013

Introduction

Education policy in the UK has been steadily evolving over the last 20 years, but the trickle of new initiatives and policy changes has turned into a torrent in recent times. The education landscape in 2013 looks much different than it did even in 2010.

Evidence from other countries suggests that this constant change is counter productive to creating the world-class education system that we all want and need. One common feature of countries that do consistently well in education comparisons is that they have a long-term development plan for the future of their education service that rises above short-term political considerations and is not driven by the electoral cycle.

There seems to be a growing consensus, amongst those people who possess expertise and knowledge, about what needs to happen for the UK to meet the global challenges facing us now and our young people in the coming years.

Therefore it seems the right time to launch a second great debate on the future of education, to begin to build on this emerging consensus. This debate aims to take stock, to look objectively and without political bias at the evidence of what is working and what is not, to clarify the areas of consensus and to set out a vision that will go beyond this and the next Parliament.

It must involve parents, policy makers, school and college leaders, governors, pupils and employers. Everyone who is serious about moving our education service is invited to join the Great Education Debate.

The Great Education Debate: 35 years on

It is over 35 years since Prime Minister Jim Callaghan in October 1976 launched a great debate on the future of education.

The issues causing concern in the mid 1970s resonate with many of the issues that are still the subject of debate today. The context was different but the headline concerns are familiar:

- whether employers were receiving recruits with the basic skills they needed
- whether enough students were pursuing engineering and science courses
- how to achieve the higher standards and skills needed to compete in a changing world
- the performance of particular groups of pupils
- the content of the curriculum
- reform of the examination system
- the quality of teaching and concern over so-called progressive or 'informal' teaching methods
- governance of school
- the nature of education and training for 16-19 year-olds

The purpose of education

Underpinning these issues was the purpose of education. Callaghan described how the education system had in the past focused too heavily on providing many

young people with just enough skills to take their place on industry's production lines. Education, for the vast majority of pupils, was basic and utilitarian in purpose. He welcomed the growing emphasis on enabling children "to flower" and reach their full potential – but he also warned of an over-reaction to past failures. Getting a balance was the key. In his speech at Ruskin College, he said:

"The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both.

Both of the basic purposes of education require the same essential tools. These are basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together, respect for others, respect for the individual. This means requiring certain basic knowledge, and skills and reasoning ability. It means developing lively inquiring minds and an appetite for further knowledge that will last a lifetime. It means mitigating as far as possible the disadvantages that may be suffered through poor home conditions or physical or mental handicap."
(October 1976)

A further parallel

Then, as now, there had been a period when resources had been injected into education on a substantial scale, partly to meet increased numbers and partly to raise standards. Then, as now there, was a debate on whether that investment had represented good value for money. Then, as now, the country faced serious economic problems with severe constraints on levels of public spending and "little expectation of further increased resources...at any rate for the time being". Then, as now, the challenge was how to achieve more with the current resources available.

A signal difference

But there is one signal and important difference in between 1976 and 2013. Jim Callaghan's speech caused a furor. His words were controversial because the government was seen to be intervening in the world of education professionals. Government was asserting its voice in the domain of the classroom. Callaghan resisted the pressure to "keep off the (educational) grass" owned and tended by teachers. Even before he had stood up to speak critics were rounding on him and arguing that the state was fettering educational freedom.

In the decade or so that followed the Callaghan speech, successive education ministers did not just walk on the educational grass, they took over and occupied the garden. A series of acts of Parliament determined how schools should be governed, who could enter the teaching profession, what should be taught, how they should admit pupils and how they should be funded.

Today the government's role in education is taken for granted – in the realm of curriculum content, qualifications and exam systems, improvement and accountability and structures and governance. Indeed the issue is not whether the state should have a say in shaping education but how much of a role is appropriate.

During the previous Labour Government, scarcely a year went by without a major piece of education legislation being enacted. Since the Coalition Government, rarely a month goes by without a major government pronouncement bringing significant change to some aspect of education practice. Current education ministers say they want greater school autonomy along with 'tough accountability': but the reality of that autonomy is in many contexts hotly contested. Freedom for schools and colleges is the government motto but ministers shape what is taught by defining the framework of national tests and public examinations and the way that results are valued and reported, while DfE officials act as ministerial 'brokers' and agents to determine the fate of poorly performing institutions.

However, in a role reversal compared with 1976, teachers and school and college leaders are asserting their right to 'walk on the grass' and have a say in the education policy debate. For example:

- Twitter has helped spawn a 'round table' of heads that aims to influence national education policymakers "centered upon what is best for the learning of all children".
- #SLTchat provides another online forum where professionals are defining their own vision, sharing best practice and learning from each other.
- The establishment of a Royal College of Teaching, backed by a range of influential organisations and individuals within the education world, is being debated as a way of creating an independent professional voice for teachers in England.

In part this professional confidence has come about as successive governments have sought to empower school leaders in leading the education system and school improvement. The advent of National and Local Leaders of Education, City Challenge, academy chains, teaching school alliances, federations and other partnerships have developed a generation of leaders with a greater sense of the strategic changes and approach necessary to bring about improvement – not just for their own schools and colleges but for education more generally. However these leaders find that outside of the professional organisations and unions to which they belong they have no individual voice on the national stage. Their expertise is only rarely being used to help determine how education strategy should move forward.

School and college leaders have also become more proactive because they are concerned about the content of key aspects of education policy. Big and far-reaching decisions are being made: simplification of the National Curriculum, abolition of National Curriculum levels, the end of modular exams, new GCSEs in core subjects, breaking the link between AS and A2 levels and a new accountability framework. Many education leaders remain unconvinced that the government is on the right track in planning and implementing these changes and feel that they have been afforded insufficient opportunities to contribute to their development. It is not a question of just agreeing or disagreeing with particular policies but the absence of a shared educational vision underpinning the changes that is the problem. The starting point for reform should be a common understanding of the needs

and demands of both the nation and young people over the next decade.

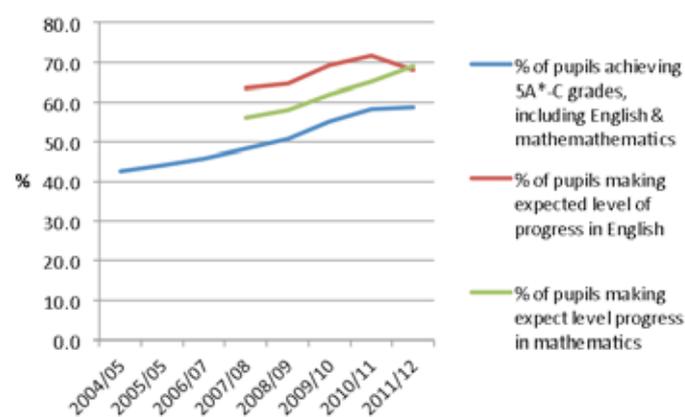
The ASCL perspective

It is against this backdrop that ASCL is seeking to support the shaping of education policy and broaden the debate about its future direction. Evidence shows that the education system is improving.

As Figure 1 shows, achievement and progress in secondary schools has, on the government's preferred benchmark of five A*-C GCSE including English and maths, continued to rise – though results in 2012 were to a degree distorted by the problems surrounding the marking of English GCSE papers. Some have argued that the increase in GCSE scores is a result of 'dumbing down'. However, the picture presented by the exam results is confirmed by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw. In the most recent annual report (Ofsted, 2012), he reported that:

"Schools in England have improved considerably over the last decade, with some areas such as Inner London witnessing a dramatic improvement as a result of London Challenge. Seventy per cent of all schools are now good or better compared with 64% five years ago. The overall picture is one of largely effective schools with committed and competent leadership... Standards are rising steadily... The quality of teaching is improving." (Ofsted, 2012)

Figure 1: Achievement in state funded secondary schools



Source: National Statistics and DfE, 2013, Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: academic year 2011 to 2012, SFR 02/2013

Note 1: State-funded schools include academies, free schools, city technology colleges and state-funded special schools but exclude independent schools, non-maintained special schools, hospital schools and alternative provision including pupil referral units.

Note 2: From 2009/2010 to the time of publication, iGCSEs have been counted as GCSE equivalents and also as English and mathematics GCSEs.

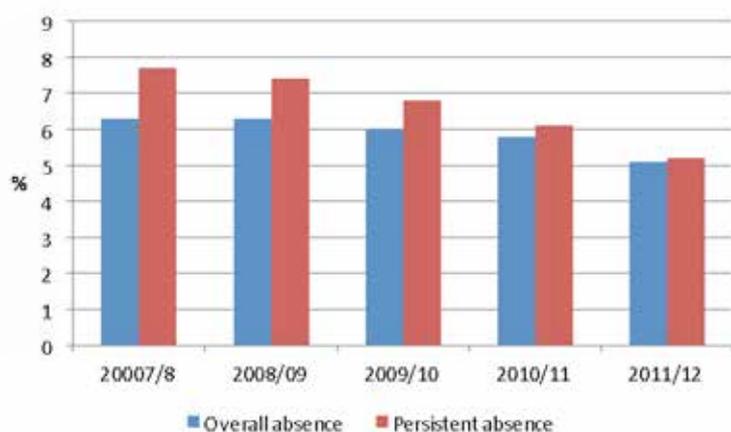
Sir Michael attributes part of the improvement to school leaders being more effective in the area of what he calls 'instructional leadership' – ie leading teaching and learning. The chief inspector also identifies another positive driver of school improvement. He describes how a growing number of the most effective school leaders

are “impressively committed” to the improvement of schools beyond their own. He says that the policies of identifying system leaders, national support schools and teaching schools, together with the opportunities provided by structural reforms (such as the growth of sponsor-led academies), have been “an important force for improvement”.

Attendance at schools in England is increasing – as Figure 2 confirms – and behaviour in schools is also much better than is generally portrayed in the media. In the 6,139 schools inspected by Ofsted between the beginning of September 2011 and the end of August 2012, the behaviour and safety of pupils was found to be ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ in 83 per cent of them. That is a higher figure than for any other area of Ofsted inspection outcomes¹ and Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector has commented that:

“Schools are mainly calm, well-managed places, providing a good environment in which poor behaviour is much less of an issue.” (Ofsted, 2012)

Figure 2: Absence in state funded schools



Source: National Statistics and DfE, 2013, Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics, 2011/12, SFR 10/2013

Note 1: Overall absence is defined by calculating the number of sessions missed due to overall authorised/unauthorised absence, expressed as a total percentage of the total number of sessions

Note 2: Persistent absence applies to those pupils who have missed around 15 per cent or more of possible sessions

So there is much to celebrate about what is happening in education. However, ASCL is among the first to accept that there is a lot more to be done to build the world class system that society aspires to, parents want and young people deserve. In an era of rapid developments in technology and the global employment market, every individual school, college or education system, however successful, needs to continue to maintain the highest ambitions for further improvement. Key problems that need tackling include:

- The variable quality of school and college performance. Ofsted says that there are too many schools and colleges that require improvement. Over two million children – 31 per cent of school-age students – attend schools that fall short of being good or outstanding.

“While some of these schools are inadequate, most are not; they are just not good enough. There are many reasons for this, but in our experience inconsistency or too much prescription in teaching is almost always at the root.” (Ofsted 2012)

- The size of the gap in attainment between pupils from low income backgrounds and other pupils. ASCL has charted how this gap widens rather than narrows during the school years (ASCL, 2013). The education system has a long and costly tail of pupil underachievement. This is particularly evident in terms of relative achievement of five A* to C grades (including English and mathematics) at GCSE. Barely a third of pupils entitled to free school meals reach this benchmark – 26 percentage points below the level for other pupils. This is seriously undermining social mobility. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are, for example, less than half as likely to enter higher education (HE) as other children. The attainment gap is in many respects a reflection of advantage and disadvantage from early on in life, though there is a growing number of schools that are showing that it is possible to break the link between educational attainment and disadvantage.

- The persistent problem of up to a tenth of 16 to 18 year-olds not being in employment, education or training (NEET). The proportion falling into this category has been stuck at between eight and ten per cent for the last 20 years – and young people who previously have been entitled to free school meals are more likely to be in that category. Behind the headline figure, more young people are participating in education and training, but offsetting this increase is the fact that fewer are in employment. As the age of compulsory participation in education and training rises first to 17 and then to 18, the challenge will be not only how to address the NEET issue but how to convince students on the margins of the education system to continue their education and training and/or go into employment at age 18 and 19.

- The performance of young people in England, which risks being outstripped by their counterparts in other countries. Caution is needed in interpreting international comparisons because evidence is sometimes taken out of context. However, the general picture that emerges is that pupils in England are maintaining their performance but there is an increase in the number of countries where pupils are performing at a higher level than those in England. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) programme for international student assessment (PISA) shows that the achievement level of 15 year-olds from England in reading, mathematics and science broadly remained the same in 2009 compared with 2006. In English and mathematics

¹ Ofsted assesses and grades schools in the following areas: overall effectiveness; achievement of pupils; behaviour and safety of pupils; quality of teaching; and leadership and management.

the performance of pupils in England was on a par with the OECD average and above average in science (Bradshaw et al, 2010). However, in all three subject areas, more countries outperformed England in 2009 compared with 2006. In other words England's relative performance slipped. In part this is due to new jurisdictions such as Shanghai-China and Singapore participating in the tests in 2009 and not in 2006. However, the OECD implies that England's performance ought to be stronger given that proportionately it spends more on education than most of its competitors, parents are on average better educated and, relatively speaking, it has proportionately fewer students from disadvantaged background (OECD, 2010)².

- The need for increased skill levels in order for the country to be competitive in a fast developing world economy. The CBI has emphasised how the UK's long-term employment security and prosperity can only be achieved by ensuring the country is a more attractive place to invest and do business than other locations. That in turn means developing "the talent of the British people" (CBI, 2012). The CBI highlights the OECD's analysis:

"Skills have become the global currency of the 21st century. Without proper investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and countries can no longer compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global society." (OECD, 2012)

The CBI argues that this means we should be much more ambitious about the level of achievement we should expect of all young people. The employers' organisation also calls for a move away from what it calls 'a conveyor-belt education system' to a focus on maximising the skills and performance of every young person, including stretching the most able. And it wants to see a systematic development of the skills that young people need to be effective and successful in the workplace coupled with better advice and guidance on the qualifications needed to follow different career paths.

Using debate to make progress

The question is how to move from where we are to where we want to be. As we highlighted earlier, the challenges facing the country in the second decade of the 21st century are similar to those identified by Jim Callaghan in the 1970s. Over 30 years of educational upheaval and continual reform have not shifted some of the fundamental problems that beset the UK education system.

ASCL believes that a good part of the answer lies in there being a more open and more informed public debate about the evidence relating to the most effective strategies and interventions. This would not only make it more likely that better policies were adopted, it would also provide the necessary foundation for building the common purpose and shared commitment necessary to implement and make a success of those policies.

All political parties are committed to drawing on the evidence of what works when formulating their policies. But all too often reform is made with policy makers cherry-picking examples of practice from other educational jurisdictions that seem to fit with the desired policy outcome. As a seminal paper by Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development for Cambridge Assessment, highlights:

"English processes [in education policy making] tend towards satisfying the conflicting demands of competing societal and lobby groups rather than developing more radical policy solutions, which have greater potential to confront chronic structural problems." (Oates, 2010)

The views and experiences of those at the sharp end of teaching and learning – and that includes young people as well as teachers and school and college leaders – all too frequently get squeezed out in the policy making process. Oates goes on to argue that true evidence-based policy making requires careful review of both international and national research, with change only being made where the evidence justifies it.

There is another reason for encouraging this sort of in-depth consideration and debate. It takes many years for major reform, particularly where it involves curriculum and assessment change, to be prepared and implemented and then to bed down and make any deep and lasting impact. So it makes sense to try to build a broad or guiding coalition for change – so that reform programmes can be sustained over several years rather than overturned by the next incoming education secretary of state or government. Short-termism and continual upheaval leave parents, pupils and the public confused, and teachers and school and college leaders cynical and demotivated.

Aiming for a greater consensus does not mean opting for the lowest common denominator. Rather ASCL is arguing for the use of vigorous debate to evaluate the evidence and discuss its application, test new ideas, tease out disagreements and establish common ground.

Three phases to the Great Education Debate

In 2013-14 ASCL will, therefore, be hosting a Great Education Debate that is open to parents, pupils, politicians, policy makers, teachers, school and college leaders and the general public. In order to make the debate more manageable it is being organised around three phases, with each phase centred around a particular theme.

The first phase will focus on the purpose of education. Does the purpose and the vision articulated by Jim Callaghan still hold true? Or do we need to update our thinking to reflect the changes and pressures young people and society face over the coming years?

The purpose of education is linked to what we think it means to be a person. That is why it is contested and probably always will be. Are we primarily to be seen in the

² The outcomes from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessments broadly tell the same story. In 2011 England held its performance and positions in the middle rank of performing countries (except for science at Year 5). However, England's exact ranking slipped in both mathematics and science at Years 5 and 9 – again partly because new countries were participating in the tests.

context of a society or a system? Is the role of education to make us better contributors to the system, or are we primarily individuals whose purpose is to become more fully what it is our potential to be? How can the education system balance and address both of these objectives?

This phase will then lead on to debate two other key areas. First, discussion on the purpose of education informs the perennial debate on how far the curriculum should focus on ensuring students have a deep knowledge of core concepts, processes and facts versus students acquiring the skills to become leaders of their own learning. The two are not, of course, mutually exclusive.

However, depending where on the spectrum policy makers take their stand will inform and influence the debate on the nature, shape and content of the curriculum. That in turn begs questions on whether, how much and which areas of the curriculum should be defined nationally and which should be left to schools to determine. Until what age should young people have to follow a broad and balanced curriculum and at what age should they be allowed to specialise? How do we strengthen the links between education and the world of work and provide young people with better careers advice?

The second key area relates to assessment. How can tests and exams best measure achievement and progress without 'teaching to the test' and 'exam drilling' winning out over deeper learning? Is it the case that exams are not as rigorous as in other competitor countries? What knowledge and which skills need to be examined at what age – for example, are examinations in eight or more subjects at age 16 still required in an age when all young people will be expected to be in education and training until age 18? How can the assessment system best recognise and value different types of learning and avoid forcing young people to make career choices too early?

In the second phase we will debate how best to **improve the quality of teaching and learning and the leadership of learning**. We know that of what happens in schools, these two factors have the biggest impact on children's progress.. So the question is how best can we build on the progress in recent years to further improve the skills and performance of teachers and leaders.

There has been a move away from institutional improvement being driven by top-down, centrally-led strategies. ASCL supports the development of a self-sustaining and improving system where leaders take responsibility for improving not just their own school or college but recognise that they also have a responsibility to work with other local institutions and support improvement across the wider system. But as various groupings of academy chains, teaching schools and other partnerships evolve is there a risk that some will get left out and left behind? Will different chains and networks share the knowledge and ways of working or will their practice get locked in 'closed' groupings? How can we

avoid ending up with islands of excellence surrounded by seas of educational mediocrity?

Is there great enough incentive in the system for school and college leaders to invest in cross-institutional support when the accountability system focuses on the attainment of individual institutions? How can we ensure that there is enough capacity in the system for schools and colleges to realistically be able to develop such partnerships without jeopardizing standards in their home institutions? Will a professional development model based on peer-to-peer planning, observation, coaching and research – which research suggests is the most effective approach to improving teacher practice – be able to take root against a backdrop of schools needing to meet short-term targets?

How can information technology better be used not just for learning in the classroom but for teachers to share ideas and receive feedback on the quality of their lessons? Can the toolkit developed by the Sutton Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation to assist with using the Pupil Premium effectively become the template for a more evidence-based approach to improving teaching and learning³? Does School Direct⁴ offer a better template for training new teachers compared with the traditional PGCE model? How can improving the quality of teaching and learning best be embedded at the heart of the new performance management system for teachers and school leaders?

The debate in the third phase will cover **structures, admissions and accountability**.

The government and the opposition both place great store by the concept of autonomy: school and college leaders being free to run their institutions as they consider appropriate and taking responsibility for outcomes. Much of education policy has been driven by this view since the introduction of local management of schools in 1988 and incorporation of colleges in 1993. These policies gives rises to two fundamental questions: how far has autonomy been an aid to improvement – has it contributed towards accelerated progress and, if so, how? Second, given the high stakes accountability regime that successive governments have operated through inspection, floor targets and performance tables how real is the level of autonomy?

Parental choice, greater diversity of schools and what is often referred to as the quasi-market in schooling has been another development in the period since the Callaghan speech. How far has this development brought welcome innovation and competition to the system? To what extent has innovation and diversity come at the expense of overlooking the needs of parents who do not know how the admissions systems work or who cannot afford to move house to change catchment area? Are admissions procedures helping to promote or undermine broader social cohesion objectives? Should the education quasi-market be better regulated and, if so, how?

³ See <http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit>

⁴ School Direct is an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) route that provides the opportunity for schools or partnerships of schools to apply for ITT places working in conjunction with an ITT provider.

Schools and colleges and their leaders accept they need to take responsibility for the performance and progress of their pupils. Similarly in a society where access to information is taken for granted data on performance has to be available in the public domain. But a key issue for debate is how best to balance the need to be transparent and accountable with the need to use accountability to support development and improvement.

How can we maintain rigour in the system while paying greater attention to accountability mechanisms that provide information and data relevant to teaching and learning – and that motivate teachers and schools to use that information to improve practice? How can an accountability system maintain a focus on improvement in attainment with recognising progress in developing broader skills – particularly those valued by employers? Is it possible for the setting of national expectations to be a shared endeavor rather than an imposed target? And how could accountability be better balanced to reflect both the responsibility of individual institutions and their wider contribution to the local education system?

How the Great Education Debate will work

There are, therefore, many issues to debate! ASCL wants that debate to take place both between its own members and between its members and the wider public.

ASCL represents 17,000 school and college leaders working in schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Through regular meetings, special forums and a dedicated website we will provide opportunities for all school and college leaders to take part in the Great Education Debate.

But the reach and ambition of what we want to achieve means that ASCL will also be seeking to involve all those with an interest in or a view on the future of education to join us in the debate. So for each of our three themes we will publish a short sharp issues document setting the scene for the debate. We will promote debate by:

- inviting authors with different points of view to write short articles for the Great Education Debate website
- encouraging comment via Twitter and through forums on the website
- arranging for additional guest blogs as the debate unfolds
- commissioning an academic to summarise the international evidence and/or interesting examples from other countries on the theme
- co-hosting a public symposium with another organisation which we will stream on the website so that it is accessible to all
- holding a seminar with key opinion formers and experts
- contributing articles to newspapers and journals
- encouraging schools and colleges to host local events
- creating resource packs to use with students
- conducting online surveys

For each of the three themes ASCL will produce a document that analyses and summarises the key areas of consensus.

These documents will be debated at ASCL's annual conference in March 2014 along with three short papers written and presented by education policy experts who hold contrasting views on their vision for the future of education.

Our aim

Our hope and plan is that the Great Education Debate will inform the thinking of the political parties as they draw up their manifestos for the general election in 2015. We believe it will also mean that the quality of debate during that election will be the stronger because politicians, the media, the public – as well as those working in schools and colleges – will be better informed about the leading policy options and their implications.

So join us in the Great Education Debate
www.greateducationdebate.org.uk

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JOIN THE GREAT DEBATE.

ASCL wants to know your views on all of these issues and questions. Here's how you can get involved:

- Host a debate in your school or college and capture everyone's views by video or by taking notes and email them to info@greateducationdebate.org.uk
- Join us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GreatEducationDebate
- Tweet us @GreatEdDebate and also use the hashtag #GEDebate
- Join the discussion and post your views on the website www.greateducationdebate.org.uk where you can also download a resource pack.

