



Debate Paper One: The Purpose of Education

September 2013

Different perspectives

Put a cross-section of people in a room and ask them 'What is the purpose of education?' and you are likely to get as many different answers as there are people.

Some might focus on the personal value of a 'good education'. Education, they might say, is about acquiring the knowledge and skills to enable each individual to achieve their ambitions and to become a successful contributing member of society. Others might stress the role of education in empowering individuals: raising expectations and expanding horizons by supporting learners to understand the impact they can have on their own life and their own world. Someone else might express a similar view but maintain that if every child is to have the opportunity to reach his or her potential then they need a framework of application and practice to turn dreams into reality.

An employer might put the emphasis on the skills young people need such as to be creative, collaborative and productive in the world of work. A government representative might stress the importance to the nation's economy of having a highly skilled workforce. Or they might highlight the need to develop active citizens.

Others, though, might reject a utilitarian approach and argue that education is an end in its own right. We should build on children's natural curiosity, stimulate their imagination and enable them to become inquirers and lifelong learners who are able to adapt and innovate as the world around us constantly changes.

Another person might pick up that theme and say that learning how to deal with failure is one of the key tasks of education since failure breeds resilience, learning and creativity.

A parent in the room might say that emotional wellbeing and having a sound moral compass are as important as educational achievement: becoming a rounded young adult with a wide range of interests and friends should be on a par with levels of attainment.

Others, however, might point to the impact of technology on learning and the way it has opened up access to information, knowledge, theories and opinions. Education should be about equipping tomorrow's generation with the skills necessary to engage effectively in a fast-moving and fully digital age.

Of course many in the room might argue that they would want the education system to foster and reflect a combination or even all of these dimensions.

Debate by proxy

In an ideal world we would debate these issues and reach a shared view on the purpose of education. We would determine the relative weight to be accorded to the differing drivers. That would then inform the framing and content of the curriculum, our understanding of teaching, the way we trained our teachers and constructed the examination and accountability systems. This is not as far-fetched as it may sound: other countries such as Singapore do precisely this.

The reality, however, is that the debate on the purpose of education is effectively going by the board. Instead we are debating the issue by proxy. The real debates that are taking place are about the nature of the curriculum and the form of the assessment and examination system.

Questions

- Should we adopt a national statement on the purpose of education?

- If, so what might it say?
- How can we build a broad base of support for a statement of educational purpose?

The curriculum debate

On one side of the debate are those, including the government, who believe that the curriculum should be based on imparting and building up knowledge. They see a knowledge-based curriculum as being a tool of social mobility, bringing greater educational opportunity to disadvantaged children. The argument runs like this:

- Knowledge helps to drive cognitive processes like problem solving and reasoning. Proponents of this view, such as American psychologist Daniel Willingham, argue that the richer the knowledge base, the more smoothly and effectively these cognitive processes – the very ones that teachers target – operate¹. Acquiring knowledge triggers a virtuous circle in which knowledge helps students to acquire and remember new information, solve problems and improve thinking.
- Children who grow up in disadvantaged circumstances often have fewer opportunities to learn at home and so come to school with less knowledge. A knowledge-rich curriculum can help to compensate for what their peers from more advantaged backgrounds have acquired.

The curriculum should therefore be based around what is often referred to as 'core knowledge' – a concept developed by another American professor, Edward Hirsch. The 'core knowledge' approach builds up a list of things a child should know – whether words, books, concepts or history – on a year-by-year basis. The

1 See Willingham, D. *How knowledge helps: It speeds and strengthens reading comprehension, learning—and thinking* www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2006/willingham.cfm

approach is reflected in the way that the government has gone about rewriting the National Curriculum.

Those who espouse this view argue that knowledge will inform and enhance the development of other skills that young people need to be effective learners.

On the other side of the argument are those, such as Professor Guy Claxton, Co-Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning (CrL) at the University of Winchester, who argue that to focus solely or mainly on knowledge is to misunderstand the nature of effective learning. Achievement, for example, requires application and resilience as well as knowledge and intelligence. The demands of today's society require "inquisitive, experimental, reflective and sociable" learners. Learning is practical as well as factual; collaborative as well as individual; and requires self-knowledge as well as core knowledge. The task for teachers is to act as learning coaches and help their students develop the attributes which they will need later in life.

In a mirror image of Daniel Willingham's view, Claxton argues that students who are more confident of their own learning ability learn faster and learn better.

*"They concentrate more, think harder and find learning more enjoyable. They do better in their tests and external examinations."*²

Some countries, therefore, are beginning to put less of an emphasis on the content of the curriculum. Finland, for example, is:

"Trying to reduce content and give more time to learning... We want to boost critical thinking, citizenship and we also have cross-curricular themes which should be going through every subject... sustainability, responsibility, humanity,

*safety, taking responsibility for your community and entrepreneurship."*³

A third way comes from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It describes how the conventional approach of schools to problems was to break these down into manageable bits and pieces, and then teaching students the techniques to solve them. But, the OECD argues, today individuals create value by synthesizing the disparate bits. Learners need to be open-minded: able to make connections between ideas that previously seemed unrelated. This requires being familiar with and receptive to knowledge in different fields and learners who can constantly learn and grow⁴. The OECD points to the work of Charles Fadel, Chairman of the Center for Curriculum Redesign in Boston. As Figure 1 illustrates, he identifies four dimensions that are needed in a 21st century curriculum, along with the challenges for those with the responsibility for developing curricula.

Figure 1: Dimensions and challenges for a 21st century curriculum

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| <p>KNOWLEDGE balancing conceptual and practical and connect the content to real-world relevance</p> | <p>SKILLS developing higher-order skills such as the '4 C's': Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration</p> |
| <p>CHARACTER nurturing behaviours and values for a changing and challenging world: adaptability, persistence, resilience and moral-related traits (integrity, justice, empathy)</p> | <p>META-LAYER learning how to learn, interdisciplinarity, systems thinking</p> |

Source: Hill, based summary in Schleicher A, (2012) Ed.

Questions

- What should the balance between knowledge, skills, character and thinking be as described in figure 1?
- Is a curriculum approach based on a synthesis of these different strands desirable and possible?
- Are different approaches needed for different phases of education?
- How much of the curriculum should be determined at national level and how much should be devolved to schools – or groups of schools?

The assessment debate

The assessment debate to a degree reflects the curriculum debate. Those who place great store by knowledge content tend to view that exams should test the acquisition and application of that knowledge through formal tests and exams. So we now have phonics and spelling and grammar tests. GCSE and A level exams are no longer to be modular and mostly exclude coursework – instead testing students on the range of the knowledge they have covered during the course.

Those favouring a more skills-based approach to learning argue for a broader and more flexible approach to assessment. They tend to support including assessment of input into assignments and projects that enables students to demonstrate creative, planning and reasoning skills – alongside their knowledge of a particular subject. The International Baccalaureate, for example, assesses students in one subject from six subject groups. But in addition, students take a course in

2 See www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk/what_it_is.html

3 Kristiina Volmari, Councillor on the Finnish National Board of Education, quoted in TES, 20 June 2013

4 See Schleicher, A. (2012), Ed., *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century: Lessons from around the World*, OECD Publishing

the theory of knowledge, write an extended essay and participate in a non-examined module that focuses on creativity, sport and community service.

The OECD is thinking of changing the way it conducts its Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) to include creativity and reasoning skills. In 2012, a problem-solving test was added to the Pisa menu and the plan is to develop assessment for further “21st century skills” in future Pisa tests⁵.

Lying behind the issue of how we test and assess students are other big issues. Some people argue that pupils and schools in England are subject to too many exams. They say that the focus on testing has bred a culture in which too often children are taught or drilled to pass tests rather than become mature learners. They point to those countries that wait until students are age 16 before requiring them to participate in standardised tests.

Some propose that as young people are required to participate in education and training until they are 18, assessment at 16 (for all but core subjects) is unnecessary and should be abolished in favour of a more baccalaureate or high school graduation style assessment on leaving school.

There are also those teachers and educationalists who believe that the emphasis on external testing has been at the expense of developing expertise in using formative assessment – in particular providing effective feedback to students to help them improve their learning.

But ranged against those views are those who say that those education systems that abandon standardised tests become flabby and complacent about their overall performance. The tests and exams provide a passport of achievement for children and enable parents and policy makers to hold schools to account for pupil progress and achievement.

Questions

- Are students in England tested too frequently? If so, which tests should go and how can accountability be maintained?
- Is redesigning GCSEs the right thing to do or should the system be moving to focusing on assessment at 18?
- Should external examinations try to balance the testing of knowledge and key skills?
- Who should determine how students are assessed (exams, course work etc) – government bodies or examination boards?

JOIN THE GREAT DEBATE.

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⁵ See *Pisa's tests could get curiouser and curiouser*, TES, 21 June 2013