WHAT should education be for?

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Written prior to the 2010 general election, this piece takes a critical viewpoint towards the role and purpose of the current education system within the United Kingdom. Explored through both a political and technological perspective, considerations are made to the function of both schools and teachers, and how their roles may appear and alter in the future structure of education.

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Introduction

When considering the purpose of education and what the desired result or goal is, it is essential to look at where the current education systems stand, and what influences (internal as well as external) have impacted upon it (Alexander, 2009a; Bates and Lewis, 2009, Illich, 1971). With this in mind, it is also important that the role and technological development of the school is investigated, to understand better the purpose it serves. Indeed the intent and philosophy behind education has, for many centuries now raised much discussion leading to various degrees of controversy, and has been the focus for many philosophers, yet it is unlikely to ever find a satisfactory answer to suit all (Bates and Lewis, 2009; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Hargreaves, 1989). However, many learned academics have observed that current education and schooling is dysfunctional and rapidly becoming an out-dated technology, and therefore is in need of a radical overhaul in order for individuals to truly benefit from it, ultimately freeing education from its current constraints (Ip, 2007; Sessums, 2006; Lemke, 2005; Pak Tee, 2005; Whittington and Mclean, 2001).

Certainly, there is recognition that it is a child’s right to receive an education (United Nations, 1989), but with further relation to the UN Millennium Development Goals, that all children globally should receive a primary education by 2015, questions need to be asked as to what exactly that establishes (United Nations, 2000). With Mitra (2007) proposing that children are capable of self-teaching and moreover, self-learning, is there still a place for formal education, and is it possible to consider children taking responsibility for their own learning, and thus ultimately deciding their own education? Indeed, with the ongoing information and communication technology revolution and rapid technological advances being made, the technology of school needs to be questioned and considered, and certainly the impact e-learning can potentially make on education in the future (Muirhead et al., 2005). Furthermore, with Illich (1971) arguing that formal educational institutions are flawed, what exactly does formal education entail and to what extent do politics play in the shaping of such an education system, as it would certainly appear that education is a political minefield across the world (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Whittington and McLean, 2001; Lawton, 1992; Hargreaves, 1989).

When considering the role of education, it needs to be established what exactly defines ‘education’. Undeniably, such a question has challenged many, and for a vast number of years, so to assume that there is a direct answer would be unrealistic to say the least. However, Bates and Lewis (2009) refer to the generalised theory that most people comprehend education as being the formal and structured method of schooling, with learning taking place primarily within the confines of the classroom environment. Moreover, Bates and
Lewis (2009, p.21) continue to discuss the concept of education being ‘the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and the skills that will equip an individual for success in their future life’, which therefore recognises that education occurs at all ages, and across one’s entire life rather than isolated within the schools and further education establishments. Without doubt the view of Sessums (2006) concurs with this, yet he adds that education is also about ‘inviting learners into the unknown in an effort to promote creativity and meaningful change’. It is interesting to note however that although Pak Tee (2005) opposes this view, it should be reinforced that ‘schooling’ and ‘education’ are not synonymous, and as referred to by Lemke (2005), education is ‘what a community does to promote learning and understanding of what it values’, and subsequently schooling is a means in which education is delivered. Undoubtedly, education is an emotive concept, and as previously discussed, a unanimous global definition is unlikely to be reached. Nevertheless with regard to previous sources, it could potentially be summarised as being the ‘acquisition of knowledge, in both an academic and vocational sense, through the process of learning to enable survival and integration within the world around us’.

To further support this summarisation, when considering the function of learning, Ip (2007) defines the act of learning as an innate human ability occurring at all times. However it could be argued that he has taken this to mean, that where learning is a continuous process, ‘education’ is purely confined to the realms of institutional hours. Furthermore, the views of Curtis and Pettigrew (2009) and Selbie (2009) remind us that learning does not take place within a vacuum, and aside from occurring everywhere, it is hugely dependent on environmental factors. Additionally, Bartlett and Burton (2006) add that learning is both a formal and informal process, shaped by current educational ideologies. To further add to this, Bates and Lewis also cite the work of Hanley (2009, p.21), who implies that the role of education varies depending on context and perspective, and certainly according to Gearon (2009), education is hugely influenced by the political and religious motives within that society and era. Yet, when taking into account the future setup of schools, the true meaning of learning and education need to be considered in order that they are truly reflected in the ethos of ‘schools’.

Within current contexts, it appears that the role of education is to provide the country with a workforce suitable and sustainable to meet its needs, and indeed Le Roux (2001a, p.42) concurs with this view, adding that ‘education is regarded as the main way of enabling individuals and nations alike to meet the rapid economic and social changes in which they are engulfed’. Moreover the United Nations (2008) recognises that education is ultimately the prelude to a job. Le Roux (2001a) discusses the pressure on the expectations of schools to prepare students for economic independence and certainly, politicians have long argued, whether openly or through subtle communications, that education should be for the benefit of the economy. Interestingly though, Barrow and Woods (2006) cite the work of Peters, who accurately states that education is a valuable asset due to the ‘worthwhile outcome and achievement’. This is recognised by the government and hence the reason as to why vast sums of money are allocated to it annually, and certainly why it is generally a focal part of all political manifestos. Successive UK governments have attempted radical reforms, or introduced new doctrines into the education system over the years, and with varying degrees of success, however, education needs to remain flexible in order to adapt to the changing climate the current society needs (Lawton, 1992; Hargreaves, 1989).
Education today

The UK's current National Curriculum appears to have a holistic aim, though certainly in practice that rarely seems to be the case (Alexander, 2009b; Great Britain. DfEE, 1999). The National Curriculum states that education is a method in which to engage in individual’s ‘spiritual, moral, social, cultural, physical and mental development’, yet within the same paragraph it almost contradicts itself by stating education is for a productive economy (Great Britain. DfEE, 1999, p10). Therefore, to whom is education directed at; the economy, the individual, or does it suggest they are one and the same? Indeed, Gardner (2006) stated that the current education system is outdated, as it was initially designed to equip individuals for the 19th and 20th century. As cited by Sessums (2006), the novelist E.M. Forster certainly had a point when he stated that as ‘long as learning is connected to earning... much so-called education [will] disappear’. The National Curriculum does discuss the involvement and importance of the home within education and this is arguably a fundamental issue that has long been neglected within current policies (Topping, 1986). Historically, politicians have placed the onus of education on the teacher as sole administrator, and there is a lack of recognition shown to the impact parents and family have upon children’s learning (Doddington and Hilton, 2007). Through a carefully structured format, parents could, in the future, become more instrumental in their children’s learning than they are now.

Today’s societies and schools are more ethnically diverse, and there are conflicting cultural messages in regards to what role education should take, and to what regard the child should be considered (Alexander, 2009a; Claxton et al., 2003; Le Roux, 2001a; Great Britain. DfEE, 1999; Rattansi, 1992). Furthermore Alexander (2009b) states that the relationship between education and social progress needs to be further investigated, as there is certainly a disparity in community cohesion across the country as well as a certain degree of social disintegration (Claxton et al., 2003). There is a need for greater global unity within education in order to cut across international boundaries, and to allow a more multicultural approach and diverseness. In addition, Curtis and Pettigrew (2009) and Le Roux (2001b) state that with current political issues such as terrorism, there is an immediate and distinct need for an educational ethos that deals with intercultural understanding and empathy; worldwide, children are influenced by the media and adult prejudices that, with a lack of understanding, can have far reaching negative consequences.

Self-learning children

Regarding education in the future, consideration needs to be given to the role it should play. Indeed, the need to educate children for a range of jobs not yet conceived is becoming more apparent. Questions need to be tabled as to what extent this involves the teacher. Certainly, the research project ‘Hole in the Wall’ by Mitra (2007), suggests that children [across the Asian subcontinent] are capable of self-teaching and that ‘even in the absence of any direct input from a teacher, an environment that stimulates curiosity can cause learning through self-instruction and peer-shared knowledge’ (Mitra, 2009). However, his research relates to children who have a desire to learn, and a need to remove themselves from poverty, and personal cynicism lies with regards to our own westernised society. Therefore, in terms of future practices, and when considering who the educator is, it needs to be considered whether that role be solely left to the teacher, or should the emphasis be placed upon the parent as educator; or could a compromise be met, and a balance achieved between the parent and teacher as joint educators? To further expand upon the concept introduced by Mitra (2007), his research found that attitudes of teachers also made a significant impact upon the attainment of children, with a teacher’s negative attitude producing low attainment scores.
amongst ‘their children’. Therefore in this regard, where there is no guarantee that all teachers are ‘excellent’ or have a positive attitude, perhaps it opens itself to the suggestion that the teacher could be replaced, and thus become obsolete to education.

With further thought towards child-centred or indeed, perhaps child-led learning it must be remembered that education should essentially be for the benefit of the child, and subsequently should be tailored to their individual needs and future aspirations. However, this in itself raises the argument as to what functions education and schooling entail, and whether or not they are mutually exclusive. Although Sewell and Newman (2006) refer to this argument, their conclusion remains inconclusive and thus ultimately, the decision as to how education is executed lies with the current governing and regulatory bodies.

The current setup and technology of schools, when considered, seems illogical and unorthodox. Generally, across the UK, all schools, regardless of geographic location or funding body, the recognised mode of ‘schooling’ revolves around a didactic approach to teaching; a teacher dictating and almost indoctrinating a large number of students, between set hours that generally mirror those of the national workforce. Lemke (2005) even goes so far as to liken schools to prisons; empty buildings with only one purpose, and sadly many children would agree with such an opinion. Furthermore, Whittington and McLean (2001) refer to the general dislike of school that many adults retain, predominantly due to the associated link between the need to learn and attain academic qualifications. In the words of Lemke (2005), schools are indeed ‘impoverished learning environments’. Certainly, Illich (1971) disagreed with the technology of formal schooling, stating they are authoritarian and purely for the benefit of the economy. As referred to by Lemke (2005), schools currently group children together by age, rather than by personal attainment and ability, and certainly do not reflect lifelike social settings. Lemke further suggests that if schools are to remain as formal institutions, conceivably there are opportunities for classes to be mixed ages, right through to adulthood reflecting real life settings and integrating lifelong learning capacities. Perhaps if schools were not so academically orientated through the need for high examinations results, individuals would have a greater positive view towards education, and thus gain more substantial lifelong learning.

**Learning beyond school – the role of the family**

Referencing earlier points raised as to whether there is merit or value with respect to the parent as educator, Kerridge and Sayers (2006) refer to the importance placed upon the entire community for determining the overall education of the child. Certainly, Petrash (2003) and Topping (1986) go further in establishing the significance parents have on their children’s learning and Topping (ibid.) supports this view and makes a bold statement as to the considerably greater influence parents alone have upon their children. Nevertheless, Petrash (2003, p.98) refers to the fundamental relationship bound between the teacher, parent and child and simply says, when this relationship has strong bonds and connections, ‘good things happen’. Although the specific philosophy he speaks of refers to that of Steiner Waldorf Education, there is no doubt that the positive relationship between all three parties has the opportunity to hugely benefit the child’s learning throughout their formative years and ultimately through to adulthood. Petrash (ibid.) and Topping (1986) both discuss the impact parents can personally have upon their child’s emotional and pastoral development, through being observed as role models, as well as actively engaging with their child’s emotional wellbeing. However, perhaps it is the culture of learning they practice that truly benefits children’s development; through the ‘whole-child’ approach (Curtis and Pettigrew, 2009).
Alexander (2009b) also refers to the inextricable and complex links within England’s primary education services between schools, healthcare services and external agencies. Yet he argues that these links are often incoherent and as witnessed with many documented cases of child abuse, many children are being failed by this supposedly unbreakable web of resources. Although this is the fundamental purpose of the ‘Children Act’ (Great Britain. Children Act 2004), if education is referred to as being the development of the whole person, then surely there needs to be a clearer and stronger communication with all agencies involved with children’s welfare, including both the parents and the teachers. Indeed, Selbie (2009) made the poignant statement that ‘we’re not fully human until we are educated’.

With thought to the role of parents’ in future academic systems, if education is to become more informal and effectively integrated into the role of everyday life, forming invisible but explicit links between the home and the work environment, then undoubtedly the parent will take on a greater responsibility within the nature of learning (Whittington and McLean, 2001). With schools currently receiving a huge proportion of blame as to children’s failings as adults and lifelong learners, it has been duly recognised that all adults are accountable for the children of today and tomorrow, and indeed we all hold a degree of responsibility with regards to educating them; both academically and emotionally (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009).

Role of the teacher

With respect to the role of the teacher, consideration must therefore be given to the style education should take in the future, and to what extent ‘the teacher’ will be required. With an ever-changing world, education globally, should become more flexible than it currently is. White (2004) refers to the future possibility of an education system where education in comparison to schools of today, is an informal process, taking place as and when it is suitable or appropriate for the child. White (ibid.) refers to the earlier point that currently, the term ‘teacher’ implies a sense of direct instruction, and thus proposes that they serve a role more suitable to that of mentor. Certainly, Lowe (2007, p.156) refers to the statement made by Chris Woodhead in that ‘the routes of educational failure lie in poor teaching methods’. Indeed, Whittington and McLean (2001) refer to the sense of intimidation many teachers project to the students with the need to judge all achievements made by individuals. However with the apparent institutionalisation of education, if a radical re-engineering of the system is to take place, it stands to reason that the role of the teacher will inevitably alter (Lemke, 2005).

Learning beyond walls – e-learning

With respect to the nature of how individuals learn, and thus develop both mentally and physically, Gardner (2006, 1993) has carried out in-depth research into the potential concept of multiple intelligences to revolutionary challenge the widely held concept that intelligence is a single general capacity possessed by every individual to a greater or lesser extent. Certainly, Lowe (2007, p.53) cites the 1938 Spens Report which generalises intelligence as a single central factor in children’s ability to progress and develop. Gardeners’ (1993, 2006) work states that there are five minds of intelligence; the disciplined mind, synthesising mind, creative mind, respectful mind and the ethical mind, and furthermore, defines intelligence as being ‘a set of human computational capacities’ (Gardner, 2004). It is with the development of these five minds Gardner (ibid.) states, which develop us as individuals and allow us to fully comprehend and engage with the world around us, enabling us to ‘learn beyond walls’. Although Gardner suggests an individual may be more naturally inclined towards a particular mind set, they are not natural per se, and they all require a certain degree of focus in order to
be developed. Certainly in recent years, there has been greater emphasis placed on the potential benefits of ‘learning styles’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009), whilst Gardner (2004) is quick to point out, style is an entirely different psychological concept from that of intelligence. Regardless of whether or not these multiple intelligences actually exist, as future practitioners it seems reasonable to assume that various forms of intelligence and learning may hold the key to how prospective education systems may function; and by developing the fundamental core minds, children and adults alike should therefore be able to apply these skills and knowledge in order to succeed in all areas required for social and academic sustainability and or acceptance.

Certainly it may prove to be more efficient in the long-term, that children are taught the essential skills as well as the epistemology for lifelong learning and success, rather than knowledge and information that is dated, and thus requires constant reappraisal in order to remain in-line with current needs (Noddings, 2007; Claxton, 2004; Whittington and McLean, 2001). At present, the educational system is orientated towards the need to only assess children at indiscriminate snap shots in time against a predetermined level or acceptance criteria and consequently does not give any credence or latitude to a vocational direction (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Bartlett and Burton, 2006; Whittington and McLean, 2001). Nevertheless, Gardner’s research (1993, 2006) further highlights the need for children to become self-learners; an autonomous interaction with education. Conversely though, with further regard to the concept of lifelong learning, a political response has been initiated within schools known as ‘personalised learning’. Indeed, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) suggest that this concept which has supposedly been developed with a lack of academic research and experience is just another political method in which to attempt to engage children with their own learning.

Whittington and McLean (2001) go on to further discuss the financial constraints that surround prolonged periods of full-time education, for both individuals and governments. This certainly concurs with the view of Illich (1971) in that there appears to be a lack of equality within current education systems. As Whittington and McLean (2001, p.154) rightly state, ‘the learning of those unwilling or unable to pay is as valuable as learning for the affluent’. Aside from the monetary issue, full-time education inevitably creates limits on resources, both through private and state education, and consequently, sets limits on individuals’ potential achievement and overall academic success with respect to qualifications attained. (ibid.). Thus, they encourage proposals for education to become a concept that works beyond the boundaries and constraints of current ‘formal’ methods of schooling, a paradigm that allows individuals to learn as and when they choose. Indeed, technology will become paramount to the success of such a proposal.

Since the end of the 20th century with the development of the World Wide Web (www), communication and technology has become a ubiquitous part of everyday life (Ip, 2006). With the exponential development of computerisation, and children’s innate ability to grasp all manner of ‘IT’ (Information Technology) developments, which far outweighs that of the current adult population, otherwise known as ‘digital natives’, surely it must have a dominant place within future education systems (Lemke, 2005; Muirhead et al., 2005; Whittington and McLean, 2001). If the purpose of education is to serve the child, then surely this is a logical development. Indeed, both Illich (1971) and Whittington and McLean (2001) have recognised the overwhelming impact technology could, and in fact is having on education, certainly within the developed world. Furthermore, Illich (1971) has referred to the impact such technology could have on education systems and organisations, allowing for more informal methods of learning. Moreover, as discussed earlier, Mitra (2007) has demonstrated the
impact even limited exposure to basic technology can have upon children’s ability to learn in developing countries, and moreover, their desire to learn. He (Mitra) suggests that those ‘given unrestricted and unsupervised access to the Internet can learn almost anything on their own’ (Mitra, 2009) – a very interesting concept to be further explored.

It would appear however, that the current setup and technology within schools does not allow for learner emancipation; for children and teachers to become truly immersed in technology and the concept of e-learning (Holmes and Gardner, 2006; Muirhead et al., 2005). According to Holmes and Gardner (2005), true emancipation of learning and education will encourage and enable individuals to become empowered in their own learning. To facilitate such personal empowerment, the technology of schools will inevitably change, and subsequently, learning will cease to exist merely within the parameters of four walls; deschooling (Lemke, 2005; Muirhead et al., 2005; Whittington and McLean, 2001; Illich, 1971). Education as we understand it now will hopefully, ultimately become autonomous; where technology enables individuals of all ages to access what they wish to learn, and when is convenient for them.

With further reference to Lemke (2005) and as has been discussed earlier, education in the future will undoubtedly look altogether different from how it appears today. Indeed with the very nature of the school system as we know it being questioned, the role of the teacher becomes questionable. If teachers are purely considered as fonts of knowledge then surely children can acquire their learning needs from current technology, for example the internet (www). Certainly, Barnes (1976) argues that the very nature of the school is to ensure a place where communication is exemplified, as personal interaction is the very core of education. However, Edwards (1998) suggests that learning occurs as a by-product of social engagement, and not a discrete entity. Arguably, the visible structure of school in the future will manifest itself somewhat differently to how it is perceived today, and surely this will include many of the academic suggestions that have been put forward. Potentially, schools per se, will cease to exist within four walls and are unlikely be housed in buildings at all (Holmes and Gardner, 2006; Lemke, 2005). Encompassing technology and online facilities, schools may veer towards a more virtual-based learning environments (VLEs), allowing children and adults alike to access education and learning materials when it is optimal for themselves.

Evidence has shown that gradually the teacher has lost control of his or her classroom, and consequently, the government and external agencies have taken over (Alexander, 2009a; Lowe, 2007). Fortunately, there are those still seeking to ensure that the role and impact of the teacher is duly recognised, more recently through the Cambridge Review (Alexander, 2009a) and formerly, through that of the Plowden Report (Great Britain. CACE, 1967). Sadly however, what recommendations Alexander has made with regard to future educational systems has received instant dismissal from the current governing political party though Alexander was quick to reply with a rebuke (Coaker, 2009).

**Political agenda**

Ultimately though, as demonstrated throughout history, the future of education depends upon the vagaries, policies and agendas of the incumbent political party (Gearon, 2009; Lawton, 1992). Historically, government reforms have repeatedly altered and manipulated the curriculum setting out supposed ‘radical reviews’ to challenge current educational philosophies and ideologies. Regardless, they have still yet to truly impact upon children’s lifelong learning abilities, even going as far to say that children have ultimately become disempowered as learners (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Claxton, 2004; Whittington and McLean, 2001). As Ecclestone and Hayes further point out, in centuries to come, people may
look back to this period in time, and view education itself as a faith of dominant religion due to the attention and controversy it courts. Indeed, as previously mentioned, with education being such a valuable commodity (political tool for electoral votes), it has courted much attention during government elections, and continues to maintain a high media profile throughout the year (Barrow and Woods, 2006).

Conclusion

As we advance through the 21st century, how education will appear in the future is ultimately still anyone’s guess, yet the purpose and focus of education should remain the same; for the uneducated child. Undoubtedly, the value of education has to be paramount, and in order to have a sustainable and structured work force and social framework it must remain as one of the prevailing government’s fundamental policies. Certainly, there have been many academic suggestions and references to potential systems and paradigms that would cater to the ever-changing needs of today’s and tomorrow’s child (Alexander, 2009b; Lemke, 2005; Pak Tee, 2005; White, 2004; Whittington and McLean, 2001; Illich, 1971). Indeed, it would appear that education and the technology within schools should become autonomous and pluralistic; revolving around further principles that develop children’s self-learning and self-educating capabilities, such as the creation of disciplined minds (Gardner, 2006; 1993; Whittington and McLean, 2001). Ultimately, education needs to be for the good of the child; to fully educate them with the skills, knowledge and values required in order to survive and prosper within any climate or society, and thus potentially, should become more child-centred with children choosing their own learning paths (Le Roux, 2001b). With reference to previous discussions, this education should ultimately be a joint responsibility across many persons, and should entail an ideal environment that develops children’s capabilities as self-learners. The technology of a school will inevitably look somewhat different to how it appears today and hopefully will enable individuals of all ages to learn informally as and when they choose, utilising a multitude of accessible technologies that are available to all, and not just the privileged and affluent.

However, as history and politics have shown, an individual country’s education system will ultimately be decided upon by its prevailing government, and or, any religious influences inherent in that particular country or cultural division. Nevertheless as Le Roux (2001b) discusses, with global issues surmounting to an ever extreme level of direness, the children of today and tomorrow need to be educated and supported in a way that not only enables the future of our planet to be sustained, but allows them to have the knowledge and understanding of how to tackle such issues, and as previously mentioned, this requires joint responsibility from all individuals. Undoubtedly though, as the model for a new dynamic and exciting education begins to develop, obstacles will be met, and many will be reluctant to change, yet it must be reinstated that this new era of education looks set to integrate whole communities and become the new dogma (Lemke, 2005; Muirhead et al., 2005).

In closing it is very interesting to note that speaking at the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) conference in London on the 23rd November 2009, two eminent captains of British industry (Sir Stuart Rose and Sir Terry Leahy) both spoke with grave concern about the UK’s educational system. Sir Terry Leahy stated that the education system was producing people ‘not fit for work’ (Armitstead, 2009, p.1). Sir Stuart Rose continued to say that Britain needs to have ‘the right kids, being taught by the right colleges, coming out with the right qualifications’ (ibid.). As these comments came from such distinguished persons who have intimate knowledge of the educational standards of an ever increasing workforce within their respective companies, which are nationally spread across the UK, their comments are to be
both applauded, and looked at to understand where the present educational system is lacking and how it needs to be addressed.

Education is for the future.

References


