



**‘What so many young people shine at is given the thumbs down in the estimation of a “good education”’**

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## Beware education for not very many at all

**Richard Pring** warns that too many of the skills and talents of 14 to 19-year-olds are neglected – if not scorned – by narrow policies and practices based on aims and values that no one has discussed or agreed

So-called 'lifelong learning' is carved up into phases. Sometimes these phases receive rather questionable theoretical justifications. For example, the normal split between primary and secondary at age 11 (though not between preparatory and public school in the independent sector) had its defence in the 1926 Hadow Report, which spoke of the 'tide which begins to rise in the veins of youth at the age of 11 or 12. It is called by the name of adolescence'. Again, the age of 16 is the age at which compulsory schooling ends. Hence, the division of 'secondary' into two further phases: 11-16 and 16-18.

However, the tide is in full flow by the age of 14. The national curriculum in England has been partly dismantled for students of this age, who are allowed to dispense with the arts and humanities and opt for

'vocational subjects' instead. The run-up to GCSE has begun in earnest, and careers advice has assumed an importance as the learners start to consider their progression into the adult world. At the same time, education and training are being extended in one form or another to 18. Therefore, continuity of progression from 14-18 would suggest a new phase in the organisation of education, though without the quaint justification of the Hadow Report. It all seems very pragmatic.

However, questions of a philosophical nature do arise in the policy and organisational development of this new phase of education and training.

First, as so many seek to leave education as soon as they can, the 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (Neet) group has for a decade remained stubbornly at just under 10 per cent, despite many government initiatives. Many more young people are in employment but without education or training. To require all these to remain in education does require educational justification. In pursuing that, the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education and training asked the question: What counts as an educated 18 or 19-year-old in

this day and age? What are the kinds of knowledge, the practical capabilities and the qualities which we should be nurturing through our educational system for all young people, not just, as in the past, for those who are judged to be academically able?

Second, in answering this question about the aim of education, the Review looked critically at the narrow vision of learning which passes for 'education' – narrow but exclusive. The 'half our future' of the 1963 Newsom Report (the so-called 'average' and 'below average' subset of the population) is still with us, fit to be trained, perhaps, but hardly recognised as educable.

The response to the second issue does of course depend on the answer to the first question. What should be learnt and how that learning should be pursued depends on the underlying view of what is educationally valuable. And yet, despite the constant interference and intervention by government, that question is rarely asked. Of course, it is not an easy question to answer. To decide upon the kind of learning which is worthwhile and which we require all young people to pursue in some form or another is to take us into the realm of ethics, and in that realm there is little consensus.

However, the question, though always resulting in contentious responses, is already answered implicitly in the many policies and practices being pursued under the banner of 14-19. Unexamined values shape the education of 14 to 19-year-olds – in the division between the more prestigious academic pathways for some and vocational studies for others, in the dismissal of the arts and humanities from the core curriculum at 14, in the focus on economically relevant skills, in the introduction of such virtues as entrepreneurship and enterprise, in the concentration on exam grades as a mark of successful learning, in the absence of practical and experiential engagement, in the proposed designation of mathematics and science as 'hard subjects' for purposes of league tables (and the arts and drama as 'soft'), in the mode through which merit is recognised in formal assessments. All these reflect dominant values and thereby the prevailing

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aims of education. But practices and policies, too often unquestioned, become problematic against a deeper ethical critique.

Furthermore, values and thereby educational aims are embedded in the very language of 'performance management' which pervades education – the engagement in those activities which are the effective means to some further end (for example, qualifications), the setting of precise performance targets, teachers as deliverers of the means of reaching those targets, the auditing of the performance in ways which depend on standardised measures). Where in all this is there room for the exploration of ideas, the struggle to understand, the risk taking through trial and error that are part of a broader vision of learning?

How, then, might one argue for educational aims which do not exclude many as ineducable and which do not leave so many with a sense of educational failure, disengaged from what the system has to offer?

The Nuffield Review argued for a closer look at what it means to be and to develop as a person. Education (in a descriptive sense) is about the learning which is promoted in communities and in places set apart (such as schools) for that purpose – for example, to attain economic independence or to play their part in the community which sustains them. And education in an evaluative sense (as in the 'educated person') puts value on that learning which is so promoted. It is what is judged to be worthwhile – an enhancement of the distinctively human life of those who are learning. Educational policy

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and practice necessarily make judgements (usually implicit and unacknowledged) about the kinds of learning (content and processes) which lead to people being educated in this evaluative sense. And, of course, those judgements need to take into account the social and economic worlds which these young people have inherited.

The Review therefore argued that what is distinctively human and what might be developed through formal learning are:

- The ability to make sense of the physical, social, economic and moral worlds we inhabit. That ‘making sense’ draws upon the concepts, modes of enquiry, explanations which we have inherited through the different traditions and disciplines of thinking. Inevitably, different young people acquire such modes of thinking at different levels of sophistication – or, as Jerome Bruner articulated, in different modes of representation. But no one should be excluded from entry into these different modes of experiencing and understanding the world in which they live.
- The practical capabilities that enable one to act in the world – we are doers and creators as well as thinkers. Richard Sennett, in his recent book *Craftsmen*, criticises the dualism between mind and body which has shaped our thinking about education, denigrating the intelligent ‘knowing how’ or the practical intelligence which characterises the craftsman. Indeed, with due reference to John Dewey in the same philosophical tradition of pragmatism, he

sees practical activity and experiential learning as crucial for a theoretical understanding of the world we inhabit. And yet, that ‘intelligent doer’ is too often neglected – unrecognised in the ‘standards’ by which learner and school or college are judged.

- Moral seriousness or the capacity to take responsibility for the direction of one’s life, for the relationships entered into and for the contribution to the wider community. It is not hard to imagine the academically successful being bereft of desirable human sensibility or appropriate dispositions or virtues, and thereby that much ‘less of a person’. And such sensibilities can be learnt through an educational process and ethos which helps shape the personality and goals thought worth pursuing.
- Community orientation – that is, the recognition that these young people’s very identity is tied up with being a member of wider communities upon which they are essentially dependent and which they have the capacity to shape.

By contrast with these broader aims, ‘educated’ is currently identified with a narrow vision of academic success, reflected in a limited kind of assessment.

First, for example, Michael Gove, the Conservative education spokesman, is proposing that vocational qualifications should no longer earn a place in the league tables, and soft subjects (art, drama, performing arts) should not receive the same recognition as ‘hard’ subjects (maths, English and economics). What so many young people shine at and find a sense of achievement in is given the thumbs down in the estimation of a ‘good education’.

Second, educational success is identified with doing well in particular forms of assessment, leading to more prestigious qualifications but resulting in teaching to the test. However, the educational quality of such learning is rarely questioned. One needs to examine carefully the role of subjects in the development of the ability to make sense of the world – the extent to which, for example, the arts and the humanities are taught for the sake, not of obtaining qualifications, but for illuminating what it means to be human and for understanding those

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issues of profound human importance which confront young people (issues of authority, social justice, racism, relationships).

Third, the political urge for greater participation in education often relies on the need to prepare for work, indeed to raise aspirations (a much used word recently) and to be socially mobile (upwards, of course). But we must think of ‘this day and age’. There are more than seven million jobs which require no skill or very low skills. Are those who occupy such low status posts to be regarded as educational failures – that is, without aspirations and engaged in the many, and necessary, low or no skilled jobs? In the pursuit of education for all, can we think of an army of educated (though academically low level) street cleaners or dish washers?

Divorced from relevance to social mobility or to aspiration to middle-class lifestyle, young people might still be enabled to have a sense of achievement and fulfilment, to have sufficient grasp of those areas of knowledge which, in Dewey’s terms, gives them an ‘intelligent management of life’, to find satisfaction in making and creating, to develop moral sensitivity and to contribute to the wider community. We can talk about educated 19-year-olds even where, because of academic failings within a particular formal context, they were regarded as ineducable.

However, these broader aims of education (basic grasp of the relevant kinds of understanding, practical capabilities, moral seriousness and being an active member of a community) need to be learnt through the initiation into the different forms of knowledge, into moral traditions which can so easily come to be neglected, into practices of doing and making, and into civic and public traditions of service. For that reason, early initiation into various kinds of understanding, into practical activities, into a set of values and into community cooperation, which takes place in the family, needs to be supplemented and built upon by the school. The world that young people are being prepared for, and in which they are hopefully to find personal fulfilment, extends in time and space far beyond their own family and community.