

SCHOOLS AT THE CROSSROADS

As someone whose motto might be ‘have mouth will travel’ I was genuinely flattered and not a little intimidated by the invitation to make this speech.

When considering the most successful campaigning organisations to have been created in modern times, the Campaign For Lead Free Petrol and the Campaign for Real Ale are often cited for taking an idea from the margins of public awareness and turning it into conventional wisdom in a few years.

There is a case for adding the SSAT to that list (controversially, it might even be suggested that its mission is more important than ensuring access to a decent pint). In just two decades the organisation has gone from an insurgent force representing those at the very cutting edge of reform to being one of the most powerful and established voices on school policy.

It is fascinating that an organisation which spent its early years making the case for school independence and diversity is now spending a great deal of time promoting innovation and collaboration. Indeed, judging by the Schools White Paper, we may see a great deal more collaboration in the future.

Meanwhile other chains of schools, including overseas organisations, are waiting in the wings to take advantage of the Conservative intention to open up the schools market place.

The focus of my speech tonight is not principally the organisation of the system but rather what happens in schools. We face a fundamental question. It sounds trite, but it is real. In the face of social change and perceptions of

continuing weaknesses in schooling do we reassert traditional objectives and methods, or do we work towards a radically different model?

My speech tonight covers three areas. First, I want to explain why now is the time for us to return to a great debate about what schooling is for, and what principles should underlie its practice. Second, to underline the urgency of these debates, I describe the radicalism of Conservative plans; plans which most pollsters think will be Government policy within twelve months. Third, I describe some of the ways the RSA is making a contribution to its vision of future schooling focussing in particular on a new initiative – the area based curriculum.

As the election nears we will hear repeatedly from media commentators and opposition parties that our schools are in crisis. A more dispassionate analysis suggests that overall attainment has risen but probably not as fast as test and exam results might imply. We can all bandy about statistics but if, like me, you think that the ultimate measure of progress is that more people are choosing to participate in learning for more time, the simple fact that a higher proportion of young people today are going into higher education than were going in to sixth form a generation ago is something to be celebrated.

But while rejecting talk of a crisis, there are important reasons why we should be having a fundamental conversation about the aims and methods of schooling. Let me mention three:

First, there seems to be a growing recognition that driving logic of educational reform since the 1988 Reform Bill is now running out of momentum. The tide is turning against the idea that improvement can be secured by more tests and more inspection. Although, correctly, in my view, this does not mean we are giving up on the idea that we need reliable and useful information about children's progress or school performance. One of Labour's most important achievements has been the progress made in reducing the very long tail of unacceptable school performance.

But for pupils who pass exams easily, a system overloaded with tests had become stultifying, while the testing and inspection regime has not solved the intractable problem of young people falling out of the system entirely in their mid teens with little or nothing to show for their education.

Reading the Schools White Paper, the sense is of a Government that knows it needs to move to a different way of conceptualising improvement but is currently stuck between the mechanical model of the past two decades and an alternative. There is a commitment to measures which offer schools more space to drive their own improvement: a reduction in schools regulation, more freedom over the curriculum, a more nuanced approach to school performance, alongside measures like new parental rights and enforced federation which speak to the need to drive change through external pressure.

There is nothing wrong with combining bottom up and top down pressures – in fact, it is inevitable - but the White Paper model of improvement feels like something bolted together, rather than an integrated strategy.

A recurrent theme of the White Paper is the principle that schooling must not fail any child. This reflects society's commitment to social inclusion and the assumption that those without qualifications or skills face a bleak economic future. But while we all sign up to this goal, arguably it has crept up on us without a full understanding of its implications for schools and for society.

For this government, and appropriately for a party committed to widening opportunity, participation is key. But setting this goal above all others risks losing sight of what we want every child to get out of their learning. We need still to be asking what knowledge must be acquired for accreditation in an area of learning to be meaningful. Also, while participation and excellence are not incompatible goals we need to be open about the challenges of reconciling them. The expansion of higher education only works for society and the individual if widening access is accompanied by raising attainment.

Raising the education leaving age to 18 over the next six years strengthens society's commitment to educational participation but it will also make more pressing the challenge of both engaging every young person and stretching them to achieve their potential wherever that lies.

A second reason for asking big questions about schooling is the accelerating pace of change in society. Whether it is diversity in family form or in race or religion, whether it is changing and fragmenting social norms, the importance of sustainability and the potential impact of climate change,

today's pupils present different needs, challenges and expectations to those brought to school a generation ago.

The single aspect that has changed most is the variety, ubiquity and power of modern technology. When I was young being sent to my bedroom was a punishment, for today's children leaving their bedroom means being torn away from video games, MSN, MySpace and Facebook. A parent scanning the web for information about their child's school is as likely to find a YouTube video of a playground fight filmed on a mobile phone as the school's official site. In a world of ubiquitous information teachers are no longer the gatekeepers of knowledge, their task is more to enable young people to understand how knowledge works, how to use it to build a deeper understanding and feel for subjects, how to consume knowledge critically and manipulate it effectively.

In this world of change none of us can be certain what knowledge, skills and attributes they will need to thrive in the middle of the twenty first century. Traditionalists may question attempts to teach life skills and cross cutting competencies but it is attributes like being able to communicate, work in teams, be adaptable that today's employers say they are looking for above all else.

The third, less often discussed, driver of radical thinking relates to what is arguably the frontier of human knowledge that has moved fastest in recent decades; the science of the brain and behaviour. The credit crunch proved an argument that behavioural economists have been winning ever since the Nobel prize winning work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman: human

beings are not perfectly informed, rational utility maximisers. Instead the way we make decisions reflects the idiosyncratic interaction of brains which evolved through tens of thousands of generations of pre-history now confronting a world hardly recognisable to that which existed two generations ago. How we make decisions, how we learn, why we are happy, why we are good; the way we think about all these questions is changing and will continue to change.

Think for example of the implications of a famous experiment undertaken by the neuroscientist and author of 'Descartes' error' Antonio Damasio. In the experiment the subjects had to pick from two piles of cards, each of which had on it a sum of money that was either gained or lost. The packs were stacked so that one had bigger gains and losses and overall left the subject down while the other had smaller wins and losses but gradually put the player up.

On average it took the subjects around 80 turns to be able accurately to distinguish between the characteristics of the packs. It took half as many turns before the players started subconsciously favouring the good pack. But it took only around a dozen turns before sensors attached to the players' hands detected higher levels of micro sweating when the player reached for the risky pack.

Put simply, nearly all day to day actions and decisions are the consequence of a sophisticated process taking place in the oldest and more evolved parts of our brain relayed through our emotional system to the youngest, slowest and least reliable part of our brain, the part where conscious thought takes

place. Yet our intuitive models of learning relate predominantly to action taking place in this conscious part of our brain. Over the coming years I believe the ways we teach and the ways we organise learning will come to reflect key insight from the new science such as:

- The relationship between the brain and the rest of the body of which it is a part; thus the importance of active and practical learning
- The impact on learners of understanding and shaping how the learning process works. What we might call reflexive learning
- The importance of emotional receptiveness to the acquisition of learning

To dwell for a moment on this last point: radical sociologists were criticised for labelling theory – the idea that people lived up or down to the labels they were given. It was seen as an excuse for misbehaviour or failure. But now we know it is true. You have only to tell black students or female students that people like them tend to do badly in a test they are about to sit for them to perform significantly less well than those given a different message. SATS scores by African American students reportedly rose significantly in the immediate wake of Barack Obama’s election victory.

So there are many reasons for us to put aside assumptions, prejudices and tired old dichotomies and have a fresh look at what schooling is for and how it is done.

I want to return to these questions in the final part of my speech but before describing how the RSA is suggesting schools might respond to these

challenges, it is important to reflect on the very different answers now being offered by the Conservatives. Last week we hosted an important speech by Conservative education spokesman Michael Gove. As well as being eloquently expressed, his ideas are far-reaching and radical and, dare I say it, help to define some of the key dividing lines in policy.

On a whole range of issues, particularly around the curriculum, the Conservatives want to see a considerable shift in practice. There appear to me to be seven distinct areas where they intend a change from what they see as the current direction of policy.

First, they believe curriculum content should contain the classical canon of history, literature and scientific knowledge and we should pull back from seeking to make content more relevant to the contemporary concerns and lives of young people. In addition the Conservatives would discourage young people from pursuing newer or non traditional subjects like media studies, which are not seen as credible by the best universities.

Second, the curriculum should be delivered through traditional subject disciplines and not through approaches emphasising cross cutting themes and competencies, like for example, the RSA's Opening Minds.

Third, and this was something I heard emphasised by Michael's number two Nick Gibb, traditional chalk and talk forms of pedagogy are seen as superior to practical, project based, forms of learning.

Fourth, schools should focus much more on the imparting of knowledge and much less on the idea of whole child development implied by an emphasis on life skills or well-being.

Fifth, schools should be institutions that are primarily or even exclusively about learning and should not be compelled to engage in the wider delivery of children's services.

Sixth, rather than blurring the divide between the academic and vocational learning we should assert it, with, for example, 14-19 diplomas restricted to the vocational.

Seventh, implicitly, strategies to widen participation in learning should not include developing forms of content and levels of assessment which enable more children to succeed.

This is genuinely my best attempt to describe the key elements of Conservative thinking as I have understood them. I recognise that some people, indeed possibly some here now, will find these ideas attractive. In essence, having abandoned the idea of creating more grammar schools, the Conservatives appear to be arguing that every secondary school should adopt the educational approach of a traditional grammar school.

The point I think the Opposition needs to recognise is this: the reason why the educational system, and so many schools on their own initiative have:

- developed forms of content and assessment which enable more students to succeed
- adopted more contemporary, competency based and practical curriculum content
- sought to address the wider development and well-being of the child
- wanted to work with other agencies focussed on the needs particularly of deprived children

is not only or primarily because they have been pursuing an ideologically progressive agenda or are kow-towing to ministerial obsessions. It is because this is how they have chosen to respond to the challenge of educating today's children in today's society while simultaneously pursuing the goals of raising standards, widening participation and preparing young people for the uncertain world that awaits them.

The challenge for those who support what might be termed a 'back to academic basics' strategy is this: their approach has implications not just for the means but also for the goals we set the schooling system. It implies, for example, that the job of the wider development of young people lies with the family and the community not with schools.

More fundamentally, we need to know how the Conservative model fits with the Party's undoubtedly sincere commitment to social justice. At their best, grammar schools provide a route for bright children from disadvantaged backgrounds to join the winners' circle of academic excellence. But what about social mobility for those less able or less suited to academic success; those who are unlikely to be engaged by traditional content and didactic

learning, however well delivered? Does the Conservative approach imply that it may be time to question the long established goal of increasing the proportion of young people proceeding through each stage of the educational process from school to higher education? There is nothing inherently objectionable about such a view. Indeed one of our most iconoclastic but also persuasive writers on education policy, Alison Wolf, has delivered a powerful critique of the idea that wider participation is key to economic progress or social mobility. But this is surely something that deserves to be debated openly.

While the Conservatives make a powerful case for schools refocusing on academic education, others argue for models of schooling which prepares young people for future citizenship. This perspective chimes with the recent Nuffield inquiry into 14-19 education which argued that we cannot say what we want or expect from the education system unless we can say what kind of young people we want to help create.

The RSA is working on its own answer to this question. We have developed a concept that goes under the inelegant title of the ‘social aspiration gap’. By this we mean simply that whilst most people in this moderate, progressive nation of ours broadly agree about the kind of future they would like to see – a future that is prosperous, safe, tolerant, fair and sustainable – the problem lies in the gap between the future we want and the future we are likely to create relying on existing modes of thought and behaviour.

From this we suggest there are three principal ways in which the citizens of tomorrow have to improve upon the citizens of today: we have to be more

engaged, more self-reliant and more other-regarding. By more engaged I mean that tomorrow's citizens have to appreciate the choices and trade-offs we face, they have to give their leaders permission to be honest and bold and, most of all, they have to see that the choices that we face are the consequence not just of decisions made on our behalf but also the ways we live ourselves.

By more self-reliant I mean we have to see the consequences for our own lives of forces such as globalisation and population ageing. Even without the pressing problems of the public deficit, the managers of the welfare state faced the dilemma of a six-foot man with a five-foot blanket on a cold night, however, you move it around some part is exposed. So we have to get better at looking after our health, at investing in our education, supporting our families, saving for our retirement.

Finally, we have to see not only that we need a strong social fabric but that it is from our attitudes and actions that the thread is made. One of the insights emerging from the multi-disciplinary study of brains and behaviour is that altruism or pro-sociality is self-perpetuating. Evolutionary psychology, game theory and neuroscience all provide reasons why it is functional for human beings to behave altruistically if they see others doing the same. But in the fast-changing, socially diverse, information-overloaded world we live in, this simple insight about the communities we inhabit can get lost, the signals confused, the feedback mechanisms disrupted. We will need new institutions, norms and incentives to foster forms of altruism better suited to the modern world.

So how can schools help to create these citizens for the future?

Innovation and collaboration are at the heart of school responses to this challenge, and, as I have said in opening, it is organisations like the SSAT that are leading the field to achieve this. But experts on innovation tell us the best ideas come from clarity and urgency of purpose. Given where we are and the citizens we need, we therefore need forms of schooling that aim for young people not only to be knowledgeable, but to be capable of wise action – of envisaging the future they want and going on to create it.

In practice this could mean offering more balanced learning experiences to include more practical learning, and learning to work with others. We need to enhance young people's competences and skills – not as abstract ideals or trendy initiatives but as real contributions to young people's capacity to make the world work for them.

It means committing to giving young people opportunities to ground their learning in their own lives and experience, so making it possible for them to use the skills and knowledge they acquire to act wisely in pursuit of what they care about.

How these priorities become implemented in practice cannot be determined centrally. But a range of organisations committed to innovation are developing initiatives that schools adapt, change and remix according to their own local needs and resources.

There are three ways in which the RSA is trying to make a contribution to answering this question:

It is only five years since we started to promote the Opening Minds curriculum and since then we have moved rapidly to the point where well over 200 schools say they are using an Opening Minds based approach. At its best this competences based approach engages pupils, excites teachers and achieves tangible outcomes in better attendance and attainment. The next steps are to encourage best practice and learning between Opening Minds schools, which we are promoting through seminars to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the approach in relation to subject areas and through an on-line platform for OM schools. Also, through the work of our innovative Academy in Tipton, we are exploring how we can make Opening Minds a whole school approach, which means addressing difficult issues like reconciling a competences approach to existing forms of assessment. Finally, we are trying to raise funds to undertake a major formative evaluation of the curriculum.

The next strand of our work is our role in leading the open source alliance of educational organisations. A wide range of organisations, which I am delighted to say includes the SSAT, have signed up to the charter of educational values which we developed last year. Some may see the charter as being uncontroversial, or even bland, but given the likely tenor of debate in the pre-election period maybe it is good time to stand up for the principles enshrined in the charter such as:

“ It is the primary purpose of education to awaken a love of learning in young people, and give them the ability and desire to carry on learning throughout life.

“Ability comes in many forms and learners need to be supported to enjoy success no matter where their talents lie.

“Learners have a valuable role to play in contributing to the design of their own learning, and in shaping the way their learning environment operates.

“ Every school should be different, every school innovative and we must find ways of holding them to account for their performance that reward rather than stifle this creativity.”

The formal launch of the charter coincides with the launch of a website and programme of activities aiming to connect those who sign up to a range of innovative practice in schools.

But perhaps the most important aim of the charter is that we want it to garner support from teachers, students, parents, and anyone else committed to a progressive future for education. Our longer term hope is that the open source alliance will evolve into a new organisation uniquely representing the combined voice of all those who have a stake in schooling and share a broadly progressive outlook.

In my closing section I want to focus on third strand of work to be set out on a report we are publishing later this month. The report today entitled

‘schools without boundaries’ is a passionate call for a much richer relationship between schools and the places they operate.

The report offers early findings from a project we have been undertaking called the Manchester Curriculum. In this project three secondary schools have been facilitated in developing Opening Minds modules based on understanding the city around them while the facilitator has also helped develop resources and relationships between the schools and the city . The full evaluation will be published in the autumn but the impression we are gaining is that the pilot has engaged and excited pupils and teachers alike.

One output of the project is that pupils from North Manchester High School for Boys are making a film about key landmarks and centres in the City which will be edited by the BBC and shown on a big screen in a central square throughout the summer.

If the evaluation is positive the next step is to explore a city wide approach in which every school that wants to is able to participate and in which key stakeholders in the city are engaged at a senior and strategic level in the idea of creating a place based curriculum.

Of course, not every school is in a city so considering what place means to a school and its pupils is an important consideration. And, in case the idea seems parochial, it is important to underline that in today’s interdependent, connected, shrinking world we see local places as frames through which we see different angles on the world.

Every child needs to see their education in the light of the conditions, challenges and aspirations of their society. This helps make their learning relevant. It helps build a bridge between their world outside school and their experience in the classroom. In the face of the pace and scale of change, to which I referred to earlier, schools should neither be havens from change nor victims of it but agents of change urging and enabling us to make progress work to the purpose of greater human fulfilment.

The connections between schooling and wider social currents can best be seen by youngsters in the places around them. In proposing this we imagine a new compact between schools and communities. Schools are asked explicitly to explore the question; ‘what kind of people does this place need to thrive in the future?’ It sees its task as fostering engaged, self reliant, altruistic citizens.

In turn the wider community is encouraged to recognise its responsibility to engage with and support the work of schools. At the moment what goes on in school is largely hidden from those who are not deemed to have a direct interest in it whether that is parents as consumers or regulatory bodies. The debate about the content of the local curriculum should be one that animates organisations and interests across the community.

This can be a response to the challenge I posed earlier about balancing freedom, challenge and accountability. It involves the emergence of what might be called collaborative accountability, not mechanical and one way, but emerging from the development of a shared vision of the goals of schooling and a discussion of the different roles of schools, other institutions

and civic society in creating the culture of learning vital for schools to succeed..

Surely, the project of developing future generations is one in which we should all feel involved. In part this is a recognition – well attested – that the success of schools reflects the cultural importance attached to learning in the communities in which children live. This resonates with the third challenge that I posed at the beginning of my speech: how do we make young people emotionally receptive to learning. We know from behavioural research that the pull of social norms is much more powerful than the push of exhortation, or even the lure of small incentives, in shaping behaviour.

So for example, in Robert Cialdini's famous experiments on what makes hotel guests reuse their towels, messages about saving the environment or the virtues of the hotel's environmental policy were much less powerful than simply telling people that the person who last used the room – in other words someone like them – reused his towel. Studies of ethnic minority attainment and parental influence also underline that cultural norms about leaning outweigh socio economic status in influencing outcomes.

A central goal of the area based curriculum is to drive the norm of learning and self development out in to the wider community. This can also help us form a stronger bridge between the 20% of young peoples' time spent in school and the 80% of their time – which is also one way or another learning time – spent outside school.

We know there are issues with the idea of the area based curriculum. As happens with most big ideas, some people will say it is unrealistic just as others say it is already happening. But in view of our account of change, and our view of citizenship, we think it has great potential.

Tonight I have argued that we really are approaching a cross roads in schooling policy and practice. In responding to those imperatives I believe it is time to establish a simple principle and, more importantly, to embody that principle in practical innovation:

the responsibility for developing future generations lies with us all.

This insight presents big challenges to schools; it means tearing down the wall between what goes on in school and the wider world. But it also provides the opportunity for the emergence of models of schooling fit for the dangerous and exciting century ahead.

Matthew Taylor

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