

BLOG The Future of Education – Time for a Radical Rethink

Dr Simon Davey

The pandemic has been a hugely challenging period for young people, their parents and those entrusted with educating them. School closures, parents multitasking demanding jobs with managing their children's attention in online classes and the ever-stretched resources as staff became sick and government guidance ebbed and flowed at short notice.

Early in this academic year, our livery company brought together four experts with wide ranging experience to tackle the thorny question "The Future of Education – Time for a Radical Rethink."

The pandemic created huge gaps in learning. Some children were able to access better resources than others, but social interaction was largely missing. Almost all schools started offering catchups, but this wasn't always well received by children – "We don't want to be punished for what's not our fault" - extra work over extra hours feels punitive in a time of crisis. The transition online also offered new opportunities – to attend or engage in otherwise inaccessible (by geography or cost) events or groups. Remote parents' evenings offered more flexibility for those with other childcare commitments (or those apprehensive of school buildings) and teacher CPD rocketed in opportunity and numbers. Sometimes this increased inclusion (and more flexible working offered a lifeline for some groups). Schools and teachers came together to innovate and share more than ever, compiling and offering resources and community spaces online to reduce the need to reinvent. But education in pandemic times was perhaps still quite reactive as we learned what worked and what didn't (and in assessment terms sometimes at a significant cost). And the underlying fundamental question remained – what is education for, especially in ever changing times?

In a wide-ranging discussion, we highlighted on five key areas:

1. Belonging, engagement, psychological safety and wellbeing – This applies to children, parents, staff and governors. Schools are communities which need to feel safe (physically and psychologically) whoever you are, whatever your identity. The pressures of home are often released at school, but home is the only place available in lockdown. We learn so much about social communication through play and interacting with others – being penned in has hindered the development of young people, disrupted transitions (starting school, primary to secondary and leaving school). Mental health issues increase with confinement and additional pressures and the perfect storm is coming as the exhaustion caused by over eighteen months of pandemic takes its toll on leaders, teachers, students and parents.
2. The poverty of expectation and the poverty of resources: equity and achieving it – not all families have equal resources or equal expectations. Striving means very different things across different households and communities. The ability to teach your own children to a high standard, to offer trips, new learning experiences and challenges is not equally distributed. Schools can level playing fields for more disadvantaged children but not when those children and families are further compromised by limited access to the internet, computers and digital skills when the world is only open online. Children who need to express who they are within a safe space in school have lost some of that growth opportunity.
3. What assessments are valuable and why – we've talked about exams and assessments for a long time and we're no nearer the answer. The debacle of Summer 2020's assessments and continual backtracking reinforces the main question

- what are assessments for? What do we need to know about a child and why? Exams have been a blunt tool for far too long and why would we use the same mechanism to measure different skills and qualities. What do we need to do to create a trusted system which can't be gamed or biased and is truly fair to all? It's time, to use the jargon, to define the critical success factors we want to measure, and to accept that not everything that counts can be counted.
4. What is needed, how do we sustain support and ensure it is equitable (not sharp elbowed) – schools and young people's groups faced significant financial pressures before Covid and that pressure has increased. What might be our priorities and how do we create the space and ensure those who most need support are able to obtain it? We need significant financial investment in the system but also targeted supplementary expertise, led and coordinated by those who know what's needed to prevent fly by night opportunism (i.e. teachers leading consultants not the other way round). We need to recognise (and demonstrate) that treating everyone equally is another form of injustice – we need to provide differential support to ensure equity rather than create the circumstance for the sharp elbowed to take all the rewards.
 5. What is education for and how is it plugging the gaps of history? A lack of investment in schools, supplementary education and communities has created a wealth of deprivation and challenge leading to schools taking on responsibilities as social workers, coping with societal breakdown and even feeding the hungry. We failed generations of children and their parents so how do we resolve that? Education might be summed up by "growing the knowledge, skills, confidence and experience to achieve outcomes, be human and enjoy the journey". It works best in a supportive, psychologically safe environment where people can be who they are, not who we expect them to be. Above all, we speak of the humanity of education and seeing the whole person, within the whole system, not the transaction or data point.

So what's the Management Consultants' role?

Dona spoke of avoiding educational amnesia (we know the problems, have tried solutions and figured out some of what works – let's stop chasing some of these issues around the hamster wheel). Whilst one size doesn't fit all, there are great resources which can be better shared, refined and implemented with sufficient capacity and support – roles of discovery and propagation that management consultants can do in their sleep – enabling individual schools, individual leaders but also groups and communities and supporting them to sustainability.

There's much to do but it starts with a few simple steps and priorities. We hope this session will be a call to action for our members to support schools and communities and make a bigger difference in young people's lives. The work is out there – we just need to target it.

The company wishes to thank Dona Henriques, Carol Selwyn-Jones, Hannah Wilson and Dr Simon Davey for their contributions to the panel and to the guests for their questions and comments.

16th December 2021