



What do we want from our schools?

A consultation

at St George's House, Windsor Castle - 2nd & 3rd February 2015

prepared by

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What do we want from our Schools? Consultation participants

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St George's House, Windsor Castle - 2-3 February 2015

We met at St George's to share our responses to the questions:

What do we want from our schools?

What are the desirable outcomes of schooling in the UK?

What stops our schools from delivering these outcomes?

How can more schools be helped to deliver these outcomes?

On the day we met in Windsor, the Conservative Election Campaign HQ released a speech by the Prime Minister outlining as a purpose for schools: "giving every child the best start in life". His Secretary of State for Education spoke of "driving out mediocrity."¹ How could anyone dissent? Similarly, in January 2014, Tristram Hunt, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, outlined what we want from schools in familiar terms that few would challenge:

"Instilling a sense of history and shared fate; encouraging cultural literacy and reflection; the maintenance of community, nation and place - in all of these what takes place in the classroom, on the school trip and at the sports day plays an essential role.

Equally importantly, a rich experience at school is vital to empowering citizens with the positive freedom necessary to know their own mind and choose how they want to live their life."

So, we acknowledged that it might well be possible for "us" to reach a consensus in general terms about what "we" want from schools. Generalised statements about the purpose of schools may mostly gain common consent. However grappling with the specific detail of both **what** we want from schools and **how** it might be achieved takes us into territory where the trenches of opposing sides have been dug deep.

So deep are these excavations that it is difficult to participate in discussion on these themes without the sense of being engaged in a war with no end in sight – be it between left and right, progressive and traditionalist, evidence-led and evidence-free, the complacent and the committed. The supposed adversaries are too numerous to list.

The Windsor group was acutely aware of this backdrop to the consultation. They were also aware that the "we" present at Windsor may well have been characterised by the previous Secretary of State for Education as the "enemies of promise" - the educational establishment – "the blob"².

Our thanks go to Kenny McCarthy and Roisin Ellison of the RSA for their excellent notes.

¹ press.conservatives.com/.../david-cameron-a-britain-that-gives-every-chil...

² Gove, Michael, 22 March 2013 in www.dailymail.co.uk/.../I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-h...

What we brought with us - the group's passions and concerns

Far from being comfortable with the status quo, participants were all driven by a desire for schools to be more effective in achieving outcomes which would “give every child the best start in life”, and provide them with “the skills, confidence and opportunity to make their ideas a reality”³. We agreed that:

“While some are giving their students a genuinely fitting start to life in the 21st century, many are not. We have not yet achieved the critical mass of thinking and practice that will change the system as a whole.”⁴

So, members of the group were concerned:

- **To focus with most effect on the areas of greatest challenge**
 - Helping schools to overcome the barriers to learning caused by social disadvantage – and especially by the impact of disadvantage in the pre-school years
 - Enabling schools to become learning communities which give more consistent attention to the detail of pedagogy, so that each pupil's experience of school produces a deepening engagement with learning.
- **To ensure that all young people leave school equipped with knowledge and skills appropriate to contemporary life, knowing themselves as learners, prepared for lifelong learning**
 - Ensuring that young people leave school with a positive and clearly articulated understanding of the full range of their own current capabilities
 - Helping young people to develop the confidence and adaptability to make best use of their capabilities after school - in a world of rapid change.
- **To invigorate and enrich schools as organisations, as workplaces**
 - Enabling schools to establish working cultures that are both resilient in the face of change and responsive to it
 - Engaging and motivating all those who work in schools
 - Developing and supporting teachers' expertise
 - Enabling teachers to feel a greater degree of ownership – so that they experience their work as professionals, rather than as technicians
 - Developing the current systems of accountability so that they help schools to focus on the areas of greatest complexity and greatest need
 - Building richer connections between primary and secondary schools.
- **To ensure that schools are open to a wide range of contexts outside school**
 - Enabling young people to encounter a rich mix of settings beyond their own immediate environment – a range of working contexts for instance
 - Providing young people with access to a wider world through encounters with places other than schools and ‘adults other than teachers’

³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZgjpUGb_8

⁴ Claxton, G. and Lucas, B. Redesigning Schooling 2: What kind of teaching for what kind of learning? SSAT (The Schools Network) Ltd, 2013

- **For greater precision in the language with which we try to articulate what else we want from schools in addition to those outcomes identified by current accountability measures.**

Interestingly, the group therefore found itself in tune with the following statements, taken from the CBI's November 2012 report: *First Steps – a new approach for our schools*⁵

- “We must develop rigour in the curriculum and better exams, but that is only part of the solution. The other factors that make schools systems successful – like community support, good teaching and a culture and ethos that extends rigour beyond the merely academic – also need to be fostered.”
- “Over the years, a patchwork of reforms has confused schools, and encouraged micro-management and a tick-box approach that has alienated teachers. Too often, what is right for the young person may not be what underpins the school's league table position.”
- “We call for a much clearer and broader statement of intended achievement for our school systems. This should set out the core and enabling subjects young people are expected to master, but also the behaviours and attitudes our school systems should foster, which depend more on the wider ethos of the school. The statement should be long-term, stable and widely backed by stakeholders, including political parties.”

The group were of course familiar with other challenges to current practice, such as those expressed by Daisy Christodoulou in *Seven Myths about Education*.⁶ Towards the end of that book she states,

“I agree that we should design our education system to suit everyone, not just the high achievers. I agree that education should be concerned with democracy and equality. I agree that pupils should be active learners and that lessons should be engaging. It is because I believe all of these things that I am so concerned about the current education system. The methods we are currently using to achieve these aims simply do not work.”

We parted company with Daisy only when it came to the final sentence. Our views were more along the lines of:

“Not all the methods we are currently using to achieve these aims work and many that do work do not work as well as they could.”

⁵ CBI – *First Steps – a new approach for our schools* – November 2012 - <http://www.cbi.org.uk/campaigns/education-campaign-ambition-for-all/first-steps-read-the-report-online/>

⁶ Christodoulou, D., *Seven Myths about Education*, Routledge, 2014

Why the consultation? Why now? Setting the scene

As a background to our deliberations, the two host Foundations outlined some aspects of context. Ivor Sutherland, Chair of Trustees of the Gordon Cook Foundation, acknowledged that the apparently simple question:

“What do we want from our schools?”

quickly leads into complex and contested areas. Who is the “we”? In 21st century UK, is there an accessible “we” which might provide the basis for consensus about schools and schooling? The CBI thinks not:

“The best systems globally, and the best schools in the UK, start with a clear idea of what their system should deliver. Everything they do is aligned to meet this goal. In the UK more widely, this has not been the case.”⁷

In Scotland perhaps the “we” still holds firm. The purpose of the Scottish curriculum is defined as enabling each young person to develop four “capacities”: to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor. Each of these four capacities is then amplified through sets of “attributes” and “capabilities.”⁸

Ivor reminded us of the three Hadow reports, written in the first half of the 20th century, and acknowledged in the opening paragraphs of the Plowden report:⁹

“Hadow, if any man, has the right to be considered the architect of the English educational system as we know it. The three reports of the Consultative Committee under his chairmanship, the Education of the Adolescent (1926), the Primary School (1931) and Infant and Nursery Schools (1933), virtually laid the foundation of what exists today. The purpose to be achieved, and the test by which its success can be recognised, he defined in 1931 in these words

'What a wise and good parent will desire for his own children, a nation must desire for all children.' ”

Ivor suggested that parents might well be able to agree that schools should:

- Provide an environment in which children flourish in all respects, not just academically, but physically, socially, and culturally – schools must be a place of learning, but should also be a place of enjoyment

⁷ CBI – First Steps – a new approach for our schools – November 2012

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<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/thepurposeofthecurriculum/>

⁹ The Plowden Report (1967) Children and their Primary Schools A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office

- Ensure that children are safe from harm at all times and protected, for instance, from bullying, so that children are happy and content to go to school each day
- Establish habits of good behaviour and respect for others, with consistent expectations linked to high standards, where control and discipline are tempered by fairness
- Engage with the local community, and particularly with parents, through leaders who are approachable, welcome parental support, listen to parents' views and actively encourage parents and other members of the community to contribute to the life of the school
- Provide evidence of effective management and good governance.

He argued that producing education of quality requires teachers and heads who are well qualified, both academically and professionally; committed to young people; valued by their employers and by government; regularly engaged in their own continuous professional development and open to the scrutiny and refreshment of their classroom practice.

The opening of the 1931 Hadow Report asked questions which still trouble us:

“The problems are numerous and urgent. A school is at once a physical environment, a training ground of the mind, and a spiritual society. Are we satisfied that in each of these respects the primary schools of today are all that, with the knowledge and resources at our command, we have the power to make them? Are their buildings and physical surroundings as conducive to health and vitality as may reasonably be demanded? Is their curriculum humane and realistic, unencumbered by the dead wood of a formal tradition, quickened by inquiry and experiment, and inspired, not by an attachment to conventional orthodoxies, but by a vivid appreciation of the needs and possibilities of the children themselves? Are their methods of organisation and the character of their equipment, the scale on which they are staffed, and the lines on which their education is planned, of a kind best calculated to encourage individual work and persistent practical activity among pupils, initiative and originality among teachers, and to foster in both the spirit which leaves the beaten path and strikes fearlessly into new fields, which is the soul of education?”¹⁰

James Westhead, Trustee of the Comino Foundation and TeachFirst Executive Director, wondering why the question “What do we want from our schools?” was especially interesting now, highlighted the pace of change, particularly in employment, and our continuing concern for equity and social mobility. From a 21st century starting point, he also felt the necessity of “the spirit which leaves the beaten path and strikes fearlessly into new fields.”

Drawing on his own employment experience, James suggested that schools need help to recognise and come to terms with dramatic and continuing shifts in the nature of work

¹⁰ Board of Education, ‘Report of the Consultative Committee on The Primary School [Hadow Report 1931], (London, HMSO 1931),

across a wide range of occupations. In the 20th century, many elements of industrial working class jobs were replaced by automated processes. In the 21st century, many occupations relying on “routine cognitive skills,” which were previously a reliable source of middle class employment, are similarly being replaced:

“Terms such as ‘financial services factory’ and ‘industrialisation’ are being applied by leading consultancy companies to describe the transformation of the service sector. Accenture Consulting is a proponent of ‘the concept of industrialization – breaking down processes and products into constituent components that can be recombined in a tailored, automated fashion – to non-manufacturing settings’”¹¹

Paralleling the mechanisation of industrial work associated with F.W.Taylor, this trend has been labelled “digital Taylorism,” which

“takes the form of a power struggle within the middle classes, as these processes depend on reducing the autonomy and discretion of the majority of well qualified technical, managerial and professional employees. It encourages the segmentation of expertise based on ‘talent’, in ways that reserve the ‘permission to think’ to a small proportion of employees responsible for driving the business forward.”¹²

Many companies now also have access to a “global supply of highly educated workers, able to compete on price as well as knowledge” so that they

“have greater scope to extract value from international webs of people, processes and suppliers, based on a Dutch or reverse auction where quality is maintained while labour costs go down.”¹³

So even those with the requisite qualifications may find it difficult to find the kind of secure employment such young people would have expected a generation ago. Nevertheless, James argued that, whilst 40% of our young people do not currently achieve five A-Cs at GCSE, it cannot be that these young people are not smart, nor that they lack potential.

- Should we be content for some young people to leave education feeling that they have little tangible to offer?
- Is the system valuing and measuring the right things? Is our version of learning and of schooling itself too mechanistic?

The CBI’s report: *First Steps – a new approach for our schools*, again echoes these concerns:

“under-performance is driven by narrow definitions of achievement that encourage a focus on the average – a kind of cult of relativism that says it is OK for a certain

¹¹ Brown, P., Lauder, H., and Ashton D.: *Education, Globalisation and the Knowledge Economy*, a commentary published on behalf of Teaching Learning Research Programme of the ESRC (September 2008), available at www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/globalisationcomm.pdf

¹² www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/globalisationcomm.pdf

¹³ www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/globalisationcomm.pdf

percentage of young people to fail. This must be challenged. A broader, bolder approach has the potential to be transformational.”¹⁴

Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA, put such a “broader, bolder approach” in the context of the RSA’s championing of the “Power to Create”, which urges that at a point when there is “across the world a better educated, more questioning population” we have the possibility of “an ambitious idea of the good life”, in which all of us might aspire:

“to live creative lives; lives of which we are the author, lives which allow us to be the best people we can be.”^{15, 16}

Many UK schools do give an outstanding service to the children and young people in their local communities - how can more schools be helped to deliver these outcomes?

In Day Two’s discussions, with help from Guy Claxton, we picked up themes from the previous day. We identified a number of priorities which we felt would help to secure further progress:

➤ We need to develop a more fine-grained definition of what we are trying to achieve through our schools.

This means we need a language precise enough to support a public conversation about the “desirable residues”¹⁷ of schooling: a language that welcomes students and parents from every constituency into that conversation - a fresher language that enables the wider public to recognise that we should think of children’s minds not as a fixed set of predetermined talents, but as a collection of habits can be nurtured and developed. Currently it can seem as if those who walk away from school without the expected examination successes walk away with nothing; obsessing about grades in literacy and numeracy has become a displacement activity for achieving a fuller picture about what we value. In unfolding a new language of desirable residues: of values and behaviours, for instance - we also need to have a sense of what progression would look like. That will mean valuing ways of “evidencing” rather than “measuring”, taking into account the full range of outcomes and the full range of presumed audiences. It will mean finding new ways of representing those outcomes, for instance in graphic form, ways which enable each student to hold up a “mirror to self” when presenting that self to the world beyond school.

¹⁴ CBI – First Steps – a new approach for our schools – November 2012

¹⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZgjpUGb_8

¹⁶ <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/blogs/mt-transcript.pdf>

¹⁷ A Guy Claxton phrase – for instance see <http://www.redesigningschooling.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Teaching-Learning-Symposium-Summary.pdf>

- **Across the UK, we have a moral obligation to work towards consensus, taking seriously what we know about how schools can secure tangible benefits to individuals and society.**

All students benefit when direct attention is paid to developing their soft skills.¹⁸ Although there is consensus in this area, progress is still slow and patchy. There are social, political and system barriers. We need to become savvy about these barriers and plan how to overcome them smoothly, economically, neutrally. That means being robust about tackling false opposites and false alternatives: we need to discard the misleading opposition between notions of “traditional” and “progressive”; the false either/or of “knowledge” and “skills”.

- **As well as greater clarity about what schools are trying to achieve, we need to pay more attention to how it might best be achieved.**¹⁹

This will mean working to develop a precision pedagogy, to further refine the habits of teachers, so that they take more account of the psychological processes of learning. It would also mean revaluing teachers’ professional expertise – engaging them as communities of learners, providing then with greater opportunities for observing and researching each other’s practice. This, we acknowledged, would take time. (We were interested in learning from shifts in other areas of professional practice, such as the lessons to be drawn from the story of Jos de Blok’s Buurtzorg organisation in Holland and its transformation of care services for the elderly.)²⁰

- **Many school leaders possess the drive and the know-how to establish and sustain improved outcomes for students.**

The energy and commitment is there, but, for headteachers in particular, so much energy and attention now has to be spent on metrics that there is a risk that headteachers are distracted from those elements of student performance that are less amenable to measurement. There is a danger that the current accountability framework creates a distortion effect, though at least with Ofsted a language of progress is emerging. We wondered if schools are in a position to turn their attention, and direct their energy, to the “desirable residues” while also fighting to

¹⁸ Kautz, T., Heckman, J.J., Diris, R., Weel, B., Borghans, L.: *Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success*, National Bureau of Economic Research 2014

¹⁹ See http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/ITEL_brochure_final.pdf - the 2015-2016 OECD study *Teachers’ Pedagogical Knowledge and the Teaching Profession*, is asking Does the knowledge base of the teaching profession meet the expectations for teaching and learning 21st century skills?(The policy imperative for the teaching and learning of 21st century skills, such as problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity, might entail a re-skilling of the current teacher workforce and upgrading of the knowledge base of the teaching profession. Our study asks, do teachers have the relevant knowledge for teaching 21st century skills?)

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BeOrNjwHw58>

achieve best results in the public accountability league tables. 'Constantly striving to squeeze out better grades is not a good enough game'.

➤ **Student leadership is a powerful resource for school improvement.**

Several headteachers in the group had experience of involving students in the process of developing and improving both the school as organisation and the quality of teaching and learning in a school. Students were involved in giving structured feedback to teachers and fellow students; acting as learning and behaviour mentors to other students; collaborating with teachers in small scale action research to identify the impact of particular approaches to teaching and learning. Such roles strengthen the learning culture in a school, provide teachers and headteachers with valuable insights and develop in students a sense of shared responsibility, as well as useful skills.

➤ **Schools benefit from a deep knowledge of and connection with their local communities.**

Schools need to draw on the strengths of their communities, as well as working to address disadvantage, for instance helping to sustain children in families facing fundamental problems such as prolonged illness or unemployment; tackling racial tensions; supporting those whose first language is not English; providing children with inspiration, but also at times providing a place of emotional refuge – probably working through appropriate professionals who are not teachers. Headteacher participants provided inspiring examples of this kind of involvement, in communities, for instance, with a high proportion of refugee families.

➤ **Parents need to be engaged as partners in a dialogue with schools**

We felt that parents need to feel that they are equal partners in their children's education. We welcomed moves to invite them to engage in a dialogue with teachers, to be givers of feedback, rather than simply listeners at parents' evenings, or passive recipients of reports.

➤ **In any locality, schools can benefit from working collaboratively, with each other and with other community partners.**

Headteacher participants emphasised the powerful impact of schools working in partnership with each other and with other organisations in the local community and beyond. A range of partnerships was in evidence: collaborations with local and national business, bringing young people into contact with expert professionals in a range of working contexts, using their enthusiasm and expertise to open new worlds; with creative contexts such as theatres, cinemas, galleries, museums and maker spaces, experimenting in 'making' in many of its forms; with universities and charitable foundations – for instance using post-graduate interns to provide insights into possible uses for the latest technologies, such as digital fabrication. Secondary

schools had used dance workshops to support transition from the primary school to the secondary school and helped primary schools by providing innovative science teaching materials. These partnerships were enabling expertise to be shared, bringing additional energy and excitement into the school, helping to sustain school improvement and prompting innovation.

What next?

Participants felt that these ideas deserved further consideration and agreed that they might usefully be shared and tested in a wider forum, for instance with a group of young people and/or with parents and other stakeholders.