IoI Education Forum

A defence of subject-based education

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These six essays are written by members of the Institute of Ideas' Education Forum. They make the case for subject-centred education. Whilst the Lib-Con coalition nominally supports a return to subject-centred teaching, there is in fact little coherence or sense of direction to their educational strategy.

The current government's wider approach to education isn't convincing because their arguments aren't theoretically grounded. Subject-centred teaching can't simply be asserted as something worthwhile. It must be argued for if teachers are to become engaged and convinced of its necessity.

More specifically, we believe subject-centred education should be defended as a method of transmitting knowledge and understanding to new generations. It should be driven by an aspiration to create a society of truly educated citizens, and foster greater intellectual autonomy and freedom for everybody.

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The case for subjects

by David Perks

Over the past thirteen years there has been one consistent theme in educational reform: an attack on knowledge in the school curriculum. Despite widespread complaints about declining standards, the real effect of these reforms has passed largely unnoticed. Every revision of the National Curriculum or change in the examinations system has without fail advocated reducing the content to be tested in order to make space for more flexible forms of assessment, such as modular examinations and coursework, or to replace teaching content with skills. But like the spread of death watch beetle, the continual and gradual undermining of schools' ability to deliver subject knowledge has led to the complete disintegration of education.

The attack on liberal education

One extreme example is the recent rewrite of the key stage three science national curriculum for 11-13 year olds. Rather than being tested on their knowledge of physics, chemistry and biology, pupils are now assessed on 'how science works'. This comprises a bizarre collection of ideas, including a critique of the experimental method and appreciation of the limits of scientific knowledge. If this weren't bad enough, the disease has spread throughout the teaching profession. Railroaded by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) – the schools inspectorate – teachers are remoulded as facilitators. They help pupils learn how to learn, rather than teaching a subject. The deconstruction of

pedagogy is so complete that to tell a new teacher the most important thing for children is teaching them something is to indulge a dirty secret. The inspectors believe it's more important to let pupils play games and assess each other's work.

We've reached the point where teaching pupils anything intellectually demanding means being classed a failing teacher. According to Ofsted, if every pupil doesn't show progress in a lesson, the lesson is a failure. Being a good teacher thus amounts to asking children to tell you what they already know. Teaching all students academic subjects is a distant memory in schools. The standard achievement for sixteen year olds in English schools is a GCSE in mathematics and English, along with a mixture of pseudo-vocational qualifications rated as equivalent to four or more GCSEs.

Whether it's the attack on knowledge or a general flight from academic subjects, the idea state schools in particular should offer a grammar school curriculum for all is long gone. So has comprehensive education's aspiration to open up the best for every child. Instead, the grammar school curriculum is considered an elitist paradigm, suited to the managerial and political classes but not ordinary citizens. Why study mathematics when functional mathematics will do? Why study science if you're not going to become a scientist but a consumer of science? Abstract thinking is dismissed as useless for the average citizen.

The charge that a traditional liberal education based on the sciences, humanities, languages and the arts is the prerogative of the cultural elite alone is another way of saying young people are bored by an education irrelevant to their lives. This attack on liberal education belies a deeply pessimistic view of ordinary people. Thinking about ideas is not for them. Rather, the cultural elite will think about ordinary people's needs on their behalf.

Liberal education is a conservative project

But the truth is education doesn't have the power to emancipate people from oppression. It doesn't tell them how to change the world. And it certainly can't substitute for the political class's lack of a political programme. What it can and must do is provide the foundation for understanding the world we live in.

At root, this means understanding what we already know. The transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next isn't a foregone conclusion. It's possible to forget. This has been consciously attempted over the last century by those dictators who've systematically tried to eradicate whole areas of learning. But we've yet to witness such a calculated withdrawal from educating the mass of people in a Western democracy. What we have isn't a conspiracy against those deemed unworthy of a good education, but rather a loss of faith in education in general. This undermines our ability to transmit knowledge *per se*. This is the collateral damage of using education to repair social inequalities rather than educating the next generation.

The recent election in the UK opens up the possibility of taking a deep breath. We can reconsider what education means and what our schools should do. Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, made it clear he wants a debate about the nature of education, and to see a return of the subject-based curriculum. This is encouraging. But the Conservatives' case for subject-based education sounds a little hollow. Concerns over 'access' and 'social inclusion' still predominate the ideas put forward by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education. Even the reform of the National Curriculum includes a predictable call to reduce its content and give teachers space to decide how to deliver it. The omens are not good, unless we can make a positive case in favour of liberal education for everybody.

Making such a case lies at the heart of a conservative project. We live in a moment when institutions of all kinds are drawn into question as the old political certainties have dissolved away. But worshipping 'change' as Barack Obama and Ed Miliband would have us do means blaming everything on the past. In education, as in politics, this is also the case. Justified in the name of social inclusion or anti-elitism, old educational ideas are being swept away. But the foundations of our knowledge of the world remain as true today as they have done for the past hundred years or so of formal state education. The 'information age' does not make Ohm's Law redundant or Shakespeare irrelevant. Google may be able to translate phrases but it can't replace learning a language and its literature.

Passing on the torch of the Enlightenment

The key to educating pupils is giving them a framework for understanding what we know about the world. Education is the study of our collective knowledge and how we know what we know. This means studying subjects in the context of how our understanding evolved. This has happened through systematising knowledge into disciplines, each with its own coherence and methods. For example, the great advances in modern biology and its emergence as a separate discipline arose through the Prussian invention of the modern research laboratory and the systematic application of the use of the microscope to study living organisms. This work led to the discovery of the cell, the fundamental unit of life. Subjects are at once historical accidents and the product of systematic attempts to pursue knowledge. To dismiss this is to dismiss the huge advances we've made in comprehending the world around us.

The basis for a liberal education is to be able to explain how we have come as far as we have. It involves passing on the torch of the enlightenment to the next generation, so it isn't snuffed out by ignorance. The key to achieving this is to take pupils seriously when we engage them with these ideas. That means not just having a passion for your subject but being an evangelist for the ideals of the Enlightenment. This is the project we face if we are to salvage education for the next generation.

Education in an 'information age'

by Dennis Hayes

We live in a society profoundly hostile to ideas and intellectual endeavour. This makes it difficult to make a persuasive argument for the value of subject-centred education. Rather, saying that subject-centred education is a 'good thing' becomes a mere assertion, as arbitrary as any other educational fad or fashion. This reflects that the assumptions underpinning subject-centred education are no longer accepted by the wider society.

Same language, different meaning

Subject-centred education is sometimes denounced by educationalists as Victorian, outdated and elitist. This is a new development. In the past, distinguished educational thinkers writing from radical, conservative or liberal standpoints all supported versions of subject-centred education. With few exceptions, they thought it appropriate for all pupils. The content of the subject-centred curriculum may have changed over time to include the sciences and modern foreign languages, but all these curricula were broad and included some practical subjects.

Although not all educational thinkers denounce a subject-centred curriculum, there's a general understanding that a different curriculum is now appropriate. This inspires the rejection of the former curriculum consensus. Generally, the traditional language of curriculum 'subjects' is maintained. But this continuity in terminology masks a

fundamental change in thinking about education. This epochal change is best characterised by the idea we live in an 'information age'. Our 'information age' offers access to inexhaustible electronic information. This information, it's believed, is more easily accessed by our children who have the privilege of being brought up with new technology. Their ability to use this new technology gives children a unique relationship to information that adults born before the 'information age' don't have.

This belief marks a discontinuity with the past. Previously, teachers had the intellectual authority to transmit what they knew to their pupils. In the information age, however, the teacher is no longer thought to have a distinctive expert understanding of the world. She or he can merely facilitate access and enhance the approaches used by the child.

The folly of 'the information age'

Advocates of the idea of an 'information age' are wrong: we don't need to reject centuries of educational thought. New information technologies may well enable humanity to generate and communicate greater quantities of information. But this doesn't mean students don't still require an introduction to the fundamental forms of knowledge that will enable them to understand the world we live in. This includes those very information technologies now celebrated, and sometimes loathed, in contemporary thinking. We should remember that whilst in many areas of social life change may be rapid, in the vast majority stasis and risk-aversion reign. This may paradoxically contribute to perception that society is running out of control.

We know that knowledge and understanding produced the 'information age'. And it's knowledge and understanding pupils need if they're to do anything with 'information', or take scientific and technological developments further. We also know the much celebrated 'special access' of young people to new technology is a myth. The perception that children have a special relationship with new technology is a product of adult anxieties about the relevance of their own cultural inheritance. Consequently, the examples often given of these special skills are possible for any well-trained chimpanzee.

The focus on accessing information rather than knowledge has three especially damaging consequences for schooling. First, accessing information is an individual process. Without mediation by teachers' own understanding, information is accessed in a non-judgemental way. Pupils operating in isolation are unable to give information meaning, significance or value. Second, the focus of schooling shifts from teaching subjects to concern over processes that supposedly 'enhance' and 'facilitate' children's learning and help them 'learn to learn'. Third, this new age requires we cultivate in pupils new 'skills' psychologically necessary for sustained information processing. These include emotional literacy, emotional intelligence and emotional competency. Consequently, all three aspects display a 'therapeutic' aspect. They tend to replace the role of the

teacher with that of a non-judgmental facilitating counsellor.

The crisis of relativism; its optimistic rejoinder

The crass celebration of information revives a sophistic rejection of the belief we can know anything. If people believe all past knowledge is ephemeral in our fast-moving information age, views like 'all knowledge is contested' or 'there are many truths' gain currency. In crude forms they are met as statements like, 'everything is a matter of opinion' or 'that's just your view, others may think the opposite.' A quick refutation of these arguments is found in Plato's *Theaetetus* (s 171ab). The refutation runs like this: When a person says, 'all knowledge is contested,' the reply is, 'what about your statement that 'all knowledge is contested'? Is that true or is it contested?' The consequence is clear: if the statement is true it is false, and if it's false then it is false. In either case, it's false.

There are many ways this schoolboy 'quick refutation' can be challenged, but the challenges can be answered. A complex discussion of philosophical relativism is hardly what's needed. The contemporary rise of relativism does not express a philosophical turn in the conversation of teachers, but a simple psychological rejection of any commitment to the possibility of knowledge and understanding. It's an

expression of the anti-intellectual mood of the age. This mood is also expressed in the idea that change is faster than ever and as a consequence knowledge is soon outdated. Examples from the cutting edge of science are used to illustrate how existing knowledge is subject to change and therefore a new education is necessary. This 'argument' ignores the vast corpus of human knowledge that is unchanging on which the few examples of epistemological fragility rest.

Arguments for change are at least positive. A negative version of the endless change argument is the claim that 'everything is uncertain', and children must have a new education to fit them for this age of uncertainty. Both these 'arguments', whether celebrating change or expressing fear of change, are used to undermine existing education. They imply that education as we knew it is over. We can no longer educate children. We might call this the 'survivalist curriculum'. It means schools give up the project of giving students the ideas they need to understand and act on the world. They opt instead for the more meagre task of giving pupils the skills they need to remain resilient in a confused and confusing world.

The most absurd direction in which this belief has turned education is putting the teacher in the tutelage of the pupil. Whether this is simply the idea we are all learners or the requirement to listen to the learner voice, adults are made abject before children. Ofsted now even sends its school inspection reports to pupils. The irony is that we live in a time when human knowledge and understanding is expanding and potentially greater than ever before. Talk about an 'information age' is an expression of this reality but one which distorts it and diminishes human potential. It fails to value the

knowledge and understanding that underlies this expansion.

We're not merely subject to change. We are knowing subjects who can change our lives for the better. The first step is to reverse the process of adapting education for information processing, and instead put knowledge back at the heart of education.

The limits of 'evidence'

by Mark Taylor

The Lib-Con government should be congratulated for seeking to re-invigorate education. It has recreated the Department for Education and spoken up for academic subjects and 'the art of deep thought'. Its approach offers a welcome new moral clarity about the value of education.

Indeed, this clarity was lacking during the New Labour period, with its hopelessly diverse range of educational innovations. The argument members of the Education Forum made against New Labour was that education was getting lost in a morass of research-led evidence about 'what works'. The concept of education itself became entirely confused. Gathering ever more evidence was, in this context, an exercise in moral displacement. It avoided the arguments that had to be made for education.

Teaching as an evidence-based profession

Taking the new Coalition's talk of moral purpose at face value doesn't mean we think everything has changed. It seems set to continue with academies, and also want to extend the 'free' schools programme. After all, says the Coalition, Swedish and American evidence shows it's 'effective' – the new educational mantra. The Coalition also wants to continue educational 'partnerships', seeing good schools as educational 'tugboats' to rising standards for all. The method is to seek 'evidence' for educational initiatives just as New

Labour did, but with an international twist. This is problematic. It represents an avoidance of the responsibility to convince teachers and the wider public that the purpose of education is to provide the next generation with the intellectual framework to understand the world they will soon inherit.

The Coalition has inherited a difficult situation in education, and rightly sought new approaches. However, the policy context it is working in has transformed teaching into an 'evidence-based profession'. This uncontested shift in teacher professionalism is presented as necessary and progressive. It's seen as the 'best practice' for 'outcome-based learning'. Often, it's presented as a welcome professionalisation of teachers' activities, as teachers are now better informed by the latest research evidence, often generated by university researchers.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on 'research evidence' masks the real outcome of the current situation in education. The intellectual continuity between subject-based teacher education in universities and subject-based student education in schools has been destroyed. However, the Coalition's plan to put academics in charge of examination boards is a welcome development that goes against the general trend to discontinuity.

An inability to justify educational strategy

It's disconcerting that the more specific statements of Government suggest they're less interested in education for its own sake than they admit. Indeed, far from kicking away the crutch of evidence as the only possible support for making educational 'interventions', they've actually tried to strengthen it. Whilst New Labour relentlessly searched for data to widen the range of educational measurements at home and inside the classroom, they merely flirted with Scandinavian models of success abroad.

The Coalition's 'nouveau' appeal to international evidence is an example of how they've gone even further, reflecting a desperation in justifying their educational policies. They've called for a widened international data set from Singapore, USA, Canada, Taiwan and South Korea as the basis for their school improvement programme. So, is this international outlook – mirrored in the IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) qualification and Education Secretary Michael Gove's call for a 'properly international curriculum' – an enlightened approach? Or is it more of a continuation of the deference to data pioneered by New Labour? Their recent excitement about the McKinsey international data (generated by New Labour's original education evidence guru Michael Barber) on school system 'performativity' suggests the latter.

Either way, educators should be wary of the political tendency to seek authority for intervention through multiplying the sources of evidence. Instead, they should start a genuine conversation with the public and teachers. Until then, teachers and parents who New Labour attempted to manage by citing 'the evidence' for

Assessment For Learning, personalised learning and parenting classes, may again be hemmed in by international evidence showing everything is better elsewhere.

Ultimately, this short-circuiting of any wider conversation about education either avoids the real intellectual issues, or serves as an evidence-based assertion of the values of skills of pedagogy and psychology. The evidence-based approach avoids the fundamental problem: education requires no justification beyond itself. Nobody should reject good quality educational evidence, but equally, nobody should think education needs evidence to be justified. There's simply no sense in seeking what we might call an 'evidence-based moral purpose'. We might argue over what an educated, civilised, person needs to know, and even give cosmopolitan examples to illustrate our position, but no amount of empirical evidence will ever resolve this moral question or indeed convince those who are hostile to the truth of our definition.

Not more evidence; better ideas

In response to the evidence overload, some have argued for a return to traditional subjects. But times are different now. Subjects can't just be asserted as valid to a generation of teachers brought up on quick-fix pedagogical solutions. After all, many academics and teachers have progressed through their careers by endorsing criticisms of the idea that all

students can obtain real knowledge. They've supplanted this with a new 'wisdom' of learning, which sees education as a process without the need for fixed subject-centred knowledge. In this context, any new appeals to promote subjects will not be understood.

Indeed, the Education Secretary seems intent on leading us into a new evidence quagmire. He recently told head teachers: 'We need more evidence-based policy making, and for that to work we need more evidence.' But this 'evidence gathering' will not solve the problem. Educational inspiration can only be rebuilt through winning the political argument with parents, teachers and children for the creative place of academic subjects in a truly liberal education. Currently, the quest for evidence at home and abroad shortcuts this conversation. It typically reduces educational discourse to a series of evidence-based platitudes.

It would be good to live in a society that understood - without evidence - that the key to education was good subject teaching and the abstract knowledge that accrues through critical dialogue with teachers. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Efforts to widen the empirical evidence base – even if they're well meant attempts to rationalise policy intervention - fail to address the political and philosophical challenge posed by the fact that we have a generation of teachers and academics who've failed to defend their own subjects.

The current obsession with the expansion of 'evidence' is an expression of a lack of confidence in the traditions today's politicians were born into. An expression of this is the breakdown of the intellectual

connection between public and politicians. This creates a cultural climate where teachers lack confidence about communicating existing subject knowledge. It's no wonder, therefore, they've often accepted a new role. This involves transmitting more palpable social fears about obesity, knife crime and emotional literacy - whilst simultaneously doubting the capabilities of their students.

The parochialism of localism

by Shirley Lawes

Government policy has made a decisive turn away from state-controlled community services. Instead, it wants to 'free up' local communities to provide many of their own local amenities on the basis of local need. This seems a positive move after years of central direction. How much power and responsibility it will be possible to devolve to local communities is uncertain. But, the principle may work if it enables and empowers teachers to organise things for themselves.

An obvious worry is the burden of responsibility for education will be shifted from government to groups of people in local communities. They, not government, will be held accountable. This would allow the Coalition to shed its educational responsibilities.

The fallacy of local educational needs

The 'localism' agenda extends to education most recently through an expansion of the Academies and promotion of Free Schools. The latter are schools set up by parents, teachers and other interested groups to meet the perceived local needs of a particular community. But can we talk of 'local needs' in education in the same way as housing, social and health services? The logic of the local may be readily understood and agreed in housing policy, but the idea of applying the same principles to schools suggests that children in one particular town have fundamentally different educational needs from those in the town next door.

In fact, the educational needs of children are exactly the same the entire nation over. All pupils need academic English, Maths, Science, History, Languages, an Arts education, and much more besides, whether they live in Brighton, Bolton, or Basildon. The real danger is the fallacy of 'local educational needs' will give licence to a narrow parochialism, when schools are in fact charged with broadening the child's mind and taking them beyond the limits of the particular locality in which they happened to be raised. If an idea is worth knowing, then surely it's every pupil's entitlement, regardless of postcode.

Any school can now apply to become an Academy. It can thus achieve a far greater degree of autonomy and freedom to organise itself more or less independently of their local education authority, but within the state sector. This means these schools are accountable to the secretary of state and subject to many of the audit and inspection mechanisms of their 'bog-standard' peers. What's new about the Coalition's policy in relation to Academies is the programme is being extended to all areas, whereas previously it was confined to areas of deprivation. Primary and special schools are also being encouraged to apply for Academy status. At the same time parents, teachers, community groups, anyone in fact, will have the support and encouragement to set up their own free schools.

Localism doesn't mean autonomy

Celebrating 'the local' in education may seem an attractive proposition following the excessive micro-management of recent years. That more parents, teachers and financial sponsors can improve on state schools opens up many possibilities. These include providing a more challenging educational experience; innovating and experimenting; even restoring a focus on transmitting knowledge through subject disciplines. But real autonomy is an illusion when education is more concerned with well-being and an instrumental view of knowledge, together with an obsession over exam results and league tables. Only a few will have the nerve to break out of the prevailing ethos and offer a truly different educational experience. More likely, the liberties offered by Academy status, particularly being exempt from crucial aspects of the National Curriculum, will consolidate these negative trends. It will mean offering a curriculum that represents the lowest academic challenge to students and therefore yields the highest 'results' in school league tables.

A number of Academies are already well-established, mostly in poor areas of inner cities with a specific mission to improve the performance of what were low-achieving schools. Some Academies have adopted an apparently strong ethos of promoting academic success. In others, since they're not obliged to follow the National Curriculum, there's been a shift towards social training. A vocationally-orientated curriculum is designed to meet 'local needs'. This essentially means identifying young people from working class areas as needing a different sort of curriculum because of their 'challenging' social background. An example of this is the Royal Society of Arts sponsored academy. Its Opening Minds project

offers a competence-based curriculum emphasising core life skills delivered through cross-curricular modules and programmes for encouraging citizenship and promoting health. This is the very antithesis of what education could and should be.

Education is a universal value

Free Schools take the notion of responding to local needs a significant stage further. To aim to provide a high quality education for children in a particular locality may be seen as a laudable project. But essentially it represents a retreat from education as a universal value. In the absence of any common vision of education, local schools will end up being a celebration of the parochial. There will be a disparity of expectations of - and aspirations for - children and young people that will be divisive, and add to educational inequality. The core contradiction in the Coalition's thinking is that it aims to restore a subject-centred education with a common purpose for all children, emphasising the importance of a subjects; but its mechanism for achieving this is to encourage an educational free-for-all that seriously undermine the original aim.

The fundamental issue is not what sort of buildings or internal organisation schools adopt. It's whether the broader society has a belief in education, not as an instrumental good with a contingent relationship to the needs of the economy, but as a good in itself. What's needed is a vision that restores the idea that education is about taking individuals beyond themselves; that regards knowledge of subjects as the key to 'opening minds'; and introduces individuals to an appreciation of the achievements of humanity and an understanding of the world. Managerial tinkering is at best a waste of teachers' time.

But, more seriously, it can contribute to a further lowering of expectations about what schools are for. We need to take stock of what education has come to mean today and repose the question 'what is education for?' or, to put it another way: what education do we want for all our children? Local schools for local communities, meeting local needs, represents an abandonment of 'education for all'. Whether they offer autonomy, the possibility of creativity or even a liberal curriculum, the tendency is against a subject-centred education for all.

'The local' is a new low point for education because it implicitly restricts access to knowledge that may transform pupil's ideas by taking them out of their parochial environment and concerns. It literally keeps people in their place.

Teachers should teach and parents should parent

by Kevin Rooney

In many ways, the education of our children is vested in both parents and teachers. Teachers rely on parents to create the right environment at home, ensure their children get to school every day, imbue them with an aspiration to learn and share responsibility for discipline. But once inside the school gate, responsibility for education shifts firmly to the teacher – the professional trained to transmit a body of knowledge to the pupil in their specialist subject area.

At least that's how it used to be. Today, the relationship between teacher and parent has been redefined by successive governments giving parents a greater role in the education of their children. This may be seen by some as supportive of a subject-centred school system, and some parents want subject-centred free schools. But the overall focus on parent power undermines the possibility of subject-centred teaching.

Formalising informal relationships

A growing number of government initiatives are institutionalising this new relationship. Parents who may struggle to retrieve any memories of their own parents helping with their homework are now expected to do regular homework with their children.

Some schools now include homework in new 'Home-School Contracts' regulating the parents' role in various aspects of their children's schooling. Open days and nights for parents proliferate. Gone are the days when

parents' evenings were a few minutes with a teacher focussed on a pupil's academic achievements.

Whilst the Coalition's decision to invite parents to set up and run schools has raised some eyebrows, the reality is the policy isn't such a radical departure given the shift in responsibility for education away from teachers and towards parents. Former Education Minister Ed Balls has spoken out against the Coalition's plans, but it was his government that introduced a radical new policy giving parents an unprecedented level of involvement and control of their children's education.

An example of this process is online entitlement. This allows parents to 'engage' more with their children's education by logging onto school computer records on every aspect of the child's education at any time. From September 2010, all teachers have to spend time ensuring information on each child, normally compiled around the time of parents' evening, is posted on the school website and updated regularly. Parents will be invited to go online from their home or work and check their child's attendance, educational progress in each subject and general. It's rumoured this is only the beginning – with some policy makers keen to extend it to cover individual goals, targets, and every class test result.

Empowering parents disempowers teachers

Online engagement is presented by government as 'empowering' parents. It's hailed as a breakthrough in educational 'transparency'. But using lots of positive words to describe something doesn't make it positive. In fact, many other measures giving more power to parents could be seriously bad for education. It's hard to see how the statutory online entitlement will not further reduce the autonomy of the teacher and erode trust between teacher and parent.

Good teaching requires discretion, trust, informality and at times pretty brutal assessments. Teachers may also want to discuss pupils' behaviour and progress in terms which they may not elaborate on in discussion with parents. Every communication of this sort is soon to be available online for the purposes of transparency. Already teachers are being warned by head teachers to sanitise the language used and word reports in ways that will avoid conflict with parents. This suggests the move won't even achieve the stated goal of honesty and transparency.

Furthermore, there's a danger that in moving from interpersonal spoken communication to remote written exchanges, the tone of the parent-teacher relationship will shift. Previously informal relationships are redefined as more formal contractual ones. It's imperative that teachers and parents engage informally and voluntarily. There should be a clear separation of responsibilities so that teachers are allowed to teach and parents are allowed to parent.

But even if the government could prove online engagement is effective and empowers parents, it should be opposed because this would disempower teachers. This initiative is

only the latest in a bewildering array of proposals which undermine the authority of the teacher in the classroom, steadily eroding any sense of the teacher's autonomy. Fundamental to this are Ofsted inspections, which do little to monitor the quality and content of teaching, instead favouring banal tick lists, not only of objectives, but to ensure that starters, plenaries, lesson plans, self-evaluations and so on are taking place.

Relevant schools, irrelevant education

On top of that, the government has also decided teachers are well placed to find answers to many of today's social and political challenges. 'Citizenship education', now compulsory, encourages young people to become active 'citizens' by voting, protecting the environment and so on. 'Personal health and social education', also compulsory, tackles problems like obesity and teenage pregnancy. The latest offer, 'capacity and resilience building' aims at tackling the relationship building and bullying. And almost every inquiry by the great and the good into 'what went wrong' seems to recommend new roles for teachers. The 'Every child matters' policy framework started as a recommendation from the Climbié Inquiry into the tragic death of a young child. But now, this scheme requires all teachers to monitor their pupils for general well-being and any signs of unhappiness at home.

The plethora of requirements says nothing about the content of subject education. Neither does it ensure teachers get on with imparting a body of knowledge and developing pupils' abilities to learn, analyse and ultimately think for themselves. This is a social function schools and teachers are uniquely able to discharge in a systematic fashion. Successive governments have obsessed over gaining legitimacy for the schools they direct. They've involved parents and provided schools with a greater role in society. But this has only succeeded in elevating process and narrow and immediate political priorities over subject teaching. Schools are undoubtedly more 'open', 'transparent' and 'relevant' to the wider society - but at what cost to education?

With respect to online school reports, teachers, always pushed for time, will now spend more of that precious time engaged in form-filling, report writing, and ticking boxes. Robbed of their autonomy, teachers will experiment less and develop a process-driven mentality. This will promote caution and stifle creativity. All of this is the result of a formalization of what were previously informal relationships between teachers and parents, teachers and students and the freedom, space and autonomy of the teacher to decide how best to educate their students.

The real power of teachers

Iconic plays and films about education like The History Boys and Educating Rita shine a light on the transformative power of education where there are good relationships between student and teacher. Away from the prying eyes of parents and the state, and rising above the constraints of family background and social class, the combination of an

inspiring teacher and the power of the subject can change lives.

The tragic reality taking place in our schools today is this potential is being abandoned without even a debate. Parent power in education sounds so positive as to be impossible to dismiss. But this process is likely to increase antagonism between parents and teachers. The focus on transparency and formalisation of relationships takes away the discretion of the teacher in the classroom.

Of course parents have the right to know how their child is progressing at school. But this genuine desire should be distinguished from the current attempt to transform an individual parent's legitimate concern for their child into a new rather crude, amateur, mechanism for disciplining errant teachers.

Bonfire of the quangos

by Toby Marshall

For many years, politicians have called for a 'bonfire of the quangos'. Education has more than its fair share of such bodies. Indeed, recent studies show that eleven organisations have until recently been meddling in the affairs of schools, eating up more than £1 billion in funding. So, should educationalists celebrate the recent closure of three major educational quangos?

For the most part, the Lib-Con coalition's recent closures should be supported. Education, in my opinion, is at root inescapably political. To define the aims of education is to set out what it means to be a civilised and enlightened human being. It's proper, therefore, that debates about education, its aims and to some extent means, should be conducted squarely within the public sphere. Politicians, rather than appointed officials, should hold the ring.

However, it would be naïve to think that closing down educational quangos will address the deeper crisis in education. In fact, there's a danger the Coalition's plans for 'structural reform' could undermine the very leadership schools desperately need. The Coalition's attack on quangos tells us about their views on educational expertise and theory, as well their own sense of ideological confidence.

This is true primarily of the closure of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), rather than the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and General Teaching

Council for England (GTC). The basic point is that closing the QCDA indicates the Coalition would prefer to close down, rather than stimulate, discussions with those who have educational authority, expertise and experience. This is a deeply defensive approach. It may stem from the fact the Tory component of the Coalition realises it lacks a theory of education powerful enough to dislodge established educational orthodoxies. Seen in this light, the Coalition's bonfire of education quangos expresses political weakness, not strength.

It would be better if the Coalition adopted a more open and optimistic approach, and attempted to build a broad base of support. This means taking more seriously the theoretical work required to make a convincing case for a forward looking knowledge-centric education. It would involve a dialogue with experts in the field. The Coalition should attempt to engage the educational elite. This means not dismissing the contribution of institutions such as university departments and key figures from the educational quangocracy. Hopefully, this would establish conditions more favourable to the renewal of England's now culturally destitute schools.

A bonfire begins

With the appetite of a Jacobin, the Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove has in recent months set about dismembering key parts of the educational quangocracy. Much of this is good news for teachers. Whilst the budgetary significance of quangos has perhaps been overstated – in reality they until recently accounted for roughly 2% of the education budget – it's true they have needlessly interfered with the business of schools. In doing so, they've undermined their decision making powers.

The grossly oversized BECTA was the first to be closed, on 24th May 2010. In case you've never heard of it, BECTA's remit was to ensure 'effective and innovative use of technology throughout learning'. Its existence, however, was based on the fallacy teachers somehow need educational technology sold to them. This couldn't be further from the truth. Teachers and the public have lost little by ending this quango. In fact, taxpayers have gained £38 million, BECTA's budget, which ought to be used to refurbish a few more of England's rather shabby looking schools.

Soon after, on the 2 June 2010, it was announced that the generally despised and derided GTC would also be cut, saving the taxpayer another £16 million. This body had been established by New Labour to play a dual role: being an independent professional body, whilst maintaining standards of conduct. In practice it did neither. Instead, it generally articulated the voice of New Labour, and failed to play its disciplinary role. Indeed, the BBC's Panorama recently showed only 13 teachers have been struck off in England in the last 40 yyears, and many of those were before the GTC started work in 2000.

However, teachers should also be clear that the GTC hasn't been axed because a new era of trust is about to emerge. Rather, as the Schools Minister Lord Hill of Oareford has

clarified, government is simply looking for a more 'effective way of dealing with incompetence and misconduct'. Nobody has suggested the government's main instrument of control, and the most significant and destructive educational quango of them all – Ofsted - will go. We can only assume the Coalition believes the GTC's other function – representing the 'voice' of the teaching profession – is unnecessary. On balance, however, I am quite happy to see the GTC go. Teachers have their unions to represent their interests, and there are more than enough public forums in which teachers and their unions are free to articulate their views on professional matters.

I am more ambivalent, however, regarding the largest and most significant head that has been put on Gove's block. On the 27th May 2010 the Secretary of State for Education wrote to the Chair of the QCDA, which amongst other activities sets the National Curriculum. Gove began by thanking its employees for their long-standing public service. Then, he promptly declared that despite this, their organisation 'does not have a place in the education system of the future'. To be fair, it's unlikely this came as much of a shock, as Gove had in opposition made clear on a number of occasions he planned to change who would take responsibility for writing the school curriculum. Reports

in a number of publications indicated he planned to establish a committee of the 'greatest minds', who would draw up a 'traditionalist' curriculum. There is much to recommend this approach, if by 'traditionalist' he means a curriculum that gives primacy to knowledge and seeks to provide students with an introduction to the fundamental ideas around which civilisation has developed.

An education system needs educationalists

Yet early reports on the composition of Gove's proposed committee are worrying. It appears to be staffed by individuals with little demonstrated expertise or serious interest in education. They seem to have instead highly demanding publishing, academic, or broadcasting careers. They don't lack academic credentials – some are stars within their respective disciplines – but few seem to have made significant, sustained and serious contributions to debates about the future of education. In short, many are not educationalists. Indeed, few have even taught in schools.

Two members of Gove's committee illustrate this point. The first is historian Simon Schama. Regardless of his specific historical opinions, Schama has a well-established track record of engaging both the scholarly world and public more broadly. He has plenty to offer. But what Schama lacks, as far as I can see, is any demonstrable record of thinking in a sustained theoretical fashion about the curriculum, or education. He may be a scholar of history, but he's no theorist of education.

Another celebrity associated with Gove's committee of the great is broadcaster Carol Vorderman. Many have sneered that her 'gentleman's' 3rd class degree in engineering from Cambridge means she wouldn't even be eligible for a teacher training grant

under the Coalition's new system. Others suggest the author of the

Massive Guide to Sudoku and presenter of Countdown (1982 - 2008) is hardly the right sort of individual to write the new Maths curriculum. But unlike Schama, she does at least appear to have written books for the school market and her Maths Made Easy is well regarded in some quarters.

If the final composition of the Coalition's curriculum panel follows this pattern of elevating non-educationalists to positions of authority, this would indicate that educational matters are not being taken seriously by Mr Gove and his team. Whilst we await the final line up, many of those candidates noted so far don't appear to evidence much educational expertise. This suggests the Coalition believes the serious and complex questions posed by education and curriculum can be easily resolved by well-meaning amateurs. They are wrong. In fact, writing a curriculum is a highly skilled exercise that requires significant prior experience. It also means having the ability to conceive of the curriculum in its totality, as the curriculum is more than a sum of its individual subjects.

Educationalists need theory

The promotion of amateurism is a longstanding theme within modern Conservatism. It has consistently expressed hostility towards those who've attempted to theorise education. In the Conservative imagination, any attempt to go beyond superficial thinking about education has been considered at best a pointless distraction and at worse ideologically subversive of the 'common sense' assumptions on which traditional forms of education have rested. This is why Michael Gove has been keen to describe teaching as no more than a 'craft'.

It also explains Schools Minister Nick Gibb's recent and rather unguarded statements to his departmental officials. He said: 'I would rather have a physics graduate from Oxbridge without a PGCE teaching in a school than a physics graduate from one of the rubbish universities with a PGCE.' Surely the point that a Minister of State for Schools should be articulating is that he wants high-calibre teachers educated in both their subjects and in education, unless he believes that approaching education in theoretical terms is a pointless exercise.

The Coalition's philistinism about education is misguided and ultimately self-defeating. All teachers require theory to operate effectively. Two simple examples illustrate this point. Before and since the election Micheal Gove has pushed for a return to subject-based education. He should be supported. But how can educators be expected to uphold subject-based teaching if the Coalition lacks the intellectual apparatus needed to define what a subject is, and isn't? Similarly, Gove has recently called for the abolition of 'pseudo-subjects' in schools. There may be something to be supported here. But how might we distinguish between a 'real' and a 'pseudo' subject? To engage in these questions requires a theory of knowledge. It also requires more than a passing exposure to the great debates held in educational

philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s, when serious thinkers attempted to make clear the nature and boundaries of subjects. In other words, theory is required.

Looking to the future

The Coalition should be clear what it stands for, and use this to start a public debate. To shape this debate, key figures from the Coalition's education team, most of which are Conservatives, should raise the standard of discourse by engaging the educational elite. Closing down the debate by closing down quangos is defensive. It will win over no hearts and no minds.

Ironically, Gove may soon find he needs to set up a new curriculum quango. Once his committee of the great and good has decided what students need to know at the level of subjects, somebody will then be confronted with the practical task of translating these ideas into a workable document for schools. At which point, Gove may rue that day he dismissed those who worked for the QCDA.

What's next: reasons to be cheerful?

The Coalition government is creating space for serious educational debate for the first time in over a decade.

We now hear some of the right arguments from government. These could be strengthened. Most importantly, the Coalition should adopt a theory which allows a universalisation of the subject-centred perspective. We hope this essay series has contributed to this task.

However, they mustn't weaken their resolve to rebuild subject-centred education. They must avoid political objectives aimed at social engineering rather than education.

We can also question the Coalition's commitment to the intellectual pursuit of knowledge. It's wrong that Vince Cable and David Willetts have cut back higher education, and Nick Gibb derides teacher education.

We end with a reminder of two facts about education. First: pupils, despite everything that society and the education system does to them, retain a thirst for knowledge - they can't help themselves. Second: teachers realise its duty to quench this thirst.

The potential for a subject-centred education system based on these facts can be fulfilled. However, the Coalition must not be side-tracked. It must develop the intellectual clarity and strength to argue coherently for subject-based education.

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