

Institute of Ideas conference report

Crisis? What Crisis? Re-examining what education is for

London, 3-4 July 2004

By **Alex Standish**, international observer from Rutgers University, USA

Some three hundred teachers, parents, students, academics, writers, and policy makers descended upon London's Park Crescent Conference Centre for the weekend to debate the current state of the UK's education system. The conference began with the question of what education is for. It is from this question that most others follow. Children's laureate Michael Morpurgo thought that how young people feel about themselves was key; Kevin Morris of Canterbury Christ Church University College emphasised the role of education for integrating society; TV presenter and 'maths enthusiast' Johnny Ball saw education as a vehicle to raise and broaden pupils experience and horizons; while James Tooley advocated education as the transmission of what is worthwhile - the good life.

These different roles for education were drawn out in subsequent discussions with many people arguing that its intellectual role is being superseded by socialisation concerns. This was an idea developed by sociologist Frank Furedi during the dinner debate with Judith Judd of the Times Educational Supplement. Furedi argued that although schools have always played a socialisation role, today this has come to be seen as their most important function. In the absence of communities spontaneously reproducing themselves, schools are increasingly being asked to fulfill this role. 'Extended schools' are a concrete example of this trend. Furedi further argued that whereas in the past schools have sought to modify behaviour of pupils, today they are shaping their personal and emotional responses, for example, by telling pupils that anger is not an 'appropriate' response to a given situation. This therapeutic model of education amounts to a high level of intrusion into the private minds of pupils, suggested Furedi, and at the expense of education itself. In contrast, Judd insisted that educational standards in schools were improving, indicating that schools still perform their core role. She quoted figures measuring national curriculum attainment to back up her case.

Evidence for a shift away from educational objectives towards socialisation was apparent in the discussions on the science and history curricula and citizenship education. With both science and history, as with many subjects, the buzzword has been 'relevance'. In another session, educationalist Ralph Levinson described how science today is justified (made 'relevant') in terms of utility, culture and democratic purposes. By cultural purpose he meant that pupils need to know how science fits into their culture, and by democratic purpose, that young people will need to make decisions in life about scientific issues, particularly to do with lifestyle. Physics teacher David Perks concluded that science curriculum has thus become a sociological critique of science rather than aiming to teach pupils about the discovery of truth and objectivity. One consequence of this trend, noted Perks, is that young people are growing more distrustful of science and scientists. History teacher Louise Fahey noted a shift towards an emotional rather than a rational interpretation of the past. Relevance then would seem to mean that education has to serve some social or psychological function for the pupil. By implication, then, some educators do not view the intellectual development of pupils as 'relevant'.

The introduction of a mandatory citizenship curriculum in 2002 is a one indication of the way that education is being used for non-academic purposes. While the content of these classes may be more flexible, specifications direct teachers towards issues

of personal, social and health education (PSHE) and other life skills. Learning about the political system is only a fraction of the required content. Educationalist Audrey Osler and Alexandra Runswick of the New Politics Network talked about the benefits of young people 'doing' citizenship, arguing that actively taking responsibility for the curriculum or school projects would help them to become more active citizens. This new model of citizenship approaches social issues such as democracy, environmentalism and cultural tolerance in terms of personal values rather than simply as ideas to be studied.

Some of the audience thought these to be positive values that should be nurtured in young people, while others noted the intrusive implications of teachers seeking to shape the personal values of individuals. Social science teacher Kevin Rooney argued that citizenship education is a political project and not about education. For this reason alone, it should be rejected, asserted Rooney. Kierra Box, 18-year-old co-founder of Hands up for Peace, was in agreement with this point, even though she thought citizenship could benefit pupils. She commented that citizenship education as it currently stands is asking young people to solve problems that adults cannot fix (principally the political disengagement of youth). It would seem she has a point here. The link between 'doing' active citizenship and political engagement is anything but convincing. 'If it really was about political engagement,' argued Rooney, 'it would teach pupils abstract concepts of political systems and democratic accountability.' This is certainly not the approach suggested by the other speakers.

In a session on subject knowledge, John White, author of *Rethinking the School Curriculum: values, aims and purposes*, argued that national curriculum is a relic of a bygone era and subject divisions are arbitrary. There was some sympathy among the audience for questioning the relevance of a curriculum devised in the 19th century to the 21st century world. But philosopher Roger Scruton, educationalist Harry Dodds and Alan Hudson of the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education launched a convincing 'defence of the subject'. Their arguments in favour of subject mastery included: the passing on of culture, a grasp of language, that only through knowledge can pupils become truly independent learners, that young people will improve knowledge and culture in the future. White argued that the potential of education to move individuals up the social ladder is not in evidence today, but the others insisted that education does not need an external function to justify its worthiness. 'The purpose of education is education,' said Dennis Hayes from the floor. Pupils should learn knowledge and skills so they can interpret and play a role in the world, was the conclusion. Hudson added that the attack on subjects is anti-democratic as it denies young people equal access to a common curriculum.

Does this also mean that new subjects, such as media studies, replacing the old, are a waste of time? Another panel addressed this question. In both literacy and media studies the emphasis should be on quality suggested Toby Marshall, an ICT teacher and co-convenor of the conference. Some subjects, like geography, are better described as fields of knowledge as their boundaries are somewhat arbitrary, while others like maths or biology are more clear-cut. The general message was that the headings under which pupils learn are less important than the content and quality of learning.

So, what makes a good school? Grammar school assistant head Richard Swan and Will Skidelsky of the *New Statesman* suggested good teachers, and Elizabeth Sidwell, principal of a successful (and well-heeled) London school, emphasised 'ethos', while Richard Stubbs, teacher at a less prestigious London comprehensive, argued that

human and capital resources were key. Nick Seaton of the Campaign for Real Education argued that state intervention in schools has made the task of quality education an impossible one. The question of the role of the state in education brought contrasting responses. Many see state interference as having negative consequences, but recent suggestions that it play a lesser role smack of an abdication of responsibility.

If teachers are the way to a quality education, then what makes a good teacher? This was the question put in another session. Their collective response was personal characteristics, knowledge of the subject and what it offers pupils, but also pedagogy. There was a general feeling that educational philosophy and child psychology were being overlooked, although some thought that learning about these could wait. Educationalist Shirley Lawes argued that the nature of teacher education has changed. Instead of theory, 'reflective practice' has become dominant. Lawes criticised this trend for reducing theory to a subjective practical enterprise.

There was concern about some of the new tasks that teachers are being asked to carry out, such as training for child protection, which are changing the role of teachers. Are teachers becoming more like social workers or counsellors? If they spend their time monitoring and regulating pupil interactions, then surely this will take away from the time and thought directed towards academic education?

The social and psychological wellbeing of the child was also at the centre of a discussion about personalised learning. Kathy Wicksteed of the Specialist Schools Trust, journalist Angela Neustatter and educationalist Bethan Marshall put forward the merits of personalised learning in that it treats children as human beings, valuing their current knowledge and experience, and recognising their differences. This they argued stood in contrast to the deficit model of education where teachers stand at the front of the class and lecture the pupils, who are viewed as receivers of knowledge. This 'chalk and talk' approach to teaching has been derided by many educationalists as a 'passive' approach to learning because the students are not doing. On this point, IoI director Claire Fox argued that in fact listening to the teacher and engaging in discussion through structured replies can be a highly intellectual and demanding process when undertaken by a skilled teacher.

Dennis Hayes comprehensively attacked personalised learning, 'The more personal learning is the less educational it becomes.' This method puts the special educational needs model of learning at the center of education, argued Hayes. It's method is to identify the individual targets for a child with special educational needs, on the assumption that they cannot achieve the same knowledge and skill level as pupils without special educational needs. Therefore, it starts from a premise that not all pupils in your class are going to be able to learn the same things. But applying the special educational needs approach to mainstream education is the death knell for the idea of a common curriculum that is accessible to all. In this sense it is anti-democratic, Alan Hudson's point. Hayes added that another consequence of personalised learning was to devalue the role of the teacher. By presenting pupils and teachers on a par, both learning together, the implication is that teachers having nothing in the way of knowledge and skills to offer young people.

The idea of personalised goals and learning is reinforced by Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Changing theories of intelligence was the subject of a discussion with Helene Guldberg of spiked, educationalist Richard Bailey and author Susan Bentham. The multiple intelligence theory posits that in addition to intellectual

intelligence, there are other intelligences, such as spatial, bodily, emotional, linguistic etc. From this notion of pupils as different types of learners has been popularised: aural, kinesthetic and visual. In schools pupils are encouraged to identify with their preferred 'learning style' and teachers to teach using different methods appropriate to the different learners.

It was suggested that while many teachers do tend to mix methods out of common sense, the idea of pupils having a tendency towards a certain learning styles presents intelligence as a fixed essence. Why can't all students learn from listening to a discussion or interpreting a picture? Some may be better at one type of activity than another, but can't we all improve these skills? Bailey noted the common reference to the Gattaca Effect. This is the idea that we can predict the future development of young people from the earliest of ages. He criticised this tendency again as promoting the idea of fixed intelligence and skills that are inherited and identifiable at a young age. Hence we are shaped by our past not by our future denying the potential of young people to change or develop in a new direction. Guldberg lamented what she described a 'pop psychology' influencing educational theory that is merely reflecting everyday prejudices.

The conference concluded with a discussion of creative solutions. Philip Walters, managing director of Hodder Education, noted the decline of value being placed on books today. Likewise, Frank Furedi observed that in some cases students at university are not even expected to read books. Several participants over the weekend had alluded to the crisis lying in the political sphere, a crisis of adult relations, rather than within education itself. By asking schools and teachers to undertake the task of reconstituting communities an intolerable burden in being placed on their shoulders, as this is a battle they cannot win. While teachers should do all they can to maintain high educational standards, ultimately the solution to the crisis will come from the political sphere.

Alex Standish is doing postgraduate research on geographic education at Rutgers University, New Jersey.