

21ST CENTURY LEARNING ALLIANCE

THE BIG DEBATE

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ALL CHANGE

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As we move into election season, there have been calls for another ‘great education debate’ along the lines of that stimulated by James Callaghan’s Ruskin speech almost 35 years ago. There is a growing consensus that the UK education system, throttled by targets and league tables, is desperately out of sync with the needs of learners. There also seems to be a growing consensus around the factors that need to change in order to make learning more accessible, relevant and meaningful to a new generation. Broadly speaking, they fall into five categories:

1. Firstly, there is an urgent need to **radically change the assessment system**. We like to think that education is learning-driven when in fact it is overwhelmingly assessment-driven. We need to reduce the amount of testing and recognise that, as the Chinese proverb suggests, ‘you don’t make a pig fatter by weighing it every day’. We also need to change the criteria and structures of the assessment system so that it supports teachers and students in identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Snapshots of performance against narrow criteria at a specific time in a child’s educational life are simply not helpful. In the same vein, school inspection needs a major overhaul. One rarely hears a teacher speaking of Ofsted with anything but dread or loathing. Wouldn’t it be refreshing if inspectors worked with schools to celebrate successes and tackle weaknesses?
2. A rethink of the assessment system will only succeed if trust in teachers is restored. Trust in teachers will only be restored when there is a sustained **investment in teaching and teacher training**. We need to attract the best graduates all the time rather than just absorbing them during a banking hiring freeze. The education system needs inspiring teachers now as much as it did in 1910 and will do in 2110 - we need to reward and treasure them.
3. Good teachers will only stay in post if they are respected as professionals, with the freedom to be creative rather than simply deliver lessons to a script. Teachers need the time and scope to **build relationships** with their students so that they can support them as individuals. Research has shown that humans are only able to develop meaningful relationships with 70-80 people, yet we ask teachers to work with several hundred students at any one time. When we are re-building schools, we need to re-think our learning environments: a shabby school with strong relationships between teachers, students, parents and the community is worth dozens of the glass entrance halls which are seemingly all the rage in the Building Schools for the Future programme.
4. We need to recognise **the skills required for the 21st century** such as the ability to relate to others collaboratively; to process information effectively; and to identify and solve problems creatively. The best predictor of whether a young person ends up in prison or re-offending is if they have a job. In order to hold down a job, a young person must have good self-efficacy skills (the ability to master something from learning to fail). If we really want our schools to succeed, they must focus on the child and their mental health. To do

this, they must nurture the child's ability to learn in an environment that is based around good relationships. If children are confident in their relationships, they will grow in emotional resilience and learn that failure is something we learn from rather than something to be ashamed of. Development of these personal skills should carry the same, if not greater, kudos as passing your maths GCSE.

5. We need to break the cycles of failure that young people experience throughout their education. A child's success at school can be predicted quite accurately by examining their family background. We have to remember that schools don't see children until they are four or five years old, by which time many cycles of failure may already have occurred. We need to focus on **children's early years** and how we can influence this stage of their life so that they are ready for school. A **readiness to learn** needs to be achieved before we even consider what and how we learn.

While there is growing consensus that these are some of the key factors that need to be addressed if the UK's education system is to equip young people for today's rapidly changing global environment, there are two significant issues that need to be tackled before progress can be made.

The Government needs a brief period of consultation – a 'great education debate', if you will – after which it commits to a strategy and sets about delivering it within a flexible framework that responds to changing external circumstances. The last thing we need is endless navel-gazing about the future of education without getting to the sharp end of delivery. And the one thing that we absolutely cannot afford is inconsistency – we need a commitment by the Government to work with teachers, parents and the wider community to deliver an agreed education strategy rather than pursuing initiatives for the sake of a headline. The Secretary of State for Education merry-go-round needs to stop and, ideally, the Minister remain in post for the full term of the new Government.

Secondly, as part of this great consultation, we need to bottom out the purpose of education in the 21st century. As a nation, we seem to have got ourselves in a terrible muddle. Are schools there to serve the needs of universities? Is school simply preparation for employment? Do we have an education system or a training system? Is education about people-making or profit-making? It is easy to fall into thinking that these are mutually exclusive choices when in fact we have every opportunity to design an education system that nurtures young people who can contribute to today's complex global society from an economic, cultural and social perspective.

There is a pressing need for us - as teachers, parents, students and policymakers – to agree a way forward, to remove education from the game of political pinball and collaborate in the creation of an education system that brings out the best in every single child.

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