

21ST CENTURY LEARNING ALLIANCE

BOARD MEMBER'S PAPERS

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN MOST AT RISK AND WHAT CAN BE
DONE?

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Who are the children most at risk and what can be done?

The millennium rite of passage has spawned much discussion on what schools need to do to meet the needs of the 21st century. The increased pace of change in society and the economy, the global nature of many so called 'wicked' issues and the need for interdisciplinary solutions to them have been cited as examples of why schools need to behave differently in the future than they have done in the past.

Children are in school for only 15% of their waking time between birth and sixteen: the balance (85%) is spent in the home or community where children find themselves in very different circumstances. In some, children are fortunate to be immersed in a supportive culture with clear and well judged expectations. These children feel good about themselves: at an early age they hear music, play, are listened to encouragingly and hear countless stories intended for them. Their lives and confidence are enriched by taking part in new experiences. In short at every turn they are surrounded by what we might call '*positive, aspirational role models*'. Other children however come from homes where some or all of these things, which the well off and better educated parents take for granted, are absent. In some – a few – they face apathy or even violence from parents or carers who have lost hope and are simply not 'good enough', as Bettelheim would have put it. These children are surrounded by what we might call '*negative or at best neutral, aspirational role models*'. Moreover in the teenage years, sometimes earlier, they are frequently in a culture beyond the school and home where they spend time in a community characterised by ever present sporadic violence, crime and drugs and where it is especially difficult to grow the resilience to avoid becoming ensnared.

In school, a particularly precious time for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, organisational practices, such as vertical or year group teaching; setting or streaming; formative or normative assessment and marking; behaviour policies and practices that achieve a positive weighting on the rewards and sanctions spectrum; use of language; the experiences offered by the school – all have a positive or negative impact on individual pupils. A school may be successful for many, some or few pupils. Existing evidence is that schools are less successful with children from apparently disadvantaged backgrounds but that a few schools buck that trend.

What the 21st Century Learning Alliance has done so far is to set out a series of statements of issues which schools consider but, in doing so, might ask themselves whether a particular answer is more or less likely to cause embedded failure among those youngsters most at risk of failure in school. For example most secondary schools, in adopting a fortnightly timetable 'to fit it all in', admit that in establishing priority criteria they start with the sixth form, proceed to the higher grade GCSE sets, ensure that Year 9 have good teachers and end with Year 7 'making do' at the end of the process. Yet they would also subscribe to the desirability for any Year 7 pupil to encounter 7 or 8 teachers at most. Except for schools which have adopted the RSA 'Opening Minds' programme, 'fortnightly –

timetable' schools often have Year 7 pupils encountering 16 to 20 different teachers in a fortnight. In the same way, schools face real choices of elevating the needs of some pupils over those of others when they decide on 'mirror' or 'upper' and 'lower' banding. The examples are myriad and we have set out some of them out in statements on a website: www.21stcenturylearningalliance.com .

My hope is that we can broaden the debate and establish a list of, say, half a dozen school organisational practices, widely agreed to be essential if we are to reduce the sort of embedded failure identified in this paper. For my money the list would definitely include:-

- 'vertical' as well as 'horizontal' pupil groupings,
- more team and less individual activity, assessment and tasks and,
- guaranteed residential experiences
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The debate is surely worth having and ought to provoke a simultaneous consideration of government practices which, at a system level, have a similar potential to diminish or increase the likelihood of embedded failure, the reduction of which is surely the country's top priority for the 21st century.

Sir Tim Brighouse

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