

21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LEARNING ALLIANCE

BOARD MEMBER'S PAPERS

DEFINITIONS OF 'FAILURE'

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### **Some definition of 'educational purposes' and the 'failure' we might eliminate.**

Given the advances in the use of the information and communication technologies and our improved knowledge of how the brain works and how children learn, it ought to be possible to eliminate failure in education. This is arguably the most important if elusive 21<sup>st</sup> century issue of all.

Of course such an approach runs the risk of being criticised as ignoring the needs of those who gain most and excel at school, those whom the government has recently identified as the 'gifted and talented'. But it is our contention that this very identification has ensured that their needs are in no danger of being overlooked. Indeed we shall argue that when schools have to make hard choices, for example about which teachers teach which children, their needs are promoted at the expense of the group we are identifying as gaining the least from school.

First however it is necessary to set out what we mean by failure and the educational purposes by which it might be measured.

The moral argument for trying to minimise failure and optimise individual educational success was well expressed by William Temple whose words powerfully affected R.A. Butler in the production of the 1944 Education Act:-

*'Are you going to treat a man as he is with many of his tastes warped, with his powers largely crushed or as he might become with his faculties fully developed? Are you going to treat a man as he is or as he might be? Morality requires that you should treat him as might be, as he has it in him to become; business on the other hand requires that you should treat him as he is. Raising what he is to what he might be is the work of education.*

*'And so you can have no justice at the basis of your social life until education has done its full work...and you cannot have political freedom anymore than you can have moral freedom until people's powers have been developed. Nor can there be individual freedom, for the simple reason that over and over again we find men with a cause which is just (who) are unable to state it in a way which might enable it to prevail.....there exists a mental form of slavery quite as real as any economic form. We are pledged to destroy it.....if you want human liberty you must have educated people.'*

To this moral imperative for successful education, (which is not emphasised as much now as it was then in the optimism of the post-war period of reconstruction,) can be added an economic one. Not merely does education add to the individual's chances of financial advantage, there is a general political consensus that ever higher standards of education and training are now necessary for countries to thrive and survive in a rapidly changing and technologically driven world. For any individual to lead a fulfilling life as a contributing citizen it is arguable that he/she needs to succeed sufficiently in either the Temple sense of being able to tighten an argument and/or to hone a skill that will bring them financial and other reward. (Both have prospects that are economic and if you succeed at only one then you at least need the skill to seek the help of someone who has the skill, rather in the way that the philosopher and the plumber need to respect each other and their mutual interdependence)

Thirdly in addition to these two *moral* and *economic* imperatives, there is a *cultural* one, at the level both of the individual and of a society collectively. We owe it to our future citizens to ensure they are initiated into the essential culture of a society and are capable of shaping its development. Finally, society expects of its schools that they will re-enforce those values, such as honesty and truth, which are the bedrock of most societies' moral norms.

It is really against these three – the moral, economic and cultural – purposes that we should measure educational success or failure.

### **So what do we mean by 'failure' in an educational context?**

It is interesting to note that the very idea and understanding of 'failure' varies from country to country. There are, for example, languages that have no word for failure except in relation to an absence of success: it is as though their language implies simply a postponement of success. Of course in that sense failure is inevitable and not harmful.

In this paper therefore I am not talking of trying to eliminate the sort of failure that arises when an individual or group fails to understand a concept or demonstrate a skill and is then prompted to more endeavour, which leads to ultimate success. Frequently that sort of failure is an inevitable and useful part of learning. It is associated with what is now called 'formative assessment' or 'assessment for learning'. Carried out well, this sort of assessment allows the learner to see exactly what he/she has to do to overcome the difficulty and embark with a clear map of the next few steps on the journey of learning. It is thankfully much more pervasive in schools now than it has ever been and many are cleverly using the Olympics of 2012 to boost its relevance to their current set of pupils. (After all every athlete who fails to reach or surpass their 'personal best' is spurred on by this sort of failure to make adjustments to their regime or approach to become ever better.) To make matters more complicated however, the appetite for interpersonal competition varies according both to age and to emerging self-confidence and capacity to cope with a comparative lack of success. The judgement about the extent the individual is exposed to this sort of competition is inevitably in the hands of teachers, parents and peer group. Get it right and the individual's and society's recognition of what is possible is extended: get it wrong and both are damaged.

This last point reaches the heart of the matter. Repeated failure can become so embedded that it convinces the individual or the group that it is impossible ever to be successful. Researchers say that it is very apparent in young children aged 7 or 8 when some of them perceive they are falling further and further behind their contemporaries in learning to read – a capability they see as clearly very highly valued by their teachers, their parents and the more successful members of their peer group. They start to see themselves as 'failures' in every other sphere of highly valued activity and perform accordingly.

Repeated failure becoming collectively embedded can be seen every week in the performances of consistently unsuccessful sports teams as their 'heads go down' and their self-confidence becomes so low that they lack the psychological strength to break the habit of losing. Failing schools are like this.

It is this sort of failure that the educational system could do without among the pupils and their schools. How the system behaves and impacts on the schools will affect both the schools' and their individual pupils' chances of success. Let us therefore consider ways in which we could reduce, if not eliminate, this sort of 'unnecessary failure' at the levels of the individual pupil, the school and the system respectively.

One final preliminary point needs to be underlined, namely the cultural influence referred to earlier. It is not merely language that affects the climate. We are sometimes reluctant or unknowing heirs to the expectations of our ancestors. In this respect it's worth noting that we have been preoccupied with - and in a sense dependant - on failure. The Bishop of London in 1803 noted that some thought that 'It was safer for the Church and State to allow the poorer classes to remain in that state of ignorance in which God had originally placed them'. Robert Lowe, the architect of the notorious 'Revised Code' following the 1870 Education Act, said 'We must give the lower classes just sufficient education to give them that sense of awe for higher education which the leaders of the nation demand'. More recently if the 11 plus didn't 'fail' you then 'O' level would; and if you surmounted that hurdle and even 'A' level, you could regard yourself as a failure if you didn't get a first from Oxford or Cambridge of course. Even then there was the real test of the PhD ahead. Such observations may be fanciful but they convey our inherited predisposition to find failure as a means of identifying success.

#### **Ways in which we measure pupil and school success.**

The emphasis on academic attainment as the main means of establishing an individual pupil's or of a school's success is well noted and sometimes contested as being at the expense of other sorts of success. Certainly OFSTED inspections and the publication of exam league tables, for example, encourage schools to focus on a few key measurements such as 5 or more higher GCSE grades including English and Maths and therefore the likelihood of giving disproportionate attention to those pupils at the borderline of this measure at the expense of others who happen to be those likely to be at risk of experiencing the sort of embedded failure we would want to avoid. In short there are systemic practices (of which OFSTED inspections and especially exam league tables are but two) within which schools have to operate which are unhelpful.

The more narrowly and normatively pupil and school success is drawn, the more likely it is that there will be embedded failure for some schools and individual pupils. Besides therefore the other systemic measures, such as funding and school admission criteria, the way we collectively decide to measure school success is important if we wish to be serious in eliminating embedded and self-fulfilling failure.

Included in such a more desirable and wider definition of schools success might be the way schools and their pupils can demonstrate improvements in:-

- Participation and average performance rates in various sports
- Annual 'health fitness' measures
- Participation in a wide range of arts activities (e.g. music)
- Participation in a wide range of other defined pupil activities and experiences (e.g. day visits and residentials as well as extended curriculum studies)

- Staff professional development activities
- Staff and pupil absence rates
- Defined student leadership and management opportunities
- Pupil voluntary contribution to the well-being of the local community
- Encouragement of opportunities for family learning

To these, plus of course the existing measures, modified to give prime importance to a capped average points per pupil at GCSE rather than 5 or more higher grades including English and maths, would be added evidence of other school success measures such as continuing improvements and developments in school organisational practices together with belonging to a learning partnership with other schools so that the resources of more than one school can assist those pupils, whose needs any one school cannot meet. One final piece of evidence a society and school serious about reducing unnecessary failure would consider, is the regular collection of the views of pupils, staff and parents through the use of attitudinal surveys.

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