**Education in a post-Covid world: a provocation**

**The world may have been turned upside down, but that’s no excuse for looking at it through the wrong end of the telescope.**

For anyone involved in education, the return of children to school has been a demanding business. The same goes for returning to university. I’ll come to that in due course, but as far as schools have been concerned, the dominant discourse has been depressing and unimaginative.

Two ideas have sucked up most of the media coverage: the need to avoid another fiasco around exam results and the requirement of children to ‘catch up.’ Given that it is the job of academics to challenge accepted thinking, let’s ask ourselves two simple questions? First –why don’t we take this opportunity to completely rethink our current regime of examinations and testing? Second – with what, or with whom, do we want our children to catch up? And why? Is life some sort of race? Especially post-Covid life.

To start by fretting over exams and the need to meet their requirements is to begin at the end of the process – the wrong end of the telescope. The two notions of catching up and testing are connected and we need to disentangle the idea of assessment from that of testing – particularly the sort of high-stakes testing that now dominates public life on a range of levels. It is perfectly proper for professionals to ascertain how children are developing on emotional, physical and cognitive levels, but it is how that information is used which is the critical issue. If data is collected which triggers resources and materials and is used to plan the next stages of that child’s development, or if it is used to address difficulties that have been identified, then that would be a perfect process. That is not what happens.

In the untransformed world we know, despite informed opposition and concerted campaigning, such data – harvested from children barely able to toddle – is tabulated and used to compile crude sources of bald information to ascertain whether institutions are meeting targets and, most importantly, providing value for the money provided by the public purse. The effect of this on those who work in educational settings, from pre-school to post-graduate, is extensive and corrosive. The emphasis on producing measurable, numerically simplistic data has an impact on their most basic of daily actions and decisions. If the test outcome, at whatever level, is the indicator by which an institution is judged and funded, and by which an individual’s professional worth and prospects are measured, then there can be no surprise when practitioners in those settings dedicate most of their time and energy to grinding out the best results they can. Which might just be all well and good if what was being tested was in the best interests of the child. Most of the time, it is not.

To illustrate why this is the case, let’s return to the notion of post-Covid catching-up. Let’s ask ourselves what all children, from infants to befuddled teenagers, need at present. There is no argument about the desirability of a return to the familiarity of routines and a sense of purpose. But what also needs to happen is for educators to be able to create the space, literally and metaphorically, for young people to share and make sense of their experiences during this unsettled time. They need to talk, play, read, draw, make and reflect – sometimes collectively, occasionally individually. The most depressingly recurrent image during the media coverage of the return to school was that of neat rows of socially distanced desks. For most of our children, the last place they need to be is behind a desk, sitting in a row…..’catching up.’

A school day which allows for flexibility to meet the current needs of this battered cohort of young people must push to one side the requirements of a test-driven curriculum. Despite the fact that some schools, universities and cabinet ministers cling on to their insistence that we simply must have this year’s – or any other year’s – examinations and tests, everything we know about pedagogy indicates that that young people will ‘perform’ just as well when they approach their learning in a happy and confident frame of mind. Which leads to an uncomfortable, but unavoidable, question: is what we’re asking them to learn of any use to anyone anyway?

Lest this question be misconstrued as frivolous, I am not suggesting that we don’t want all children to be able to read, write and be numerate – although, to reiterate the point, quite why these processes need to be time-limited has no basis is any sort of pedagogical knowledge. However – and there is no doubting the gargantuan challenge this poses to the way our current curricula are constructed and imposed – does what we currently ask our children to learn (for their narrow tests) help them understand their relationship to the endangered planet they are about to inherit? Does it cast light on who makes important decisions about how society is organised and how it is controlled? Does it explain the divisions and inequality that affect the lives of every one of them, be they beneficiaries or victims? And if we’re not asking why these things are central to what educators do, which is all part of the enduring question of what education is ***for***, then what, to put it bluntly, do we think we’re playing at?

It should be obvious why this is important to us in Higher Education. We inherit those who have come through the school system and we form part of the bridge that then takes people to their place in wider society. We cannot, as educators, simply say to those young people that we are neutral, disinterested observers of that society, that we are humble suppliers of social and educational capital. For us to be bystanders, pretending that we act in a political and societal vacuum, is an abdication of duty and responsibility.

Here then, as promised, are some provocative prompts. I look forward eagerly to the discussion they will produce:

1. Would the whole edifice crumble if we disposed of national tests and examinations?
2. How can schools’ curricula be reformed – and who could control the process?
3. If either/both of these issues changed significantly, what would be the implications for Higher Education?
4. And, finally, the $64 question: Is it at all feasible that we could ever see the political and economic upheavals that would be required for such fundamental change?

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