

A vision for the future of primary education

An Oxford School of Thought report on prospective education provision and policy



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Foreword

I really welcome this paper from the Oxford School of Thought. After years of downward pressures imposed on the education system by politicians, it is refreshing to be reconnected to our heritage of principled and engaging primary education, which pays attention to individual children's abilities, experience and needs, and welcomes their varied interests and talents.

The current regime, imposed by ministerial diktat and enforced by Ofsted, demands daunting testing from the start of schooling, and premature expectations of children's achievements across a limited and limiting range of prescribed content. It is as if the Plowden Report two generations ago, the Rumbold report commissioned by a Conservative Education Minister and published in 1990, and the RSA recommendations made by Sir Christopher Ball in 1994, had never been successfully implemented: content has become the focus of inflexible instruction from the start, and has replaced the recognition and nurturing of individual children's needs and interests. It is high time that we addressed future needs and the wider meaning of education.

The UK has a particularly rich heritage of enlightened and effective early years and primary practice, led by principled professionals with insight as well as knowledge, which enable them to respond sympathetically and realistically to children's ambitions as well as their needs, and to take into account their personal situations along with their developmental stages. The days when visitors came from around the world to observe the inspiring practice in our primary schools are long gone, but fortunately, we still have teachers who know from experience how important it is to support children, families and communities holistically, as part of their role as educators. This paper looks afresh at possibilities: teachers need to be learners too.

The authors of these papers are aware how vital this is, especially following the various stresses caused by covid: this sharing of their vision of how a fulfilling education can be offered successfully is a gift to young children, and all who engage with them.

Wendy Scott OBE
President, TACTYC

Introduction

When education issues are addressed by politicians the tendency is to discuss outcomes only in terms of GCSEs and A levels, often with regard to PISA comparisons with other nations. There is frequently little consideration or understanding of the importance of early years and primary education – the years which provide the foundations for attitudes to learning, skills, and knowledge.

State funding reinforces this view with more spent per capita as children progress through the education system and the adult-child ratio widens as children grow older. An implicit component of many of the suggestions made here is that funding should be substantially improved for early years and primary schools to emphasise that all stages of learning are of equal standing. Improved government funding for nurseries and early years provision generally, is vital for the future of the nation and has the potential to be economically self-sufficient over a relatively short time span.

Our concern is, as Paul Goodman put it in his 1960 book *Growing Up Absurd*, that people have “ceased to be able to imagine alternatives”. The current education system is widely accepted and “is the only possibility of society, for nothing else is thinkable... there are no alternatives. And when one cannot think of anything to do, soon one ceases to think at all”.

A vision for the future of primary schools gives a view of where we are now, where we should be, how we get there, why it's important we get there, and makes some suggestions for the relevant policy changes.

We have tried to imagine alternatives.

The layering of educational provision

For decades we have added layer upon layer onto existing educational structures and provision. Our future depends upon maximising the talents we have available to react to a world where the needs are changing all the time.

What provision can guarantee this equality of opportunity? How can we avoid creating layer upon layer of policies which stultify progress, and ultimately deny the potential of our learners? An equitable rationale needs to be developed which breaks down the differences between regions; and mean deprived and privileged backgrounds become of minimal importance.

It has been shown that high quality early years support has a significant impact upon later educational outcomes and a stimulating learning environment from the moment they are children facilitates this. The opportunity for high quality education must be considered a right for all children, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28.

The primary importance of learning

To maximise the early educational opportunities for the next generation, one which needs to be ready to face a very changed economic, societal and working environment, three key areas need to be addressed:

Learning context – for social, cultural and economic reasons, it is important that the facilities, buildings and services available and a good school are integral to the wider culture of the community. In addition, recent experiences in the pandemic have highlighted the need for a system of support for each home which encourages good learning opportunities for all.

The **learning environment** needs to move beyond a primarily knowledge based education system to one which actively encourages social interaction, collaborative skills and creative thinking to achieve objectives. This requires a rigorous and clearly focussed programme of learning approach to the education journey which retains the self-directed learning of the Early Years and removes the many downsides of the high-stakes testing regime. This should also be a system which is based on positive values, enquiry and creativity as well as the involvement of the young person in evaluating their own progress.

Learning resources are now predominantly digitally based. The capacity to manipulate digital information often more than matches the ability to turn the page of a book, well before children can decipher the print. The fundamentals of learning to read need to be suited to each child (not limited to only one option) and take into account the complexities of the English language. Furthermore we must ensure that comprehensive access to technology is better embedded in the learning environment.

These three principles are fundamental to restructuring our education system but there are specific policy changes throughout this paper which aim to provide focus and direction. These key policy changes include:

- The creation of well funded and provisioned learning hubs – including Sure Start Centres, early years nursery provision, and improvements in community resources.
- The elimination of high-stakes tests, replaced with diagnostic testing internal to the school and bringing parents in as a part of the process
- The formation of a strategic education task force – building on the recommendations of the G20 Education Ministers Meeting – including representatives experts who can advance values-based education to help develop ethical intelligence
- The design of a broad primary curriculum which delivers enquiry based learning and a modular approach
- The removal of the emphasis on restrictive synthetic phonics systems as the *only* mechanism for learning to read, and restore programmes focusing on critical reading and thinking, and creative writing
- A minimum provision of a laptop for every child in every primary school as well as equity of digital support such as – resources for those who lack them, support for those who need it and mentorship for those who are gifted and talented

Learning context

Community comes first

Key policy changes:

- Create completely funded and well provisioned learning hubs (including Sure Start Centres, early years and nursery provision, and community resource improvements)
- Develop a new, 10 Year Strategy for Childcare starting in a suitable set of pilot primary schools, with rollout over the decade to all primary schools. At its peak in 2009 Sure Start cost approximately £2.3 billion and might be expected to return around £685 per child in economic benefits up to age five. Benefit savings and tax receipts could amount to up to [£8,432 per year per family moving into paid work](#). Figures in 2023 prices.
- By properly rebooting Sure Start and integrating it into the educational environment we can start engaging with all children from the moment they are born (or even earlier) to give them the benefits of education in its wider sense. Schools will become an integral part of the community rather than bolt on appendages.
- Introduce provision for all children to be in a learning environment from very early on and an equivalent system of support for the home which encourages good learning opportunities for all.
- Every school or nursery to be open for learning for a whole working day (including some flexibility for dropoff and pickup times), and at least 210 days a year. This would enable a number of parents and families back into the full-time workforce. It has clear economic benefits and is highly likely to be a net positive in economic terms.
- A policy about full funding for nurseries
- To support this, four day working weeks, at full pay levels, to be explored for full time educators
- Changes to the traditional structure of terms. The substantial shortening of summer holidays for instance could help [achieve key social mobility benefits](#).

Where we are

The Times Education Commission [has found that](#):

“poorer students are more than 18 months behind their wealthier peers when they take their GCSEs and the persistently disadvantaged are almost two years behind. The Education Policy Institute found that 40 percent of this disadvantage gap emerges by the time children start school. Nearly a third of five-year-olds are not reaching a good level of development and disadvantaged children are already 4.6 months behind by the end of the reception year. The life chances of many have been determined long before they get near the school gate”

In high-performing education systems, fully-provisioned nursery schools [play a crucial role in child development](#).

While recognising this the chancellor announced in the 2023 Spring Statement, 30 hours of free childcare for every child over the age of 9 months, with support being phased in until

every single eligible working parent of under 5s eventually gets this support by September 2025.

[This is a move in the right direction, but it has been challenged as a means of providing universal child care, with nurseries noting that funding for running costs is still insufficient](#) It is also difficult to reconcile the provision of 30 hours of childcare to the requirements of a standard working week of 38 hours

The Reach Foundation in Feltham, has demonstrated that the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children dropped from six to three months in a year after extra free hours were introduced for working families. They believe that education begins in the womb. The school runs antenatal classes and yoga mornings for pregnant women. New parents are invited to baby massage sessions, parenting courses, relationship guidance and play groups. "If we don't get involved right at the start of kids' lives then we are playing catch-up throughout their school careers," Ed Vainker, the chief executive, said.

This inspirational academy in one of the most deprived parts of the country is pioneering a cradle-to-career model of education. Reach is already seeing the benefits of intervening early and is working with 16 schools that want to adopt its approach but most of the pre-school work is funded by donations. "In our nursery we can see a huge difference between children even at two or three, based on their earliest experiences," Vainker said. "We know [how important those first 1001 days are](#), starting at conception, but the funding hasn't caught up."

It is currently the case that for parents of children aged two or three, average spending on childcare costs is about 29 percent of income (almost 2.5 times the OECD average), and yet the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) rankings for the UK have been consistently below the top ten. It must be hoped that new funding for the early years system in the UK moves away from being underfunded. Large chains of providers [focus on serving more affluent areas](#), creating inconsistency overall.

Where we should be

The Reach Foundation model (and the [experience of countries like Estonia](#) and Finland), suggest that ensuring contact with helpful professionals at an early stage in a child's life (coherent early years provision is offered for children up to the age of 6 or 7) can help parents make the right choices at home, when encouraging their child to ask questions about his or her environment and develop early enquiry skills to be developed later in school.

Schools have always held this key role though it has been eroded since parental preference was introduced in the late 1980s. Then, Kenneth Baker's drive to introduce market conditions in the schooling system had the effect of turning families into clients and fracturing the bond between a school and its locality. Too many children find themselves recruited from distant schools meaning that, for many of their families, the concept of a school within the community diminishes.

For families in the most disadvantaged areas, the school can be a constant and for some a lifeline. This is particularly so with primary schooling where the school can act as a security blanket for parents. As children often travel extensive distances to secondary schools, that blanket loosens. Schools have gradually extended their reach. Breakfast clubs, after school facilities, holiday activities all contribute to an extended school provision that should be further extended to create a different concept in a re-imagined system where the traditional school day and term are revised.

There is often the concern that if we provide too much for parents, they gradually become dependent on the provision, but services do need to bind together around the needy families or they are bound to fall through the cracks. Teachers are the key universal service that can wrap around the child, especially as the concept of the village surrounding the child has all but disappeared. Teachers today act as social workers, counsellors and a whole range of other roles and can see when specialist services should be brought in.

Twenty years ago progress was being made. Sure Start Centres were carefully targeted at areas of disadvantage. They were expanded into a universal service through Children's Centres, with pre-school entitlement, wrap-around care and accessible health and social services. These facilities have suffered severely from cuts over the last ten years, and it is hoped the new funding announced in the 2023 Spring statement will start to address this.

What is left of the [mainly privately provided pre-school provision](#) after the pandemic is unlikely to be in the areas of greatest need. The restoration of Sure Start or something similar is essential to creating universal provision – Sure Start has been shown to improve the home learning environment, which is even more important in a time of remote learning and digital access.

The quality of early years education available to families is crucial to children's development. It can reduce inequalities that would otherwise continue into adulthood. Over the last decade, the number of free childcare hours has increased, but this gap has not shrunk. It is vital that the educational needs of early years are considered, supported and funded.

“Childcare is not a domestic problem, or a women's problem: it's an economic problem.”
– [Guardian Editorial](#), February 13, 2023

A recent estimate from the The Centre for Progressive Policy (CPP) suggests that 1.7m working mothers were prevented from taking on more hours, while 1.1m had to reduce their hours and 560,000 found themselves forced to quit their jobs because of the lack of available and affordable childcare.

Three in four mothers who pay for childcare say it no longer makes financial sense for them to work, according to Pregnant Then Screwed.

Universal childcare provision is [an economic benefit](#) with a potential to [raise the UK's economic output by £28bn annually](#). Failing to adequately fund or facilitate effective provision for the early years has massive social, cultural and economic impacts.

How we get there

A recent government report, [The Best Start for Life: A Vision for the 1001 Critical Days](#), proposes Parent Hubs which could be the beginning of a process of building a support system for families that may, within a generation, begin to overcome some of the difficult conditions that determine the restricted educational trajectories of far too many children.

Rebuilding the Sure Start model, although a bit more expensive, could [save the cost of later remedial interventions](#) and would give young people high quality early years education opportunities to develop social interaction strategies which would stand them in good stead

in their primary school life. This high quality, and fully funded, educational provision needs to be combined with a system that works for the modern, working life of parents, guardians and carers.

“We tend to worry about inner city provision but some of the worst problems are in semi-rural areas of deprivation where working out the vision would be a different experience.” says Dr Kate Pretty, former head of Homerton College Cambridge. There are whole communities, across the UK, where education is undervalued and has a limited impact on social mobility – by ensuring that the primary school is a hub of the community it could help to address early on (and embed) some of the things that cause the disconnection of parents and children.

In Wales, the potential of the school as a building to be a community hub is being explored in some pilot programmes. Thinking of the school as a ‘community hub’ making it, in some cases, a one stop shop for families makes maximum use of resources, as well as helping to ensure early, lasting connections to a learning environment.

Basing the local post office, health facilities, benefit agencies and advice services together in schools enables schools and parents to feel more at ease with each other and address concerns together.

Fully facilitating early years educational provision at all school hubs would be a way of [cost effectively using the resources](#) available by expanding and improving on existing school infrastructure. This would also allow for the sharing of other wider resources (playing fields, forest school sites, swimming pools, etc.).

Anchoring services and early years education in the school environment, [centres the school](#) at the heart of a lasting, living, and local learning community.

Ensuring that school terms, nursery days and overall daytime provision suit a modern workforce is also important. Funded provision would need to be made for classes, workshops or activities run by education professionals during shorter school holidays. Supporting this would be the move to a four day week for educators and support staff, avoiding burnout, improving retention, increasing flexibility, and potentially [increasing productivity](#).

Some of the ways in which a learning hub could work include the following:

- Facilitating wraparound learning activities for children (such as suggested in [the recent Institute for Public Policy Research \(IPPR\) report](#)) during term time and also during weekends and holidays to help working parents would promote cohesion and extend the provision for children.
- Expanding free childcare hours to cover a full-time year of fees at all ages from 1 year – c.48 weeks at 40 hours.
- Funding and providing for high quality and affordable early years facilities at every primary school location that is suitable, helping to get more parents who want to back into work.
- Creating a Building School Hubs for the Future funding programme to allow for capital projects which could provide space for nursery provision or further integrated community facilities and basing Sure Start centres in these school hubs

- Expand and improve [the tax incentives](#) to allow for local businesses to support social events and fundraising initiatives, or to volunteer their time to assist schools (e.g. to develop the playground, read to children or repaint a classroom).
- Schools using community venues for some of their activities, e.g. sports facilities, theatres and museums; and reciprocal arrangements for the community to use school facilities.
- Local third sector organisations running bespoke projects in schools (e.g. to engage with families or to develop community cohesion).
- Where possible, having community services located on school sites could improve service access and create schools as hubs of communities. Services might include adult community learning opportunities, Flying Start, credit unions, Citizens Advice or Communities First.
- Community representatives being involved in the progress and development of the learning hub to provide a broader vision.

Why it's important that we get there

It is vitally important that schools are seen as hubs of the local communities and enjoy good reputations in their communities. Although these things already happen in some schools, provision is far from universal.

The ability to build on this, by establishing the local school as a well resourced learning centre, means many of the issues of alienation felt by parents under pressure could be mitigated as well as helping to provide better access to high quality, affordable childcare. It would provide a natural progression for the child as he or she matures and widens their social interactions.

The IPPR suggests that 6 key changes that would take us towards the kind of model explored [here](#) would cost in the region of £15 billion, more than offset by the income to the treasury from parents able to return to work.

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[UK childcare investment would boost women's incomes by £10bn | Financial Times](#)

[Delivering a childcare guarantee | IPPR](#) – Rachel Statham, Sam Freedman, Henry Parkes, 2022

[The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days - GOV.UK](#)

Learning environment

Learning for life – towards a modern, modular curriculum

Key policy changes:

- Broad curriculum reform using a more modular approach that encourages child choice and enquiry led learning
- The elimination of high-stakes testing, helping reduce stress, anxiety and embedded privilege
- Refocus inspection towards a supportive and collaborative approach between inspectors and schools, reducing the impacts on school staff and the time spent on measuring educators rather than educating learners
- Establish self-directed and collaborative learning throughout the primary years as a solid foundation for a lifetime of education

Where we are

With the world changing at a dazzling rate, schools need to heed the words of the moral and social philosopher, Eric Hoffer 'In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists'.

To address the radical changes in industry and society in the future it is a moral imperative for schools to ensure that children and young people are [taught to be lifelong learners](#), able to respond creatively to a world we cannot yet begin to describe.

Unfortunately, our schools are based around a restrictive, industrial model, where success is measured through a limited range of final exams, which narrow the curriculum and opportunities for wider creative development. More broadly, formal learning is based on a timetable generally considered to end at around age 21, limiting life chances for those without the resources or motivation to continue.

"It is perhaps hard to believe that under the 1944 Education Act, the decisions regarding the exact curriculum taught in a school were ultimately with the headteacher of any particular school. Those days are long gone and since the 1988 Education Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum, the definition of the curriculum for each of the nations of the UK has been a matter of government policy." — Angela McFarlane

Where we should be

Schools need to be learning communities for adults, children and young people alike, where knowledge and skills are shared continually and every individual has responsibility for the quality of learning of the whole community: learning for life as an open, social and collaborative experience.

Schools should explicitly teach children and young people learning and thinking skills which will empower them and make them positive, active citizens; skills to make them experts in *critical, creative, collaborative and caring thinking*; and a fully integrated, more personalised curriculum so learning always has both a social and ethical context which is founded in social purpose.

In the best primary schools, the arts, sports, sciences, technology and philosophy inform and influence each other allowing learners to make rich and complex values-based decisions whilst fully understanding their consequences.

We need to take the best of the primary education approach, and apply it across the education journey. This entails an entrepreneurial approach to education that is self-directed, personal and which broadens, rather than narrows, learners' horizons.

By allowing for ongoing learning (and unlearning), this expanded, integrative curriculum will prepare students to play an engaged, humane and constructive role in life rather than becoming overwhelmed and passive in the face of future developments and challenges.

As outlined in the Royal Society of Arts' (RSA) Design for Life programme, we could be creating a different approach to the curriculum by thinking about all the skills that might be needed in this century. As [they describe it](#):

“a three-layer cake with foundational skills (literacy, numeracy, digital literacy) as the base layer, non-transferable vocational and academic skills as the middle layer, and transferable capabilities or attributes (from creativity to empathy), as the often invisible, and indeed often absent, top layer of the cake”

The RSA discuss this in terms of an education that is “modular, team-based, experiential, capability and creativity-building”.

How we get there

- Embedding and increasing co-learning, peer training and collaborative projects throughout not just primary but also secondary curricula.
- Increasing the use of digital tools, ensuring students regularly learn alongside others globally. This will require further and continuous investment in personal device provision as well as training but pays for itself in economic terms through [a more productive workforce](#).
- Funding the provision of flexible classroom learning environments which [will help facilitate rapid changes](#) to support the framework and direction of the learning and specific learning needs.
- Refocusing the way school inspections work to look at what benefits students, rather than what benefits the processes of assessment.
- Create an entrepreneurial education journey. Retain the self-directed learning approach of the Early Years throughout the education journey, giving students ownership over their own curiosity and [accommodating](#) a range of differing pedagogical techniques to accommodate children's different intelligences
- Reforming the increasingly-narrowing process of the curriculum – keeping more options and funding the range of choices available to students (and adults) for longer.

- Restructuring the curriculum towards a modular or granular approach (better suited to modern learners and able to respond to contemporary life skills) and integrating a properly accessible system of incremental lifelong learning, open to all.
- Introduce a cross-curricular theory-of-knowledge component to embed critical thinking, collaborative improvement and an understanding of why we learn, not just what we learn.
- Eliminate high-stakes testing for children and radically alter the current ossifying and deskilling inspection regime. With a revised, supportive inspection approach which considers the inputs and not just the outcomes, schools would be enabled to become more innovative research institutions, where all are eager to ask questions, to take risks, to challenge themselves, to explore ideas and to behave creatively in their thinking and learning.
- Undertaking regular reviews and [critical reflection](#) on the quality of the learning community and their own learning by young children and young people themselves must be recognised as a vital element of school life as [these skills of self-evaluation](#) will lead to continuous lifelong learning improvement as well as to a naturally self-improving and vibrant system.
- Embedding these principles and ideas from Early Years onwards.

Why it's important that we get there:

It is important to establish co-learning and [collaboration as key skills for learning for life](#), (which are already more widely expected in tertiary education, and firmly embedded in the modern economy) through standard working practices such as [Agile methodologies](#) for digital project management.

Regular opportunities for children to learn alongside others across the world gives them a [deeper understanding and appreciation of cultures](#) and opens up different ways of thinking. This is a crucial part of being able to participate fully in contemporary society and any twenty-first-century business environment.

Increasing the focus on building sustainable approaches in business and politics is hugely relevant – exemplified recently by the rise of [B-corps](#), the adoption of [‘Doughnut Economies’ by forward thinking cities](#) and the popularity of [ESG investing approaches](#). It is both morally and economically essential that children and young people should learn how to use and create technologies which enrich and deepen our relationship with the planet and our fellow citizens worldwide. It is also important to [embed environmental education](#) throughout the curriculum – [improving environmental literacy and social engagement](#) will enable us to work together to establish a fully sustainable way of living.

Research shows that [expertly-facilitated enquiry-based learning enables learners to embed learning most effectively](#), and will enable them to respond more flexibly and imaginatively to the rapidly changing world around them and the vast amounts of information they are receiving. This also means widening children's choices, giving them ownership of their education, while schools maintain a commitment to self-directed learning.

Bringing classrooms alive with purposeful learning talk is an important component of this – oracy and [dialogic practice must be at the heart of all learning](#).

Providing a flexible framework for a curriculum with a modular approach, will offer more choice to children. This has the obvious benefit of reducing the stress, anxiety and [embedded privileges](#) inherent in a system heavily weighted towards final exams.

Therefore, this is also a system that allows for flexibility, and time for teachers to respond to children as individuals. We must alleviate the growing pressure on children to do things before they are ready. As noted by Professor Merryn Hutchings in [her report on the impact of accountability measures](#), in a learning society which concentrates on improving the quality of teacher-pupil interaction, we would have a system less focussed on final exams.

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Importance of dialogic practice: [Dialogic Teaching: A classroom guide for better thinking and talking](#)

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How a Bigger Purpose Can Motivate Students to Learn: [How a Bigger Purpose Can Motivate Students to Learn | KQED](#)

Positive evidence for flexible classrooms: [Flexible Classrooms: Research Is Scarce, But Promising | Edutopia](#)

The value of external assessment and accountability

Key policy changes:

- The ending of external, high-stakes tests, replaced with testing, internal to the school, diagnostic in character and standardised for age as key evidence of development
- Bringing parents into the internal testing environment as a part of the process to better appraise progress in collaboration with teachers
- Reinvigorate teacher education with an emphasis upon child development which, over recent years, has had to give way to other objectives
- Child peer assessments: involving children in critical thinking about their own and others learning

Where we are

The education of young children in their primary schools has been hit hard in recent years. A political insistence on external testing has diminished professionalism as teachers have been reduced to the status of technicians tasked with the coaching for tests. Every year a large number turn away from their work in schools, disillusioned by the lack of freedom to use their individual skills in order to address the varied needs of their pupils.

The government's control of the education system is total. Primary education is seen as preparation for secondary schools in terms of literacy and numeracy. The outcome has been a harmful narrowing of the curriculum. The arts, particularly music, have been sidelined and important subjects such as physical education, history and geography have too often been relegated to an hour each week.

The opportunities for children to develop their natural creativity are limited in too many schools. Even the process of learning and teaching has been adversely affected. Many schools, threatened by sanctions based upon test results, have returned to old fashioned chalk-and-talk in the misguided hope that their scores might improve. Such improvement rarely extends to more than a few weeks beyond the test.

Where we should be

Radical reform is required. We need to seek alternative ways of assessing children's progress which will free the curriculum and also help to stem the loss of so many teachers.

Above all else, assessment must be in the children's interest and not, as at present, used by the government as an instrument for the monitoring of school efficiency and the holding of schools to account. The dominance of external testing must be ended.

“To solely use standardised achievement tests is like casting a net into the sea – a net that is intentionally designed to let the most interesting fish get away. Then, to describe the ones that are caught strictly in terms of their weight and length is to radically reduce what we know about them. To further conclude that all the contents of the sea consist of fish like those in the net compounds the error further. We need more kinds of fish. We need to know more about those we catch. We need new nets.”

– [William T Randolph](#), Commissioner of Education, Colorado

Politicians are often attracted to testing because the results can be quantified. But the accuracy implied by a number is false: [research](#) has shown that scores are not consistent and are seriously affected by personal circumstances. Human beings are complex creatures and the testing system presumes far more accuracy than is merited. Testing is very far from being an accurate way of assessing progress.

Using more team based systems, rather than solely individual learning environments, and shift towards more experiential rather than examination-based techniques.

How we get there

In seeking enlightened alternatives to external testing we should turn to the parent and teacher partnership. Here are adults who are jointly concerned with children's upbringing and who spend much time in close contact with them. They have unrivalled access to the evidence of children's growth in understanding and skills in both home and school. There is a need for a more open dialogue between schools and parents, not just the reporting of outcomes.

No-one and [no system is better placed than this partnership](#) to appraise progress which is formative of new learning rather than a flawed summative measure provided by external testing. We must remind those who point to research which indicates that teacher assessment is inaccurate that the alleged inaccuracy stems from the validation of such assessments through comparison with examination results. Assessment is for children's benefit and not for forecasting the results of testing.

The teacher in primary school is immensely privileged through contact with individual children for the majority of each day. This is an arena which facilitates sound assessment. All the interactions between adults and children which we summarise as teaching inevitably embrace the continuous assessment by the teacher of each pupil's level of understanding and growing skill. The child's work is powerful evidence of their progress and the dialogue with the teacher always reveals additional evidence. Assessment is implicit in the act of teaching.

Testing, internal to the school, diagnostic in character and standardised for age would constitute a source of further evidence. Evidence suggests [digital-first approaches, spread across the year, could](#) be an effective part of this. Such testing would be a weapon in the teachers professional armoury, and integrated with teaching, would never become a pre-eminent part of education, but remain in support of it.

Parents' role in primary education has developed over recent years despite a political intention that the parent should be cast as a consumer of an educational product. Research and sound practice show that parents are, in fact, teachers too, who have a significant and guiding influence on children's upbringing. They should be partners in education and should be closely involved in the assessment of progress. The ending of high stakes external testing will remove much of the tension which at present inhibits the partnership and we can look forward with optimism to a future which is effective in acknowledging the different but complementary roles of teachers and parents.

Change on the scale set out above is unlikely to be achieved quickly. Attitudes and assumptions engrained by years of harmful practice must be overturned before action can be

taken. We should begin with an intensive programme of professional development coupled with the restoration of the universities' independence in teacher training.

Trust in professional competence should be restored, teachers' centres should be re-established and become the focus for an emphasis upon child development. The link between research and practice must be restored and the direction of primary education should be informed by children and their growth rather than political considerations.

Why it's important that we get there

To relieve the stress for children and their teachers of tests dominating, and time dedicated to preparation, reducing opportunities for progressing learning

In schools where a return to traditional talk-and-chalk [methods raise test results](#), such improvement rarely extends to more than a few weeks beyond the test.

It is vital that children know that they are equal partners with their parents and teachers and that assessment is a forward looking activity which helps to progress their learning, rather than a measure of performance.

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A values led education.

Key policy changes:

- Convene a national strategic education task force – building on the recommendations of the G20 Education Ministers Meeting – including representative experts who can advance values-based education. This task force would be a clearinghouse for the contents, strategies and effective practices for values-based education
- Ethics-centred education to be at the heart of a new curriculum for all, where human wellbeing and flourishing is nurtured
- Provision of sufficient funds for teacher education in values as part of Initial Teacher Education

Where we are

Education in England is a highly complex, values-laden system for teaching and learning, firmly rooted in its historical context. Its dominant educational philosophy, pedagogy, curriculum, and teacher training reflect the values (often not made explicit) that the government, as the elected representatives of society, deem to be the ones that will ensure young people are educated; and are able to take their place in society as good citizens and be contributors to a productive economy.

Values are often implicit within education but can be identified through the expressed culture and ethos of an educational setting, such as a school. The culture will contain routines and structures that reflect an institution's values. The lived and modelled values of adults in a school may not be those that are the stated values on its website, as they are often habitual and lived outside of conscious awareness. In England a group of values are required to be taught about by law as British Values. These values however are not required by devolved governments in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The current weakness is that education is not seen as a moral pursuit that equips young people with an experience and understanding of values that will help them to make wise choices in life, develop their character and empower them to be prosocial citizens. This is despite Nicky Morgan, a former Secretary of State for Education, thinking character development should be made a national priority.

Currently, education focuses on the development of a prescribed curriculum that is mainly knowledge based with scant regard for education in values.

To be clear: there are two main types of values: limiting and positive. Limiting values, such as excessive competition, greed, envy, consumerism, controlling power, lead to cultural entropy. Cultural entropy is experienced through an absence of general wellbeing, by an over emphasis on the wants of the individual at the expense of the community, a general decline in good relationships and caring for others. Conversely, positive human values, such as altruism, love, peace, wisdom and harmony, lead to an increase in wellbeing, good relationships, teamwork, creativity and productivity.

Where we should be

West Kidlington Primary School, in Oxfordshire, became one of the first English state schools to be explicitly values-based: meaning it consciously created a culture that underpinned every aspect of its life and work (policies, curriculum, routines, staff behaviour and relationships) with a community inspired set of universal positive human values, such as respect, courage, trust, cooperation, empathy and justice.

The school's transformative initiative became the focus of a [seven-year doctoral research project](#) at Oxford University, overseen by Professor Richard Pring. The aim was to see if the research evidence would show that the quality of education would be improved if pupils were explicitly inducted into an ethical vocabulary, which was based on positive values. How this was done, and the actions required to replicate the work of the school can be seen in the [doctoral thesis](#).

The evidence of this qualitative research project showed that by giving pupils an ethical vocabulary produced profound effects:

- On their wellbeing and the professional satisfaction of the adults at the school
- A consistency of behaviour, expectation and practice was achieved which teachers said made their work more enjoyable and effective
- Excellent relationships with pupils created an ethos which was calm, purposeful and happy
- Pupils' academic diligence and standards improved, as did their relational trust
- Values awareness led to the parents and community adopting the values rhetoric
- Pupils developed what is now referred to as ethical intelligence, defined as the ability to ethically self-regulate behaviour
- Teaching of reflective practices, alongside the values vocabulary, coupled with the authentic modelling of the values by teaching and support staff, creating a unique humane culture

The research results were endorsed by a large-scale research project, across many Australian schools, led by Professor Terence Lovat at Newcastle University.

In stark contrast to the values that were displayed at West Kidlington School are the general values of society, which currently create pressure on schools to focus on priorities which adversely affect wellbeing. They demand a response to external influences, such as: the imposition (in England) of fear inducing approach to school inspection by Ofsted, an extreme focus on testing, the teaching of inappropriate aspects of curriculum content that are not age and stage related; certainly not commensurate with what is known from research and practice about how children best learn and how this learning should be resourced.

Processes, routines and structures, such as the almost exclusive focus on phonics in teaching reading, and rules of grammar which are required to be taught. Schools are challenged to ensure that such teaching does not adversely affect wellbeing from a neurological perspective e.g the brain learns best when it is relaxed and alert.

How we get there

The [scholarship of Dan Siegel](#) and [Louis Cozolino](#) provide powerful evidence to suggest that classrooms should be places that are built on the social relationship and positive values between teacher and pupil, which harness the neural mechanisms of learning.

Schools need to go beyond the display of 'laminated' values in their entrance halls. creating values-based cultures that focus on quality education, which foster the positive aspects of human character and nourish wellbeing and develop children's emotional intelligence.

Enabling pupils to develop higher order reflective, critical thinking skills based on a deep understanding of values – which requires an investment in teacher time and therefore increased funding for staffing.

This should include the teaching of reflective practices, alongside the values vocabulary coupled with the authentic modelling of the values by teaching and support staff. It must also provide professional development in values education for current practitioners and making values part of the curriculum in initial teacher education.

Why it's important that we get there

Why are values-based schools so important as the bedrock of education? The key to human survival is our ability to foster all forms of sustainability effectively.

A curriculum is now required in schools that gives equal emphasis to basic education and character development. The fourth industrial revolution of artificial intelligence (AI) is upon us, which demands that we use this force for the good of humanity by ensuring that its use is ethically based.

This can only be achieved if young people have been educated to respond ethically in personal and professional matters. Providing a values based education can help to improve pupils emotional intelligence, which will continue to be highly valued in the modern workplace.

Professor Marco Tavanti and Dr Neil Hawkes outlined how this could happen in a document for the [V20 Summit in Italy](#), which formed a part of a protocol sent to G20 world leaders for their conference in 2021. They argued that to attain the United Nations Sustainable Goals, world leaders need to sponsor the development of ethical intelligence.

This ethical intelligence is the disposition which enables people to ethically self-regulate their behaviour and develop the skill of self-leadership and must be developed in all citizens.

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Learning resources

Updating the mainframe – a new computer literacy project

Key policy changes:

- A minimum provision of a laptop for every child in every primary school and access to VR, and robotics: this would require initial funding of around £850 million (some of this funding may come from private enterprise via the careful expansion of tax incentives).
- A modular and personalised digital curriculum programme for all children – responsibly using the power of AI, Machine Learning (ML), Large Language Models (LLMs) and modern digital resources.
- Utilising and funding school libraries as the hubs for access and maintenance of available technologies, whilst also fully resourcing them with physical books and learning tools.
- Algorithmic thinking, basic coding and AI/ML/LLM access as part of a new BBC Computer Literacy Project or Raspberry Pi-style national program. Partnerships with key tech companies may be a possibility here.
- Equity of support such as – resources for those who lack them, support for those who need it and mentorship for those who are gifted and talented.
- Suitable training, resources, provision and support for all primary teachers and classroom assistants for the above.

Where we are

The UK lead in developing the link between computing and school education was held until 2010. The vast majority of secondary schools and many primaries were getting to grips with the effective use of managed learning systems. These were repositories for student work and curriculum materials, accessed from school or home. Schemes were in place to provide suitable devices for those homes that could not afford them, although the cost of high speed broadband was then, and remains now, a significant factor undermining equity of access. Today, such provision is a distant memory.

When the Cameron government came to office it dispensed with the dedicated agency for educational technology and its legacy was dispersed and was largely lost. Later a Computing Curriculum was reintroduced, but the subject of ICT which focussed on computer use all but disappeared.

The consequences of this change of emphasis were thrown into sharp relief by the impact of the pandemic starting in 2020. With the closure of schools to all but the most vulnerable (and children of key workers) and on-going challenges to attendance by teachers and learners, schools and government looked to a technology supported learning solution to maintain access to education.

Schools were on a steep learning curve – teachers were not used to distributing digital content or managing work supplied digitally from learners. In the intervening two years, much

work has been done and progress made. Nevertheless, the learning deficit is enormous and those with least cultural and social capital have lost most.

How different that might have been if the progress begun in the [1980s](#) had been nurtured and encouraged over the last 10 years. If schools were organisations with embedded digital networks for collaboration and learning the move to entirely home based learning could have been smooth – an extension of how learners worked at home already rather than a complete break. Used to collaborating with teachers and fellow learners, the social isolation and parental challenge of being at home full time would surely have been less.

The danger is that we allow our own experience of schooling to over-influence our judgement of what works and what doesn't when our evidence source is so limited. This can lead to a model of learning and achievement suited to the 19th Century where what you carried in your head and a neat hand would take you a long way in the world. Today, assuming what you carry in your head is the whole story will get you into trouble. We have the challenge of making sense of excessive information, too much of it opinion masquerading as fact. We are at the mercy of algorithms we do not understand and cannot influence.

While we continue to treat technology as an adjunct or compartment of education rather than accepting it as embedded in the very weft and weave, as it is in wider society, it is hard to see how we can begin to prepare young people for economic and social success.

Before the pandemic, the low impact of technology on student achievement was mostly linked to the way in which digital tools were used. Frequently to simply supplement the tell and practice model of teaching and learning.

Where we should be

Are we now poised to move forward based on the successes wrought as a result of the pandemic or will we simply slide back into entrenched practice based on short-sighted policy? We need to examine this further and consider how radical it may feel if we were to take on board the implications of a digital world.

How do we determine what 'value' looks like? If the balance remains in favour of familiarity with a prescribed body of content, the evidence of impact is slight and so the argument for investment is weak.

If the balance tilts towards true digital literacy, where, as well as familiarity with content learners are required to demonstrate their skills in knowledge building, critical analysis and content creation, then it is hard to see how this can be achieved without significant investment. Ultimately it will all depend on the definition of a good education.

We can also look to technology to help better provision of a more modern, personalised curriculum that provides learning journeys, AI-attuned to each individual's learning styles, motivations and circumstances and in a digital-first format.

Consider how radical it might feel if we were to really take on board the implications of a digital world.

How we get there

We must persuade politicians to adopt a policy of continuous investment in appropriate, up to date technology in our schools. A laptop should be as essential as an exercise book and is much more valuable than a worksheet, every child must have one. Why are we denying children access to these resources in the most important stages of their education?

There has to be the political will to invest sufficiently in the infrastructure and training needed to support ICT use by learners as and when it adds value. This might come in several forms, such as:

- Utilising a range of modern digital resources, preferably developed by British educational technology companies
- Making sure these resources are available to all – with full funding
- Adjusting teaching about digital ideas to prioritise the [understanding of important concepts, ideas and processes](#) before moving on
- Creating cohorts who understand the basic workings of the computer code that surrounds us
- Children being able to view their progress, strengths and areas for improvement on screen – most [testing to be done online](#)
- The explicit study of robotics from KS2
- Regularly exploring LLMs and other aspects of AI as a key component of learning
- Using AI to help personalise and engage with the learning journeys of each student
- Using VR to visit historical sites and parts of the world, or participate in accessing other learning experiences as already [happening in tertiary education](#)
- Using augmented reality to overlay information or images on to the real world
- Providing 3D printing facilities in primary classrooms as preparation for the real world of additive manufacturing, already prevalent throughout industry
- By implementing Mick Waters' and Sir Tim Brighouse's concept of [Open Schools](#), a resource for all children at home and school

This does not have to mean that children spend the whole day staring robotically at a screen. They will still write and have use of a well-stocked school library. And school libraries should be at the centre of this resource revolution – providing and maintaining day-to-day access, maintenance, expertise and space for these digital technologies as well as improved funding for traditional resources.

This would be hybrid learning – employers want digital skills and we want to prepare our children for the real world.

This is also not simply about being better prepared for a pandemic – although it is a brave politician who assumes this will never happen again – or that we are entirely out of the woods this time. Rather it poses a question about the fundamentals of education.

Are we poised to move forward based on the successes wrought as a result of the pandemic or will we simply slide back into entrenched practice based on short-sighted policy?

Why it's important that we get there

Prioritising investment in appropriate and up-to-date technology in our schools is crucial for ensuring that our children have the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the digital age. In today's world, digital skills are now essential for success in almost every career, and we have a responsibility to equip our children with the tools they need to succeed.

In addition, technology can help to level the playing field and mitigate educational inequalities. By providing all children with access to appropriate digital resources and tools, regardless of their background or financial situation, we can help to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to learn and succeed.

Investment in appropriate access to technology can also help to make learning more engaging, interactive and personalised. By using AI, VR, and other digital concepts, tools and practices, we can create learning experiences that are tailored to the needs and interests of individual learners, helping to improve their motivation and engagement with the curriculum.

In short, investing in appropriate and up-to-date technology in our schools is essential if we want to ensure that our children have the skills, knowledge, and opportunities they need to succeed in the 21st century.

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Language and communication

Key policy changes:

- Abolish the phonic tests in Key Stage One (KS1) & remove the emphasis on restrictive synthetic phonics systems as the *only* mechanism for learning to read – a broader set of options are necessary for all readers
- Revise the curriculum for early years foundation stage (EYFS) and KS1 & 2 establishing continuity across the phases and making the curriculum more modular and personalised
- Restore programmes focusing on creative writing, critical reading and thinking, and include a curriculum based focus on the effective use of the spoken word (explaining, arguing, discussing)

Where we are

Within England's [EYFS framework](#) and the Primary National Curriculum, language development, literacy and communication – both written and oral – rightly have a central place.

Current curriculum documents across the primary age range are extensive and detail requirements for spoken language, reading and writing. The detail concentrates on a narrow definition of language and literacy.

Curriculum requirements are presented as a set of technical skills to be acquired rather than identifying the range of children's social and cultural experiences.

Technical skills are essential to developing fluent and assured language and communication, but focusing almost entirely on technical aspects of language risks ignoring strengths and experiences that children bring with them from their home and community experience, [thus failing to build on them](#).

This is particularly critical when considering [children's experience of digital worlds](#). Not finding out about and building on children's home experiences jeopardises both children's sense of [identity and self-worth](#) and [future academic success](#).

In particular, the compulsory phonics check for six year olds restricts the curriculum, so that teaching is focused mainly on a narrow range of word reading skills rather than on making sense of texts as children move towards being independent readers. This particularly affects those children who have had [little experience of being read to at home](#). There is also little acknowledgement that critical reading [is essential in the 21st century](#) with the plethora of information available digitally as well as through social media.

The emphasis on technical features in writing: transcription and attention to grammatical 'correctness' and labelling of grammatical features also affects creativity and children's

motivation to communicate their own messages through mark making on paper and on screen. The relative absence of reference to [digital worlds and writing on screen](#) is also notable.

Where we should be

Spoken language lies at the heart of teaching and learning and the lack of references to this area in KS1 and KS2 curriculum requirements needs to be addressed. Where [home experiences differ](#) from those literacies associated with schooling, some groups of children will be placed at a disadvantage, particularly speakers of English as a second language or SEND issues

The recent [APPG Oracy Inquiry](#) heard compelling evidence on the educational benefits of effective and purposeful talk at every stage of schooling and how a greater focus on oral language improves outcomes for the most disadvantaged students. The ability to communicate effectively is an essential ingredient to success, both in school and beyond.

Evidence shows that being confident with spoken language:

- Improves academic outcomes
- Underpins literacy and vocabulary acquisition
- Supports wellbeing and confidence
- Enables young people to have access to employment and thrive in life beyond school
- Develops citizenship and agency

How we get there

It is vital that we have a curriculum that explicitly recognises that children have different starting points, having had different experiences at home, including being bi- and multilingual. As a part of this, it is also crucial that we emphasise the importance of the spoken word, and create a learning environment that encourages children from all backgrounds to be articulate and effective communicators.

By providing a broad and balanced approach to reading which recognises that there are many ways in which children learn to read, not just by the use of phonics.

Removing the singular focus on phonics (and in particular systematic synthetic phonics and the restrictions this includes) will improve outcomes and understanding for a wider range of children.

With a wider spectrum of learning methods for reading, teachers can create the conditions (on paper and screen) for children to become enthusiastic writers and readers through the activities they are involved in. For instance, using children's own writing and other meaningful texts for learning grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation.

Why it's important that we get there

The points above highlight the current limitations of England's EYFS framework and Primary National Curriculum in terms of language development, literacy and communication.

The focus on technical skills neglects children's social and cultural experiences, particularly in the digital world, and fails to build on their strengths. A narrow definition of language and literacy affects children's sense of identity, self-worth, academic success, and future opportunities.

To address these problems, policy changes are needed to emphasise the importance of home and community language and literacy experience, spoken language, critical reading and writing, intrinsic motivation and engagement, and abolishing the phonics check.

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About the authors

This paper reflects the views of its authors, and we are grateful for their contributions.

Oxford School of Thought

The [Oxford School of Thought](#) is a primary education think tank – the first of its kind in the UK. We regard learning as a continuum, and we recognise the powerful and enduring influence of primary education across a lifetime of learning.

We aim to improve the practice of all educators, examine the impact on and relationship with other phases of education and explore the generation of new ideas through rigorous research, analysis and opinion. Through these activities we help to better inform the public, improve education for children and hold policy- and decision-makers to account.

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In addition he supervises trainee teachers at Oxford Brookes University and advises FMCG companies including L'Oreal, Essity and Kellogg where he's a judge on the Breakfast Club awards, on how to raise their social impact in young people and families. A Fellow of Royal Society of Arts, another focus is on the adoption of technologies for education (3d printing in primary schools being one example).

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There are, of course, many other competing issues which all deserve our attention, and this report is only able to address some of them. The fact that a topic is missing from this report is no reflection on its relative importance and the intention is to continue the exploration of these absent ideas in future publications.

Cover photo by [Kelli Tungay](#) on [Unsplash](#)