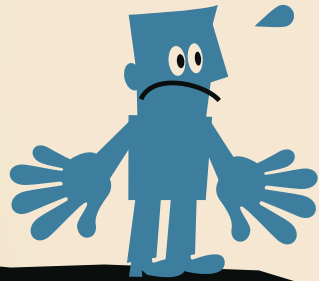


WE'RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION

James Clarke on why change in education is so elusive.



For a number of years – if not decades – now, we've been asking what the future of education should look like, and over the last few, challenging months this question has edged into the spotlight. In a nutshell, the argument goes that as the world changes, so too should education evolve – to prepare young people properly for their future. It's a fairly straightforward argument and, without wanting to sound trite, a pretty straightforward conclusion too – and one that is shared by the vast majority of educated opinion. The details might be different – Professor Sugata Mitra, for example, largely focuses on the use of computers and the internet – but the fundamental tenet remains the same: the world has changed. So too should education. Keep up!

But if I sit around the dinner table in the home of a member of the chattering classes in Middle England, I hear a very different story. Equipped often with no more than what they've seen on the latest edition of *Educating Greater Manchester*, parents mourn the disappearance of the fearful respect they showed masters who in turn addressed them by their surname when they attended school. They'll talk of "crowd control" and the lack of discipline. They'll complain of disengaged students and grade inflation. Whether or not that synopsis of the current education system is fair, it makes no difference.

As Shadow Secretary of State for Education (and *Times* journalist) in 2010, Michael Gove wrote that he felt "most parents would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England, the great works of literature, proper mental arithmetic ..." – and the trouble is he was right. That is what most parents wanted and as a politician needing their votes, that is what Gove promised. It would be easy to consider this a cynical sop to voters rather than an ideological argument. Just weeks later he was sat behind his desk in the Department for Education.

In her book *Inadequate: The system failing our teachers and your children*, Priya Lakhani asserts that both "classroom teacher and parents – with their unique views of education as both frontline practitioners and its primary consumers – are almost entirely excluded

from the 'why' of education". She continues: "They are crowded out from the decision-making process by powerful politicians and well-funded interest groups. The system itself is also unintentionally designed in a way that is incapable of receiving and considering feedback and data from the frontline. This is the opposite of how any successful operation works."

Hopefully, in 2021, we are starting to come through the global pandemic that has interrupted traditional schooling throughout the world; but whereas many commentators have talked about the fantastic 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity for renewal that the pandemic offers, what we hear on the street in large part is the desire to "get back to normal".

During [RE]LEARN 2020, Learnlife shared its new learning paradigm, containing 21 components, divided into three groups of seven, the first of which is "preparing the community". And it is this that I believe is the most important thing we should be doing. The question we should be asking is: "how do we persuade parents to demand a different education for their children?"

Until we truly understand the "man (and woman) on the Clapham Omnibus" – and overcome their resistance to change - we'll achieve little more than continuing to sit in our ivory towers pontificating. We must adopt some humility and work out how to achieve real change, otherwise we'll still be asking what the future of education should look like another 15 years down the line. ■

James Clarke is the Divisional Director of Learniture and a contributor to the book Planning Learning Spaces.

Inadequate: The system failing our teachers and your children is published by John Catt Educational Ltd. Priya Lakhani founded the educational technology company CENTURY in 2013 after being struck by underachievement rates in schools. She is a former member of the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills' Entrepreneurs' Forum.

