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EDUCATION

SCHOOLS: THE CASE FOR A NEW MODEL

By Martin Yarnit



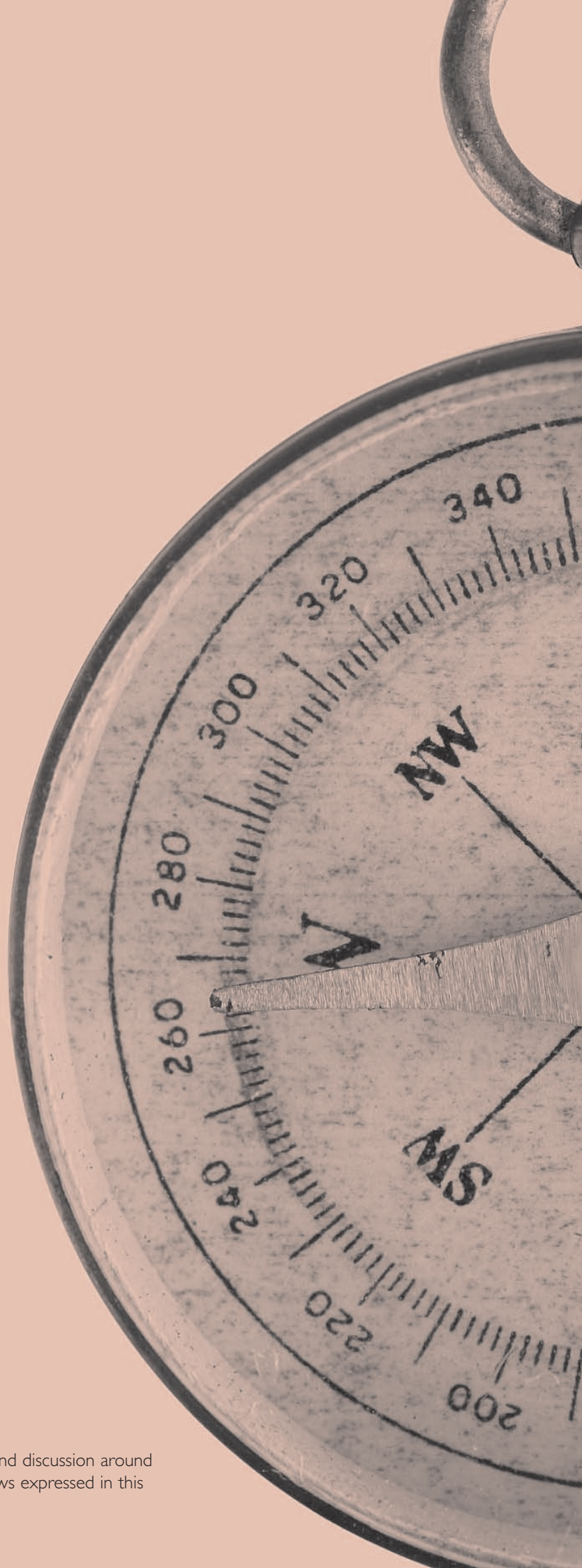
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“What the left now needs to do is to spark a debate about the future of comprehensives rooted in a socialist understanding of what education is for and the limitations of the traditional model of schooling”



Schools: The Case for a New Model

By Martin Yarnit

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Since the 60s there has been a remarkable improvement in education standards in England, brought about above all by the comprehensives. But the limits to that improvement have generated two opposing schools of thought about the way forward. One, led by the government, has argued for an injection of competition through the introduction of new types of school and the fostering of parent choice. The other, the supporters of comprehensives, has argued for measures to produce more balanced intakes coupled with improved investment. I agree that this is a vital part of the solution but it's not enough. What is also required is a radical change in our conception of schooling, whilst retaining the essence of the comprehensive: the commitment to all ability intakes and the building of a common culture.

For reasons of time and space, I intend to confine myself to dealing with the English state secondary school system. I recognise that there are pressing issues that have a bearing on all this, such as pre-school and primary education, fee-paying schools and further and higher education, but they must wait for another occasion.

A Radically Different Kind of School

Perhaps the most powerful obstacle to the renewal of the comprehensive system is not as some would argue that the underlying principle is outmoded but that the model of schooling itself no longer works.

Considering the educational turmoil of the last thirty years, there is a high degree of consensus about the comprehensive ethos, even if the term itself is not always used. Such views are eloquently and clearly expressed by a wide range of writers and thinkers including Jonathan Porritt and Tim Brighouse in a recent collection, *Education for a Change: Transforming the way we teach children*. What this makes clear is that any discussion about schooling is also a discussion about the sort of society we want and its moral basis. In an increasingly heterogeneous society, school is perhaps unique in providing a meeting point for different cultures and outlooks. If anything, it is even more critical in building common goals and a common culture than it was for a previous generation that campaigned for the abolition of the grammar schools. These social goals cannot be usefully separated from the educational goals of increasing skills and knowledge. To quote John Dewey:

I believe that the moral education centers upon this conception of the school as a mode of social life, that the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought. The present educational systems, so far as they destroy or neglect this unity, render it difficult or impossible to get any genuine, regular moral training.

The problem is the vehicle we are using to put these objectives into effect. In its essentials, it would be familiar to a Victorian teacher or parent. In this model of schooling, children and young people spend their daytime hours together with their peers and apart from the surrounding community, ingesting a body of knowledge organised into subject specialisms. This vehicle is based on a pre-neuro science view of human capability, from a world before the discovery of accelerated learning, critical learning, creative partnerships, family learning, the Pacific Institute and emotional intelligence. We can ameliorate the problems thrown up by an obsolete model with increased flexibility programmes, glitzy new schools and behaviour improvement strategies but this is to mistake symptoms for causes.

What we need instead is a new model of schooling that

- * Links the acquisition of knowledge directly to the experience of the world
- * Brings together people of different ages to exchange ideas and skills
- * Takes account of our growing understanding of the way human beings develop understanding and skills
- * Promotes enterprise for wealth creation and active citizenship
- * Gives responsibility to young people as citizens for the conduct of their lives, relationships and learning
- * Going beyond the extended school concept, strengthens communities through a two-way bond: the school provides services and employment, the community offers learning experiences and expertise – the Scarman Trust call this a Community Service Agreement.

Titus Alexander and John Potter (eds.), Routledge/Falmer, 2004.

From 'My Pedagogic Creed', first published in *The School Journal*, vol. LIV, no.3, 16 January 1897, pp.77-80. See: www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/e-dew-pc.htm#gc



Because form follows function, the result is a radically different kind of school. Charles Handy sums it up: 'schools should be like work and vice versa'. School becomes a centre for the production of ideas, products, services and networks for a whole community. For as Charlie Leadbeater has argued, '...education will not be enough on its own. We also need to excel at exploiting and applying our know-how... A dynamic knowledge society must promote innovation and entrepreneurship alongside education and training'. This is the vision that underpins the CAN Academy at Shotton Hall near Peterlee, or the enterprise initiative at City School, Sheffield. As a community enterprise and learning centre, the school should acquire the social and economic weight to drive regeneration. The enterprise initiatives funded by the government are a step in the right direction but they are too timid, too easily integrated into an old way of learning, lacking the critical mass to propel schooling in a new direction.

What goes on in the new school, how is it organised, how is it designed?

Inside the New School

The old school begins with a curriculum, little changed over decades. The new school begins with a set of activities designed to prepare students for life and work and to strengthen the community. The boundary between the school and the outside world is porous; the school is an integral part of its community. Knowledge transfer networks promote school inter-dependence and the easy exchange of ideas, what Hargreaves calls an 'education epidemic'. Activities involve young people working and learning alongside their peers and adults, acquiring the core skills of critical thinking, managing learning, working in teams, communicating, reading, writing, listening and speaking, playing sport and developing self-expression in a variety of media. They involve too the essential skills of self-government, decision-making and building sustainable communities. In short, we are talking about building a learning community.

The 11-14 phase is a period of exploration, trying out experiences and activities, taking an increasing level of responsibility for organising activities and learning, and acquiring the core skills. Already much of the time is spent working with an adult or older student, perhaps making pots or plumbing a house or learning about nanotechnology. From 14 onwards, as they move into adulthood, young people spend an increasing amount of time away from school, taking part in projects such as building a nursery or restoring a disused cinema as a performance centre or helping to run a hotel or small engineering business. The enthusiasm they experience in doing and making and thinking to a purpose translates into a willingness to manage their own learning and to crack problems with literacy and numeracy.

The school is organised into teams and groups of teams. Groups contain teams of varying ages and are led by older students, teachers and adult specialists. The specialists have several jobs:

- * to organise and fund the annual work plan of the teams, ensuring a balanced programme of activities and learning
- * to liaise with the teachers in the design and delivery of learning programmes
- * to identify a coach for each student
- * to set up projects inside and outside the schools
- * to use their own expertise in programme delivery eg as drama coaches or core skills tutors.

The annual work plan, which forms part of the local community strategy, is designed to promote local enterprise and development. The school provides a base for a number of student-run companies, some of them spin offs from the nanotechnology programme. The school has a governing body, representing students, staff, parents and community interests. It is managed by a small executive group of teachers and specialists plus two students on work shadowing placements. As in a university, this group elects a Dean to provide overall leadership. What's wrong with democracy in schools?

Design Follows Function

The first sight of the school is of a hive of activity. The ground floor is given over to workshops, performance and exhibition areas and a range of service outlets, including a hotel, restaurant, library, nursery and advice centre, all staffed by students. Nearby there are incubator units, where fledgling enterprises are learning to spread their wings, and live-work units where craftspeople and designers live above their workshops and studios. You can see a band rehearsing a hip hop set in an audio studio, whilst lunch is being prepared in the training kitchen. Upstairs there are study rooms, team meeting rooms, offices and lecture rooms. These are the nearest thing to the classroom of the traditional school but they are designed to hold 100 students and can be configured for small group work. A team of university lecturers is leading a day seminar in one of them, based on their research work on the local social enterprise sector.

See Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter; ODP/ Home Office, 2005, p. 22.
In Education for a Change: Transforming the way we teach our children, p.44.

Living on Thin Air; Viking, 1999, p.108. Education Epidemic: Transforming secondary schools through innovation networks, Demos, 2003.

There are also virtual operations rooms where computers are used to simulate a variety of real world experiences, including pilot training, hospital management, courtrooms, warehouse distribution centres, newsrooms. (These are all based on current practice eg Staffordshire University's courtroom, and will be familiar to the computer games generation.) Most of the people we see are young people but a substantial minority are adults who come to work on the site or to take part in the learning programmes themselves. Many teams include adult learners. On the same site, set apart in its own campus, there is also a primary and pre-school. Younger children are progressively introduced to the resources enjoyed by their older counterparts, gaining the confidence and skills to take part in the doing, making and performing ethos of the new school.

We call it a school but maybe the American Community College is closer to the mark for this new type of institution that subverts the traditional boundaries between school, further and higher education.

Three Exemplars

This is not science fiction. It is based on a reading of new trends and initiatives. Let me mention three inspiring exemplars.

The RSA's Opening Minds project audaciously marries the subject specialisms of the national curriculum and its emphasis on knowledge accumulation with a competence framework derived from an analysis of the skills and knowledge required by the modern world such as citizenship skills and values and interpersonal skills. The national curriculum straitjacket, nonetheless, puts a finite limit on experimentation, constraining the development of project or task based learning. Opening Minds demonstrates the value of the competence framework but the next stage will involve a considerable loosening of the shackles on schools.

Typical of Gothenburg's determination to redesign its learning and industrial base in tandem is GTG, the technical high school set up jointly by the City Council and Volvo to train the motor engineers of the future. Students, who are taught in a purpose-built learning centre with the latest Volvo models to practice on, have the opportunity to earn a decent income during spells spent gaining experience of production management and engineering. They also know that they can progress to university if they complete the high school course successfully. What is especially appealing about GTG to British eyes is the way it combines high level general education with a fixation on the industry's current know-how needs. 40% of the credits counting towards the final qualification are for general and social studies, designed to ensure that students are able to make sense of rapid global change and to communicate in two or three languages. GTG is producing engineers who will be global citizens.

Another model is Ruskin Mill, a restored textile mill in the Horsley Valley near Stroud in Gloucestershire, which employs over 100 people running a residential college for young people with special needs and a host of craft workshops. In return for training apprentices, these enjoy a rent discount. On the same site, there are teaching rooms, IT centre, bakery, a teaching kitchen, 15 fish ponds, 2 acres of market garden, a 45 acre mixed organic farm and 38 acres of managed woodland. The Mill works as an educational, environmental and employment project with mainstream funding from the LSC. Its success has led to new offshoots in Stourbridge and Sheffield.

These two contrasting models, GTG and Ruskin Mill, demonstrate how it is possible to provide a high quality vocational experience for both special needs young people and potential high flyers. Our new model will only work if it is seen to meet the needs of all young people. That is the comprehensive principle.

Next Steps

But surely all this is hopelessly utopian, like global disarmament. It may be desirable but there's no hope of ever getting there. But as Oscar Wilde said, 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing... Progress is the realisation of Utopias'. So, how can we go forward? In two ways, I think: through debate and action.

First, we need to promote a national discussion about new models of schooling that meet contemporary needs. Our aim should be to renovate the comprehensive ideal based on a candid acceptance of its limitations. In other words, we recognise the constraints of a system engineered in the 60s and 70s and acknowledge the need for change.

Second, we need to develop a new model or models rooted in practical reality. Building Schools for the Future (BSF) offers an opportunity for trialling the new model but it will need long conversations and real engagement with all concerned.

There's no time here to explore the ways that these problems are being grappled with elsewhere, for example Chicago's brave attempts at reform – see <http://www.smallschools.cps.k12.il.us/JLN%20School%20Dis%20Article.pdf>
I'm grateful to Valerie Baylis for her help in understanding Opening Minds and how it relates to the broader theme of this piece.



BSF provides an opportunity for

- * a fresh start with parents and students, especially in communities with a distant relationship to their schools
- * engaging the educational professionals in a debate about how best to realise the ideals that brought them into teaching
- * engaging employers in a discussion about what they can gain from and what they can offer to the new school
- * discussions with other learning providers, especially FE colleges, about where they fit in, and with the DfES about loosening the rules about re-building.

Currently, BSF represents a missed opportunity: true, the new buildings are impressive but their design reflects an outmoded approach to learning.

We need to be able to demonstrate that the new model(s) are well grounded in reality, are workable, make a difference and have the support of young people, parents, local authorities, employers and other stakeholders. A pilot scheme should explore the implications for schools of the new model(s) in terms of curriculum, organisation, teaching and learning, community links, funding and pay, and so on.

Conclusions

My aim here has been to spell out the beginnings of an alternative to the traditional model of schooling, one that fits with the comprehensive ethos of 'forging a communal culture by the pursuit of quality with equality', and which is designed to bring out the best in all abilities and aptitudes. No doubt there are other models: what we need now is a debate about the alternatives, much like the debate that took place in Britain from the 40s onward that paved the way for the abolition of the 11 plus. Recent events have done wonders in focusing attention on the divisive effects of the school system and the likely impact of the government's proposals in the Education White Paper. What the left now needs to do is to spark a debate about the future of comprehensives rooted in a socialist understanding of what education is for and the limitations of the traditional model of schooling.

It is worth recalling, finally, the bitter-sweet experience of Arthur C Clarke who wrote an article for *Wireless World* in 1945 predicting satellite technology and had to wait for more than 20 years for the technology to catch up with the dream.

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Based on Esther Caplin and Nicholas Falk's evaluation, *Making the Most of the Achievements and Potential of Ruskin Mill*, unpublished manuscript, November 2001. See the account of Freeman College, Sheffield in *New Start*, 1 April, p.16. *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. Robin Pedley quoted in Millar and Benn, p.8

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