

## Reflection.

The first 'reflection' article of 2019 has been provided by Tony Ryan, the Chief Executive Officer of the UK Design and Technology Association – a professional association for Design and Technology educators, and the sponsors of Design and Technology Education: An International Journal. Tony's background is as both a Design and Technology teacher and as Headteacher of two large urban secondary schools for 11-18 year olds. He reflects on a set of current issues in the English school system as he considers whether the current system is fit for purpose. While his reflections relate specifically to England, it would be interesting to consider if his reflections have resonance with education systems elsewhere in the world, or whether they are unique to England. What are the priorities at the core of national education systems? And do they match up with those things valued by learners and their parents? Please let us know if you have comments to contribute.

Kay Stables,

Editor

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## Is our education system fit for purpose?

**Tony Ryan, CEO Design and Technology Association, UK**

I have come to dread the question that often raises its head at social events "so what do you do?" As a secondary school headteacher this was often the start of a very short conversation, once you had declared your hand, the response was frequently something along the lines of "I could never do that" or the old favourite asking me what I did with my thirteen weeks holiday every year. As the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a charity championing design and technology, the conversation that follows usually starts with "wasn't that metalwork, woodwork and cooking?"

Everyone has a view on education, because everyone at some stage went to school. I have listened intently and politely on many an occasion while someone has taken me to task as a serving headteacher about the English education system and its inherent failings.

As a headteacher my first priority was to lead a school within which students felt safe and secure. I felt privileged that every morning, parents entrusted the safety and care of almost 1300 young people to my colleagues and I. For the most part, these parents had performed their due diligence, they had turned up at the open days held for prospective parents who were deciding which school they would wish their child to go to when they had completed

their primary school education. They had attended the transition talk that helped them understand how the school managed the child's transition from primary to secondary school and the ethos and values that the 'new' school holds and had no doubt discussed their choice of secondary school with friends and neighbours. Many were swayed by their son/daughter's desire to go to a particular secondary school. I was always quietly in awe of just how much of the decision-making process actually lay with the students.

Reputation plays a greater role here than one might imagine, to some, the school was only as good as the last staff interaction with a parent, the 14-year-old student group on the bus on their way home, the last set of public examination results or your last school inspection report from the national Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

I would like to think that we were reflective as a school and asked the parents to complete questionnaires or surveys at least once a year, feeding back on what we did well, what could improve and what areas we should be developing. The response by parents prioritising what they wanted for their sons and daughters was scarily consistent:

- For them to be safe, confident and happy
- To have a group of friends that they could rely upon and trust
- It was important that their sons/daughters enjoyed school and wanted to be there
- The relationship between teachers and their students was often mentioned as a priority with parents recognising that nothing makes as much of an impact as a good teacher
- Discipline and order often came high up the list
- Extra-curricular activities and opportunities for students to try out new experiences, find gifts that they didn't know they possessed or to visit other countries was another plus for parents
- Surprisingly low down the list of priorities (possibly taken for granted) was the ability to gain a body of knowledge that would ultimately lead to examination success.

One of my 'go to' books as a school leader was Guy Claxton's "What's the point of School - Rediscovering the heart of education" (Claxton, 2008). It was all too easy to allow yourself and others to get caught up in the school performance data, the threat of Ofsted, the next governing body meeting ... allowing the real purpose of school and education to get lost in a sea of nonsense. In this book, Claxton grounds the reader suggesting that, while examinations and student progress are both clearly important, education's key responsibility is to create inquisitive, enthusiastic learners who will go on to confidently address questions asked of them in a rapidly changing world. Who could argue with that vision for education?

All too often I hear business and industry leaders bemoan the fact that they often pretty much have their pick of highly qualified school leavers. They arrive at interview confident that their stream of A\* and A grades will be enough to see them safely through the

interview process, but stumble as soon as they are asked to talk about anything slightly off-piste. These students have been conditioned by an education system that asks little of them, other than to passively acquire pockets of knowledge before regurgitating this onto an examination paper. Knowledge is king, with skills and attributes consigned to the rubbish bin, if you can't measure it, it clearly has no value!

A few weeks ago, Carolyn Fairbairn Director General at the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), gave a talk at the UK Royal Society. In this talk Ms Fairbairn suggested that our education system, in its current form, is probably not fit for purpose and needed to urgently adapt to the requirements set by a changing world. In this talk, three new proposals were tabled:

- The question was asked if GCSE's<sup>i</sup> taken at age 16 are really necessary? Carolyn Fairbairn described them as being "intrusive and intensive, leaving little space for schools to teach the broader skills that employers' value". She continued "In a world where few employers even ask for GCSE results and there are better ways of assessing school performance, why should we require students to cram for a set of exams which feel increasingly anachronistic?"
- Secondly, she talked about the fact that today's students will live longer and will consequently spend longer in work, so should they logically not spend a longer time studying and preparing for work? A suggestion was made that the government should consider the possibility of every student being supported to take at least the first stage of a level four qualification.
- Finally, the CBI announced its intention to support employers to work with schools, colleges and universities to help them to adapt to this change.

I have a lot of empathy with the proposals tabled. In my time I have taught and been involved in a range of qualifications ranging from vocational certificates, CPVEs, GNVQs, through BTEC's, GCSE's, Applied Qualifications, Diplomas and A Levels<sup>ii</sup>. For two years I was fortunate to teach International Baccalaureate (IB) Design & Technology to a mixed ability group of post-16 students.

These students had a choice of taking A Levels or the IB Post 16 and despite not being the 'traditional academic profile' for the IB, they and their parents, had opted for the breadth and depth that this qualification offered. I had previously taught A Level D&T but this was different, the syllabus required students to master a core body of knowledge, but then demanded that they put this knowledge to work in order to solve real problems ... not unlike the 'new' D&T GCSE. The students absolutely loved it (as did I) our conversations dug deeper and deeper into design theory and practice as my students completely immersed themselves in the subject. Students gained strong grades and Russell Group /

leading university placements not just on their examination grades, but on their ability to talk with deep knowledge and passion about their studies; that is real education.

An extended period of study with exams at 18 (not dissimilar to many school systems beyond the UK) would provide space for state schools to provide the breadth of education expected and demanded within the private sector. This would address a social inequity and a gap between the sectors that is growing ever wider.

The concept of the expectation that every student would move to at least the first stage of a level four qualification is also exciting to me, so long as that first stage could be with an employer, as part of an apprenticeship or the foundation year to a degree.

Finally, we are seeing an increasing number of companies and sectors that want to engage with schools. Be they driven by need, self-interest or simply a desire to 'put something back into the system' this engagement can contextualise learning making it 'real' and helping students (and their teachers) to see first-hand careers that might excite and motivate them. For their part, employers can stretch their young graduate trainees bringing them out of their comfort zones and back to school and the employer can be more involved in shaping the school system that they rely upon so heavily.

For the above to happen we need a government (of whatever colour) prepared to step back and look at the fundamental changes (real and emerging) to almost every sector of society, and to then be brave enough to design and implement a system that looks beyond political rhetoric and short-termism, to the real needs of students, business and society. I live in hope!

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<sup>i</sup> GCSE – (General Certificate of Education) are external, national examinations taken typically by 16-year olds in English schools

<sup>ii</sup> CPVE - Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education; GNVQ - General National Vocational Qualifications; BTEC - Business and Technical Council; A Level – Advanced Level national examinations taken typically by 18-year olds in English schools, at the end of their formal schooling

## Reference

Claxton, G., (2008). *What's the point of school? Rediscovering the heart of education*. One World Publications, Oxford, UK