What is the meaning of education in a post-pandemic state?

By Charlotte Lattin-Rawstrone*

As pandemic restrictions are lifted in England and schools and work life begin to return to more of a pre-pandemic state it seems pertinent to ask ourselves about the changes that have been occurring within our minds, homes and schools. How have our ideas about what education IS and IS FOR changed? Is there a new view of what we see as education?

England is in a unique position in terms of education systems, with what could be considered a tripartite system consisting of independent schools, comprehensive, or state funded, schools and 'alternative' settings, including 'home-schooling'.

Previous PESGB blog posts, including December 2021's here, have discussed the historical and cultural construction of education and considered possible future trajectories (See also Fisher and Fisher, Jan 2022 here and March 2021's post by Stock here). Awareness of

how current systems and settings have evolved can assist our understanding of the different education choices and outcomes from a deeper perspective. The impact of cultural context on the shaping of educational systems and strategies and the underlying philosophical assumptions that these systems draw on has been considered by many greats within the field of education, e.g. Holt (1964; 1982), Dewey (1966) and others to more recent considerations such as those put forward by Reay (2018) and Cunningham (2021). Many of these have considered specifically the evolution of comprehensive schooling and pedagogy but this misses the fact that there are alternatives to 'government-led' schooling in England, consisting of both the independent school system AND those who do not attend a conventional school setting.

The 'normal' must be reconsidered carefully within our current context of a post-pandemic England to consider where we go from here from the perspective of the children and families who have seen alternative ways of 'doing school'.

Families and young people with access to high levels of technology have been able to access school education from their own homes or

places other than school. This has brought a range of issues to the fore, not least of which is a questioning of the purpose of school and whether schools as they exist are fit for purpose. This, of course, depends on what the purpose of schools is considered to be. Is school a place of learning? Does school conveniently look after children while parents go about their business of working and making money? Does the importance of school lie in the social connections that young people make? Is this where young people are socialised in preparation for the ‘‘real world’’? The answers may well differ for people from different classes, backgrounds and experiences.

We must consider who gets what from different forms of education and who misses out. It could be considered that the choice to home educate enables education to be tailored to the individual needs of carers and child, potentially avoiding some of the cultural concerns of different school environments. Those who either choose (or are able to choose) alternative or independent schooling for their children are perhaps choosing networking opportunities over ‘education’. The ‘choice’ of culture doesn’t stop there either. Despite there being a national curriculum, no two state schools are the same.

Parents choose the schools they desire for their children according to criteria regarding school ethos and attainment results.

If we were able to create our own system of schooling from scratch what would we build? Nicholas Stock considers this in a blog post here, (2021) but the debate is fuelled by the underpinning philosophical positions discussed earlier. There is no agreement about the role of schools within education. Recent rises in the number of parents and young people who are choosing their own way out of the current school system following their experiences during the 'home schooling/online learning' period can't be ignored (ACDS, 2021). These increasing numbers suggest that the desire to continue some aspect of individualised, personalised learning and support appears to have been ignited in many. Equally, the number of both parents and young people who have changed their opinion of schools, now favouring school attendance following their pandemic experience is a factor to consider.

What does this mean for the state of education? And why should we care? It is my belief that the possibilities that greater awareness of alternatives to mainstream schooling in large in-person buildings

should, or perhaps more accurately could, enable a more diverse system of educational choice. Perhaps this is the point in the history of education in the UK where consideration of the different positions regarding education allows us to move away from a judgemental dichotomy of right/wrong when it comes to school or alternative education.

If we are unable to learn from the raised awareness that there are options that are available to fit with the differing experiences, needs and lives of different young people, families and education settings perhaps we are missing our greatest opportunity for change.

References

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