

Education Committee conference, 'The purpose and quality of education in England'

Tuesday 13 September 2016

Keynote speech from Professor Mary Beard, Professor of Classics, University of Cambridge

I should preface this talk by putting some cards on the table about my own background in education. My mother was the head of a large primary school in Telford, I went to a girls direct grant school, read Classics at Cambridge and I have worked in universities all my adult life (in London, America and back in Cambridge). But I'm talking here more as an amateur observer (or at most *semi*-professional observer) on public educational debate. I apologise that I will sometimes be stating the bleeding obvious (but sometimes stating the bleeding obvious is what's needed). And I apologise for sounding off in areas where most of you know a lot more than me. But that's what I was asked to do. I want in particular to expose some the muddles that we get into when we discuss big educational issues, I want to underline that the question you have been trying to address of what education is *for* is one of history's great unanswerables (which is part of what makes it so important and intriguing) but I also want to suggest that there *are* some places within our school system where taking a much braver look at what we are doing things *for* might help us.

Let's start with some baselines (and I don't mean in the technical educational sense). Societies have always argued about education. It hasn't recently become a political football; it's forever been one. You can go back, if you like, to 399 BC when one of the charges that took Socrates to his death was "corrupting the young": he was teaching them the wrong syllabus, and he was undermining, in that familiar phrase, 'Athenian values'. (In this country at least, we don't kill teachers any more – so that's something to be thankful for.) These debates are never going to end. There is no right answer. We're never going to be able to sit back, and say, 'OK – education's sorted now'. For me – and I speak with the privilege of being an observer, not (say) a practising head teacher -- the priority is to try to ensure that the debates we have are as productive as possible. Part of that involves recognising that this is one area in which there are happily no villains. No teacher goes into the profession in order to wreck the life chances of their pupils, no examiner is in it for the sadism, and policy makers (however much I may *disagree* with many of them) are aiming to make the system better not worse. The question is what *better* means and on what criteria we would recognise *better* when we saw it.

If I was forced to say what I thought education is for. I guess I might say that it is “the process by which screaming babies are turned into the kind of human beings we would like them to be, both individually and en masse”. It’s not usually put that way but it’s broadly true, uncontroversial and doesn’t tell us very much. It only gets interesting and controversial when we try to pin down what *kind* of human beings, or human society, we want, and which of the many desiderata we should prioritize. (The ‘we’ I am referring to, I should say, is the ‘we’ of public debate, not of the academic seminar.) More practically it gets controversial when we try to narrow down those desirable aims into something that the *formal* education system can or should deliver and how we judge whether it has done a good job. Schools aren’t the only places involved in turning babies into people and what particular contribution we can expect of *them* is always going to be a matter of debate.

It’s right, not a mark of failure, that we disagree about a lot of this. To be honest it would be decidedly scary if we were all of one view (do you want to live in a world in which everyone agrees about what should go on in schools? I don’t). A civilised society is, by definition, one that gets very worked up about how its young are educated. My problem isn’t with disagreement; it’s with the fudged evidence, muddled language and un-thought out assumptions with which our public debates are sometimes conducted. It’s too easy, for a start, to white out the difficulty of assembling reliable detailed and objective evidence for how good an education system is, beyond perhaps some very broad-brush figures for literacy and numeracy. We have to be straight with ourselves that school exam results, Pisa rankings and employment statistics are *proxies* for that evidence, and they may be the best, and certainly the most quantifiable, proxies we can get; they are *not* evidence of quality in themselves. I mean, the fact that school exam results are improving *may* indicate that our education system is getting better. But it does not necessarily do so. (And, of course, the choice of which proxies to put most weight on is itself an ideological one.)

It’s too easy, as well, to let clichés and slogans pass for policy and argument. I’m sure I’m as guilty as the next person on this (it’s always easier to spot other people’s clichés than your own, and I fear there’s no subject quite like education for encouraging the trite). But no rallying cry is worth crying if no sane person in the country could possibly cry the reverse. As Michael Wilshaw came close to hinting in his evidence to the committee, ‘driving up standards’ (which has become an extraordinary mantra in recent discussions) doesn’t mean very much if no one is actually trying to *lower* them (though they might rightly be disputing how you would go about “driving them up”, at what cost, how those standards are to be measured, and possibly on the undue weight placed on those proxies I was just talking about). And my impression was that an

awful lot of the other buzzwords in the submissions to the inquiry tended, at the very least, to obscure the complexities we should be thinking harder about. I couldn't help finding the stress on the virtues of a "rounded education" particularly piquant – when over the last few weeks we have been cheering on *and treating as role models* young elite athletes from Team GB whose education in adolescence was anything *but* rounded. The bottom line is that we have violently conflicting aspirations for our young people. (? Worth reflecting on our different attitudes to the sporting and academic elite?)

It isn't of course all about language. One big *destabiliser* of our debates is the 'quart into a pint pot' problem – our habit of asking of *school* education more than it can possibly deliver, and then judging it to have failed when it doesn't. I'm not just talking about curriculum wars: Latin or Computer Science; *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Hamlet* or, God help us, *The Faerie Queen*. The simple truth is that we can't teach children all that we would like them to know, and we should be keeping in our sights that old fashioned aim of teaching children *how to learn* not *what to know* (even if *how* is much harder to measure than *what*). But there's a grander scale to this. We've come to demand that our formal educational system takes the lead in effecting social change, and in driving social mobility. That is asking too much of it; it may help, but it can't do it on its own. And it's simply a counterproductive distraction to shift the blame up and down the system: as the fire gets turned onto Russell Group universities for failing to admit more of the less privileged, onto secondary schools for failing to stretch the aspirations of their bright working class students, and then on nursery schools who fail to counter the achievement deficit that has set in by the age of two. And so on...

These anxieties, and the sense that social ills can be blamed on *educational* failure, are as old as formal education itself (to go back to Greece, try Aristophanes comedy, *The Clouds*, for a satirical attack on a new style 'curriculum' in fifth-century BC Athens). But some of our *responses* to them are new, and possibly not helpful. One of those is the welter of rules, regulations, initiatives and written guidelines that are increasingly assumed to be the safest solution to any perceived problem in our schools; and that go hand in hand with a dangerous unwillingness to trust the judgement and flexibility of professionals on the ground. (It's part of the 21st century disease, that we imagine that the best way to solve a problem is to throw a law at it.) This system *will* eventually implode under its own weight: you *can't* regulate for every problem, and one size does *not* fit all. In preparing for today I came across, by chance of Google, the website of what I shall call "Little People's Community Nursery" in rural northern England, for kids aged 0 to 5. This included, following government guidelines, a six page document on how they were implementing the Prevent Strategy: "Although serious incidents

involving radicalisation have not occurred at Little People's Nursery . . . it is important for us to be vigilant". I hope that was sarcasm, but I suspect it wasn't. Whatever the dangers we face (and I am not denying that), when future historians discover this and the thousands of documents like it, they will conclude that we had gone barking mad. Aristophanes would have had a field day, and made mincemeat of the idea of guidelines to prevent the radicalisation of babies.

Future historians will have a similar reaction to our intense investment in formal testing and exams (which is not, I suspect, unrelated to the regulation problem). Over the last 30 years we have come to assume that if something is worth teaching it must be examined, and that all children in the country (depending slightly on where they live) will be subject to mass, repeated written tests. We are currently, I think (though comparisons are not always easy) the most examined nation in the West; we are certainly examining our children more than we ever have done before. You will know the figures well. In 1950s O levels were a minority option (not much more than 10% of the age group achieved 5 of them; most young people were not still at school at 16 anyway). Now GCSEs are standard fare for all (in 2011 roughly 80% of the age group got 5 at A* to C). Our biggest exam board needs 25,000 markers each year. Is this sustainable? Can it be a good thing? What are we doing it *for*, and with what impact on *education*?

As I said, this system was not invented by a load of sadists, and in fact the spread of O levels (later GCSEs) and A levels to the majority of children was driven by laudable social motives: to give many more young people access to key qualifications that had previously been the privilege of only a small elite. But other problems have predictably followed.

First are those that stem from scale. We do not have the person-power to run this system. Or to put it another way, the more inexperienced or less qualified markers we are forced to employ, the more mechanistic the marking criteria *have* to be. It's a classic case of lack of trust (and here maybe a legitimate lack of trust) generating rules and regulations, and ultimately leading to what one might politely call a formulaic approach to learning. My own students increasingly want to know exactly what they should have written to move their essay from a 2.1 to a first, as if fulfilling the 'assessment objectives' was all there was to it. Of course breaking down the obscurantist mystique of that undefined 'first class quality' (which often meant male) may be a good thing; but when I say thinking hard should make your head hurt, that real learning can be uncomfortable, it doesn't always go down well.

Maybe more important are the different purposes that we are now using these mass tests for. In terms of judging the national success of the school system they have become one of the most important (and possibly a very unreliable) proxy for evidence. They provide a way of judging individual student performance and rationing places in the next stage of education. And notoriously they judge and rank schools. And that is the most seriously disruptive element. How universal or oppressive the crime of "teaching to the test" is, is hard to say, and anyway it's rather more nuanced than we often imagine. I can remember when it was used as a criticism of teachers in maintained schools versus those in the independent sector that they were not "in" with the ways of the exams boards (now they get ticked off for being too 'in'). And middle class mums and dads protest a bit too much when they complain that young Emma isn't interested in their views on *Romeo and Juliet* because it 'won't come up in the exam'. (Emma may just want mum and dad off her back.) But it is an iron rule that every exam *can* be crammed for and *will* be when the success of the institution is directly tied its results. I have seen essays submitted by excellent applicants to my university where the teacher's comment are restricted *solely* to how far the work has fulfilled the assessment objectives, and I have talked at schools where the teacher has punctuated my talk to explain to the kids which AO my last sentence was relevant to. That is grim.

So what should we do? The point of much of what I have said is that we have to face up to the fact that education in the broadest sense is one of the most elusive subjects in the human sciences; that we are bound to disagree and never to get it right, and never even really know how right we are getting it. Disagreement and even dissatisfaction are *not* signs of failure. But here maybe the practical problems of scale – the exam system sinking under its own weight -- will come to our rescue, and encourage us to ask ourselves some of the questions we often shirk.

Some of the biggest changes in assessment have come from practical, not ideological considerations. The change in mid nineteenth century universities, from oral to written examinations, was partly driven by the difficulty of testing advanced geometry without a pencil and paper, and partly by rise of student numbers: the examiners were spending months of each year conducting orals when everything could be done much quicker on paper.

Right now, practical pressures might tempt us to have a long hard look at GCSE, which are not only the big stick in the league tables, but seem oddly overblown now that they are not a terminal set of exams, in the old sense of a 'school leaving exam', for anyone. Maybe we could do without most of them, at least in their current form (imagine the freedom of that) -- and

while we were about it, maybe we could abolish a few paper trails and initiatives trust the judgment of teachers on the ground more -- and in general 'loosen up',