Wasted

Why education isn't educating

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continuum

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The Paradox of Education

> Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the
> world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same
> token save it from ruin which, except for renewal, except for the
> coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And educa-
> tion, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough
> not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own
> devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of under-
> taking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to
> prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common
> world.[1] (Hannah Arendt)

It is tempting to find a scapegoat for the many problems that appear
to afflict the institutions of education. Some critics point the finger
of blame towards opportunist politicians, others target the numer-
ous poorly conceived experiments with schooling, and teachers and
parents are regularly denounced for their apparent failures. For their
part, teachers blame government and its official inspectors. In
private conversations, civil servants express the conviction that
many teachers are simply not up to the job of educating their pupils.
Condemnation is also directed at children and, by implication, at
their parents. On numerous occasions I have been struck by the
negative sentiments that teachers express towards their 'disruptive'
pupils – some as young as six or seven years old – as well as towards
their families. Education has become a battlefield on which often-
pointless conflicts are fought. Such conflicts are not confined to any
one country. They assume a particularly intense form in Anglo-

American societies, but in recent years I have encountered parents and teachers in Germany, Holland and Italy who are angry and bitter about this or that aspect of the way their education system works.

Education is about many different issues, but in the first instance it is about the exercise of adult responsibility. As Hannah Arendt, one of the leading political theorists of the twentieth century, reminds us, 'education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it'. These days it is easy to overlook our responsibility as adults for the education of young people. Society continually communicates the warning: 'Keep Out – other people's children are not your business!' The task of educating children has been outsourced to the care of curriculum experts and pedagogues, and education is frequently represented as a discrete specialized activity that relies on their expertise. Of course it is that – but education is also much more than an activity that can be left to the care of a small group of professionals. As Arendt suggests, it is through education that adults ensure that the younger generation are prepared culturally, morally and intellectually to renew our 'common world'.

The term 'adult responsibility' can come across as a meaningless platitude. After all, most grown-ups have little involvement in the education of the young. Children are perceived as the responsibility of their parents or carers at home and of their teachers in school. Indeed, adults are encouraged to keep their distance from other people's children, and understandably draw the conclusion that what happens to young people is not their business.[2] But grown-ups are not just individuals: they are members of a wider world of adults. By their very existence they represent adulthood to the younger generation and through their behaviour send out very clear signals about what we expect from children. In a very real sense, adult authority is indivisible. The way grown-ups behave in everyday life does not go unnoticed by children as they head to school. If adults behave authoritatively towards youngsters at home and in their communities, it is likely that teachers will feel comfortable in exercising authority in the classroom. But if adults in general are reluc-

tant or confused about giving guidance to the younger generation, the challenge facing the teacher in the classroom can sometimes become overwhelming.

Today, adults have become estranged from the task of taking responsibility for the younger generations. In March 2009 Bob Lightman, President of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, complained that teachers were expected to teach children who 'seem never to have the opportunity to have a conversation outside school with an adult'.[3] The implication of this statement is far-reaching, because, as I argue in Chapter 3, an inter-generational conversation is an essential component of education. When grown-ups become disconnected from the young they cease to play an adult role. Adults are not simply biologically mature individuals. Although the state or quality of being an adult has many meanings, the sense of adulthood develops and gains its clarity through its relationship with the young.

Currently, ideas about adult responsibility tend to be expressed in a one-sided negative manner in relation to the question of education. Protagonists in controversies about schooling are happy to criticize parents, teachers or policy-makers for their 'irresponsible' behaviour. But such criticisms are often motivated by the goals of point-scoring and blame-avoidance. Typically parents are rounded upon to get involved and help the school get on with its job, and such exhortations often communicate a sense of disparagement towards the parent. A paradigmatic example of this approach was the highly influential American report *A Nation at Risk*. Published in 1983, the report warned American people about the threat posed by a decline in academic performance, and urged parents to be a 'living example of what you expect your child to honour and emulate'.[4] As one commentator observed: 'the initial portrayal of uninvolved and uncommitted parents in *A Nation at Risk* made serious mischief as it legitimized scapegoating parents, seemingly for everything'.[5] Similar sentiments are regularly expressed in Britain. 'It's no good blaming schools for deteriorating behaviour among young people when parents all too often set such an appalling example themselves', stated Tim Collins, a former Conservative spokesman on education.[6] In this case, censuring parents

appears as a sensible alternative to blaming schools. Ed Balls MP, the Labour Government's Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, took a similar view, stating that 'parents should face up to their responsibilities' and be penalized if they don't.[7]

Far too many teachers adopt the attitude that the parent is the enemy. Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, writes that 'we know far too many children are behaving badly at school, even to the point of being violent to staff', adding: 'this is horrifying enough, but it is hard to be surprised since many children are just mirroring the behaviour of their parents'.[8] This sentiment is reinforced by John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, who insists that 'in too many cases, the root cause of poor behaviour is a pupil's home life'.[9]

While some cast parents as the villains in the drama, others assign them the role of the saviours of education. In his capacity as Education Minister, Lord Adonis stated in August 2008 that more 'pushy parents' are required to force poor state schools to improve.[10] In March 2009, the British Government announced a scheme that would allow parents and pupils to use 'satisfaction ratings' to grade their schools.[11] Such calls for parental intervention are likely to reinforce the tendency for parents to vent their frustration on their children's schools, exacerbating the tensions that divide adult society without doing anything to improve the quality of schooling.

In passing, it is worth noting that parents are no less culpable than any other constituency of adults in pointing the finger of blame. Too often, parents adopt the role of their child's advocate and regard a teacher's criticism of their child as a slight on themselves. Instead of reinforcing and supporting the teacher's authority, parents inadvertently undermine it. Indeed, one of the most disturbing symptoms of the erosion of a sense of adult solidarity is an apparent lack of inhibition on the part of parents about criticizing teachers in front of their children. Such negative remarks undermine the authority, not only of the teacher, but of all adults.

Instead of representing a call for the assumption of adult responsibility, the 'blame game' often expresses an attempt to evade such

obligations. Petty, divisive squabbles indicate that adults are not prepared to work together and assume a common responsibility towards the younger generations. Although most thinking people are concerned about the challenge of managing inter-generational relations, this is rarely conceptualized as a problem that needs to be addressed in its own right. Attitudes on this matter tend to be sectional – parents want school to exercise more authority and discipline, while teachers and politicians lecture mothers and fathers about their responsibilities. Such a narrow sectional approach does little to help revitalize an inter-generational conversation.

In debates about education, the concept of adult responsibility is rarely acknowledged as a significant issue, yet it influences virtually every aspect of formal education. Indeed, it appears that the very expansion of formal education can be understood as an attempt to occupy the territory vacated by the retreat of adult authority. So a recent review of primary education in England noted that schools need to respond to an ever-growing range of social problems, since 'society at large does not always live up to and exemplify the standards of behaviour it expects of its children'.[12] This call for taking an interest in the personal development of children is justified on the ground that 'society at large' is not setting a right example to young people. Yet schools can play only a limited role to make up for the failure of adult society to do this. The aim of this book is not to condemn the conduct of individual adults, because the problem lies with the inability of society as a whole to give meaning to the exercise of generational responsibility.

Sadly there is little public acknowledgement of the fact that the exercise of adult responsibility enjoys little cultural affirmation. Instead of explicitly addressing how to conduct an inter-generational conversation, society has sought to by-pass the issue by looking to motivational techniques and pedagogic expertise for a solution. Some of the gimmicks used to motivate children convey a sense of desperation. Some schools offer prizes such as iPods and game consoles to children who promise to behave. And when bribes fail to motivate, schools rely on professional crowd controllers, employing 'bouncers' to maintain order in the school.[13] The constant search

for a substitute for adult authority is one of the main drivers of the expansion of the institution of education.

Education has become the repository of adult society's problems, and this is one reason why its role has expanded so dramatically. Unfortunately, schools do not possess the magical powers to fix the problems that have been assigned to them. Motivational techniques and pedagogic expertise cannot compensate for the ambiguous manner in which grown-ups in the twenty-first century exercise their authority. Worse still, through expanding the remit of education, the job of teaching becomes further complicated. When education becomes everything, it ceases to be education. Education needs to be saved from those who want to turn it into an all-purpose institution for solving the problems of society.

Confusing the symptom of the crisis with its cause

There is little agreement about what issue constitutes the fundamental problem of education. There is widespread concern about the inability of schools to do very much about the apparent 'underachievement' of children coming from poor or marginalized communities, but others claim that teachers spend far too much time indulging 'social misfits' and overlook the needs of 'bright' children.[14] Some policy-makers are worried about both the underachievement of the economically disadvantaged and the lack of stimulation for the high achievers. School standards are a perennial subject of controversy. Critics lament the phenomenon of dumbing down while government officials insist that policies 'have helped to raise standards to an all-time high'.[15] Apprehensions about school discipline are widespread and, unlike the question of standards, nobody pretends that discipline is getting better.

Education and its meaning has always been a source of dispute. Should education be for its own sake? Is it right for schools to indoctrinate children with religious and national values? How much responsibility should schools assume for the socialization of children? Is the aim of the education to prepare children for the world of work? Such questions have been raised and re-raised through the

centuries, so it is not surprising that the twenty-first-century public continues to argue about the meaning and aim of education. What is new, and in many ways unprecedented, is that the contemporary discussion of education is not confined to a debate on the basics but touches upon virtually every aspect of schooling. In recent times arguments about schooling have extended into an ever-expanding variety of specialized concerns. Even pedagogic matters to do with which techniques are most effective for teaching children to read, the role of assessments, exams and inspections, or the content of the curriculum, have become constant topics of debate.

Heated arguments about policy, pedagogy and the ethos of schooling are symptomatic of a culture where far too many of society's preoccupations and anxieties are refracted through education. Unfortunately such arguments rarely clarify matters. Invariably they tend to focus on the symptoms and confuse it with their cause. One of the key points argued in this book is that the different symptoms – unsatisfactory standards, confusions regarding the curriculum, uncertainties about how to socialize young people, lack of clarity about how to enforce discipline – are the outcome of a more fundamental problem, which is that of adult authority. As I argue in succeeding chapters, it is the reluctance of contemporary society to value and affirm the exercise of adult authority that undermines our capacity to develop the potential of the young people. Without the valuation of adult authority, much of teachers' hard work and effort and society's resources are wasted.

The ambiguous status enjoyed by the exercise of adult authority has a negative influence on education in five important respects:

1. The authority of adults is inextricably linked to the status enjoyed by the experience of the past. Historically their authority was, in no small part, based upon their capacity to transmit the legacy of human knowledge and cultural achievements. The ambiguous status of adulthood has fostered a mood where their knowledge, and the authority of academic subjects, is frequently called into question by educational experts. One unfortunate outcome of this process has been the growth of pedagogical

beliefs and practices that self-consciously question the status of subject-based knowledge, leading to the downsizing of academic learning in the school curriculum. Many policy-makers and curriculum engineers argue that learning from current experience is more rewarding than the study of subject-based knowledge. They often dismiss academic subject-based knowledge as 'narrow' and call for the 'broadening out' of the curriculum.

2. Paradoxically, although education is celebrated continually in our so-called 'knowledge society', the authority of formal schooling and education is questioned implicitly by policy-makers and curriculum engineers. The formal is often con-trasted favourably with informal forms of learning. The widely acclaimed notion of 'lifelong learning' is presented often as a demonstration of the seriousness with which education should be taken. But, through recycling education as a lifelong project, the relative weight accorded to the formal education of the young diminishes. Indeed, some advocates of lifelong learning describe the education of children as the 'front-end model of learning' to signify that there are other potentially better models of learning. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the authority of formal education is called into question.

3. The erosion of adult authority in general has a direct impact on the status of the teacher. During the past quarter-century the professional status of the teacher has undergone important modifications. Since the very term 'teacher' conveys a sense of authority, this term has come into question. There is a growing tendency to refer to all members of a school – teachers and pupils – as 'learners'. Many pedagogues insist that instead of acting as authority figures, teachers should assume the role of facilitators. The devaluation of the authority of the teacher is also reinforced through the loss of value accorded to subject-based knowledge. Many pedagogues regard the teaching of aca-demic subjects in schools as irrelevant. Since the authority of teachers rests on their expertise in a subject, the current deval-uation of academic subjects has a direct effect upon teachers'

professional status. The cumulative outcome of these develop-
ments is the decline of the status of the teaching profession.

4. Confusions surrounding the role and status of adult authority
    have led to a loss of confidence in society's ability to socialize
    the younger generations. The loss of authority undermines the
    claim that adults have something important to transmit to the
    younger generations. This crisis of adult authority frequently
    is experienced as an inability to communicate a shared system
    of norms and values with clarity and conviction. Often schools
    are charged with the task of taking responsibility for the social-
    ization of their pupils, and it sometimes appears that schools
    are expected to find solutions to problems for which the wider
    society has no answer. As a result, the problems of society are
    frequently confused with that of education. It appears that as
    adult authority diminishes, the role of the school expands –
    particularly in the domain of socialization.

5. The confusions surrounding the exercise of adult authority have
    undermined authoritative forms of discipline. Since there is
    little cultural affirmation for the exercise of adult authority,
    schools and teachers are overwhelmed by a sense of disorien-
    tation when it comes to the maintenance of classroom disci-
    pline. The loss of nerve about the management of classroom
    discipline has become palpable. In many instances, teachers
    indicate that they are 'at risk' from the aggressive behaviour of
    young children – never mind teenagers. One observer has
    commented that 'adults are suffering from ephebiphobia – fear
    of young people'.[16]

Of the five trends outlined above, the only one that constitutes a
topic for public concern is that of discipline. Issues like bullying,
truancy and antisocial behaviour are difficult for society to ignore.
Unfortunately, the question of discipline tends to be discussed in its
more dramatic and violent manifestations. Discipline is not just
about managing bad behaviour – it has a creative dimension in the
cultivation and disciplining of young people's taste and sensibilities.
The internalization of the habit of discipline encourages habits and

attitudes that help children gain a sense of independence and self-mastery. Fundamental questions that bear upon the disciplining influence of academic and intellectual learning and of the formality of schooling are overlooked in the current public conversation on this subject.

Many of the current educational policies and pedagogic practices represent a semi-conscious attempt to compensate for, or evade, the difficulties surrounding the exercise of adult authority. Within teaching itself there is an emphasis on inventing motivational techniques that can by-pass this difficult question, and the new pedagogic vocabulary is full of terms that articulate an accommodation to the decline of adult authority. Terms like 'learning to learn', 'reflective learning', 'lifelong learning', 'e-learning' or 'experiential learning' signal a shift in emphasis from teaching to learning, and a shift in authority from teacher to learner. Although these terms touch on different dimensions of learning, they all communicate a common aspiration to promote and uphold a form of learning that does not depend on the authoritative leadership of a teacher. As an important study of this trend reminds us, 'all these pedagogic strategies can be seen as strands of an attempt to suppress hierarchy, or at least render it invisible'.[17]

The pedagogic project of suppressing hierarchy is often misinterpreted as a move towards a more democratic way of managing education. Many schools claim that they are in the business of providing students with an opportunity to voice their views. Policymakers also advocate the institutionalization of the student voice and sometimes transmit the idea that adult authority is no big deal. These initiatives are inspired by an ethos that is devoted to the project of motivating students in ways that are not reliant on authoritative adult behaviour, often through the use of behaviour management techniques. One of the unfortunate consequences of this approach is that its focus on motivation is at the expense of the content of the curriculum. As I note in Chapters 6 and 7, many of the motivational and behaviour management techniques used in schools foster an anti-intellectual climate in the classroom. One government-commissioned report, published in April 2009, proposed

that teachers should try to hold their students' attention through adopting techniques from popular contemporary television quiz shows.[18]

The motivation of students in educational settings has always represented a significant challenge to schools. Historically, students become motivated to learn through a combination of different factors. Experience of life and the desire to improve one's life chances has often served to motivate children to take their education seriously. Within the school it is the authoritative guidance and, in some cases, the inspiration provided by teachers that has helped to motivate young people. The aspiration to learn and the motivation to study are outcomes of family and community influence and the authoritative leadership provided by schools and teachers. Motivational techniques are useful tools for encouraging students but, on their own, are rarely successful in fostering an effective learning environment. More to the point, the tendency to conceptualize motivation as a problem in its own right often leads to a one-sided reliance on techniques and gimmicks that distract children from engaging with a challenging curriculum. For example, in recent years, attempts to utilize information technology to capture the interests of pupils have failed to motivate the classroom. Nevertheless a recent review of primary education in England concludes that 'one highly promising route to meeting the demand for in-depth teaching and learning is undoubtedly emerging through ICT' (information and communication technologies).[19] The ease with which this report makes a conceptual leap from the need for in-depth teaching to ICT is testimony to the triumph of technique over the content of education

More worryingly, the pedagogy of 'motivation' often contributes to a deterioration of the academic ethos of a school, as well as to its standards of discipline. It encourages a culture where the question of how to keep children interested overrides the issue of what is the content of education that must be taught. For example, many curriculum engineers take the view that since it is not possible to motivate children to read books it is preferable to show them DVDs or give them simple worksheets. Recently Michael Rosen, the

Children's Laureate of England, noted that many pupils are going through their formative years in school without reading a single novel. He denounced the practice of giving children short extracts on worksheets as 'absurd' and 'pathetic'.[20] My own interviews with children aged seven to eleven confirm Rosen's concerns. Many schools have almost given up on the idea that children – especially boys – can acquire a love of reading. Recently a group of Dutch teachers complained to me about the way in which 'worksheet culture' alienates children from the world of books.

The imperative of motivation also has a corrosive impact on teacher–pupil relations in school. In January 2009, Ofsted, the regulatory authority for schools, announced that it would crack down on 'boring' teachers, in response to concerns that the deterioration of pupils' behaviour was due to their lack of stimulation in class. Christine Gilbert, the Chief Inspector of Schools, justified this crackdown on the grounds that 'there was strong evidence' that there is a strong 'link between boredom and achievement'.[21] Every reader will have encountered a 'boring' teacher in their school years and understands that a state of tedium is not a desirable feature of school life. However, at a time when there is a manifest shortage of teachers who can teach maths, sciences, grammar or foreign languages, the focus on boring educators reveals a narrow-minded orientation. Another inane idea of Ofsted's is that it should write to children about their teacher's strengths and weaknesses. In one school, pupils as young as four received a letter from Ofsted which informed them that 'we have told your teachers they must try harder'.[22] The desperation with which the mission of motivation is pursued sometimes acquires a grotesque caricature. In some cases children are offered money or gifts to stay in school or to study for exams.[23]

Whether we like it or not, it is not always possible to motivate every student, and episodes of boredom are a normal feature of children's lives. When responsible adults hear a child say 'I am bored', they will not respond by transforming themselves into a clown. So too in education. The current one-sided obsession with motivation overlooks the fact that children too are responsible for their education. Chris Keates, the General Secretary of the National

Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), was to the point when she responded to Christine Gilbert by stating that the 'chief inspector fuels the view that every lesson of every day for every minute has got to be packed with excitement, and education isn't like that'. On a more ominous note, she added that 'comments like this make teachers fair game for everyone, including pupils'.[24]

The infantilization of education

Pedagogy, the science of teaching, should always be engaged in developing practices that promote students' enthusiasm for learning. However, the effectiveness of such practices depends on the authoritative leadership of educators. One of the ways in which adult society becomes conscious of the challenge it faces in exercising authority is through the difficulties it has in gaining the respect of the young. Parents and teachers can readily see this when young people respond positively to their guidance and embrace their ideas. That is why the problem of adult authority is frequently experienced as a motivational crisis. Uninterested pupils serve as reminders of the ineffectiveness of adult leadership. A current symptom of this crisis in education is the one-sided preoccupation with bored children.

The feeble valuation of adult authority indirectly leads to a disturbing loss of belief in children's capacity to engage with challenging experiences. In education the assumption that children need constant motivation has encouraged the institutionalization of a pedagogy that tends to infantilize them. Many pedagogues claim that children need to be taught material that is directly relevant and accessible to them. Too often children are treated childishly by educators who assume that playing is the ideal vehicle for learning. Back in the 1930s the American educational theorist Michael Demiashkevich warned that making mud-pies and dressing dolls were great kindergarten activities but 'the kindergarten must not be permitted to extend its domination over the secondary school and college'.[25] But in the twenty-first century the utilization of childish

pedagogic techniques is no longer confined to the nursery. As we
note in Chapter 7, role playing and a reliance on therapeutic tech-
niques are increasingly used throughout the system of education.

The tendency to infantilize children even influences the way in
which schools manage children's play. According to the prevailing
wisdom, children are defined by their vulnerability and are character-
ized as 'at risk' from virtually everything.[26] Consequently, schools
worry about the risks associated with playing and in some cases try
to regulate children's physical activity carefully. In recent times many
primary schools have drawn the conclusion that contact sports, and
especially competitive sports, are not suitable activities for their pupils.
In August 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced that the
nation needed to have more competitive sports at school. He argued
that his government had begun to 'correct the tragic mistake of reduc-
ing the competitive element in school'. However, his announcement
is unlikely to undermine the powerful cultural crusade against chil-
dren's aspiration to compete against one another. The ideals associated
with a sporting ethos are bitterly opposed by a formidable army of
educators, psychologists and health professionals who contend that
competition threatens the emotional well-being of children. According
to this view, children who fail to come first suffer long-term trauma
and their self-esteem risks becoming damaged for life.

Many schools have introduced so-called 'co-operative games' in
which there are no losers. Anti-competition campaigners advocate
a carefully managed form of therapeutic sporting education for chil-
dren. They believe that children gain great psychological benefits
from co-operative sport since everybody receives applause and gains
in self-esteem. In reality, children gain nothing from the manufac-
tured forms of tokenistic rituals that accompany such emotionally
correct gestures. When every child receives a prize for 'trying their
best', the youngsters readily see through it. Even at an early age they
understand that when nobody loses, nobody wins.

In part the attempt to immunize children from the experience
of losing serves as an alternative to motivating them. To put it
bluntly, many educators have drawn the conclusion that 'if you can't
motivate them, at least make them feel good about themselves'.

Supporters of the therapeutic turn of education also subscribe to the illusion that if children are happy they are likely to feel motivated to learn. Experience shows that the project of abolishing failure in school infantilizes children and actually undermines their capacity to deal with the challenges they face.

Schools have become wedded to the idea that praising children and boosting their self-esteem is critical to children's well-being. The promotion of self-esteem has acquired the character of a crusade to the point that criticizing children is deemed to be 'bad practice'. Recently Dr Carol Craig, who is Chief Executive of the Centre for Confidence and Well-being in Scotland, has conceded that young-sters were being over-praised and had developed an 'all about me' mentality. She noted that 'parents no longer want to hear if their children had done anything wrong' and resent any criticism of their children. Most important of all, Craig warned that the self-esteem agenda has a detrimental impact on children's education. She stated that 'we are kidding ourselves if we think that we aren't going to undermine learning if we restrict criticism'.[27]

The tendency to treat children as vulnerable and fragile individ-uals has the perverse effect of discouraging children to develop their resilience and capacity to cope. Experience indicates that artificial attempts to boost children's self-esteem do not make them more confident, and that therapeutic education diminishes children's ability to deal with pressure. Time and again reports and surveys indicate that children are under more pressure today than ever before.[28] What these surveys actually mean is that children have become de-educated from being able to deal with difficult circum-stances. To a considerable extent, children have been socialized to perceive pressure as a marker for a disease.

Whenever youngsters' existential insecurity is treated as a poten-tial mental health problem, it is likely that this will encourage them to feel powerless and ill. Children fed on a diet of empty praise, who are rarely challenged and even more rarely forced to confront their failures, are poorly prepared to tackle the tests of life. Even relatively banal episodes will be experienced as a source of emotional disori-entation. For example, during the past decade the transition from

primary to secondary school has been represented as a major trau-
matic event for children. Instead of depicting the process of starting
big school as an exciting experience, many children are offered
transitional counselling for what has been regarded as a normal
dimension of life for centuries. Transitional counselling, like many
forms of therapy, has a habit of turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Once children pick up on the idea that going to secondary school is
a traumatic experience, many of them will interpret their normal
anxieties and insecurities through a psychological vocabulary. The
result is that a growing number of children reinterpret their anxieties
in pathological terms and become disoriented. One symptom of this
malaise is the growing number of referrals for a recently invented
condition called 'school phobia'.[29] Most grown-ups can recall numer-
ous occasions when, as children, they felt that they hated school;
but today, children no longer hate school – they suffer from school
phobia. The addiction to diagnosing young people's anxious
response to the trials of life continues well into higher education. In
universities, students who are anxious about sitting for their exams
are diagnosed as suffering from 'examination syndrome'.

The tendency to infantilize education is not restricted to the
promiscuous distribution of smiley faces in the classroom or the
institutionalization of therapeutic rituals. As I note in Chapter 6, it
also influences both the teaching and the content of the curriculum.

The paradox of education

The infantilization of education coincides with what appears at first
sight to be a contradictory tendency: that we take the institution
of education more seriously than ever before. In recent years, edu-
cation has been the beneficiary of an ever-expanding expenditure
of financial resources, and the government is continually banking
on the capacity of this institution to deliver a range of positive out-
comes. But paradoxically, the more that we expect of education,
the less we expect of children; and the more hope society invests
in education, the less we value it as something important in its own
right.

Throughout the western world, the education of children has become a continual source of concern to policy-makers and the media. Nobody complained when former Prime Minister Tony Blair told the 1996 Labour Party Conference that his three top priorities on coming to office were 'education, education and education'. Four years later, Blair still felt the need constantly to repeat the word 'education' when he promised that his 'government's passion' would be 'education, education, education'. Such zealous commitment to the cause of education is also constantly repeated in policy documents throughout Europe. An historian looking back on our time a couple of centuries from now may well infer that education was a dominant faith that inspired the European cultural elite in the twenty-first century.

Yet despite all the importance that newspaper headlines attach to education, it is not at all evident what is meant by this phenomenon. Indeed, it appears that the more that society talks about education, the less it is able to affirm education as a value in its own right. Education is frequently praised for its potential contribution to economic development, and upheld as a central instrument for encouraging social inclusion and mobility. People insist that education can promote values such as multiculturalism and environmental awareness. It often appears that the celebration of education has little to do with any integral qualities. Instead, education is interpreted as a means for achieving an objective that is separate and distinct from itself. That is what Tony Blair meant when in a speech on urban regeneration he insisted that education is 'now the centre of economic policy making for the future'.[30]

Numerous observers have criticized the tendency to treat education as a means for realizing economic objectives. Some have questioned the belief that money invested in education leads to a rise in economic efficiency and productivity.[31] Others take objection to the instrumental manner with which education is treated. In recent times numerous commentators have warned about the danger of perceiving education as an all-purpose policy instrument for solving the diverse problems facing society. 'We cannot deliver all the high expectations heaped upon us by society', argued Jane

Lees, President of the Association of School and College Leaders, in 2009.[32]

Many well-meaning people fervently believe in the capacity of education to minimize or overcome social differences and inequalities. Policy-makers and reformers believe that education is a powerful instrument of social mobility that will provide opportunities for people to improve their life chances and narrow social inequality. No doubt there are many individuals who have benefited enormously from their education and enjoy a social status that their parents could only dream of. However, research suggests that the institution of education has played only a limited role in promoting the mobility of children from poor families or from a working-class background. The constant expansion of the institution of education has led to the growth in educational attainment of people from all sections of society, but this growth in terms of credentials does not necessarily make people more mobile.[33] Expanding educational opportunities is a worthy objective in its own right but it 'cannot be used, on its own, to eradicate social inequalities'.[34]

Of course there is nothing novel or wrong about attempting to harness the potential of education to realize wider social and economic objectives. What is relatively novel and profoundly disturbing is that the mantra of 'education, education, education' coincides with a palpable sense of indifference to its content. Education is rarely upheld for its own sake, and all too often pragmatic interests and concerns are allowed to undermine the integrity of different school subjects. All too often the content of education has become negotiable. Frequently it appears that the political imperative of solving society's problems overrides the educational needs of young people. In many instances the problem of society is confused with that of education, and the school curriculum becomes a battlefield where the conflicting claims of competing interest groups are fought out.

The politicization of education even impacts on subjects such as physical education and music. Take the example of the UK's *Music Manifesto*. This manifesto is not so much about celebrating music as it is about using music to help realize a variety of social policy

objectives. The imperative of social engineering leads the authors of the manifesto to proclaim: 'The time is ripe for a *Music Manifesto*.' Apparently the time is ripe because 'there is an increasing belief in the power of music to contribute to whole school development and community regeneration'. In other words, music is a useful tool for motivating people to buy into the agenda of policy-makers. Music is judged and evaluated by how well it contributes to community cohesion and economic development.

The tendency to confuse the problem of society with that of education creates the risk that schools become distracted from getting on with the task of cultivating the intellectual and moral outlook of children. A classroom that is subjected to the dictates of a policy agenda is very different from one devoted to inculcating a love and habit of learning. When education is perceived as providing an answer to everything, its distinct role and meaning become unclear.

In principle, education can serve as a vehicle for many different objectives. Some societies have relied on schools to help forge a distinct national identity and culture. Schools have been used to train young people for the world of work and for assuming their role in adult society. Schools have been used as centres of indoctrination by highly motivated ideologues. Schools have always been charged with carrying out activities that were motivated by the wider agenda of society. However, although education can be about many different activities, at a fundamental level it needs to be valued in its own terms. Education works when it is perceived as important in its own right and when children are taught to value learning for its own sake.

The paradox of education is that the more we expect of it, the less it is valued for its own sake. The reason for this paradox is that the main drivers of the expansion of education are motivated by objectives that are external to it. Strictly speaking, the idea that education is in crisis is inaccurate. As an institution, education has never enjoyed so much cultural and political support. Its social weight and economic role is on the increase and more and more people spend a greater amount of their life in educational institutions than in previous times. As the educational theorist Rob Moore argues, the crisis of education is 'specifically a crisis of *liberal–humanist education*'.[35]

A liberal–humanist education can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but fundamentally it is based on the conviction that education is important in and of itself. It has an intrinsic worth, and education is its aim rather than a means to another objective.

The statement that education is important for its own sake is not an appeal to some snobbish sentiment about valuing ideas in the abstract. What it refers to is the valuation of cultural accomplishments through which society renews itself and acquires the intellectual and moral resources necessary to understand itself and face the future.

In current times, the liberal–humanist ethos of education is often dismissed as an out-of-date elitist idea that is totally removed from the realities of the real world. Even in universities, the ideal of pursuing knowledge for its own sake is rejected as a pathetic expression of medieval prejudice. Education is endowed with the mission of fixing pressing practical problems. Many educators dismiss the liberal–humanist approach as inappropriate for the schooling of youngsters on the grounds that they are unlikely to be motivated by the love of ideas. What these criticisms imply is a marked preference for activities that are educational in form but not in content.

Yet experience indicates that the alleged benefits of a more practical and problem-fixing schooling are more apparent than real. Research and debate around the so-called 'education effect' finds it difficult to identify a specific causal link between levels and types of schooling and economic or social outcomes. A lack of consensus about the education effect is not surprising, since it is one of many other variables that influence economic and social life. Of course education does have an effect – a very important one, to do with its impact on individuals and communities – but this effect is intangible. The principal achievement of education is an educated people and society. My argument is that a significant portion of the resources and energies devoted to the institution of education is wasted when society loses sight of the importance of young people's education as an intrinsically worthwhile activity. Wasted opportunities, wasted potential and wasted youth are symptomatic of adult society's inability to give meaning to its authority and education.