

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

The light is worth the candle

National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)
Thinkpiece

Resource

Thinkpiece: The light is worth the candle

1

Introduction

There are powerful reasons for believing that the gaps in educational attainment and other outcomes between different groups of young people should and could be closed. An education service with gaps as wide as those across the English system cannot provide the personal, social or economic returns to which it aspires. Those gaps are harmful to individuals, dysfunctional for society and over-dependent on social background.

Changes to the organisation of the system and to arrangements for curriculum and assessment have so far failed to produce the changes in outcomes and attainment that a post-industrial society demands if it is to be economically competitive, socially coherent or healthy in body and soul. The gaps are therefore a profound practical and moral matter.

Parts of the system have shown how gaps can be closed without harming the vulnerable, without opening new gaps and while promoting self-esteem and resilience. The challenge remains to permeate the system with those insights and activities.

Assumptions

Gaps in attainment and other outcomes for different groups of young people have persisted across more than a century of public health and education provision, despite a widespread professional and political assumption that they could and should be closing. Of course, overall health and education outcomes have improved over the years but despite some local, limited and inspiring exceptions, the gaps between the best- and worst-performing groups of students have proven resistant to all kinds of effort and initiative. Activity to close the gaps marginally has required enormous effort from individuals and, over time, cost the Treasury billions of pounds, often with disappointing results, more so for central than for local initiatives.

Would it be better to call it a day, acknowledge that gaps are a permanent feature in the landscape of childhood and either focus the collective effort on other priorities or take the saving on time and funding? The answer is no - and there are powerful reasons for that.

Closing gaps is a contribution to three distinct though overlapping ambitions that any society should expect of its education service:

- private returns, the personal benefits to individuals, often expressed in terms of income, occupation, wellbeing and health
- social returns, often expressed as improvements in general health, social participation and social cohesion
- economic returns, generally thought of as increases in employment and labour productivity

Blundell, Dearden & Sianesi, 2001, quoted in Owens, 2004

Across each of those three ambitions, the reasons for closing gaps can be corralled into two categories: practical and moral.

Practical

For much of the 20th century, the outcomes of the public education service and the demands of the economy seemed to be in some sort of workable balance. That was formalised when the Education Act 1944 created the tripartite system:

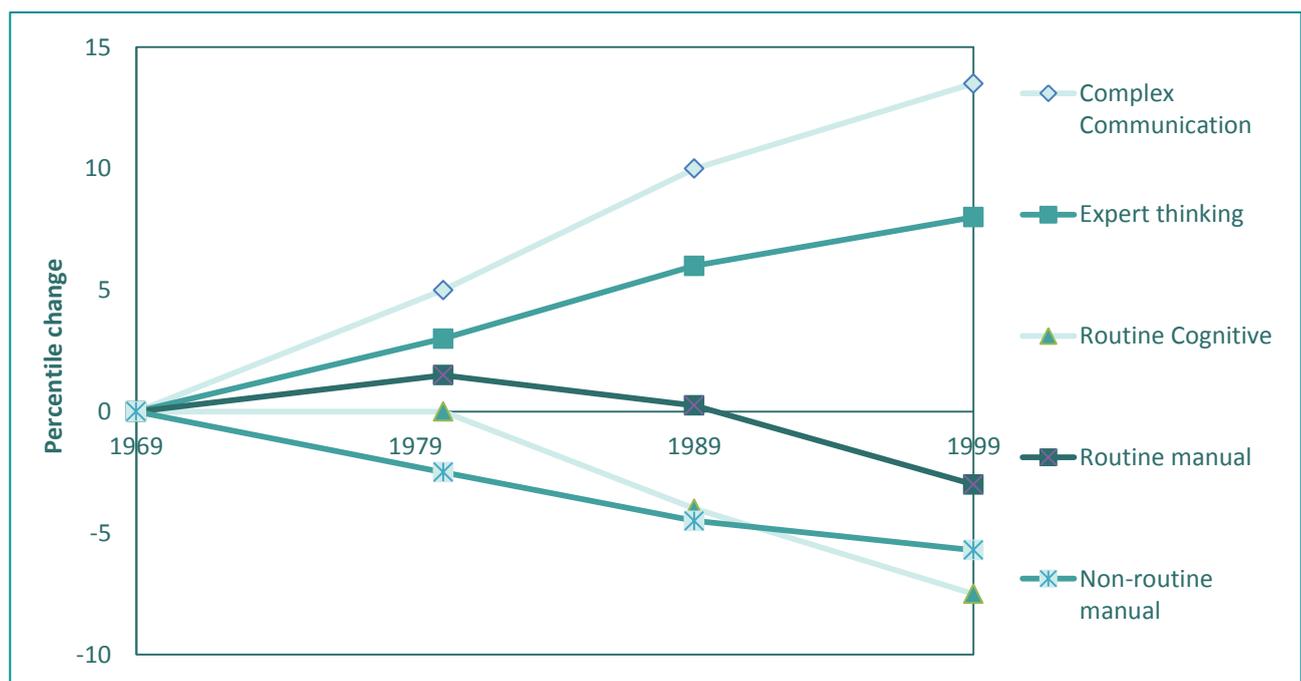
- grammar schools to select a minority of academic students for the professions
- technical schools to prepare suitable pupils for particular occupations or trades
- secondary modern schools to provide a general basic education for the remainder

For better or worse, the psychometric and economic models behind the 1944 Act were dated almost before its national implementation was complete. As the evidence emerged that children could not be accurately sifted at 11, the economy began to shift from its dependency on primary industry towards professional or administrative services. The caricature that many workers required more skills and initiative getting to work than they did at work became obsolete. Nor was the tripartite system serving all children with equity: comparatively few children from working-class families were going to the grammar schools.

The system based on predominantly non-selective, comprehensive primary and secondary schools introduced in the second half of the 20th century was intended to redress inequities and to offer a curriculum that would prepare young people for a modern, even 21st-century, world. In that generally comprehensive system, attainment and other outcomes have improved overall though social mobility remains stagnant and some challenging gaps persist.

There is broad agreement that the UK needs to raise its attainment levels and improve its skills base. Complex, expert occupations are increasing as a proportion of the employment market, while routine cognitive roles and manual work are in proportionate decline (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The impact of technology on the job market, 1969-1999

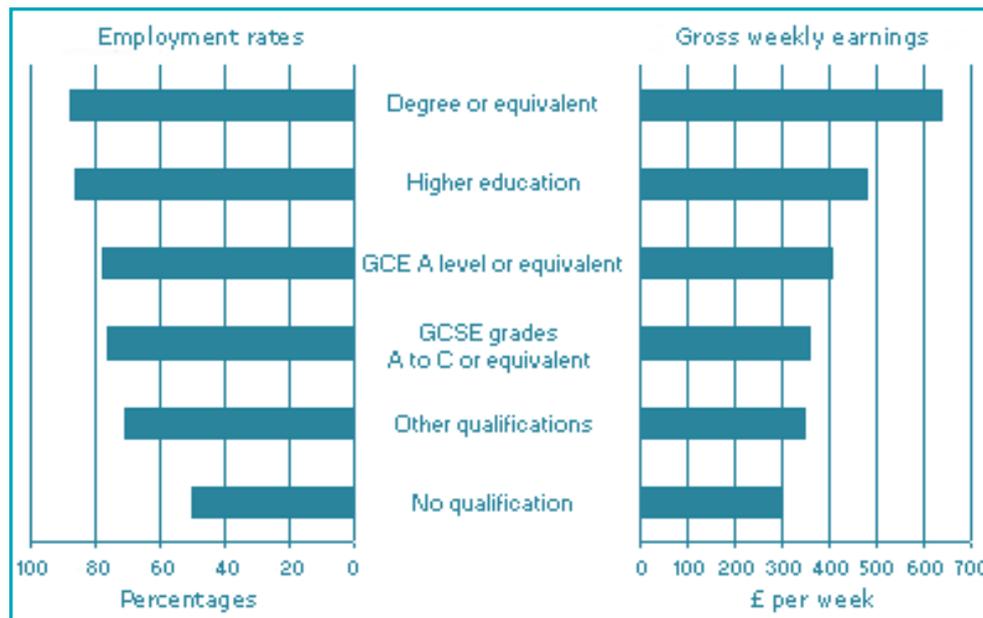


Source: Autor, Levy & Murnane, 2001 quoted in Wiliam, 2010

The consequence in the UK was, until the start of the 2008 downturn, that the increase in numbers employed was almost all in the number of those educated to degree level whose percentage share grew from 28.1 per cent to 33.9 per cent between 2002 and the end of 2008 (Patel, Kelly, Amadeo, Gracey & Meyer, 2009:18-19). Over the same period, the number of unqualified or poorly qualified employees declined while the unemployed in that category increased steadily then markedly when the recession began around 2008. In a globalised economy where an administrator in India can deal with your train booking from Manchester to London, a law firm in Beijing can provide out-of-court legal services and a consultant in India can diagnose your MRI scan seconds after it is completed, the UK will be a poor competitor if it cannot significantly raise its attainment levels and skills base.

This is an issue for individuals as much as for governments. In 2003, the average gross weekly income of full-time UK employees with no qualifications was £298, less than half the weekly income (£632) for those with a degree. Employment rates for those without qualifications are about two-thirds the rate for those with GCSEs at grades A-C and only just about half the rate for those with a degree.

Figure 2: Employment rates and gross weekly earnings for full-time employees of working age: by highest qualification, spring 2003, UK



Source: National Statistics, 2010

British and US studies have shown that economic benefit is not the only advantage accruing to education and in particular school experience. They also have positive effects on health and wellbeing (Ross, 1999). Though parts of that effect are related to consequent work and economic conditions, a significant part is also played by psychological resources and health lifestyle – the educated person’s sense of empowerment. Leon Feinstein and his colleagues reviewed international evidence of the hypothesis that education has a positive impact on health. Their conclusion was that:

Education is strongly linked to health and to determinants of health... empirical investigations often find that the effect of education on health is at least as great as the effect of income. Education is an important mechanism for enhancing the health and well-being of individuals because it reduces the need for health care, the associated costs of dependence, lost earnings and human suffering. It also helps promote and sustain healthy lifestyles and positive choices, supporting and nurturing human development, human relationships and personal, family and community well-being.

Feinstein, Sabates, Anderson, Sorhaindo & Hammond, 2006:172-73)

Using a review of the literature and their own research through the British National Child Development Survey, Chevalier and Feinstein conclude that education reduces the risk of poor mental health and that the greatest impact is associated with the acquisition of low-level credentials. ‘The effects are broadly constant throughout life, stronger for women and strongly non-linear; the largest impact is observed for gaining low level credentials’ (Chevalier & Feinstein, 2006: executive summary). As if to close a virtuous circle and with a profound echo of the relative impacts on education, there is some evidence that maternal education is more important for child health than paternal (Doyle, Harmon & Walker, 2007).

In addition to the practical economic and health benefits that accrue to individuals and society from being well educated there are also wider social benefits. In her wide-ranging review of the research, Julie Owens identified six broad areas of ‘social non-market returns to education’ (Owens, 2004: 22):

- population and health effects: lower fertility rates, lower net population growth and better public health
- democratisation: increased democracy, improved human rights, better political stability and more liberal attitudes (the last specific to adult learning)
- poverty reduction and crime: reduced poverty, less homicide and lower property crime rates
- environmental effects: decreased deforestation, water pollution and air pollution
- family structure and retirement: lower divorce rates, higher divorce rates (the latter specific to adult learning), later retirement, more activity after retirement
- community service effects: increased volunteering, generous donating, increased knowledge dissemination and extended networks

Moral purpose

Education also weaves a moral thread through the tapestry of vitally important practical returns to education, private, social and economic life. Part of the educational enterprise is to create the kind of society that reflects and sustains what we believe to be good human relationships. For most of us that means a society in which there is a profound dimension of equity and justice, not least for children. Most would agree that a young person's attainments, health and wellbeing should not to any large degree be determined by his or her parents' income. Few readers of this piece can be comfortable with an education service that 'All too often, instead of equalising life chances... reproduces existing advantages and disadvantages' (Dyson, Goldrick, Jones & Kerr, 2010).

Overall, equity in education embraces the two concepts of inclusion and fairness. Inclusion stresses the need for the whole population of children and young people to experience successful education. Fairness means that their background of gender, race or social status should play as little part as possible (OECD, 2008).

In that context, closing the gap has a strong moral element which in turn defines how the work needs to be done. Gaps should be closed in ways that:

- are not harmful to particular groups of children: the vulnerable should not be left behind while the gifted and talented should not be constrained
- do not cause other gaps to open: what does a young person gain from five A*-C GCSE grades if the process robs them of inquisitiveness and the joy of learning?
- promote self-esteem and resilience: the roles that young people can take in being responsible for their own learning and contributing to their peers' learning have only recently become apparent to the adults working with them

There is enough evidence that parts of the system know how to work in those kinds of ways and that as they do, their methods enhance community cohesion, promote a sense of wellbeing and encourage a sense of empowerment in young people. The challenge remains to permeate the system with those insights and activities.

References

- Autor, D H, Levy, F & Murnane, R J, 2001, *The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: An Empirical Exploration*, NBER working paper 8337, St Louis, National Bureau of Economic Research Inc. Available at <http://ideas.repec.org/p/nbr/nberwo/8337.html>
- Blundell, R, Dearden, L & Sianesi, B, 2001, *Estimating the Returns to Education: Models, Methods and Results*, London, University College London and Institute for Fiscal Studies
- Chevalier, A & Feinstein, L, 2006, *Sheepskin or Prozac: The Causal Effect of Education on Mental Health*, London, Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics
- Doyle, O, Harmon, C & Walker, I, 2007, *The Impact of Parental Income and Education on Child Health: Further Evidence for England*, Warwick Economic Research Papers, Warwick, University of Warwick
- Dyson, A, Goldrick, S, Jones, L & Kerr, K, 2010, *Equity in Education: creating a fairer education system*. A manifesto for the reform of education in England, Manchester, Centre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester
- Feinstein, L, Duckworth, K & Sabates, R, 2004, *A model of inter-generational transmission of educational success*, London, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London, wider benefits of learning research reports 10. Available at www.learningbenefits.net/Publications/ResReps/ResRep10.pdf
- Feinstein, L, Sabates, R, Anderson, T M, Sorhaindo, A & Hammond, C, 2006, *What are the effects of education on health?* Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Copenhagen Symposium on Measuring the Effects of Education on Health and Civic Engagement, Paris, OECD Publications. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/15/18/37425753.pdf>
- OECD, 2001, *Knowledge and skills for life: first results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000*, Paris, OECD Publications
- OECD, 2008, *Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, policy brief January 2008, Paris, OECD Publications. Available at www.oecd.org/dataoecd/21/45/39989494.pdf
- Owens, J, 2004, *A Review of Social and Non-Market Returns to Education*, Cardiff, Education and Learning Wales (ELWa)
- Patel, R, Kelly, S, Amadeo, C, Gracey, S & Meyer, B, 2009, *Beyond Leitch: skills policy for the upturn. How skills can rebuild the economy*, London, Learning and Skills Network
- Ross, C E & Mirowsky, J, 1999, *Refining the Association between Education and Health: The Effects of Quantity, Credential, and Selectivity Demography*, 36(4), November, 445-60
- William, D, 2010, *Leadership and learning in a changing world*, Keynote address to the 2010 north of England education conference, January, York. Available at References www.neec2010.co.uk/Dylan%20William%20keynote.ppt
- Wrigley, T, 2003 *Schools of Hope: a new agenda for school improvement*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Book

The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children's centres – whatever their context or phase.

- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

©2012 National College for School Leadership – All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior permission from the National College. To reuse this material, please contact the Membership Team at the National College or email college.publications@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk.

Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk
www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege

An executive agency of the
Department for Education

We care about the environment
We are always looking for ways to minimise our environmental impact. We only print where necessary, which is why you will find most of our materials online. When we do print we use environmentally friendly paper.