

Do we still need schools?

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'School has never been a huge issue for me, perhaps because I left it so young. The longer I spend out of it the sillier it appears. The mere idea of locking up so many children together, dividing them into age groups, forcing them to be quiet and still, and then expect them to learn things, is so staggeringly foolish that I am often amazed it continues to happen.'

Letter posted on
home education kids website



Kate Myers

There used to be good reasons why we taught young people in large same-age groups (it was cost effective) for periods of roughly three-month blocks with a long summer holiday (to allow the pupils to help with the harvest) between 9am and 4pm (child-minding facility for working parents). None of these reasons are still valid and most of them restrict the chances of learning rather than enhance them. There are now moves to change the school year and many schools are open long after 4pm (though most are not available for community use and almost all are closed for large parts of the year). We tinker with the system but in the main continue to operate our schools based on organisational issues rather than what we now know from a range of research about the best ways of creating optimal conditions for learning. And the irony is that, because

of new technology and changing lifestyles, these organisational reasons are no longer relevant.

In the UK although education is compulsory for young people aged 5–16, schools are not. Home schooling is a growth area and with new technologies, it is increasingly being seen as a viable alternative to formal schooling. CD-ROMs, DVDs and internet sites abound offering the national curriculum and much more. As an increasing number of parents work from home it is going to become easier to organise adult supervision for individuals or small groups of young people living near each other. They can find specialist tutors available via the web and the telephone.

One implication of developing technologies in the UK is that if more and more middle-class families become dissatisfied with state schooling and they find it increasingly feasible to home-school, we may see a rise in the number of middle-class children being educated this way. The effect in some communities would be that public-sector schooling remained mainly for the deprived and disadvantaged. If we are to resist this and other depressing scenarios where deprivation and disadvantage are compounded rather than reduced by the education system, we need to ask some fundamental questions about schooling and its purpose. In particular what are the justifications for making education compulsory and paying for it out of the public purse?

New technologies may have revolutionised the possibilities of home-schooling but they have not yet had the same impact on school-based education. If we agree that the core purpose of schooling is learning and if learning is about making sense of new information, we need to consider how that process is best supported by schools. What is – or could be – the advantage of schooling? What is its unique selling point? We also need to think about what we value and

what we want to take forward into the future.

- What are the arguments for bringing young people together for their learning?
- What is better learnt in class groups/other groupings?
- Could some learning be more productive on an individual basis or in small groups (virtual or real) with a virtual teacher?
- If we believe some learning experiences are enhanced through participation in group experiences, does the group have to be 20–30 students of the same age?
- What kinds of learning can best be achieved interacting with a 'live' teacher?
- Is the answer the same for all types of learning and for all subjects: history, chemistry, PE, art?
- Is the answer different depending on the age, stage of the pupils or their gender?
- Is the answer different depending on the previous learning experiences of the pupil?
- Do we need to bring them together on the school site five days a week between 9am and 4pm?
And, of course, most importantly:
- How do the answers to the questions above affect the role of the subject teacher and the organisation of the school?

Schools will need to ask themselves what extra they are providing. Timetables offered in most schools serve organisational needs rather than learning needs. Home-schoolers can take advantage of working in depth on a particular project rather than stopping and starting every 40 minutes. So could schools, though they rarely do. Taking a day to paint a picture or participate in a music workshop could be a much more fulfilling experience than the current one that most pupils are offered. Nevertheless most schools still stick to short blocks of time per subject even though we now know that this structure is unlikely to enhance learning.

The community schools of the 1970s provided opportunities for adults to learn alongside the young, and advocates of these schools were enthusiastic about the social benefits of this system. As far as we know knowledge and technology are going to continue to increase at least as rapidly as at present. We are all going to need to constantly update ourselves. We could do this through a private provider but it might be more sensible to benefit from the facilities offered at our local school. This could mean schools becoming the focus of learning for the community, not just for young people of compulsory school age. Schools could position themselves as the local neighbourhood link into the world of learning. There are implications here for the furnishings and fabric of school buildings. If this is to happen they must be furnished with state-of-the-art ICT, eating and leisure facilities.

The school day increasingly no longer matches the hours that the rest of society works. We are becoming used to visiting supermarkets or contacting our bank at any time of the day or night. The 24-hour provision, flexitime and the increased possibilities of working from home derived from new technologies means that an increasing number of people are working less traditional hours. If this trend increases will it still make sense for schools to operate a rigid 9–4 day? Should we organise for our schools to operate 24 hours? This does not necessarily mean that the whole site is open for 24 hours but that access to particular facilities might be. It is

important to emphasise that 24-hour provision does not and must not mean longer working hours for teachers and other school staff, but it does mean the possibility of flexitime. I would hope that we could organise a system whereby those who want to must be able to continue to work traditional hours but opportunities would be available for those that prefer a more flexible timetable.

One version of the 24-hour school that would be possible to introduce now would be for young people of compulsory school age to have priority access to the facilities between 9–4 with the school open to the community for the rest of the time. In some areas no one would want to use the school during the night except perhaps virtually, but in other areas where there are significant numbers of shift workers this may not be the case. Workers may prefer to take their early morning or after work swim/work-out at the school rather than at the local health club. Families may enjoy meeting at the school restaurant for an early supper before embarking on either a joint or individual course offered in the evening. These scenarios would depend on the school having the state-of-the-art facilities mentioned earlier. Keeping the plant open and in this state all year round would, of course, have cost implications but some would argue that it is very expensive not to have the specialist facilities of schools available more widely.

One future scenario that appeals to me is that, as pupils get older, more of their learning could take place in other venues.

Other learning opportunities – facilitated and guided by the school – could happen from home and other non-school venues such as museums. Some learning would be through other schools, colleges and organisations, nationally and internationally. There would be a mix of virtual contact and face-to-face. Some learning would be individual and some with groups of varying sizes depending on the needs of the situation. Decisions will be affected by the age of the pupils, their experience of learning and available opportunities. Central to these decisions will be what young people *themselves* feel they need and want. This scenario means that pupils will no longer be limited by being associated with only one school. Their local school will offer a sense of belonging and community but will be a starting not a finishing point.

Notes

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