Educated for the 21st Century?

John Tomlinson* and Vivienne Little with Susan Tomlinson and Emily Bower

Using cameos of children whose schooling spans the millennium and of teachers’ attempts to foster their individuality and talents under pressures for conformity, we question whether the long-term educational interests of pupils are being fully served. We suggest that even for the secure and stable majority the school curriculum has serious shortcomings in limiting the freedom and creativity of teachers and in prioritising technicist over humane values. Moreover, the goal of social inclusion depends considerably on educational inclusiveness. We ask whether the depth of social and psychological disadvantage in Britain is within the capacity of the current system to correct.

Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Education in Britain at the beginning of the new millennium

It is instructive to consider society’s aspirations for schools and pupils a century and more beyond the introduction of compulsory elementary education. The story has been one of expansion in terms of the number of years of education and of the levels and extent of knowledge and skills required. Education is now seen not only as essential for economic development, but also as a key element in the government’s policy of social inclusion. The goal set before teachers and trainee teachers, implicit if not explicit, in manifold policy documents, for example, Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 1998) is that of ‘inclusive education’, the provision of an appropriate and wide-ranging curriculum for all learners, whatever their background, age, stage of development or pre-disposition; while also meeting society’s need for articulate, well-informed, self-directing, creative and responsible citizens, with multiple skills and a capacity to cope with uncertainty, discontinuity and rapid change. That is the dream.

Building upon earlier foundations, much was accomplished during the last 30 years of the twentieth century towards its realisation. The training of teachers was made more practice-oriented and more rigorous, not only imbuing them with respect for individual rights and human diversity; but also equipping them with strategies and techniques for translating these principles into classroom realities. A statutory national
framework was developed for the school curriculum, to ensure recognition of the entitlement of all pupils to a broad, balanced and progressive range of studies, appropriate to their age and potential. This was accompanied by a system of assessment, testing and inspection, designed not only to encourage individual attainment, but to monitor the quality and foster the equality of provision, and, by setting increasingly demanding goals, to raise levels of achievement generally. Moreover, during the final decade, determined assaults began upon the long-identified, but stubborn, association between socio-economic deprivation and failure at school, with the introduction of national literacy and numeracy projects, education action zones and projects such as Sure Start and Excellence in the Cities.

While these are major contributions, we wish to argue that they are flawed in ways which, unless they are addressed, will impede the realisation of the dream and even inhibit the emergence of new dreams, whose configurations cannot from present vantage points be known. In trying to demonstrate this, we shall use pen-portraits, produced by a couple of insightful and skilled teachers, of some children whose years of schooling span the millennium and whose characteristics and experiences allude to some of the issues with which we are concerned. We do not offer them as case studies; but as a way of making manifest the impact of theories and government policies upon the real lives of parents and children and teachers and of making more vivid and urgent, the positions we wish to defend. In our view, the system of publicly funded education we are importing into the new millennium falls short in three main ways. It severely limits the exercise of informed professional judgement by teachers; it seriously undervalues the arts and humanities, thus failing to foster the very creativity the government and industry claim twenty-first century living demands; and it does not fully or properly take account of the implications of poverty, deprivation and social change for the business of education.

The professionalism of teachers

William

William was excluded from his reception class (permanent exclusion from school at age five), was taught at home by his parents for a year, then came to a different school and entered my year one class. He was very intelligent, reading well beyond his age and two to three years ahead in maths and science. The priority was to help him to socialise with other children. He was very territorial about his possessions and personal space. He would instigate a disaster, then blame other children. His parents were very supportive of the school and accepted my judgement that William's chief needs at this stage were social, not intellectual.

He spent his first week hiding in the cloakroom, head in the coats. Then he came into the classroom and hid behind the curtains. The other children were tolerant of his behaviour—said 'He needs time to himself'. I made sure William knew I knew he was there and expected him to come out when he was ready. Sometimes he would call out the answer to a question, always getting it right. After about a month, when relations with me were becoming established, I asked William to do the same piece of work as the rest of the class. He refused, rocked to and fro, and demanded 'Why should I?'

I felt I must challenge him and begin the process by which control would gradually pass from him to me. 'You are the same as the other children', I told him, 'I have to make
decisions about what is good for your learning. You are a part of our community’. Within about 20 minutes he had started the task. If necessary, I would have waited all day.

By the end of two years William was much more socialised, indeed a popular and key member of the class. I did my best to stimulate his love of reading and science investigations by giving him open-ended challenges and allowing him a good deal of control over his own learning, in return for his staying with the mainstream (an unspoken agreement between us). By the end of his first year in key stage two he was working on years four and five maths, but still needed the contact with his own age-group for his personal development.

Sandip

Sandip was an extraordinarily intelligent original eight year old with a thirst for discovering new information. He came from a stable professional family and had one younger brother. His parents’ first language was Punjabi. They provided Sandip with plenty of stimulating material, but found him difficult as he was restless and often reverted to infantile behaviour.

He had been likened by his previous teacher to ‘a wild animal that needed taming’. He found it almost impossible to sit still and spent a lot of time pacing round the classroom. He seemed frustrated by his physical limitations and by the apparent futility of what he was required to learn. His particular forte was English and he could produce work of lower secondary standard but he disliked maths. He often refused point blank to do his work and reverted to his own world. He had an extremely sophisticated mind but could only focus on what was immediately important to him. For example, when questioned about not having completed a maths task, he replied ‘I haven’t got time to waste with these silly numbers right now. I’m planning a campaign to save the endangered species of Africa’.

Teaching Sandip was a challenge. He had to learn to conform to a certain extent but I did not want to compromise his unique talents. It was not easy to achieve a balance because the usual sanctions had no effect. It seemed very important to support him by allowing him to explore his own ideas and show him how to take them further. He also needed to be allowed to regress to infantile play such as scribbling for short periods. We made a deal which expected him to conform when necessary but left him enough leeway to feel he was still in control.

The head would have preferred me to force him to conform because of an impending inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) but I knew this would crush his spirit. By the end of the year he had achieved a balance and his mother reported a dramatic improvement in his behaviour at home.

Commentary. Central to these successes were the personal resources and professionalism of the teachers, who worked well beyond any standard model of the child or classroom management envisaged in the curricula for teacher training recently laid down by the government. Unlike William’s first teacher and school, his second teacher had found a way to keep him with his peers, despite his precocity (increased by that time by home
tuition). Sandip’s teacher had to manage his regressive and disruptive tendencies without impeding his unusual abilities. Both teachers had to secure and depend upon the cooperation of parents. William’s early years antedated the introduction of the literacy and numeracy hours which militate against the flexibility his teacher had to use, and can stultify children like him. Sandip’s teacher had to maintain confidence in her special methods against the pressures to conform imposed by an imminent OFSTED visit, never easy and certainly not for someone in the early stages of their career. It is increasingly clear that the pressure to meet annual targets for attainment in literacy and numeracy is in conflict, in classrooms and schools, with the requirement to meet individual learning needs; that a consequence is rising stress levels among teachers and that the casualties are large numbers of unusual children, among whom may be some of the most damaged and some of the most creative of their generation.

The public accountability of teachers has been a pre-eminence concern of public policy for the last 30 years. Another kind of accountability is also necessary if teaching is to be more than instruction and children are to be prepared to face the continuing change and uncertainty which now seems to be the permanent condition of society.

The fundamental purpose of teachers is to divine and serve the best interests of their pupils and to do it within the entitlement to education afforded by the laws of the day in the public interest. A professional is one so trained and disposed that he or she acts in the best interests of the client rather than in his or her own interests. Unless the accountability required of teachers is as much to their own consciences as to public ‘performance indicators’, nothing of value will be achieved. Moreover that sense of conscience needs a corporate as well as an individual aspect. As individuals, teachers know whether they have really done everything possible to help pupils learn and when help from colleagues is needed. Collectively they must create and accept a professional ethic and code of service. In this way a proper balance may be achieved between external, state-directed forms of accountability, the individual conscientiousness of teachers and the collective ethic recognised by all teachers.

Were this balance of internal/external accountability to be recognised as the best safeguard for excellent teaching, then important changes would be needed in the pre-service and in service training of teachers. The emphasis on reaching levels and ‘standards’ of competence would have to be supplemented and to some extent supplanted by encouragement to experiment, to be creative, to become self-aware and self-confident and to acquire insight into pupils as individuals and in their social settings. It would have to be acknowledged that in preparing teachers, no single ‘tool kit’ of competences and classroom experiences can suffice to cope with the variety and challenges of a pluralist and rapidly changing society. Teachers’ own ingenuity and their collective will and empowerment to solve new problems and rise to new challenges would have to be valued. And those richer qualities arise from the extent and quality of teachers’ personal education and the opportunities continually offered for professional development. It is to be hoped that the creation of the General Teaching Council will start the process of rebalancing public and professional accountability, though the advice it gives the Secretary of State on training and education at all stages and by establishing and maintaining a Code of Conduct and the Professional Register.
One cheer for the National Curriculum

Maria

I first met Maria when I was a student teacher on teaching practice. She was seven and came from a close, caring family. Her elder brother was disabled, but Maria had been helped to see him as just another human being who had particular needs and though he required a lot of care she was not burdened with inappropriate responsibilities and her parents found time to spend with her alone, talking to her and taking her to interesting places.

Maria liked school. She was popular and cheerful, but she was on the special needs register for seriously underachieving. This did not seem to concern her unduly. She always tried hard and she did well in less academic subjects. She excelled at art and was easily the most talented in the class.

When she was ten I became her year six teacher. Her attitude to school had changed completely. She seemed unhappy and spent her time day-dreaming or talking, often asking other children if she could copy their work and made no attempt at anything she found challenging. There had been no change in her home circumstances. She told me that she hated school because she ‘was stupid’, couldn’t read or write properly and was in the bottom maths set. There wasn’t enough time for art or anything she was good at and she had had to miss art lessons in the past to work with the special needs teacher on academic work.

She was drastically underachieving and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator’s (SENCO) advice in view of an imminent OFSTED inspection was that I give her time-filling activities while I was preparing those who could achieve well in the Standard Assessment Tests (SATS) and then use an art lesson to give her some special help with academic work. I should let her do some art, but because I was allotting more time to art than the suggested guidelines, OFSTED would not be too concerned that I was withdrawing her from some lessons.

For me the most important thing was to rebuild Maria’s confidence and her interest in school. Art was useful for both these goals. I did not withdraw her from any art lessons and she often achieved a much higher standard than the others. After art her self-esteem was higher and her attitude more positive. I tried to use art to help with English allowing her to do illustrations before creative writing to help her gain inspiration and confidence and I found as many opportunities as possible for her to undertake art activities.

Slowly she started to make some progress, but with OFSTED and SATS drawing nearer I was ordered to spend less time on art and forbidden to give Maria extra art activities. She needed practice at writing not drawing. Once again she lost interest in school. She was absent for two of the English papers, her mother saying that she had worried herself ill.

By the end of the year she had made little academic progress and transferred to secondary school with a very negative attitude.

Commentary. This portrait illustrates further the panoply of demands made by individual children upon the resilience and resourcefulness of teachers. It also underlines the rigidities
and imbalances of the statutory curriculum. It is difficult for teachers to use children’s strengths in the arts or humanities to build the self-esteem which is crucial to their learning of subjects for which they have less aptitude. It is virtually impossible to convey the value of subjects outside the core against the hidden curriculum message that they are less valued and because of the insufficiency of time allowed for their exploration.

Teachers have been seen as technicians required to transmit those elements of our cultural capital current opinion holds to be valuable. We have just shown the limitations of that view of the teacher, and now challenge the National Curriculum and the monitoring and inspection procedures attached to it. The concept of a national curriculum is to be welcomed in a democracy because it is intended to give equal access to essential knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. But the current curriculum, even after ten years and two revisions, is inadequate in insight into the processes of learning and teaching, and in coherence and purpose. It perpetuates the education system of the late nineteenth century, which was designed to produce an intellectual elite and an industrial workforce. Yet a knowledge-based economy requires a workforce intellectually strong but also creative. And it must have a strong social conscience if the power technology gives the unsupervised worker is not to be misused (think of Nick Leeson, Robert Maxwell and the perpetrators of computer viruses). Moreover, a pluralist and multicultural society needs schools which promote mutual respect and understanding.

There have been many voices that have called not for doing better what we have always done, but for a curriculum which still values academic achievement yet much more besides. *All Our Futures*, the Report of the National Advisory Committee on Creativity, Culture and Education (DfEE, 1999) argues:

> Intelligence is multi-dimensional: it is also dynamic . . . the two hemispheres of the brain have different functions. The left . . . largely concerned with logical, analytical thought; the right with more holistic modes of thinking . . . the brain does not work in separate, isolated compartments, but as a whole dynamic system (p. 36).

By contrast, HM Chief Inspector of Schools defines intelligence as ‘the ability to memorise, to think sequentially and to write good prose’ (Woodhead, 2000).

High standards in creative achievement require just as much rigour as academic work. To value them equally with academic achievement would transform our schools and open success, self-confidence and self-esteem to many more of our children. The consequences in terms of a more coherent, cohesive and successful society, which spent far less on dealing with delinquency, crime and inadequacy may be surmised.

Yet not only does the new National Curriculum 2000 (DfEE/QCA 2000) continue to foreground literacy, numeracy and science, but the attempt to introduce serious attention to personal and social education, (PSE), though entirely laudable, is sandwiched between the Programmes of Study and the Attainment Targets. Teachers are left to dovetail PSE into existing provision. And the opening statement of values, aims and purpose, though an important step forward, is not integral, and gives the impression of afterthought.

We understand that Government intends in future to avoid the ‘Big Bang’ approach to revision of the National Curriculum, which experience has shown leads to hurry and compromise as deadlines have to be met, and adopt instead a ‘Continuous Creation’
approach such as is used in Norway. We would urge those responsible for the next
revisions to take account not only of the excellent ideas in *All Our Futures* (DfEE, 1999),
but also to remember that the subject-based and overly academic curriculum of 1988 was
not inevitable. There were better models to hand. The ‘curriculum movement’ since the
1960s, motivated by the explosion of knowledge, the emergence of a pluralist society, and
taking account of new insights into the working of the brain and the importance of
emotional and personal development to successful learning, had created new paradigms.
It drew on a range of Nuffield and Schools Council projects, on Her Majesty’s Inspectorate
(HMI)/Local Education Authority (LEA) Curriculum 11–16 Reports (1977–83), the Tech-
nical and Vocational Education Initiative (from 1982) and culminated in HMI’s *The Cur-
riculum from 5–16*, (HSMO, 1985), probably still the best professional commentary on the
curriculum yet written.

And we would also urge them to remember that today’s young people live in a demanding
world, where emotional security is hard to find, role models confuse and moral guidance
falters in face of a post-modernist anomie and the power to interfere with nature conferred
by the new technologies. The first essential is to help them to survive psychologically,
mental health assured, and then to be broadly educated, self-reliant and respectful of the
position of others. For this the classroom must be the microcosm, but it will succeed only
if the purposes are right and teachers are encouraged to engage deeply and courageously
with their charges.

Moreover, while curriculum 2000 commends, indeed commands, the study of both science
and religion, it fails to notice that for some scientists and some spiritual thinkers, the
twentieth century saw a remarkable convergence in world view.

As modern science reveals to us an image of a world that is participatory and inter-
connected, so the belief systems associated with a universe perceived to be predictable
and mechanistic are being challenged. Quantum physics tells us that we are intrinsically
creative beings; much of our reality, and our potential . . . has yet to unfold. Material
existence is a surface manifestation of a deeper, underlying source. In saying this,
contemporary science supports the essential messages of the ancient spiritual and
religious traditions. It seems that we are entering an era where science and spirituality
can finally talk to one another. (Walton, 2000).

Their dialogue underlines how vital it is that our education system promotes in young
people this deep sense of interconnectedness, of the profound significance of individual
action, of the need for responsibility and respect for self, other and the wider universe;
and, above all, of their own creative potential to rise above circumstance and make a
unique and valuable contribution to the human story.

**Education and social inclusion**

*Henry*

Henry was the middle of three children born within five years to a woman who by the
time Henry came to my year two class was a heroin addict—a habit she had acquired in
prison where she had been sent for persistent shoplifting. She had involved Henry in the
shoplifting with her, but neither was good at it and they kept getting caught. During
severe spells of Henry’s mother’s addiction or her periods in prison her mother looked after the children, as well as her own of about the same age.

Henry was the strongest character in the family and would get the children up and to school. There would be no food in the house, so the school gave them breakfast. The children were closely bonded together and also wanted to be with their mother. She would come out of prison, make them promises and then revert. Then the children were fostered separately and a guardian *ad litem* was appointed.

At school, Henry had first been in the class of a capable newly qualified teacher, who had coped well with his excesses of behaviour. By the second year when he entered my class, he had become very tough with everyone and everything around him, because he had no control over his own life. He was a danger to other children, would ‘blow up’ in class and became more and more violent. The nursery nurse appointed to work with him was drained by his actions and manipulations. Yet he was very intelligent—140 measured intelligence quotient (IQ), without finishing the test. At the end of the infants school it was decided he should go to a school for those with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

*Commentary.* The infant class teacher had coped with Henry among 32 others and had become, as often happens, the leader of the diagnostic group. She felt that he needed to grow in personal and social security before anything else, but the system did not provide for that. His future may well be in a secure unit.

These are the realities faced by many teachers which need to be remembered amid all the rhetoric of raising standards. For some children, ‘Who will look after me? Where will the next meal come from? Where will I sleep? Am I safe?’ are the real issues of their lives and of those caring for them, including teachers. Yet, given secure nurture it is clear that Henry could have hit all the ‘targets’. He probably never will.

Most children today are healthier, wealthier and better educated than in 1900, but their emotional and social well-being has deteriorated. The Mental Health Foundation reports a steady rise since the 1940s to an estimated one in five children experiencing mental ill-health today. There are further signs that children are not coping well with modern life. More are excluded from school and get into trouble with the law. There is also a rise in the rates for self-harm and suicide. How this relates to the social context is disputed, but it is the case that the number of children living in poverty has risen between the 1970s and 1999 from one in ten to one in three and 4.3 million children live in households with below half the national income. Nearly one quarter of children now grow up in ‘work poor’ families in which no-one earns money. Nearly one in five children live in a family headed by a lone mother, and one in six fathers now live apart from their children. Eight per cent of children live in step families. In 1999, every day 600 children saw their parents divorce (in 1905 there were only 600 divorces in the whole year), and one in four children under 16 will see their parents divorce. While there is no straightforward relationship between family disruption and the consequences for children, the deleterious impact on children of subsequent financial hardship is substantiated by research studies (Pugh, 1999).

In the period following the introduction of compulsory education and particularly following the Second World War, it was believed that education could and should solve social problems as well as fuelling social requirements. Comprehensive schools were seen
as crucial to this purpose, as was the notion of bussing children to schools to achieve a ‘balanced intake’. The theory was that if children from all backgrounds were educated together, all would have a better chance of success and it would be easier to grow social cohesion. Moreover, if those suffering deep deprivation were kept to a minimum, the rest of the school community would be strong enough to give real help. By the mid-seventies, there was some evidence that the policies were making an impact, at least as far as the most able were concerned and as evidenced by analysis of the social origins of university entrants (for example, Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Halsey and others, 1980; Heath, 1994).

Nevertheless the association between socio-economic deprivation and failure at school was stubborn. The aim of full equality of opportunity remained elusive and was pulled off course by the severe economic down-turn of the early ‘seventies. Moreover, for 20 years the target was abandoned. Egalitarianism and social engineering became unacceptable concepts and the levelling-up intentions of general entitlement to a national curriculum, arguably the last and shaky shot of the education idealists, were vitiates by the introduction of free market principles into schooling. Once the market in education was made paramount through the policies of parental choice and budgets determined by pupil numbers, such ‘solutions’ were ruled out. The resulting polarisation in schools has been vividly described and is the everyday experience of many parents and teachers (Davies, 1999). A recent study of a primary school in Wales, by the Tavistock Institute (BBC, 1999) concluded that just too much is being expected of human beings in the public service working in areas of high and multiple deprivation.

At last there is again emerging a real debate about education. For 20 plus years discussion and public thought have been stifled by the political doctrine that the market would succeed where planning had failed and that pupil attainment could be raised and teachers improved simply by laying down a curriculum and teaching techniques for all to follow, backed by draconian inspection routines and ‘naming and shaming’. Now the voices of dissent are heard again. Some argue that the policy of competition between schools must go further still if it is to solve social problems. Only private education companies, freed from all political and public control will do (Tooley, 1999). Others suggest that the way forward is to measure the value added by schools in wider and more sensitive ways, so the market can work better. Others claim that, while social inclusion is fiendishly difficult to pursue after 20 years of the reification of the self, and when 30 per cent of the population are excluded, contributing nothing to gross domestic product (GDP) and costing support, it requires the promotion of fraternity as well as individuality.

‘Education, education, education’ was adopted as a slogan, because the ‘knowledge society’ will in future determine the success of the economy. But a knowledge-based economy is very different from one where workers can be supervised collectively. Every individual has to have a conscience about using their knowledge as constructively as possible and for the common as well as personal good and the courage to seek help when they are out of their depth. Such an ethical foundation cannot be built on a curriculum still redolent of large-scale industrial production or by the British Standard Teacher envisaged by the Teacher Training Agency. The debate puts into contemporary idiom the age-old question whether good teachers can solve social problems and whether some social and family pathologies place children beyond the reach of what can be offered within the schools funded by the public purse.
The present Government’s response is to tackle the problems of disadvantage directly, adding to or bypassing the schools as necessary. The *Excellence in the Cities* programme’s initiatives include ‘learning mentors’ to work with children at risk of disaffection; on-site visits to handle disruptive pupils and cooperation between schools to share specialised facilities. In cases where a whole area or LEA is deemed to have failed, private contractors are appointed (for example, Islington LEA 1999). Whether such preventive measures will reduce or remove disadvantage remains to be seen. What is clear, in families where parents encourage their children not to go to school but become unpaid child-minders, under-age earners, or drug pushers instead, or where family and social life has removed any sense of personal worth or ambition, is that there are some problems that are so firmly located within the economic, social and cultural context that they will resist any fix so far within the reach of publicly funded education. Current, target-driven policies to improve literacy and numeracy, to eliminate ineffective teachers, schools and local authorities may appear in the short term and by limited measures, to be winning the battle against deprivation and injustice; but the gains will prove superficial in face of the deep structural inequities they seek to redress.

**Conclusion**

We have argued that preparation for life in the new millennium means paying attention not only to technical competence in literacy, numeracy and the basics of science, but to the arts and humanities. It requires that sufficient account is taken of the inner life of the young and that they are given the tools of personal autonomy and relationship. It entails, at the same time, fostering recognition of globalisation and of human interdependence. It demands investigation and exploitation of the resources of the human psyche, of imagination and the creativity of the human spirit. These depend to a great extent upon the deeply rooted relationships at the heart of the professionalism of teachers and we need to understand and develop them better. Such insights and skills as are reflected in our pen portraits will be needed whatever new or rediscovered structures are put in place. Above all it requires work and sacrifice by the rich in every sense on behalf of the poor.

**References**


HMI. 1985. *The Curriculum from 5 to 16 DES*.


**Contributors’ details**


**Susan Tomlinson**, Head of Primary School, with 20 years’ experience in inner city and rural schools.

**Emily Bower**, Teacher in Secondary School for children with educational and behavioural difficulties, with five years’ experience in inner city primary schools.

**Vivienne Little**, Lecturer in Education, University of Warwick, with 30 years’ experience in teaching and teacher education.