

Education: my hopes and expectations

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The media is working itself up into a minor frenzy this morning about what Andy Burnham might say about education in a speech to be delivered this morning.

According to The Telegraph, he is going to reject Tony Blair's approach to education, which was all about getting 50% of young people to university. Since that goal was always inappropriate, because an academic education does not suit everyone or meet the needs of all employers, changing that approach is desirable.

Others are getting excited about the prospect of local employers being asked to advise on the curriculum to be used in their local area of the country. It is this suggestion that I take issue with.

I would, firstly, note that there is nothing new about this. I became a governor of a school in Wandsworth, South London, in the late 1980s precisely because the Tories were at the time promoting the idea that, if only more local employers were on the governing bodies of schools, children might be better prepared for the needs of the workplace. It was in that role that I was appointed. I remained a governor for 13 years, being joined by Sadiq Khan for a while along the way.

Why this was considered necessary in a primary school baffled me at the time, as it did the excellent headteacher I worked with there. I felt, as I do now, that education for work was just one aspect of education, amongst many, and not necessarily the most important one at that. Preparation for life was, I felt, much more useful, and there is much more to life than work. Nothing has changed my mind since then.

I also think the suggestion that employers might know what education is required to meet their needs is slightly naive because, very obviously, there is no one answer to that question. The skills required of a hairdresser are not the same as those required of a dental technician, or those necessary to work in a call centre. A delivery driver is not going to use the same skills as a care worker, except that both might require a driving licence, and no school that I am aware of does at present provide driving lessons, although it could be argued that this is a notable absence on their part. I could continue

making these comparisons, but the point is clear. Just as not all people are suited to university, not all people have the same skill set, or match the requirements for all jobs. In that case, who is to decide which employers get priority? Is it the biggest, the loudest, those who make the biggest donation, or what? None of this makes any sense.

There are several things that could, however, make sense. One would be to design education around the needs of both genders, and they are not the same. Boys do find it much more difficult to work without frequent periods of physical activity than many girls do. Deny that, and you will have problems.

And do provide an appropriate physical environment for learning, including clean air and natural light. Concentration skyrockets if you do.

At the same time, design education for understanding, not learning. Unless you explain why fractions and percentages are useful, and what role they have in the world beyond the classroom, the chance that anyone will want to learn them is incredibly low. There are vast numbers of examples of teaching that miss this fundamental point, and it is no wonder, as a consequence, that we have people leaving school who do not understand basic concepts because that understanding has never been imparted to them. They have been told to learn what a frontal adverbial is, which they will never need to know, but not why.

After that, educate to feed curiosity. A wise employer wants a curious employee because they are the ones who will add value. That, though, is precisely the quality that education seems designed to destroy. Take a five-year-old, and you have an intensely curious person. "Why?" is their favourite word. By the time you get to 18, the education system has done everything it can to remove that spirit of inquisitiveness from them.

Let me also make the obvious point, which is that you need to teach, taking neurodiversity into account. Maybe 15% of children in most classes will have some form of neurodiversity, which is sometimes described as creating special needs, which in itself is inappropriate. There is nothing special about these needs. They exist. We know they do. They always will. There must, as a result, be an adaptive evolutionary benefit to them. The only problem is that we treat them as abnormal, and so label them as special. What education needs to do is treat them as normal, but different, and ensure that education meets the needs of those who have them as well as it meets the needs of those who do not. Do that, and a great many of our problems with alienation from the workplace throughout life would disappear.

There are more issues I could raise, but my point is a simple one. If you assume that the purpose of education is to supply an economic input for use in the workplace, you do not know what education is all about. If you reinforce that misunderstanding by suggesting that employers must define what education is for, when employers will not agree on the issue, you just set up the education system to fail, yet again. Instead, you need to create an education system that provides children and young people with the

chance to learn in ways that suit them, and that help them integrate better into the very many and varied communities of which they will be a part throughout their lives.

This will require that they know how to read and write. It does not require that they have the ability to write an essay, because well over 90% of people never will once they leave school, so why do we make it such a priority (and also teach how to do it so badly)? At most, they need to learn how to send a clear email, text message or short letter, because that is all that many of them will ever do once they leave school. They will read a great deal more, but employers will rarely ask for essays: they will ask for basic communication skills.

Likewise, when it comes to maths, they do need to know how to do basic arithmetic, understand concepts like percentages, interpret charts, appraise financial products and know how to use a spreadsheet. There are few who need more than that. Troublingly, there are many who do not even have those skills.

But, most of all, education is about encouraging inquisitive engagement, and when its primary goal is to teach conformity, rather than the development of the individual and their potential, it is bound to fail.

I am not expecting to hear anything about education today that will fulfil my hopes and expectations.