

education leadership - a trio on trial

the issues that education is facing and the politics of claims to rescue it

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There's a lot to disagree about in education. And there are constant re-alignments of who stands for what in that mix. This blog examines a new one.

- **ISSUES**

Education raises as many issues as any field of social policy. A load of questions each get a gamut of answers...

THE LOAD

THE GAMUT

<i>priorities</i>	...from competitiveness...to well-being
<i>teaching</i>	...from meeting targets...to earning trust
<i>methods</i>	...from damping down...to firing up
<i>outcomes</i>	...from acquired content...to critical thinking
<i>interests</i>	...from shareholders...to stakeholders
<i>transfer</i>	...from up-scalable...to locally relevant
<i>institutions</i>	...from controlling...to enabling
<i>strategy</i>	...from learning to score...to learning to learn
<i>servicing</i>	...from individual success...to social needs
<i>presentation</i>	...from success stories...to learning from mistakes

The new re-alignment is announced by education's most prominent voice. The Times Education Supplement reports the formation of an 'Institute of School Leadership', to be based in the University of Buckingham. The argument is that there is a shortfall in 'good head-teachers' and a reluctance among deputies for promotion. There's no shortage of evidence about why heads and their deputies are stressed and unwilling to get more-so. But this re-alignment isn't asking about causes and effects, it's case is that we've lost too many and so we must find more. There's a lot to disagree about here.

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- **THINKING**

There's also a lot to play for. A central re-aligning belief is that 'nothing matters more than the quality of leadership'. The spokesperson doesn't want deputies, department heads or hands-on educators to miss this claim - the word 'nothing' is repeated. The replacement leaders are to be 'compassionate, wise, accomplished and rounded people'; they are not to be 'league-tabled obsessed'. No comment on that from the University of Buckingham. But there are questions to pose.

The movers and shakers are a trio. Anthony Seldon, principal of an élite school, values high academic achievement alongside a passion for learning, independent thinking, moral values, self confidence and interests beyond the classroom. He looks forward to the dissolving of the separations between private and state education. Michael Wilshaw is, by turns, a head teacher and chief inspector. He's a bold one, calling for 'battle-axe' assaults on school sloppiness in the pursuit of uncomplicated calls for effective control in schools. Toby Young is an enabler of free schools. His admiration of Friedrich Nietzsche contributes to his action in severing schools from both local authorities and the welfare state.

Buckingham is a private university holding a royal charter and attracting a cosmopolitan student body - some qualifying as teachers. Following the market the curriculum is strengthening on economics, business studies and enterprise and weakening on the humanities - though they include a masters programs in military history and another on English country houses. The university has an education research unit which reports to government, frequently gathering information from large samples and engaging computer technology in assembling them into what is called 'big data'.

School leaders, their deputies, the department heads and the hands-on educators may reasonably wonder about this. The triad are not entirely in accord, and it's far from clear how Buckingham will take them to where any of them want to go. Something to argue about?

- **PURPOSE**

The reforming triad sees their initiative as transformational: the great heads of the future will not need ever to have managed a classroom. The underlying belief is that great-leadership will succeed in whatever setting it works. So successful leaders - whether from commerce, or being at war, or active in public life - will be successful head teachers. Buckingham has an education programme, but these heroes need never to have qualified in it.

Versions of that faith-in-greatness crop up in the appointment of mayors, szars, commissioners, guardians and - in the Buckingham scenario - gurus. These great-and-good are thought to be blessed with a rare command of solutions. This is the Seldon-Young-Wilshaw, prospectus.

The most thorough award of such an attribution of leadership I know is to Kim Jong-un. But the west has its examples in Messrs Churchill, Reagan and Thatcher. In all such cases any follower-feeling of being in safe hands is comforting. But such reverence is rarely unanimous or invariably successful. And what if the Seldon-Young-Wilshaw retrospect fails to have delivered anything impressively great or noticeably good?

And there is also this: some leaders, promoted into schools, have shown the sense, courage and grace to acknowledge that they are out of their depth. So what if there are no safe hands, only the sense, courage and grace that every educator - at every level - brings to the work? We would all be in this together. Though, that doesn't mean that we would necessarily stop arguing.

- **CREDIBILITY**

Mayors, czars, commissioners, guardians and gurus are inclined to talk about systems, establishments and institutions. They're what movers and shakers know how to change. They are engaged when movements to influence, reform and replace are on the agenda. There is a credibility factor in responding to constituency feelings that something must be done. The action is reshaping schools, universities, research-and-development outfits and the like. Looking good in action can mean rubbishing existing institution - such as the National College for Teaching and Leadership. It is how Buckingham becomes the sole platform for attracting ministerial support and government funding. The whole is a tightly-bound mind-set, defending a narrowly-based credibility.

So there's plenty of room for disagreement. Much of it is in the day-on-day working lives of educators. But that talk is complicated. So movers-and-shakers need followers who can curtail it. They staff and prime media for asking simple questions and highlighting manageable answers. All is contained behind a narrow window. The controllers and the media they capture, present themselves as heroes, speaking for us all. Followers feel free to argue, but they find little to argue about.

A leadership with any credibility depends on a liberated following. And that needs a bigger window. Credibility then depends less on what is claimed and more on the sense that citizenship makes of it. History finds plenty of celebrated leaders with feet of clay, charging up blind alleys, and engineering catastrophic consequences. Who better to push at the limits of their entrapments than educators and their students? They all have plenty to argue about.

- **FUTURE**

The plenty to argue about includes facts, attributions and purposes. The facts are what people can find, observe and believe. They are truths whether anybody believes them or not, and they belong to everybody. Meanings are the significances that people attribute to facts. They are interpretations, can divide people and usually do. Purposes are what people mean to do about this. They are based on the facts they find and the attributions they attach. Angry exchanges can gather around what is a fact, what is opinion, and how much of that is prejudice, snobbery or racism. People can jump in to talk at any level in those three-story exchanges. But a careful approach would make facts, attributions and purposes the stuff of what philosophers of education call reflection.

Reflection makes room for disagreement. And the outcomes depend less on leadership than on followership. The triad's proposals and Buckingham's claims matter less than what people find, what they attribute, and what they do about it. Some of that reflection looks for monetary returns on mercenary investments. These are the distinct interests of shareholders. Others look for social returns on investment in

families, community and well-being. These are the different interests of stakeholders. There's no guarantee here of follower support for what the great and good want to do with their systems, their establishments and their institutions.

This reflection is on facts, attributions and purposes engaged by shareholder and stakeholder interests, There's plenty for some to value and others to dismiss. I had some contact with Buckingham's education research unit. An issue is whether big data, framed by economics, might be missing something. The argument is about whether more is going on in stakeholder experience. If there is it would need a research tool such as ethnography to pick it up. I can't say I got anywhere with that suggestion. It seems that arms-length data speaks for as much as some want to hear. The disagreements were, at times, heated.

It gets more complicated - reflection finds conflicts of interest. What is done for some interests harms the interests of others. So reflection must question whose interests any proposal serves. This means students and their educators interrogating any manoeuvre for who gains and who loses. These are equal-opportunity issues. Dealing with them means recognising who is escaping scrutiny and where that leverage is anchored. There might be a simple valuing of market forces, or the inevitability of competition, or the righteousness of private property, or the nod of some guru - but in a fair society none of that will do.

The maneuvering, evading and muddying of various interests load educators with what might well have reached a tired-and-defeated level. But It hasn't and I see no sign that it will. On the contrary, resistance to arbitrary control is strengthening on a daily basis - among families, local authorities and educators. There's a lot to disagree about in education. And the argument ain't over yet.

There is no shortage of credible sources on what is proving useful and sustainable in all of this. Together they find a focused and self-consistent answer to each of the questions posed above...

THE LOAD

THE FOCUS

<i>the priorities</i>	<i>...are for well-being</i>
<i>the lessons</i>	<i>...are for finding who & what can be believed</i>
<i>the methods</i>	<i>...are for firing up</i>
<i>the outcomes</i>	<i>...are for critical thinking</i>
<i>the interests</i>	<i>...are for stakeholders</i>
<i>the transfers</i>	<i>...are for local relevance</i>
<i>the institutions</i>	<i>...are enablers</i>
<i>the strategies</i>	<i>...are for learning to learn</i>
<i>the services</i>	<i>...are for shared social needs</i>
<i>the presentations</i>	<i>...are for learning from mistakes</i>

This is thought-and-feeling. Yet it is clear enough and consistent enough to rule out the possibility of seeing education as commodity, or school as marketplace, or student as consumer.

But there's a lot for students, their educators and their stakeholders to learn. And experience is finding that there's more to be learned from acknowledging failure than from vaunting success. That capacity, for making good use of bad news, is undervalued. A changing world requires the great-and-good to both learn and unlearn. Listening to students, their educators and their stakeholders will help.

All of the players mentioned here are facing existential consequence of accelerating rates of change. The faster the acceleration the greater the relevance of coherent and focussed thought-and-feeling. And the faster the acceleration the more urgent is the need to engage citizens in that informed reflection.

I don't know what the Buckingham-based trio can make of this. Do you? After all, there's a lot to disagree about in education.