

What would the ideal education system look like?

Looking back at classrooms from 150 years ago, it is evident that the education system has remained stubbornly persistent in its appearance and methods, with the exception of some technological advancements. Modern-day students are expected to learn in the same way as those who lived over a century ago, and are reprimanded when they fail to conform to such methods. This gives many students a profound distaste for learning, which often translates into bad behaviour and poor grades- which raises the question: why is no one doing anything to change it? Our understanding of students and their needs has changed, so why has the education system not changed accordingly? Such a question is one that has been asked for decades, and has received few notable answers. I aim to explore the flaws of the current education system whilst simultaneously presenting new, more inclusive alternatives to out-dated methods. Throughout this essay I will use a mixture of facts and opinions to emphasise changes that need to be made in order to achieve a more ideal education system.

Prejudice within the education system

Within society, those who are wealthy have a considerable advantage over those who are not. This is also true within the education system, where students from wealthy backgrounds can afford a much better standard of education. This could be one of the reasons for the lack of change within the education system; those in positions of power have often been educated in private schools that can afford to provide a higher standard of education. People who have experienced and benefited from such an education may see little reason to change the system that provides it.

Statistics and evidence play a key role in exploring the bias within the education system as they provide insights into an otherwise unfrequented topic. According to Study International News (2019), “private school graduates are twice as likely to get admitted into one of Britain’s elite universities compared to state-educated children.” This demonstrates an evident and harshly unjust divide between those who can afford to enrol in private education and those who are unable to, contributing to the continued lack of social mobility within society.

Another factor that unfairly affects admission rates into universities is ethnicity. In 2016, black people made up a mere 1.5% of the University of Cambridge’s intake (BBC News 2018). Black people are less likely to be admitted into prestigious universities than white people, which emphasises how the systemic bias against people of colour continues even into the education system.

In an ideal education system, such profound prejudice would not be possible. No student should be at a disadvantage due to their ethnic background or family's financial state, yet all over the world there is an evident divide between those who can afford a good education and those who cannot, and a bias against those of certain ethnic backgrounds. An ideal education system would be one of total equality on a global scale. All students would be given the same opportunities regardless of their backgrounds and wealth, allowing for significant progress to be made in all aspects of society.

Appreciation of Diversity

Being in school is challenging. Harsh social norms and ideals can cause serious self-esteem issues, particularly for teenagers, who are already more socially sensitive than most. This means that for many, school is not a place where they can truly be themselves. Thus, one aspect of school that students have reported that they want to change is the limitation of self-expression. Uniforms and strict rules on appearance create almost a dystopian atmosphere within schools, with students being prohibited from having 'too many' piercings, wearing certain types of trousers, removing their blazers, having certain coats...the list seems almost endless. What effect do piercings have in someone's ability to learn? Why does the colour of someone's hair deem them worthy of punishment? Why do trousers have to be a binary representation of someone's gender?

If children are punished for exploring their own expression, it will take them longer to discover and accept who they are. Moreover, alienating students who look different just perpetuates the ideas behind social discrimination, and can have a negative effect on both those who fall victim to it and those who observe it. Uniforms can be useful, but why extend that uniformity to faces and hair? Particularly within a school environment, differences in appearance and elsewhere should be accepted and appreciated, not punished.

Ideally, the unjust rules against self-expression through appearance (for example, coloured hair or piercings) would be abolished. Education is a key stage of a person's life, and one which often defines their future. The lessons that are learnt during school years can remain with a person for their entire lives- and to appreciate diversity should be one of them.

Neurodiversity

Another aspect of diversity is neurodiversity. This is heavily prevalent within schools, where a wide range of neurotypes and mental conditions are present. Certain conditions, disabilities and disorders can make students targets for bullying and isolation, yet many schools fail to provide adequate support and education regarding such (The Guardian 2019). A lot of schools also struggle to provide a personal understanding of those with these conditions or disabilities, or fail to recognize them entirely, meaning that many people are unable to reach their full potential due to a lack of resources and support.

In an ideal education system, and perhaps an ideal world, everyone would have a much better understanding of neurodiversity and mental conditions, and all teachers would be more educated on how they can impact a person's learning. Instead of silently judging a student's behaviours based on outdated stereotypes, people would accept their differences and appreciate them and their potential. More resources would be available to those who could benefit from them, and no one would be judged for doing so. Diversity is a driving force behind change and advancements, and neurodiversity is no exception to this.

Diversity in learning styles

Perhaps even more prevalent within the education system is the huge variety of learning styles that exist within it. As individuals, all students differ in their preferred style of learning and being taught. Such a diverse range of learning types seems drastically underrepresented within classrooms, which often present a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to teaching. This often includes sheet work, prolonged writing and a very restricted curriculum. To assume that all students will learn in this way- especially to the best of their potential- is absurd at the least. For some, as previously mentioned, such mundane methods of learning create a distaste for learning. Nothing about sheet-work is distinctly memorable to most, so why is it used so often to teach a whole class? If generations are not being taught in a way that benefits them, there will be mass amounts of potential wasted. This is particularly troublesome given the growing amount of skilled professions and their high demand- scientists are a wonderful example of such, and are needed more than ever under the current circumstances.

Finland demonstrates an effective approach to education, which includes breaks at regular intervals, a wider variety of learning methods, smaller schools, and more freedom for students to explore and decide for themselves how they would like to be educated (Big Think 2019; Smithsonian Magazine 2011 and The Atlantic 2014).

Finland is achieving consistently high results without the added stress of extra exams and tight restrictions.

This is in stark contrast to our own education system, which is heavily exam-oriented and restrictive in many aspects. The use of GCSEs in particular is being questioned as researchers develop a greater understanding of adolescent mental health and the kind of effect these exams can have on it. Adolescence is a significant period of life where people are more vulnerable to mental health issues, and GCSEs are simply not practical or helpful during such a time. GCSEs may not be an accurate representation of a person's knowledge of a topic either, as the examinations are often heavily based on someone's ability to write, rather than how much they actually know. Those with certain conditions or mental health issues may feel drastically let down by their exam results more so that, and would greatly benefit from having their understanding tested in other ways.

A coalition known as 'Rethinking Assessment' wants to remove GCSEs (The Times 2020), saying that the system 'neither measures the right things nor is very reliable- and leaves in its wake a trail of stress and unfairness.' Many students forget a lot of information needed for exams after a few years anyway, having never truly understood, or enjoyed, the concept of what they were 'learning'.

Some people benefit from the current education system and its methods. Some do not. Which is exactly why students should be allowed more choice in the way that they are taught and tested. In an ideal education system, students would be granted much more freedom and exploration into different styles and methods of learning, allowing them to find what works best for them as individuals. Those who teach would be inclined to guide students on this journey, observing and learning themselves from what they find.

Curriculum

The school curriculum itself is also seen as flawed by many as it seems to 'whitewash' British history and the effect it had on people of colour. Jeremy Corbyn once proposed that British school children should be educated on the realities of British imperialism and colonialism, but received harsh and unjust responses to his proposal (Heath 2018). Students of today need to be taught about the intense racism of the past in order to better understand the blatant and systemic racism still faced by many in the modern world. Another argument is that the school curriculum

provides inadequate preparation for adulthood as it fails to teach students about basic concepts such as taxes and bills.

Teacher-student relationships

Currently within the education system there seems to be a level of misunderstanding between students and teachers. Teachers provide increasingly stressful amounts of homework, whilst students disregard some of their most important lessons. Students are punished for their increased impulsivity and need for social approval, rather than taught how to deal with and overcome it, despite the fact that such behaviours are a result of their ongoing development (Underwood 2013). Life-changing examinations are forced upon them before they have even fully matured. This shows that not only do teachers struggle to understand students, but the education system as a whole fails to do so also.

The ideal education system would have students and teachers connect on a more personal level. There would be a mutual trust and friendship between students and each of their teachers, which would provide them with a sense of safety and support. This would improve the mental health of students, as many young people feel isolated during their school years, and could also directly affect their academic performance in a positive way. A deeper understanding of students would allow teachers to get a better idea of their needs as individuals and the best ways in which to help them reach their full potential. Actively trying to understand students would be greatly beneficial to them, particularly during higher forms of education, as many people feel painfully misunderstood during their adolescent years. Feeling understood by those who teach them would improve students' perceptions of the education system as a whole, leading to the potential for better grades and more successful futures.

Mental health

Mental health is a heavily discussed- but perhaps not as well understood- topic. A growing amount of teenagers are experiencing mental health issues, even more so during the current pandemic, yet there still seems to be an insufficient understanding of mental health within the education system. The support that students receive during their school years is a fundamental aspect of who they will grow up to be. Schools need to focus now more than ever on the mental health of its students, and have the potential to play a key role in helping to educate and de-stigmatize people's views of mental illness.

It has been scientifically proven that time spent in nature has a positive effect on mental health and helps reduce stress (Harvard Health Publishing 2018), yet the closest thing to nature that can be found in most classrooms is the distant view of faraway trees. If this information and research is being made readily available to schools, why are they not acting upon it? Such a seemingly small example seems to act as a microcosm of the education system's optional ignorance to important scientific research regarding students.

Conclusion

An ideal education system would depend heavily on an ideal world and society. As the word 'ideal' is a subjective term, this is virtually impossible. So although a truly ideal education system is unattainable, there are still changes that could- and should- be made in order to improve the out-dated methods that are being used today. The education system is fundamentally flawed. Instead of clutching traditions made by those who lived centuries ago, those in power over the education system need to listen to the voices of today. The education system, somewhat ironically, needs to learn from those who are at the heart of it- students.

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