

Martin Luther King Jr once stated, “Intelligence plus character is the goal of true education”. Sometimes, as young adults, we can get lost within an unrealistic realm of gullibility, believing the media’s incredibly toxic interpretation of the education system. “True education”, in my eyes, is the fulfilling sense of belonging through being part of a supportive community. Particularly in recent years, television, social media, and various news articles have been notoriously renowned for a paroxysm of hatred toward the education system; stigmatising those who academically excel in the process.¹ This distasteful representation of such a vital system can, in result, lead to an unneeded atmosphere of pessimism revolving the topic of education. As students with masses of potential, people of the future and prospective leaders, we must understand that education is a key element to accomplishing our goals: concluding that the education system is the only way to effectively prepare young people for adulthood. It is equally vital to critique this system from the well-balanced perspective of current students rather than from the bias media viewpoint, enabling it to thrive and educate future generations. Simultaneously, ensuring that academia is not always the prime focus of educators and instead prioritising the social, mental, and emotional well-being of all students. Unfortunately, as a student, the current system lacks such space for individuality.

To begin with, it is important that we review several aspects of learning within a variety of schools over many decades, to evaluate what an optimal education system would look like. Consequentially, a central issue raised by the word ‘ideal’ is that it is a subjective and personalised vision. Every writer will take a different approach to this question, tackle a contrasting issue, and have a distinctive image of their own flawless education system. It is salient to understand that the epitome of education is that it is a journey full of constant growth, reflection, and individuality. Therefore, my essay will be personalised to how I envision school at its maximum potential, suggesting recommendations for areas of improvement, explaining the impacts of how these changes can drastically transform one’s school

¹ Harvard Graduate School of Education, 12th August 2020

experience, whilst exemplifying ubiquitous methods of teaching from around the world.

Linking to an ideal classroom, the formation of learning spaces plays a vital role- the “Harkness-style of learning” involves replacing invariable desks with welcoming, round tables, resulting in a more inclusive, personalised learning experience. Each student can therefore work collaboratively, and independently.² This almost conference-room table structure subliminally prepares children for life outside of education, developing public speaking skills and formal interactions whilst sitting in a position typically viewed as informal. Teaching children practical skills that are often used in a day-to-day working environment from an early age allows them to shine when they reach employment. Additionally, students are also able to share thoughts and opinions in a sophisticated manner, enhancing oratorical skills. Nadga and Gurin argue that “increasing children and young people’s ability to debate issues” through oracy improves “civic engagement and empowerment” of students resultantly developing confidence, understanding of current affairs and appropriate emotional intelligence.³ Several teaching methods (especially immersive ways of learning) will encourage children to engage within the classroom: this provides an opportunity to truly grasp the curriculum rather than to passively observe the teacher, whilst uncomfortably sat in uniform rows.

A deeply complex issue surrounding the quality of education given to students, especially those of a lower socioeconomic class, who are educated in disadvantaged, underprivileged areas, is overcrowding. It would be too simplistic to claim that all state schools are overpopulated as this ignores the exceptional measures many schools implement. Nonetheless, various privately funded schools tend to have smaller classrooms and more 1-to-1 learning opportunities. Tackling overcrowded classrooms is particularly powerful as having less students enables customised experiences for the expression of pupils’ thoughts and opinions.

² Phillips Exeter Academy, 26th August 2020

³ Impact, 15th September 2020

Furthermore, classrooms that are sparsely populated allow a better teacher-student relationship and a more inclusive, sanguine learning experience. According to The Department for Education's statistics, in January 2018, there were roughly 66,000 more new pupils than in January 2017.⁴ Additionally, in January 2019 there was an even larger upsurge of around 84,700 new students.⁵ The world population is rapidly increasing, meaning school's number of pupils are at an all-time high, the prime concern is that there are not enough qualified teachers for a comfortable classroom size-to-pupils ratio. An appropriate solution to this issue is emphasising the demand for teachers, ultimately increasing the number of staff qualifying per year. It is equally essential that the government provide more funding for schools, specifically those with inadequate evaluations, to construct further space for learning.

Over the last decade, the idea of learning has become progressively venal. The education system has a fatal flaw, that being the way in which pupils are examined. The quality of a child's 15 years of education is solely determined upon a multitude of tests. Children put countless hours of effort into schoolwork in their lifetimes -not only during school hours but at home, only to be discouraged when their work is examined on a test result alone. The pressurising criticism from teachers, classmates, parents, and the government, is greeted with shame and disappointment when a student fails to meet their predicted grades. This despondency, from numbers on a piece of paper can negatively affect pupil's mental health, which can have lifelong, enduring consequences on the individual's confidence. Providentially, this method of evaluation can be simply transformed to a fairer and more equal system with little exertion, through adding a section based upon effort into the overall grading system. A successful example of this is Finland; exams do not account to an overall grade, which creates designated time to do the arts and "Hands-on" learning such as creating a business, which subconsciously prepares children for life in a working environment.⁶

⁴ Department for Education, 15th August 2020

⁵ Department for Education, 20th August 2020

⁶ Education in Finland, 29th July 2020

Additionally, the government need to rethink the quantitative content necessary in exams and, instead of teaching minors to memorise, teaching children to understand the concepts and lessen the depth of some less crucial topics, should be a priority. Moreover, this will leave time to teach children practical lessons, where adulting, mentoring and PSHE subjects are prioritised. For example, enforcing educative classes on banking and how to rationally manage money, decreases students developing unhealthy money habits in the future. The Money Advice Service states that only “40% of young people are taught money-management” undoubtedly this figure is substandard.⁷ 90% of these teenagers claimed they found the money-management sessions beneficial. Indisputably, this is proof the government can do more to raise awareness of problems every adolescent is going to face, particularly if they extend to further education.

Regular training for teachers is of great importance. Enthusiastic, passionate teachers are the foundation of a great school, they are the “heart” of the education system. Underqualified teachers consequentially result in lower grades and a less enjoyable learning journey. Regular requalification and updated courses reviewing what methods worked well and what could be improved requires all teachers to reflect and learn. To further influence motivated staff, the government is obligated to prioritise teacher funding, assigning experienced teachers who can lead generations confidently.

Another challenge faced by schools is management of pupil behaviour. This can be influenced by dangerous external factors such as county lines and child exploitation. The decline in a child’s attendance and/or behaviour should be a warning signal to staff that there may be more sinister factors behind this. An ideal school should have exemplary safeguarding procedures and have close relationships with the police and Social Care to intervene for the safety and protection of all vulnerable pupils.

⁷ The Money Advice Service, 1st September 2020

A school must also obtain qualities necessary to encourage students to perform at their highest potential in all aspects of living. A notion familiarly discussed in 21st century classrooms is how to follow a relatively, balanced diet. Public Health England believe that approximately 20% of year 6 children are considered obese.⁸ Despite a range of factors such as gender, background, and medical conditions, this is still a pertinent matter and more can be done. Therefore, schools should expand upon conversations, regularly holding healthy eating workshops, exercise classes and dedicated PSHE time slots. School catering services should provide enticing food ranging in a variety of healthy fruits and vegetables. Concurrently, these implications link to the concept of a balanced diet and ultimately inspire children to motivate themselves, achieving a healthier lifestyle. Well-being lessons must be implemented into the curriculum to ensure each pupil is able to mindfully reflect on their current mental health.

The Schools Without Classrooms competition encourages “Learning through a park” to “recover the values:...self-esteem, empathy...respect for diversity”.⁹ This idea is a fantastic way to innovatively inspire children to understand that learning is not merely constructed under the grounds of a classroom, and that you can educate yourself in any environment. To teach the broad, time-consuming curriculum, classrooms need to be easily accessible and flexible, allowing students to listen to the teacher with enthusiasm and partake in active learning through asking a multitude of inquisitive questions. Each school requires a SENCO team who should have up-to-date training and forward thinking in the latest techniques. Considering recent events with the coronavirus pandemic, it is just as important as ever that children are supported with their learning to ensure they are not struggling through online schooling alone. Which leads me to a vital point on home-learning, there must be an organised contingency plan for a possible second lockdown, ensuring once again that no pupil is left behind. The government should recognise the

⁸ NHS Digital, 17th August 2020

⁹ Bustler, 2nd October 2020

importance of creative subjects including textiles, cooking, and poetry, creating specialised areas for teaching.

In a world that is consistently evolving, filled with driven humans, tech integration is detrimental to the education of students and their progress. Providing children with the necessary IT equipment to develop the scheme of blended learning, allows students to feel comfortable with change. Simultaneously, making the possibility of learning from home less daunting, notably in these unprecedented times of covid-19.

John F Kennedy once said, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other”. Creating student leadership opportunities that interlink with the importance of mental health will encourage the emotional well-being of students to be a key focus. Allocated staff members must undergo specialised training to teach and support students. They may also lead group or 1-to-1 counselling sessions where students can express their emotions in confidence. Especially in the current climate of covid-19, many children and their families have undergone bereavement, loss and other personal struggle emotionally, financially and socially, as a result of such an extended period of isolation. Opportunities for mindfulness, yoga, meditation and other holistic approaches may be beneficial for students to manage their emotions and lower stress levels, enabling them to cope with distracting “outside-the-classroom” influences.

School buildings should be welcoming, colourful and litter-free, teaching students how to respect their environment. Implementing strict mottos, ensures all children are treated equally; no child should be viewed with less potential or less academic talent. Vitaly, schools must promote the “no barriers” concept within all classes, no matter their academic strengths, to ensure no pupil is left behind. Moreover, all extra-curricular activities should be opportunities open to all students, allowing a range of knowledge and an enhanced variety of creative skills. These broader experiences allocate students time to socialise with other classmates that may not typically be members of any subject classes, allowing students to instantaneously gain confidence in collaborative working, speaking in large groups and social skills.

Eliminating students' anxiety whilst also supporting those who are anxious about public speaking. Enforcing these chances from a young age, increases the likelihood that children will pursue a career that involves a considerable amount of public interaction, many of these career paths being incredibly valuable, establishing future doctors, lawyers, politicians, and engineers. These tertiary industries will have a vast peak in employment rates, reducing the prospect of another detrimental recession.

As mentioned previously, the "no barriers policy" is significantly valuable, an anti-discriminatory system is an idyllic solution to bullying and unkindness. By guaranteeing all children the opportunity for the same school experience, it allows pupils to understand that, despite physical appearance or opposing religious beliefs, all pupils have the same right to an equal education. Correspondingly, all students should be educated on apt topics, inclusive of: Black history, gay rights, and feminism to accentuate that all humans are equal. These topics are urgently needed as an addition to the curriculum, enforcing change for the better and recognising that difference should not lead to segregation, instead taught as a part of history, reducing discrimination and stressing the vitality of how historic events have had all-time effects that are still being felt to this day. Recently, the Black Lives Matter movement has received far more media coverage, in response to the death of George Floyd and several other victims of such tragic fatalities, stemming from continuous racism. Within my own education, I feel the exploration of these subjects has vast effects on students' perceptions of social injustice and diversity. Currently I am studying Harper Lee's, *To Kill A Mockingbird*; this book is a prime example of racial injustice and emphasises the gap in socioeconomic issues that remain relevant to this day. Teaching children a range of authors, from various backgrounds, acquires children to contextualise their text and explore many lenses improving evaluation, cultural capital, and critical thinking skills.

Considering the main priority of schools is to encourage children to enjoy learning, it is useful to apply an attractive reward system as children are more likely to prosper when they feel they are acknowledged and appreciated. A fascinating example of

this profitable deal is an end-of-year trip, or reward week, consisting of trips, educational workshops and amusing experiences using outside visitors to spark interest. Alternatively, another method of recompense for the dedication of students over the past academic year, is to use off-site residentials.

World Class opportunities such as this competition, are a privilege to participate in. World Class Schools have already made immense developments in education. Schools without this accreditation, seek motivation in striving to reach these prestigious titles. Yet, extolling schools who excel, with the recognition they deserve.

Ultimately, there will never be a perfect path to learning, but the Government must understand that changes need to be made. I hope that we can soon live a day where education and intellect is not based upon numbers, I hope that “Intelligence plus character is the goal of true education” and that people in a position of power can realise the value behind each student. That value, being not selectively based upon academia but building model citizens in the process.

