

# Work on schooling for tomorrow: trends, themes and scenarios to inform leadership issues

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## 1. Intense interest in the school and new forms of organisation

Across the OECD, there are now searching questions being asked about the nature of schools. The tasks they fulfil are increasingly demanding, yet more than ever it is being asked whether they are able to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. Schools have always been the subject of attention, and often criticism. Today, however, this is tending to be both more fundamental and more forward-looking than traditional concerns about standards: radical questions are being asked about the very aims and nature of schooling.

In working towards a set of demanding, sometimes contradictory, agendas for schools, the nature of change and policy-making are to the fore. In many countries, the locus of educational action and decision making continues to shift to the local level in awareness of the limits of centralised, bureaucratic reform. The language of policy reflects such a shift: innovation, partnerships, networking and new professional relations. How can dialogue and partnership – between policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, the private sector, parents, communities and others – be promoted? With decentralisation, how can problems of growing inequality be avoided while at the same time permitting local-level initiative to flourish? And how can the huge potential of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool for learning be realised without opening up further a yawning digital divide? All these raise important questions about the nature of educational leadership, whether at local or more central levels of decision making.

In this paper, I first sketch some trends that define the environment in which schools operate today. Behind this lies the question of how well such trends inform the decision making and leadership processes, whether at local or higher levels. Secondly, the paper structures some key themes and questions that will need to be confronted over at least the next decade. In response to the questions posed, we should not only assert normatively where we would like to be, but assess where we are likely to be in the years ahead. Both call for leadership. Thirdly, over this summer (2001), these trends and themes will be developed into a set of scenarios; some of the broad options confronting policy and practice are presented.

## 2. Trends in society and the economy

Some of the key trends relating to education are well rehearsed, while others are more hidden. This section presents a selection of the more important among them. Such a selection can never be definitive, and the world constantly changes, calling for fresh analysis. It is essential, however, that education policy is informed by some picture of what is taking place and where we need to be headed.

There are important **demographic changes** occurring, with far-reaching social and economic – and educational – consequences. Birth rates have fallen significantly in many countries, posing substantial future challenges for societies, especially as regards financing pensions systems and health care for the elderly. One possibility being confronted by many countries now is that immigration levels will again rise significantly, as they did in the 1950s and 1960s, raising a range of issues about how well schools, among other social institutions, deal with and build on cultural diversity. Often, these fertility and migration patterns are presented as essentially problematic. Yet they could also represent genuine opportunities, allowing education systems to focus their financial and human resources more effectively on qualitative than quantitative goals, and acting as a liberating force for schools and teachers.

Falling numbers in youth cohorts may also be taken as an opportunity to involve other age groups much more substantially in schooling than they have hitherto, particularly those adults who missed out earlier on. There is a great deal of rhetoric about lifelong learning these days, and there are many ways in which schools can contribute to turning this into a reality throughout the population. The most obvious, perhaps, is about instilling in all students the foundation of competence and motivation to continue learning throughout their lives, but another might well be to broaden participation so as to become less exclusively learning institutions for the young. To move in this direction might also prove to be a wise investment in relation to inter-generational relationships and their impact on funding. As more and more affluence accumulates in the hands of older members of the population, their support for continued and high investment in schools may well be buttressed by a more even age distribution of those who directly benefit from it. In the digital age, it might anyway become more desirable to build more effective bridges across the generations.

Many of the most important changes in relation to the digital age, as they impact on schools and schooling, concern the **changing nature of work** and the knowledge economy. Economies become more influenced by global developments, whether we like it or not. The speed of industrial and occupational change quickens, continuing the trends towards growing tertiary and service activities and declining jobs in the primary and secondary sectors of farming, extraction and manufacturing. Skill levels continue to rise, and while there is (rightly) debate about how many of the new white-collar and service jobs being created really are high-skill, semi- and unskilled manual work undoubtedly is shrinking. A major factor underlying all this is, of course, technology: its ubiquity and consequences for the nature and pace of change of work. Rapid change can be portrayed positively – a feature of the knowledge economy that education is an integral part of. Indeed, the most compelling arguments for lifelong learning have been made precisely for this reason. Yet it will also be necessary to attend to the less positive aspects of rapid change, to work out how best education should take these on board as well: heightened job stress and insecurity, risks of exclusion etc. What should be the nature of competence and motivation that will stand most in good stead for uncertain futures?

Of the pertinent social trends, two should perhaps be signalled for particular attention.

First, there is the individualism, even social fragmentation, which has come to be a feature of Western societies. This is not specific to those with fewest resources, indeed it might best be understood as a feature of relative affluence. While many are engaged in diverse leisure activities, often these are solitary rather than communal. Traditional notions of family and community are eroding.

At least two related questions arise for education. How far should it be contributing to this process through the embrace of ever-more individualised forms of learning? And how far might education, and schools in particular, become centres of social activity and identity in societies where these are otherwise fast disappearing?

Second, there is the hardening of social exclusion and widening gaps between the affluent and those in poverty. Two aspects might again be highlighted: the evidence that inequalities appear to have widened, in the UK at least, over the past 20 years or so, and the shifting distribution of poverty away from the older generations and towards the young, including children.

At the very least, schooling should not be a mechanism for exacerbating these divides, including those arising from residence and the exercise of choice. Much better that it should be a force for inclusion in society.

### **3. Key themes and questions arising for schools and schooling**

Education systems should not, of course, be merely reactive to external pressures and changes – they have their own goals, dynamics and deep trends. Here, I focus on some of main themes that help to structure our understanding of future developments in schooling, and some of the principal questions that need to be addressed under each.

#### **i) Public attitudes, expectations and political support for schools and schooling**

There are important questions to address concerning the role of public opinion towards schools and education, and the views of different stakeholders. Firm evidence about attitudes and expectations is notoriously difficult to acquire. For instance, many of the same people who declare concern over the overall state of schooling own up to much higher levels of satisfaction with their children's own. While the language of debate is often about change, many stakeholders are conservative and suspicious of change.

What are and will be views and behaviour, particularly of parents, on such matters as school autonomy and choice, or private, home and alternative schooling etc? What is the role and significance of the media (and which media?) in terms of creating the terms of debate? How far is the political and media climate one of consensus or conflict over schooling? How far does the existing climate militate against concerted action to raise quality, and what can be done to change it? While it should be recognised that everywhere the views and expectations of the educated middle classes are critical in determining climate and outcomes, it is also important to recognise diversity of expectations and attitudes – by income and education groups, ethnicity, location etc.

#### **ii) Goals and functions**

What is likely to be the impact of the major changes taking place in education, society and the economy on the key processes that define schools' business? These are:

- socialisation and guardianship of the young
- knowledge and culture transmission
- selection, certification etc

Some regard as fundamental the declining monopoly of schools, especially in the light of the extensive possibilities opened up by ICT, networking etc. But if schools as institutions were to play a less prominent role, would proposed alternatives do better in performing all of what schools currently do? How to foster diversity and profit from new modes for learning without jeopardising the opportunities of those who are socially and economically vulnerable? Is the observation about schools' declining monopoly in fact an expression of a new digital divide in education and learning, where the better-off have greatest access to alternatives, a divide that schools must actively compensate for?

There is another area of possible declining monopoly that may be more significant in the long run: the recognition and accreditation of competence. Some predict that new forms of accreditation will develop through an array of new agencies, in line with the immediate needs of enterprises and individuals in a fast-changing world. Outcomes-based qualifications might already be seen as an important step towards cutting the traditional umbilical cords connecting delivery and accreditation. What impact might such developments have on education systems that have been the main guardians of competence assessment to date?

These questions prompt the objective scrutiny of what is most valued in education systems at the moment, and whether this is really best suited for the world of the 21st century. What are the main definitions of knowledge, competence and culture defined by current curriculum and assessment policies and by schools themselves in their everyday practice? How much room for manoeuvre do schools have if they perceive the need to innovate and change? While much of the educational debate is about standards of cognitive performance, close examination of what worries many people shows that most relate to socialisation, values, attitudes – the non-cognitive. These are matters where schools continue to play a unique role, one that, if anything, grows in importance with the fragmentation of many other aspects of family and community life. Should they be more fully recognised and built on, and can this be done without either jeopardising the quality of teaching and learning, or moving down the path of indoctrination? Or instead, as some assert, is a strong emphasis on values and the non-cognitive to load too much on to schools, distracting them from their primary tasks relating to knowledge and skills?

### **iii) The organisation of learning, systems and schools**

Many observers (especially from outside education) criticise the bureaucratic nature of school systems, seeing them as the embodiment of out-moded factory models and out of step with other areas of modern life. These criticisms need to be addressed seriously if schools are to maintain legitimacy and support. Will and should the organised learning for the young continue to be provided through systems? If there is a weakening of systemic (bureaucratic?) structures, how to ensure that equality of opportunity to access high-quality learning is not sacrificed?

Questions arise in relation not only to systems but to the nature of schools themselves. Can bureaucratic constraints give way to more flexible, professional arrangements, with the norm being schools characterised as learning organisations? How will knowledge be used and shared in them, and will what will this mean for R&D, including the right mix between the R and the D? Within schools, what are the implications for the use of time and space, and the organisation of the teaching-learning interface – in short, the future of classrooms, timetabling and other familiar organisational characteristics? What will be the impact of ICT on the life of students, learning and schools: will it bring radical change or simply represent a supplementary resource?

These questions obviously raise further questions about teachers. There are immediate questions concerning teacher preparation, in-service development, and meeting immediate recruitment needs. Broader questions concern the organisation of teachers' work, and the balance between individual professionalism and the roles of teams and networks. But, over the

longer term, still more fundamental issues arise about the nature of the profession, and about careers and profiles of teachers at different levels. The need to deal with the longer-term issues is something that many can agree to in principle, but engaging in change is a different story. One spur to do so would be a major crisis of teacher supply, which would force the uncomfortable choices to the fore.

#### **4. Possible scenarios for the future**

The answers to the different questions posed can be clustered into scenarios for the future. Such scenarios can never be definitive; they are selective constructs of a world that is inherently uncertain and may well never exist in pure form. They serve to highlight possible future developments that either could emerge, given the conditions to promote them, or that are being posited to do so as desirable futures by commentators, educators, politicians etc. As such, they may either embody positive futures to be encouraged or negative ones to be avoided.

Three main forms of scenario will be developed in the OECD/CERI work, and these will be further subdivided. Broadly, these might be described as:

- the continuation of the status quo
- the strengthening of the role and status of schools
- de-schooling, to a greater or lesser extent

##### **i) The status quo continues**

At the risk of caricature, some current school characteristics can be summed up in the following:

- Education is politicised, and a major ground of party politics. Parents, employers and media grumble and exert pressure on schools, but basically support them and are fundamentally opposed to radical change.
- The nation state (or province in federal systems) continues as the main locus of political authority, but is increasingly squeezed by decentralisation to communities, new corporate and media interests in the learning market, and by globalising pressures.
- Much attention focuses on the curriculum, with many countries operating a common curriculum and assessment, seeking to clarify standards or to create greater formal equality or both. Clear inequalities continue, but there are widespread policy endeavours to combat failure.
- The strong bureaucratic nature of schools and school systems continues. There is still a dominance of the classroom model and the primary role of individual teachers, but there is some room for innovation and for developing schools as learning organisations.
- There is an increase in ICT use in schools, but not resulting in radical change to organisational structures of teaching and learning.
- Formal certificates are seen as the main passports to economic and social life – but, while increasingly necessary, are increasingly insufficient.

These and related features are certainly more recognisable as a status quo in some countries than in others. They assume that education systems are very robust and resistant to fundamental change, no matter how often pundits have heralded the demise of schools as products of the industrial rather than the digital age. This scenario recognises that there is much in existing systems that is functional in the sense of meeting powerful interests.

Though robust, within this scenario are factors making for instability:

- possible dissatisfaction by the educated classes with lack of responsiveness by schools to meet their own perceived needs
- declining efficacy of educational credentials in themselves as passports to secure socio-economic prospects
- teacher supply crisis

Yet education systems have in the past proved remarkably adaptable in the face of crisis. In the future?

## **ii) Strengthened schools – one variant: schools as social centres**

Societies may be willing to invest the resources and recognition of schools so as substantially to strengthen them as institutions. One variant of this is schools as learning organisations; another, outlined below, is schools as social centres. In ideal circumstances, perhaps, both may be combined:

- The role of schools as centres of community activity and identity is accorded widespread recognition. Greater prominence is given to values in the life and curriculum of schools.
- There is a wide measure of party political agreement on goals and on the value of public education. Funding increases have the support of different generations, social groups and media.
- Strong schools are distinct social entities, reinvigorated by new organisational forms: less bureaucratic, more diverse. Hence, inequalities reduce but diversity widens.
- There is a general erosion of high school walls. ICT is strongly developed, with particular emphasis on communication by all partners.
- The role of schools in legitimising and accrediting knowledge continues, but there is greater recognition of a range of other social and cultural outcomes. The lifelong learning function becomes more explicit.
- The local dimension of schooling is substantially boosted, buttressed by a strong national framework and support, particularly in those communities with weak social capital.
- There is a core of high-status teaching professionals, but not necessarily in lifetime careers, with a prominent role for a wide range of other professionals, community actors, parents etc. and a blurring of the teaching role with a range of other community responsibilities.

This scenario is an optimistic one as regards the future of the institution of the school itself. Far from evaporating as an outdated institution of the industrial age, this scenario supposes that its position will actually strengthen substantially, but with a clear shift in direction. As different community institutions erode, leading to a crisis of values and social cohesion, the school comes to be regarded as a critical bulwark against generalised fragmentation and social pathologies. These aspects of schools' functions and curricula become much more explicitly recognised, the status and support for schools increase, and the individualisation of learning in initial education is tempered by a strong emphasis on collective aspects. Cognitive competence remains important, but to meet this there is a shift towards continuing education and training and informal learning, freeing up schools to concentrate more on socialisation and bolstering social capital. Meanwhile, schools themselves become less exclusively for the young only, and bring together a wide range of social responsibilities and partners.

While this is a more optimistic scenario, what will make it come about? Can an often-antagonistic media become supportive? What would make educational politics become non-partisan? Will the majority of taxpayers perceive the benefits from substantial investments in institutions that many may view as of little direct relevance to them? Can schools as strong centres for community action come about where they are most needed: where existing community infrastructure is weak? These are surely thorny questions.

### **iii) De-schooling – one variant: the market model**

Among the most widespread scenarios proposed as alternatives for schools and schooling are those based on the widespread development of the network society, with very extensive ICT-based individualised and small-group learning. Co-operation and communication are their driving force. As such, they may represent an even more idealistic vision than the previous scenario, and prove unstable in the face of glaring gaps and unmet social needs. An alternative de-schooling scenario instead posits competition as the driving force and, while more hard-nosed, may prove a more realistic alternative. What might this scenario look like?

- significantly reduced belief in the value of public education
- widely divergent positions on the value of established schools
- possible revolts by taxpayers and retirees
- privatisation, public/private partnerships, and diverse management the norm
- individualisation and home schooling flourish
- greater experimentation with organisational forms
- decline of the classroom and rigid timetabling
- different forms of indicators and accreditation the critical basis of market operation, with efficiency and quality prominent criteria
- different values and attitudes also prominent, as they acquire greater market value
- a decline of established curriculum structures in terms of delivery; re-defined more as outcomes

- ICT much more extensively and imaginatively exploited for learning; strong emphasis on information, guidance and marketing – some publicly organised, much private
- substantially reduced role for central providers and public education authorities, even in relation to steering and monitoring. International providers and accreditation agencies become more powerful.
- less distinct teaching force, with the involvement of a wide range of professions and backgrounds; flourishing training and accreditation for professionals to operate in the learning market
- substantial tolerance of wide inequalities in learning: lifelong learning the norm for some, exclusion for others

This scenario extends the role of market forces to a much greater degree than is presently the case. It does not posit the demise of public education or the government role altogether, but assumes greater privatisation and more extensive mixed solutions based on public/private partnerships. This is much nearer to dominant values and arrangements in some countries than others, and hence more imaginable in these places. To move significantly towards the market model is to assume that enough powerful interests find this preferable to existing arrangements.

Whether it would emerge as a stable future would depend on a number of factors, including

- a political climate where this was possible, and sufficient entrepreneurialism to establish the market
- the (un)willingness of society, especially taxpayers, to continue to support education
- the extent to which new learning markets in aggregate would meet labour market demands and social aspirations
- the comparative (dis)advantages of these arrangements, domestically and in international comparisons
- the nature and extent of market failure and the likelihood of social conflict resulting from widened inequalities and exclusion