

# Is Education Reformable?

by [Christopher Ormell](#) (March 2023)



Illustration from *François Truffaut: The child who loved cinema*, Victoria Semykina, 2019

That the 'education' being administered in public sector schools is not preparing the younger generations properly for their future adult lives ... is nowadays a widely held opinion in the UK, USA, and many other similar countries. This is also, incidentally, a contradiction in terms, because the principal purpose of 'education' is to prepare youth mentally for the future. It tells us that the so-called 'education' being typically delivered in public sector schools today fails to meet the most basic standard associated with that word. But it is not provoking the outrage one might expect, bearing in mind that it ('education') is visibly failing the children of millions of families. Instead, this state of affairs is commonly being regarded as a regrettable *fait accompli*, another symptom of a world which has gone mad, and which seems also to lack any mechanism for regaining its sanity.

But actually, it is stranger than that, because if we seriously ask ourselves, *What is the natural process by which a world which has gone mad could regain its sanity?*, the answer is—of course—*education!* This unobvious reflexivity may be taken to reveal an important, insistent cue: that radical changes are urgently needed in today's schooling systems. What the cue says, though, almost immediately hits a brick wall. Most people are aware that it is almost impossible today to bring about radical change in education. And it has been like this for about fifty years, since, in fact, the advanced world was plunged into deep, apparently bottomless, confusion, by the collapse of the 'Curriculum Renewal Movement' of the 1960s.

Partly in response to the shortcomings of the Curriculum Renewal Movement, a determined 'philosophy of education' revolution was launched here in the UK in the mid-1960s ... one which promised beneficially to apply the cool analytical methods of linguistic philosophy to the dilemmas of schooling. It was ably led by Richard Peters and Paul Hirst. It sounded

good, and it certainly steered some effective critical pressure onto the two ideologies behind the Curriculum Renewal Movement—progressivism and new math for schools.

But after wielding considerable influence in the UK and US for thirty years, it began slowly to dawn on a circle of sceptical reflective people that philosophy of education might lack sufficient teeth to solve the problem. (In fact, after the total collapse of new math for schools and the virtual collapse of progressivism around 1980, a much cruder paradigm, 'behaviourism,' was widely imposed by governments onto schooling systems around the world.)

So, by the early 1990s, it had become clear that the 'cool' methods of philosophy of education (based on linguistic analysis) had been too weak to fight-off both the plausible ideologies of the 1960s and the cruder imposed ideology, behaviourism, which had taken over. The Philosophy of Education Society here in the UK also harboured a kind of contradiction: Its members seemed to be unaware that the word 'education' in its title referred to something which had already largely disappeared, at least in the public sector. Was there any longer any point in studying the 'philosophy' of something which had virtually disappeared?

A group of us convened the P E R (Philosophy for Educational Renewal) Group in London in 1993. We started from the premise that philosophic reflection on the deep dilemmas of education could be much more radically energised, using the self-evident principle of the Democratic Accountability of Education, than by studying the minutiae of the meaning of common words used in teaching.

The kind of analyses cultivated under 'philosophy of education' had been badly blunted by the assumption—which stemmed from linguistic analysis—that philosophers were able only to comment on *second-order* moral values. The Democratic Accountability of Education, a concept championed by Hugh

Sockett (George Mason Uni, Washington, DC) changed all that ... though only a relatively small circle of reflective UK 'philosophers of education' responded to the call, and joined the new group. (We subsequently operated under the title of 'Philosophers *for* Education'.)

We recognised from the beginning that there were both vested interests and deep-seated conceptual confusions, effectively preventing radical reform. Today, nearly thirty years later, the prospect that some reform may actually happen may have slightly improved, but radical reform is still problematic ... because, although the main conceptual obstacles have been identified and half-understood, there has been no general diffusion of these clarifications, and the original vested interests are still in place, probably now even more firmly entrenched than before.

In this essay my intention is to outline the progress which has been made in dissolving a few of the confusions which are stifling education.

We need to begin by considering what 'reform' might mean. What are the main respects in which today's typical school systems are failing to *bring out* the best life-durable, mind-energising qualities of the young people under their care? In considering this question, it is important to bear in mind that education is a mainstream activity, and the qualities on which the public-sector schools concentrate their total teaching effort, will inevitably be mainstream qualities—as opposed, perhaps, to the loftier hopes of the most engaged, idealistic, ambitious parents. There has always been a tendency among doting parents to harbour exaggerated expectations about their childrens' potential.

In recent times, though, the common experience has been that caring parents have tended to suffer swift painful disillusion *vis-à-vis* their children's schools. Parents who worry about their children's development can see in a flash whether they

are growing mentally on a diet of satisfying cognition, or are stoically resigned to endlessly dull, boring, information presentations. Far too frequently parents have discovered, after their children's graduations, that the qualities actually implanted by thousands of hours of classroom teaching have been below the level they had earlier confidently expected.

This kind of disappointment can lead all-too quickly to the pessimistic belief that education is almost impossible in the modern age. Actually, as I pointed out in my previous [essay](#) on education (*NER* January 2023) this theory does not account for the fact that some private schools *do*—contrary to left-wing wishful thinking—successfully manage to 'educate' quite a lot of their pupils. (In the sense that these fortunate pupils acquire values, perspectives, understandings and skills which are fully appreciated, internalised and stay with them for the rest of their lives.) It is, perhaps, a successful transmission of 'the middle-class version of the culture of the society' rather than that of the wider classless community. But it makes a profound difference to their lives. (They benefit, too, from the fact that it embodies a greater degree of *personal hopefulness* than that which the children of the 'wider society' normally feel.)

But the fact that this cultural legacy is being successfully transmitted to the favoured part of the youthful cohort, is important: because it shows that it is not totally unrealistic to expect today's public sector schools to educate their cohorts. And there are, here in the UK, still a few outstanding public sector schools—often schools inspired by a charismatic, workaholic head—who manage to pull this off.

Private schools have the huge advantage, though, that their students are drawn from a sub-sector of society which has sufficient money to be able to pay the fees, and sufficient belief in the intrinsic value of 'education' to be *willing* to pay the fees. Both the parents and the schools tend to display

an overall sense of optimism about, and involvement-in, the future ... something which adds up to a priceless X-factor for getting young people to internalise what they have learnt.

Unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said about most public sector schools, where children from poorer homes may often form the majority of the intake, or at least be a sizeable minority of it. These schools are under great social and media pressure to 'get their students to learn,' but pressure of this kind tends to induce cramming, and cramming almost inevitably leads to rote learning.

A change is needed away from today's 'high pressure' mood, towards a more relaxed approach. A good way to tackle this problem would be for each school district to issue 'school vouchers' to all parents with school-age children. When these parents went ask their local or chosen school to register their children, they would do so via the act of giving the school in question the above-mentioned vouchers at the beginning of each semester. The average dollar cost to the school district of a semester's tuition would be printed in large print on the vouchers. Although the parents cannot "spend" this money, except by offering it to the local school or school of their choice, it is still nominally "their" money which is being proffered.

Unfortunately, politics enters into the consideration of such schemes, because proponents of voucher schemes have tended in the past to be right-wing marketeers intent on giving a boost to the private sector, by letting parents also "spend" their vouchers as a contribution to the fees of a private school of their choice.

This has naturally provoked animosity from left-wing commentators, who have claimed that such a system is arbitrary, 'artificial' and likely to worsen the social divide which already exists—between those who have been privately educated and those who have not.

These criticisms, though, would not apply if the vouchers were *only* designed to be 'cashed' at public sector schools. The scheme, in this form, is a way of showing parents the considerable cost of the tuition their children are going to receive, and also a way of giving the parents a vicarious feeling of well-being and local community membership. Such a scheme will confer some of the sense of obligation and partnership between school-and-parents which private schools enjoy in full measure, but public sector schools quite often do not.

[Incidentally a criticism of such a scheme to the effect that some feckless parents will mislay or lose the vouchers, can be countered by building-in the option that parents can delegate the routine handling of the vouchers to the school, or to a specified member of staff at the school. Such an option should include a provision by which parents regularly see their vouchers and hand them over in person to a school administrator.]

Of course bringing such a scheme to fruition would be much less than a 'reform' of education, but it could be a first step in getting the provision of public sector schooling into a better, less panicky, mode.

Is education reformable?

Yes, *of course* it is reformable. If it can (and it does) actually happen in private schools, it can actually happen in principle in public sector schools too. There is also a powerful argument which can be marshalled to try to bring this key reform about. It is that this is the only viable way to increase 'social justice' in today's dog-eat-dog free market society ... which includes rough, ragged, chaotic, no-go enclaves. A society cannot be genuinely 'socially just' if a large, invisible majority of its children are doomed to waste thousands of hours sitting half-bored and inattentive in classrooms *not* acquiring the ideals, perspectives, knowledge



and understandings which alone will turn them into becoming fully principled, contributive, regular members of the adult society ... people at ease with themselves and their friends.

Socialism was at one time supposed to be the main highway towards a 'socially just' society, but it had the fatal flaw that it needed a sizable cadre of selfless, incorruptible, fully principled, public-spirited organisers to administer it. There may have been a short window of opportunity for it to happen at the end of the Victorian Era ... though this is to take the Victorian Official Story for granted, and to discount doubts about widespread hypocrisy which may have lurked within. But we know that there was a serious cultural collapse of confidence and idealism, both before and after, the monstrous horrors of WW1. The 1920s saw wave after wave of cynicism, apathy, irrationalism and hedonism. This cultural decline systematically eroded the principled social body within which potential public-spirited administrators could be found. We can see today—with all the advantages of hindsight—that when the Bolsheviks tried to introduce communism in the USSR, the possibility of finding such a strict, unworldly, incorruptible, competent cadre had already passed. (Instead, the Russian masses found themselves under the hammer of ill-trained commissars.)

Today the Western masses of the 1920s—though not the upper classes—seem amazingly principled, amazingly restrained. Alistair Cooke, in one of his BBC 'Letters from America,' commented on a scene he observed himself—of hundreds of quiet, law-abiding unemployed workers, camping with their families in fields after the Wall Street Crash on the banks of one of the great continental rivers.

Fast forward a hundred years, and the degree of human solidarity reflected in that scene is no more than a dream. 'Social Injustice' can sound like a glib, invalid phrase—to fat cats and unreflective, well-heeled commentators—but it is, no doubt, all-too real to anyone born in a downtrodden, no-go

enclave. Their chances of ever escaping a life of dire poverty are virtually nil. The kinds of institutions, teachers, textbooks, curriculum, etc. which would be needed to build their psyches up to the minimal level of confidence and resolve required to survive in the comfortable spaces of today's world are nowhere to be seen. But in the absence of such provision, any feasible degree of 'wealth redistribution' would make little difference to their lot. They would still feel like outsiders, bruised, maligned and marginalised.

So how could a radically renewed school system manage to pull-off the miracle needed for 'social justice via education' to happen? This is the \$64-thousand question we face. Schools would have to become places where no one thinks that cramming is a good idea, and where students naturally find the work, they are being asked to do, fascinating. (A major behind-the-scenes effort will be needed to create sound curriculum materials which genuinely fascinate children. The kind of glossy packaging tried in the 1960s was not enough.) The assessment of students should be aimed at finding out what they have deeply internalised, not what they have superficially memorised (with the aim of 'gaming' the system and undeservingly grabbing good grades).

There are various over-arching messages which need to be conveyed directly to the young learners in such a reformed school-of-the-future. The first two are addressed to students from the worst dysfunctional homes:

1. *Trustworthy, helpful people exist. You can trust them. They will help you.*
2. *You also need to become fully trustworthy and helpful vis-a-vis others. To get up to this level you need to spend a lot of time and energy learning to de-centre, which means 'seeing things from the viewpoint of another person.'*

The next two messages are specially addressed to students from IT-aholic backgrounds:

3. *You are going to find mental-laziness opportunities and temptations everywhere: they can be described as 'snakes' ... they are like the snakes in snakes and ladders. These IT snakes deplete your mental stamina, and leave you with less mental power than you would otherwise have. You need scrupulously to avoid them. There are hundreds of them being dangled by salespersons and demagogues on the media, on ads and social media, all the time. Only mentally energised people can hold their heads high in today's ultra-sophisticated milieu. 'Mentally energised' means that you are able cheerfully to work your way through frustrating problems ... to finding valid solutions.*
4. *In today's world everyone's work performance is being constantly mentally compared with that of AI-powered-software, robots, bots, avatars, automated systems ... etc. If you don't gain sufficient confidence, mental energy and diligence to cope with ordinary physical-material and face-to-face reality—and thereby match these electronic copy-cats—they will master (enslave) you. This is a modern version of the sword of Damocles.*

The last two messages are addressed to students generally:

5. *Education is the essential process of mental energisation needed by everyone today. The main aim of education is to establish generalised insights which will give you the capacity to handle otherwise daunting*

*complexity. You need to spend much time every week practising thinking, envisaging and problem-solving. These capabilities are what provide the stuffing you need (to carry off the role) when you are perceived by others to be trustworthy and helpful.*

- 6. There are generalised insights of many kinds which need to be deeply internalised, so that they relate fully and naturally to your own specific experience and to adjacent insights. The school curriculum contains all kinds of unobvious truths such as that 'the Earth goes round the Sun', and  $-1$  times  $-1$  is  $+1$ , and that ships made of heavy steel float. The aim is to get your mental picture of 'the real world' to be fully continuous, all tears and damaged areas having been carefully filled and closed-by training yourself to look very carefully at what is involved in the trickiest niches.*

These are some of the basic mantras of the future we need to convey to young people, some of whom will have realised that there is an uncivil tendency for older, disillusioned, burnt-out people to try to abdicate their responsibility for the present state of the world ... thereby passing this heavy 'baby' to the younger generation as swiftly as they can.

Yes, education is reformable. There is a way back to sanity. These mantras offer a broad picture of what is going to be needed: but there is a long, difficult, painful road ahead.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Christopher Ormell is a philosopher who has combined linguistic analysis with targeted conceptual synthesis during a long career. He was co-founder (with the late Eric Blaire)

of the Philosophy for Educational Renewal (PER) Group in London in 1993.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)