

Childhood Policy Programme

How can we plan for our children's futures? Should we even try? – panel discussion

November 2020

On 5th November 2020, the British Academy hosted an online panel discussion which brought together different perspectives to consider how we plan for a child's future outcomes through education policy, and to discuss what agency a child should have to determine their own choices.

This online event formed part of the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme. The programme was set up to reframe debates around childhood in both the public and policy spaces, and to break down academic, policy, and professional silos in order to explore new conceptualisations of children in policymaking.

The Academy's series of childhood provocation papers, written by experts from across the arts, humanities and social sciences, accompanies the programme. This event provided an opportunity to debate and discuss issues surrounding one of these provocation papers – Professor Peter Mandler FBA's paper ['Does it matter what we study in school?'](#) which explores the trends in the uptake of different subjects at secondary school level in the UK over the last 50 years.

The event was chaired by Dr Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy at the British Academy. Speakers at the event comprised:

- Professor Peter Mandler FBA, Modern Cultural History at Gonville and Caius College, at the University of Cambridge.
- Professor Carol Robinson, Professor of Children's Rights, Edge Hill University
- Dr Chae-Young Kim, Visiting Research Fellow, King's College London
- Jane Driver, Deputy Principal, Queen Katharine Academy, Peterborough
- Jack Andrews, MRC PhD Programme in Neuroscience and Mental Health, University College London

Provocation Speech

Peter Mandler opened his talk by considering the recent historical development of the mass education system. As set out in his provocation paper, politicians and policymakers have struggled to truly grasp the complexities of teenager's lives and their futures. Social change became so rapid over generations that governments were using past patterns and modelling the future based on their own experiences, rather than taking current circumstances into account. Even recently politicians have been heavily reliant on big data which confined them to quantifiable factors that were better at illustrating correlations and forecasting than they were at diagnosing causes. There was little consideration given to hearing children's views and perspectives. Peter proceeded to offer three case studies to illustrate where politicians have faced difficulties in attempting to grasp the intricacies of the education system and in ensuring that the system evolved in order to keep up with changes and developments within society.

- Peter led with his first case study speaking on the post war period where secondary education was made compulsory. During such times assumptions were made that there would only be 20-25% of the population that could benefit from an academically focused education. However, the number of people wanting to take O and A levels started to increase, beyond the capacity of the grammar schools.
- Peter's second example detailed the huge growth of numbers in secondary schools offering O and A levels, that continued to rise in the years after the war: this led politicians to forecast an increase in the demand for higher education. However, the survey data that was being collected proved misleading as politicians were only collecting participation rates of 18–19-year-olds, they did not measure the participation rate of older generations who were also taking up higher education. More specifically, Peter points towards the larger numbers of women over the age of 19 that were not being accounted for. He noted that attitudes to women's education, careers and futures were changing dramatically. Changes including the drop in family sizes and an increased average age of marriage raised led to an increasing number of women being in a position to contemplate Higher Education.
- Peter's third case study detailed the development in government policy where politicians from the 1960s onwards attempted to steer larger proportions of young people to study science and technology subjects, with the intention of contributing to Britain's economic growth. However, this intended rise in STEM study failed to materialise, and in fact the proportion of students taking science subjects dropped over time. Peter discussed how this should be seen in conjunction with cultural changes at the time which led to some reactions against science, and an assertion by some individuals of the valuing of people over things and of the importance of social relations. This new orientation of discovering the relationship between self and society became a key component in the increasing uptake of subjects such as Biology which allowed students to then progress to study social science subjects like psychology at higher education level.

Finally, Peter covered the reasons for politicians not to try and steer teenagers into particular subjects or subject areas. The Dainton report of 1968 commissioned to steer students to science in the end praised instead the British tradition of respecting the choice of an individual in terms of their education. It was not thought right for a liberal state to tell people what they should or should not do in this regard.

Panel Responses

Carol Robinson, Chae-Young Kim, Jane Driver and Jack Andrews then responded to the provocation author. Points put forward during this section include:

- A focus on whether the English education system and education policy in the UK incorporates article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), which states that children have a right to an education that develops their personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.
- Examination results are used for a variety of purposes: to measure children's level of knowledge; to indicate individual progress; to measure school quality; and to create league table school rankings. This emphasis on rigorous testing, and particularly on achievements in the three core subjects of English, science and maths sends a clear message to children that these are the most important subjects, when compared to other areas of their school education.
- The emphasis within English education policy on limited curriculum areas and high-stakes testing from an early age steer children and young people towards certain subjects. This raises questions about whether children and young people have agency with respect to making subject choices, and whether the English education system supports the development of their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the full as stated in article 29 of the UNCRC.
- Adjustments of interests during childhood and youth are natural and inevitable processes that occur as children and young people construct and reconstruct a sense of who they are. Yet, their interests and choices are not value-free. The formation of and changes in both during childhood are influenced by various factors including their socioeconomic background. Therefore, rather than focusing on a choice between STEM vs. non-STEM subjects, policy needs to consider more closely what influences the formation of young people's interests and choices, help them to better identify and maintain what they are truly interested in and to cultivate their potential.
- Children are often aware of what it takes to pursue a certain area of study or an occupation in terms of the level of academic ability required and the effort needed to achieve it. Within what they perceive as being possible, they form and adjust their interests and preferences and make unconscious and conscious decisions concerning their pathways.
- Common challenges faced by many educators in the UK stem from pressure for schools to focus on outcomes that contribute towards league tables and OFSTED reports which have historically been based on raw grades.
- The move in curriculum policy to Progress 8/Attainment 8 and the English Baccalaureate led to schools narrowing the curriculum and are also associated with the use of harsher grading systems in certain subjects. Children who are not highest achievers can be dissuaded from particular subjects because it could ultimately impact how the school is rated or perceived.
- Studies of the brain and behavioural development across childhood and adolescence might have implications for how children make educational choices. For instance, heightened sensitivity to social risk/rejection and the influence of peer group norms mean that young children are more likely to change their views and behaviours based on what others in their age group are doing.
- It was noted that during childhood and into adolescence there are introspective and metacognitive abilities that are still developing which means that young people may not be certain exactly what they like or what they are good at.

- Early specialisation in the national curriculum hinders adolescent exploration and therefore can lead to children taking on subjects without fully pursuing their self and social development.

Policy Changes

During the final part of the event, panellists and participants discussed some of the topics raised and considered what policy changes are needed to ensure that children have agency to determine their own choices within the education system.

Education based on exploration: Schools must encourage children to take on subjects driven by their curiosity, interest, or passion rather than following solely on rigorous demands set by the national curriculum which focus on outcomes, grading and achievement. Schools and children should feel supported by education policy in embracing more creativity and exploration and they should be offered opportunities and resources to develop creative art skills and flourish in these areas.

Children's voice and participation: It is essential that we do not rely solely on large databases that tell us about correlations and not causations. Young people are making decisions as early as 13 that are going to have major implications in the future and can potentially close off certain avenues to them. Therefore, there must be an attempt to speak to young people on subject choice, particularly those younger than 18 to get in depth perspectives as to why children choose their subjects for GCSE and A level. Participation of children in education policy is key; we need to listen to teenagers' own hopes and expectations for the future and ask them more directly what they would like to see in their schools.

Practical Skills: Education policymakers and practitioners should consider that the modern labour market has changed and that many graduate employers are not looking for subject specific skills but, rather, young students with high levels of cognitive performance, flexibility and trainability. Additionally, the practicalities of life that children will inevitably face as they grow into adulthood, such as banking, taxes, and mortgages, are something that policymakers could think about incorporating as part of the national curriculum. Education policy makers also need to acknowledge the importance of developing children and young people's life skills including, for example resilience, critical thinking, problem solving and effective communication, and consider where these fit within the education system.

Purposeful schooling: there needs to be a more concise and common understanding about the purposes of schooling from education policy. What is the balance between preparing young people to contribute to the large economy /labour market, individual choice and wellbeing, and the betterment of society as a whole?