

What is Education?

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



The Schoolroom, Thomas Webster, 1820

Every country has its public 'education system', which is of course tasked to 'educate' the country's youth. Some countries, e.g. the UK and the USA, also have well-established private sector institutions ('schools' and 'colleges') ... to which some well-heeled parents are willing to pay quite heavy annual fees. These private institutions are also expected to 'educate' the children in their care. The collection of private schools and colleges involved is not, however,

normally regarded as a 'system.' Indeed some of the institutions field rather idiosyncratic practices, and even comical bits of private language. So it is far from being obvious that 'being tasked to educate' means the same thing in the public and the private sectors. In fact it would be surprising if it *did* mean the same thing, because why would parents gladly forego expensive holidays, new stylish clothes, yachts and other status symbols, to pay the fees, if the private institutions offered exactly the same kind of 'education' as the (free) public institutions? This tells us that the word 'education,' when applied to community and private schools, refers to different things.

So 'education,' it is plain, has a significantly ambiguous, de facto, two-polar meaning. Whether we should accept this serious ambiguity is another question.

One of the expected outcomes of a 'good education' is supposed to be that it confers clarity of speech onto the young person who has been educated. But here we have a situation where it seems to suit everyone *not* to speak clearly. No one, it seems, is minded—even today when various existential crises are bearing down ominously onto the human race—to 'sort out' and say plainly what is clearly different about these two kinds of "education."

This is an unclarified anomaly. Most universities have 'Schools of Education' among their faculties, and many thousands of academic 'educationalists' are employed by them. But here, too, there appears to be an accepted, unspoken professional blind-eye ... one which implies that we must get-by without expecting, or enjoying, any simple, basic clarity about what 'education' finally means, or what an 'educationalist' or 'educator' actually does. In universities—which, let's remember, are tasked to develop socially relevant theory as well as educate their students—it appears that there is a sensitive theory-phobic area to be contended with.

All this would not matter very much if the wheels of education were turning sweetly. But they are not. Gordon Brown, the former UK prime minister and UN ambassador for education, stated bluntly at last year's world education conference in New York (August 2022) that "the whole world is in educational crisis." What he was saying was not a surprise. There has been a cacophony of concerned voices in various countries airing deep dissatisfaction with 'education' for a long time. And it is not necessary to understand the full meaning of the word 'education.' to appreciate what this crisis consists of ... it stands out as a sore thumb. There is, at the present time, a massive breakdown of trust between the youthful generations and the adult establishment. Many of the leading lights of the youthful generations have tacitly followed Greta Thunberg's example, and realised that they wholly lack respect for an adult status quo which has managed to sleep-walk into dire existential crises like global warming, substance abuse, cyber-scams and an intolerable war in Ukraine. And if they lack respect for the adult status quo, why should they deeply absorb the definitive lessons set out (planned to be dinned into them) by that adult status quo operating in schools? This tends to be the downbeat, considered view of those youngsters who think most clearly. It not an easy path to follow, because the public education system in any country hands out certificates which, in effect, largely determine each individual's initial life chances. By refusing deeply to absorb the mandatory lessons taught in schools, these youthful dissidents are, in a way, standing up bravely for their own mental clarity, but they are also simultaneously paying a heavy price. Other, less single-minded, youngsters choose instead to game the system ... consciously memorising the mandatory messages set (by the adult consensus) with minimum personal involvement ... until they have secured the marks they need in the examinations. Soon afterwards they forget almost everything they unwillingly memorised for the exam. They don't need consciously to discard this information: it slips away because it was never properly internalised in the first place.

But not everyone sees the schooling crisis like this.

The managers who administer the public education systems mostly look at this in a different way. They make no apologies for saying that there is a huge body of information which young people *undoubtedly must learn*—if they are to stand a chance of getting themselves usefully employed after leaving school. When young people balk at the pressure they are under—which adds up to an insistent “Learn! Learn! Learn!” injunction imposed onto them—these administrators tend to simply double-down. When young people say that there is little point in memorising facts which you can access on Google in 30 seconds, these administrators will retort—correctly—that it is *absolutely necessary* for youth to *absorb and inhabit* this salient information ... to the point where it doesn't need to be “accessed” at all.

So, if the youthful refusniks and the administrators are both apparently right, whatever is going wrong?

The answer is that the system administrators are trying to *impose* their perceptions onto youth in an insensitive, heavy-handed way ... one which takes-it-for-granted that levels of trust between generations which obtained 20 or 30 years ago still apply today. But they don't still apply. In the years which have passed since then, diversity, cultural fragmentation and existential gloom have all increased mightily, and they have tipped large parts of the youthful generation into outright rejection of the status quo. The last sixty years (the ‘Computer Age’) have also been years of rampant, knee-jerk, tsunami-like technical innovation. Within this perpetual landslide there has evidently been hasty, deceptive and unwise change. A crucial howler was trusting simplistic behaviourists who didn't believe in the concept of ‘mind,’ to take control of schools. It beggars belief that a group of operators who didn't believe in mind, were entrusted to control the mental development of most children.

One unexpected side-effect of rampant change has been that each generation of children has looked on with amazement at the attitude of their parents' generation towards what they (the children) can see is 20-year old, obsolete, laughable technology. And although this is "just technology," we have to remember that technology has been the main de facto source of hope-for-the-future since the decline of religion and the end of the enlightenment project.

So we have a doubly false situation: the word 'education' is deceptively frozen in an ambivalent state, and today's supposed major 'education systems' are not educating. A fail-safe partial definition of 'education' would be that it is a process which transmits insights to youth which are fully internalised and increase their integrity ... ones which are expected to, and do, last for the rest of their lives. However the heavily pressurised teaching which passes for 'educating' today does not begin to meet this standard. Students know that they have been consciously "sold" memorisation to game the system, so once they have gamed it, the need for the memorisation disappears, and what was temporarily committed to memory can be forgotten. This isn't education' by any yardstick.

The so-called 'cognitive science' on which this regime rests doesn't trade in 'insights,' only statistically countable behaviours. And whether these "countable behaviours" *really qualify as 'education'* is a moot point, because research shows that the memorised items officially accredited have mostly been forgotten a month after the examination.

In the past gaming examinations was generally regarded as an unworthy, substandard practice. But we are now in an era where everything looks complicated, earlier standards have become problematic, and many people are reluctant to take a stand.

Education used to be a no-brainer ... in the days when society was changing at a snail's pace, and when the task of educators

was to convey the gist of the current, undisputed, secure, consensus culture to lively, eager youth. But those days are long past. Education today has become a heavy-brainer, because it is evident to almost everybody that some as yet unknown version of it is desperately needed to prepare the younger generations for a new level of civilization ... a version which will be far more sophisticated, structurally under-pinned, inter-connected, disciplined and complex than anything we have seen before. There are no easy, ready-made solutions. The problems affecting education are deeply embedded in the problematique which surrounds today's civilisation. They are profound, much more difficult than before ... and yet still being treated in many quarters as if they were easy. The question, –how to find a variety of education which works and is suited to today's world? –has quietly moved up the pecking order of socially difficult issues to the level where it is at, or near, the top.

So what are the starting points for the new heavy-brainer 'education' we need today? What can we still "take for granted" in a world which is falling apart, allowing blurring of the vital distinction between 'true' and 'false,' obsessed with simplistic, over-hyped IT fantasies, and running out of ordinary commonsense and simple-minded goodwill? What is the central thrust of the kind of 'education' needed today, and how can schools around the world find the wherewithall to win the trust of their youthful generations?

Education has been generally treated in the past as the least 'semi-academic' discipline in universities. It now needs to "up" its game, and become a recognised heavy-weight academic subject.

We know education has had an historic similarity to 'philosophy,' in that both are holistic and involved with cognitive insights of every shape and size. Some of the famous names in philosophy such as Plato, Rousseau and Dewey, have also introduced major insights into education. Russell, Popper

and Wittgenstein actually spent time teaching (mostly maths) in schools. Today we seem to be passing through a seriously impoverished intellectual era when there is a dearth of philosophers capable of throwing any light whatever onto the future of civilisation, and hence onto the kind of mental preparation needed to get there.

So what is (could be) the essence of 'education'? Perhaps we need to go back to basic meanings to glimpse the way ahead.

Well. There were a few private schools (for boys only) in Ancient Rome, but the main prompt which started the Western school tradition was the Renaissance. At that time the world was visibly changing its mind about all kinds of things previously decided by the Church and Aristotle. Many striking discoveries were being made. Responsible leaders realised that universities were needed to pioneer and develop the new mindset. Also, if the effect was to be represented across ordinary communities, some children (mainly those of fairly secure, independent-minded parents) needed to be taught the gist of this new emergent knowledge, and the insights from which it sprang. In the British Isles grammar schools were introduced, including one in Stratford-on-Avon, where a boy called 'William' (Shakespeare) attended.

We are in a situation today with some similarity to the Renaissance. Mega-modernity, a completely new, strange way of conceptualising the world, working, thinking and living is rapidly emerging. Like the Renaissance, it brings a distinct change of mindset ... away from what went before, and it provokes the uncomfortable question which points towards education: *How can we prepare the young generation mentally to sustain and preserve the best of our common culture whilst also becoming aware of the new, exciting possibilities?* This "shock of the new" can be the trigger which kick-starts a better concept of education: because, if nothing is done, "the new" will overwhelm everything, and we will lose our common culture. For 'losing our common culture,' read 'losing our

personal identity.'

Actually there has already been a substantial loss of what used to be the (our) "common culture," resulting from modern knowledge, modern lifestyles and modern attitudes. It was for centuries based squarely on Judeo-Christian ethics. Losing this basis as the dominant aspect of our culture makes us painfully aware of Hobbes' verdict on life as being "nasty, brutal and short" when lived outside civilised conventions, or if you prefer, when it (society) tries to get-by without insisting on minimal ethical standards.

Just such a change can appear in some of today's impoverished, ambiguous urban areas ... in the form of an ominous neglect of basic ethics. Today's dominant, omnipresent scientism has evidently had a subtly morally dessicating effect: leading, for example, to the extraordinary phenomenon of so-called 'Goblin Mode' behaviour, which is—in its defiant version—100% selfish, narcissistic and anti-social. It was the background presence of religion as a logically necessary longstop which used to guarantee the observance of minimal ethical standards. For more than two thousand years monotheism was a virtually unquestioned fixture, offering what looked like the only possible explanation for the existence of 'the world,' viz. that it "must have been" created by an infinite supermind ('God'). But today we are aware (If we accept the orthodox scientific worldview) that *mind* requires, and arises from, the backing of a living, vibrant brain. So wherever is the necessary 'infinite vibrant superbrain'? There was no room for trillions of superneurons, let alone an energising source of nervous energy ... in the minute microdot from which the so-called 'Big Bang' is supposed to have exploded. This is a conceptual absurdity to the *n*th degree. That it is so howlingly absurd tells us that today's science has gone badly wrong.

This means that we must look elsewhere for the necessary 'supermind,' and the only realistic candidate for it being the

de facto superbrain which arises from the combined effect of eight billion ordinary human brains freely exchanging their rational deliberations. It may be a precondition for education to return that adult society must rebuild its commitment to rigorous minimal ethical standards.

But ... to return to the painful paradoxes of education, the elements of common culture which we have already lost, indicate that we are no longer enjoying much of the hoped-for effect of secondary education.

'Education,' properly understood, is not a value-neutral word. It was coined precisely to signal the *successful* transmission of the basic common culture to youth. A school is no longer automatically a place where children get an 'education', and a school system is not automatically an 'education system.' Before the progressivism of the 1960s and the subsequent "cognitive science" (simplistic behaviourist) intervention of the 1970s, it was probably reasonable to assume that any secondary school was at least *attempting* to educate its students. But neither the progressivists, nor the behaviourists who later took over schools, ever admitted in public that they had settled for lower standards, that is, not even trying to educate. The progressivists settled for social rebellion, while the behaviourists settled for conformity. Both movements knew that any admission that they had abandoned the ideals of education would unleash bitter controversy. (The progressivists were against any kind of 'transmission' of culture, while the behaviourists pilloried the concept of mind itself, and made no attempt to conceptualise, let alone secure, total cognitive digestion.) That these profound changes—whatever their merits or demerits—were introduced in a stealthy way, probably explains why colloquial talk today curiously treats 'education' in a weary, value free manner: reflecting a kind of acceptance that the transformational effects formerly associated with education have long since disappeared.

Of course the average primary school does still transmit—though not always as well as expected--the common cultures of reading, writing and figuring. The main cultural-transmissive shortfalls and deficits obtain at the secondary (High School) level, where pupils are taking-on quasi-adult attitudes and schools are competing full-on against a tide of cynicism, pop culture, slick media and abusive social media trolls.

But without the stability which stems from secure ethical standards, it is probable that education in the proper (achievement) sense is an impossibility. Education in the proper sense is, in any case, a long process which nowadays is expected to last for about thirteen schooling years. This is a process horizon which sits badly with today's ever-changing, just-on-time economy.

It would not matter if the common culture was still based on, and respectful of, the dream of mental harmony and progress. But it began to lose this status and this dream in the 1920s. What finished it off was probably the car crash of intellectuality which followed the collapse of 'New Maths for Schools' in the late 1960s. This showed all-too plainly that the high elite of the intellectual class (the pure mathematicians) had got clay feet, not to mention a total absence of commonsense. The immediate result was a dangerous void which governments could not be allow to stand. Corporate business stepped-in, and, in effect, took over the commanding heights of schooling. Their status quo has now been in place for more than forty years. So we are stuck with so-called 'education systems' which don't educate ... because the horizons, ethical standards and intellectual stability needed to educate (in the proper sense) are not part of the mindset of corporate business. In the UK the 1980s were the years when managers with MBAs were parachuted into schools—allegedly to create the kind of 'efficiency' of operation characteristic of corporate business. They boldly declared that muddled thinking

would henceforth be banned, and that a resounding 'Skills Revolution' which was taking place would produce "at long last" cohorts of school leavers with excellent skills and employability.

Learning would be made easier, and much more efficient, if students merely focused onto learning precise segments of fact and process which triggered marks in the examination.

It is another dream which failed, because four decades later there is still a deafening cacophony of complaints from employers ... to the effect that many school leavers are woefully short of basic skills, work ethic, judgment, reliability and initiative.

The 'Skills Revolution' has turned out to be chimera. This need not be surprising, because the substandard concepts of 'cognitive science' don't allow its adherents to explain the essence of skills. We urgently need a new, much richer paradigm with which to organise secondary education.

There is also the knotty side question whether the kind of teaching offered in the private sector is 'educational' in the proper sense of the word. Judging it by means of the massive barrage of abuse and dismissive put-downs it receives each year, this might seem to be a silly question to ask: the presumption of most (left leaning) 'educationalists' is that it (the private sector) is simply an unfair, unjust confidence trick—a partisan socialisation of children into privilege and middle class norms.

Anyone with class-war-type bitter attitudes sees private sector schooling as worthless and deserving only of being stamped out. Such class-warriors are hopelessly unaware that a subset of these schools actively produce most of the well-organised, far-sighted, effective people who manage to keep today's communities moving forward, if not brilliantly, at least after a fashion.

So ... no sweeping generalisations fit the picture. What is clear, though, is that if we judge the private sector by its capacity to get students to acquire educative insights and to slowly consolidate their knowledge, it delivers quite a lot of this, quite a lot of the time. There are some private schools which have perversely set themselves the challenge of becoming even more ruthless at gaming the exam system than the public sector schools, but they are an anomaly. Parents who pay heavy fees normally expect teachers in the private sector to engage closely and personally with their children. Making sure that this happens, and that teachers get “on side” with all their pupils is one of the main goals of most private school heads. Such schools are de facto businesses as well as teaching institutions, and they can easily fall by the wayside if they don't deliver what parents want.

A common feature of private schools which is only weakly replicated in the public sector is that they tend to create, over the years, a distinctive school ethos. It is a focus of pride and good feelings as well as accepted obligations. It often lasts for a lifetime, and the students themselves remain in touch with their youthful friends.

So there is a need here to swallow the bitter pill and recognise that the private sector *does* deliver some half-decent education. But now and in the past, it has often been a transmission of a characteristic *middle class* sub-culture rather than the broader enduring classless culture. The abuse and ad hoc hostility targeted at it by ‘woke warriors’ –most of whom do not read serious daily news reports, and have only a sketchy grasp of current affairs—is a disgrace. This assault has also led, ironically, to some of the most educative private schools pitching their aims in relatively more inclusive language.

Education is, at the end of the day, a socialisation of youth into the enduring classless culture of a society. Unfortunately we cannot say with anything approaching a

'consensus' backstory what the 'enduring classless culture currently is.' The obvious candidate for the thrust of the enduring classless culture is that it is a culture which has tried (mostly, often intermittently, successfully) over more than 1000 years to increase the emancipation of the individual v. the potentially brutal power of the state. But it can only safely do this if there is a devolution of strongly-held ethics to the individual ... just the opposite of what has been happening for sixty years.

One bone of contention about private education is that it negates social justice because it confers added advantages onto those youngsters who are already advantaged ... by their expectations, habits, middle class contacts and family associations. If this is supposed to point towards *stopping* such an unfair social practice, it is however self-contradictory. The sensible conclusion is rather that public sector schools should use similar methods to get through to their learners.

Let's look at the "getting through" problem in schools.

Many bitterly discontented children arrive at school having already learnt a "home truth" from their early years ... namely that you can't trust anyone, even your so-called 'friends,' your siblings, family members or parents. Such children are not going to benefit to the slightest degree from sitting in classrooms listening to teachers whom they have no intention of trusting. There is unlikely to be any benefit if they sit through thousands of hours of such normal "instruction."

So what can be done to "get through" to such pupils?

The only way such children can begin to gain from their attendance at school is if a personable teacher is willing to show them *by example* that they, at least, are trustworthy. Such children need to experience trustworthiness. This is not an easy ask. A teacher who takes on this challenge is likely

to be the unfortunate butt of repeated abuse and offensive comment.

Only heroic teaching, persisting far beyond normal expectations, is likely to succeed.

Of course the most demotivated children are not the only group who suffer from this failure to recognise trustworthiness. Any school which publicly boasts that it is preparing youngsters mentally for joining the workforce, will give its rhetoric a demotivating side-effect, because many children have heard bad stories about today's workforce in ruthlessly dehumanised firms.

The whole thrust of education ought to be that it is aimed at being the best possible way to help the learners. It needs to be on their side—while not flinching from making them aware that life is not a bed of roses, and that hard work and hard thinking are needed (essential) at many points.

We can now see, with the advantage of hindsight, that the progressivists of the 1960s were *right* in their principle that teaching should be substantially child-centred, but wrong in not making children aware that a great deal of mental discipline is needed to cope satisfactorily with modern life. The behaviourists, who stepped in after progressivism after failed, made the opposite mistake... of putting all their emphasis on memorising stuff and *accepting* information, i.e. what they had been told. This is “swallow learning”... supposedly an “efficient” kind of learning, but actually a hopeless form of learning, because it remains bitty, provisional, undigested and is quickly forgotten. Swallow learning, even when successfully swallowed, is *shallow* learning. Every worthwhile new thing a child learns needs to be subsequently fully integrated into her or his mental picture of the world. This is what we used to call the ‘digestion’ of learning. The new elements need to be tied-in to everything already present and closely related to them in

the child's mind. In this way the learner acquires a mentally continuous, joined-up picture (rather than a broken picture) of reality. The downside of shallow learning is that it leads inevitably to mental health issues: it condemns unsure learners to agonisingly broken mindsets.

The pleasure of learning, by contrast, is derived from the wonderful sense of mental resonance and relief one gets when what one has newly learnt *fits in perfectly* with what one already knew.

So the central issue in education is that it must be true—and be seen to be true (trustworthy) by the learner. This 'truth' is experienced mentally as 'fitting accurately with what we already know'... or, if you prefer, triangulation. (When Tony Blair became prime minister in the UK in 1997 his line was 'Education! Education! Education!' He should have said 'Triangulation! Triangulation! Triangulation!') Swallow learning is also a very bad mental preparation for adult life from a social and political point of view, because once it becomes a habit, it leaves the learner susceptible to demagogues and conmen.

[Table of Contents](#)

Christopher Ormell is an older philosopher, the author of six recent essays in *New England Review* which extend Wittgenstein's demystification of ordinary language into mathematics.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)