

Re-imagining the role of councils in supporting London's schools

- By Barry Quirk

The needs of London's children in the 21st century

A 10 year-old at school in Balham or Barking today will be starting their new secondary school this September. They will most probably enter the world of work in the early 2020s; and they will most likely be starting their own family sometime in the early 2030s. The success they will achieve at their new secondary school will be a vital part of this critically important phase of their life. It is the beginning of their transition into adulthood; it is when they start to discover their wider potential in life. And it will be so much more difficult for them to craft their own path if their schooling fails them. In this way, all of London's schools offer positive paths for life; they are not simply places to learn how to pass exams.

Children start at school full of wonder and curiosity about the world. They approach every issue with a “why?” The purpose of schooling is to fuel this drive for learning through the disciplined pursuit of knowledge and the imaginative desire for creative self expression. The ability continually to discover new truths and creatively express one's views are the core purposes of a rounded education.

And this ability is strengthened by the transformative character of 21st century education.

Education is important substantively in its own right; and it is important in the instrumental power it gives young people to realise their full potential in the world of work but also in their own personal growth and development. These substantive and instrumental roles of education leads to many arguments amongst people who are passionate about the sector. Some worry about the growing “vocationalism” in education and feel that young people are schooled too early into the world of work. They need to worry less. Education has always fulfilled both roles. A good education serves to open minds and not to close them. It supports an independence of perspective and hence encourages the development not only of valuable work but also of critical debate and of the engaged and critical citizenry that London needs.

What's more the character of learning is changing.

Open sourced learning and peer networks of learning support are not restricted to the university sector. Schools in London are at the forefront of innovation in teaching and learning. Some of the leading edge pedagogic practice in the world can be found in London's schools - with tens of thousands of highly engaged classroom teachers motivated and inspired by thousands of excellent headteachers. But the world of learning is changing fast.

This was brought home to me recently at a discussion in Catford with 40 or so pupils representing the various schools councils in Lewisham. They were discussing with me the age when young people should have the right to vote. One young 14 year-old boy said to me, “Sir, because of the Internet we have more knowledge at our finger tips than you ever did at our age, so our chances of discovering the truth of things or of being successful must be greater than yours was at our age”. This was a healthy (if sobering) reminder of the changes sweeping through the character of education and learning.

My response to the young boy was to say that his task was substantially harder than mine was at his age. For his problem was that he had so much information he could call upon, that he needed to develop high order skills so as to filter out the truths from the untruths. He said that it was right that a lot of what passed for knowledge on the Internet didn’t merit knowing but that the tools at his disposal were incredible compared to previous generations.

London’s schools do well, they need to do much better

In the 21st century young people can increasingly pursue their own line of enquiry through self directed learning. But they also need the discipline of learning at school. Obviously we want to witness the individual and personalised flourishing of each and every pupil in all of London’s schools. The ideal for each pupil is that their school experience will add to their personal growth and creative potential.

Our means of appraising pupils’ experience of school often gets trapped in simple statistical tables of aggregate school performance. These tables (that aggregate pupil level performance at school level) are useful in showing an overall direction of collective success. And what they show, over the recent past, is that pupils in London’s schools are performing better than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. Many have claimed part of the credit for this comparative success. In truth a mix of complementary factors is likely to be behind the facts.

London is the most socially diverse and highly populated place in the UK. London is also a destination for ambitious parents, teachers and headteachers.

London has the most successful economy in the UK and it therefore attracts talent and investment more generally. London is a crucible of innovative practice in teaching and learning - encouraged by the university sector and by schools themselves. London has some of the country’s most accomplished headteachers, who bring the vocation of educational leadership to impact upon the wider school communities.

And finally, London’s councils have a highly progressive approach to supporting their schools improve their performance. The combined effect of these (and other) factors is that London’s schools do comparatively well. London’s primary schools are doing exceptionally well in equipping young pupils with a baseline of education and skills. And London’s secondary schools are doing comparatively well. That is a substantial achievement.

Those who have played a part in this success should be proud - but not for long, perhaps for about fifteen minutes. That’s because this achievement is in truth not anywhere near good enough. They need to redouble their efforts and try to achieve substantially more.

When I was a teenager in the 1960s at school in Stepney, in East London, my headteacher addressed us in one of our school assemblies in the following way. “Look to the boy or the girl on your left. Now look to the girl or boy on your right. Only one of the three of you will succeed. So work as hard as you can at school to make sure that you are the one

that succeeds!” That’s what passed for scholarly inspiration in my school in the 1960s. The fact is, he was wrong. London’s population declined over the next 20 years. People moved out of London; including many of my fellow pupils. This meant that the majority of us who remained in London did fairly well in London’s labour market.

To put it at its simplest, it could be said that those who were successful over this period achieved that success against a background of comparatively weak competition. Not so now. The equivalent teenagers sitting in assemblies in Stepney today are going to live through a period of rising population. People are moving into London. London is a global mega-city that will shortly be home to over 10 million people. This means that these pupils are not competing with the girls or boys in their class but girls or boys from across the UK or more widely from across the world.

And this is why London’s schools need to redouble their efforts so that their pupils continue to do substantially better over the coming ten years. Just look at the Central and Inner London labour market. This is where the majority of Londoners work. Not all of course, but most. Over two-thirds of the jobs on offer in the Central and Inner London labour market are graduate level jobs. Well, how many of the 10 year-old pupils attending the schools in these central and inner London boroughs will, on present trends, go on to get degrees? Not two-thirds, that’s for sure. And that’s London’s problem - the aggregated pupil achievement at secondary school is falling short of the requirement of the sorts of jobs on offer for those pupils.

That’s not to say that all jobs are graduate level jobs. Many hundreds of thousands of workers across London perform fulfilling and valuable roles in the transport, logistics, service and retail sectors. After all, London’s bus drivers need a solid basis of education and arguably the role they perform across the capital is more crucial (or at least just as crucial) than the daily role performed by equity analysts in the financial services sector.

Of course the ratio of graduate level jobs in London just tell some of the story (albeit two-thirds). There are very many job roles for non-graduates. However, the other one third of the jobs available are subject to intense competition from that proportion of the resident workforce who do not have a graduate level education. Many of these roles provide good quality training and development - and opportunities exist.

But even here there is tough competition for these roles. For example, how many of London’s restaurants are fully staffed by under-employed young graduates, from around the globe, who crowd out others from this particular sector? These factors are behind the attempts of many councils to build easier paths for young people into work - particularly those who for whatever reason are excluded from the conventional routes into valuable employment markets. It is one of the reasons why the South London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham are working on a “shared solutions” model of getting young people on the margins of the labour market into semi-skilled work.

To build easier pathways into work demands excellent connections between schools and wider society, and there are many excellent examples across London of schools connecting with wider society in ways that help their pupils succeed. Schools have links with local business, with local civil society, with the higher education sector more generally. But these links are tend to be developed ad hoc and in isolation. Each and every London secondary school needs to have strong roots in its locality. But they also need to devise effective routes for its pupils into the wider world of London’s work, culture and economy. There are several schemes for achieving this but they point to the future role of local authorities.

So what can councils do differently?

What precisely can London's councils do to support and challenge schools? There are three main ways they can assist. First, they can support them to be independent and autonomous. Second, they can help them strengthen their roots into their immediate locality. Third, through critical challenge they can help them thrive in the growing global mega-city that is London - with its acknowledged global excellence in business, sport, culture, public services and higher education.

The starting point for councils is the recognition of the significant and rising autonomy of the secondary school sector. In addition to the growth of Academies, all secondary schools rightly operate under conditions of very high autonomy.

And it is also recognised that they are doing well because they operate free from arbitrary constraint and because they have control over their own resources - with the commensurate freedom to innovate so as to improve the teaching in their schools. This high level of autonomy is a trend that will continue into the foreseeable future. There is no going back.

What's more the ring fencing of school budgets during the first phase of public austerity in the UK (2010 - 2015) has meant that schools have been shielded from the worst affects of the fiscal consolidation. Indeed, in very many London boroughs the amount of public resource that is devoted to schools (in the dedicated schools budget) is now greater than is spent on mainstream council services in aggregate.

Nonetheless, local councils have an important role to play in supporting local schools for a to arrive at sensible solutions to collective funding problems. For while it is right that headteachers locally (and their governing bodies) decide upon these matters; they require the support of finance and audit professionals to help them strike the right balance in the revenue and capital funding decisions they have to make.

Additionally, schools may, over the coming period, increasingly require more formalised "fee for service" deals with councils for the provision of professional support service functions.

But while schools start from a position of relative autonomy, they are not completely autonomous. No public institution, no public service, is completely autonomous and free to act wholly as it sees fit. In the glare of the modern world every agency is called to give a public account of their actions to someone: a regulator, a funder, the media, Parliament or the public at large. Institutions learn this when blunders occur or when they or their employees make errors of judgment or conduct. It is why they are called to give an account in the court of public opinion, to some regulator or to another level of public governance.

The move over the past decade for many of London's schools to become academies may alter the constitutionality of this accountability but it does not alter the need for academies to give an account of their actions to some public fora. This points to the prospect for councils' oversight and scrutiny committees to have a role in the local education sector commensurate with the role they perform in respect of the local health sector.

For each secondary school to be successful it needs to have effective roots in the locality where it is based. In London this is slightly more difficult than is the case elsewhere in the UK. That is because many pupils attend schools other than the one that is closest to their home. This is a

function of London's high population density and its excellent public transport network. The parents of the average 10 year-old in London can realistically consider up to 10 or so schools within reasonable travel distance for a teenager. And so pupils at any one secondary school will have attended dozens of different primary schools and may themselves live in several different boroughs. Together these factors mean that the community roots in London are seldom drawn as parochially as they are elsewhere.

Of course this varies across the capital with schools on the fringe of London tending to serve larger geographical areas, albeit with pupils derived from fewer primary schools.

Councils have an important role in cementing local links for schools. And not in terms of connections to local councils themselves but in terms of establishing effective links with local civil society, local businesses as well as the local sporting and cultural sectors. It may not be the "local business" that can make the most fruitful connection but the local business woman or man who may run a large business elsewhere in London but who may happen to live locally or have some strong local connection. Every locality has its "alumni" in the same way as every university searches for its successful graduates. Local ambassadors with links to local schools can be matched by activist local councils who are keen to add social and community capital to their schools.

Over the short term, London's councils need to have a close regard to their current responsibilities insofar as these impact upon schools. These include school places planning, special education, various support functions to schools, and a range of key children's social care functions including safeguarding and child protection. Increasingly, these functions are being conducted across borough boundaries as the fiscal pressures on councils bear down upon their abilities to maintain these functional responsibilities on their own.

As a result of these "top-down" budgetary pressures it is likely that, over the next five years, new styles of "combined authority" approaches (such as "joint committees" and more integrated approaches) for schooling and learning across three or four London boroughs are likely to come to the fore.

These responses are only in part driven by the changing legal responsibilities councils have for educating their children, which are developing in a more ad hoc way than ever before.

In 1870 the "School Board for London" was set up under the Public Elementary Education Act. According to the archives of the City of London, the School Board, "had great difficulty in carrying out its responsibilities in building sufficient schools to accommodate all London children of the elementary school class and persuading parents to send their children to school. It devoted great attention to school architecture and curriculum, and, once the problems of the early years had been overcome, to developing higher grade elementary education for older children and to assisting underfed and badly clothed children."

After just 30 years, following disputes about the Board's revenue raising powers, the Education (London) Act of 1903 abolished the School Board for London and transferred its responsibilities to the London County Council (LCC) in 1904. For the next 60 years, the LCC was the principal local authority for London in respect of a range of functions, including education.

Some 60 years later the Herbert Commission's report (published in 1960) recommended the establishment of the Greater London Council. This commission advocated a London-wide

division of educational powers between the GLC and the London boroughs. The GLC would be responsible for strategic control of schools, and the boroughs for routine management. However, this part of the report was rejected by the government of the day. Instead the London Government Act of 1963 created the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) so as to inherit the educational responsibilities of the LCC within Inner London. It also gave Outer London boroughs responsibilities for educational functions.

One generation later the ILEA itself was abolished and the responsibilities for education across London is as we see it today - with each London borough responsible for a range of education and (what has become known as) children's services functions.

So, structural change in borough councils' responsibilities for education has historically occurred through legislative change after considered reports by strategic London-wide commissions.

At present, changes across this sector are occurring in ad hoc, tactical and emergent ways. Some strategic approaches have been adopted - such as secondary school admissions; now implemented London-wide each year. Other innovative approaches to collaborative working on school support services are currently being devised by leading councillors across London and by the Directors of Children's Services and the professional networks of those staff working on school effectiveness.

Councils need to continue to support and critically challenge all their local schools to continue to improve the educational (and other) outcomes for their pupils. For while schools (and the teachers in them) are characterised as acting in loco parentis; London's councils act as stewards for the wider community. To do so councils need to adopt a whole system and long term perspective. Just as parents have ambitions for their children, so councils have ambitions for their communities. And just as schools nurture the capabilities and confidence of their pupils, so councils must foster opportunities for people and enterprises locally. Councils need to ensure that schools are alert to wider changes and alive to wider opportunities. And London is replete with both.

Three generations ago lessons learned and skills acquired lasted most people, for most of their working life. Lessons learned and skills acquired 10 years ago are already fading in their utility. And with the accelerating pace of change in the economy and society in London it is likely that some of the lessons learnt and skills being acquired now may not see the end of 2015.

In the context of the globally competitive world in which London's economy operates; and in the context of the competition for talent that London draws upon; London's schools need to ensure that all their pupils tightly grasp the mystery of life long learning. For over their long working lives (and in all likelihood they will most probably work longer than previous generations) this will surely prove more useful to them than the short term mastery of any specific skills.



Barry Quirk

Annex 4

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