



STANDARD ISSUES

We all want to provide 'quality education' for the children in our care, says **Ian Gilbert**. But do we actually know what that means?

Have you spotted the elephant in the room in the world of education recently? Our politicians don't see it. Herr Schleicher from the OECD doesn't seem to see it. And if new head of Ofsted Michael Wilshaw saw it he'd probably shoot it. This particular elephant clammers onto the table every time a conversation strikes up about the quality of education, where 'quality' is defined by the following simple, unspoken syllogism:

- 1) You know you have received a good education if you have lots of high-grade qualification to show for it;
- 2) If that is the case then you must have gone to a good school;
- 3) Therefore the good schools are the ones where people leave with lots of high-grade qualifications to their name.

Then, because that is as far as the conversation seems to go, the elephant on the table turns around, and performs its very own Blue Peter moment.

There are so many loose threads in that logic that it's hard to know where to pull first. Let's start with that word 'education'. When was the last time you saw that term defined in way that resembles why you came into the job in the first place? Award-winning US teacher and elephant spotter John Paul Gatto suggests we need to be clear that when we talk of 'education' what we really mean is the process by which we 'school' children to pass exams (and take their appropriate place in the world). Furthermore, he claims, the two notions are entirely incompatible:

'...it's just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing.'

Personally, I think they *can* coexist and have seen this in action in some highly innovative schools across the UK. My friend and colleague Dave Harris, headteacher of one such



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merits of this or that school based entirely on grades. But that's the thing about elephants that people refuse to see – they are hard to measure. The biggest challenge that should be vexing the world's education ministers and our friend Andreas Schleicher is finding a way of measuring quality education that does not revolve

exclusively around exam output and takes into account a far more wide-ranging series of assessments that better befit the formation of the people who are the future of the world.

Interestingly, I was sharing a platform recently with the headmaster of Eton College who declared himself to be a prisoner of the university-driven exam system and that if he could do away with exams he would. The thing is, he *could*.

Job done?

Another point to consider when seeking to define quality education is what I call 'The Great Educational Lie'. This is the falsehood we commit every time we say to young people that if they do well at school they will get a good job. It is an invidious non sequitur carrying with it an equally invidious corollary: that if you don't do well at school you will never get a good job. Grades give you an increase in options up to a point (a point that finished way before you hit your 14th A grade) but a real, rounded, effective education also develops the sort of attitude in young people that the world is crying out for. Sitting in rows, digesting and regurgitating facts so that schools can play the grades game, singularly fails to develop the sorts of workplace skills that will see an individual go far, skills such as creativity, rule breaking, risk taking and teamwork.

To send people away from us 'educated' is not enough. To say that this is a 'good school' based solely on its exam results is dangerous. The elephant in the room needs to be addressed: what is the education that we need to provide for our children in the 21st century and how can we know when we are getting it right? Because simply relying on grades and the concomitant tables and targets is really not good enough.

school, talks of being 'in it for the marathon and for the sprint'. The sprint is the schooling game measured by targets, grades, levels, KPIs and other such spreadsheet-friendly data. The marathon is where you can really get to grips with properly educating young people and their communities. The message to take away? Cover your back and sleep at night. It's not ideal but that's the game you're playing.

Making the grades

What's more, education does not equal grades. And top grades don't mean a top education. I saw one of our highly-favoured Academy chains lauding the fact that one of their students was awarded 14 A* and A grades last year. Does that make her twice as educated as someone with a lowly seven? Maybe at ten someone should have had a quiet word and encouraged her to go out and fail at something. Now, that would have been an education.

I have no knowledge of the mental well being of that particular student but I do worry for it; as a father of three children I would by far rather see three happy, healthy C-grade students than three stressed, vulnerable A-grade students.

I noticed from when my son first started secondary school that the way his teachers and I were pushing him for A grades ('to fulfill his potential') was more in our interests than his. Why be an A-grade 'bof' with no friends when you can aim for B grades and have a life too? I am so tired of hearing debates about the



IAN GILBERT IS AN AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR, EDUCATIONAL INNOVATOR AND FOUNDER OF INDEPENDENT THINKING LTD (INDEPENDENTTHINKING.CO.UK). HE IS CURRENTLY DIVIDING HIS TIME BETWEEN THE UK AND CHILE, WHERE 30 YEARS OF NEO-LIBERAL POLICIES HAVE LEFT THE NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN TATTERS BUT ENRICHED A SELECT FEW.