

EDITORIAL: AN EDUCATION CONFERENCE LIKE NO OTHER

Dr. James Mannion

“The modern education system is like a wish in a fairy tale gone horribly wrong”.

(David Sloan Wilson)

Education is a beautiful thing. It is a truly wondrous, marvellous, hopeful thing. I strongly believe it is humanity’s best bet for bringing about a more harmonious, less hair-raising state of world affairs.

However – as the quote above captures so brilliantly – it would be fair to say that our education system remains a ‘work in progress’, and that there is more than a little room for improvement.

WHY DO WE NEED TO RETHINK EDUCATION?

Most people associate the word education with school, so let’s start here.

The very idea of school – that society should be liberally sprinkled with communal spaces where young people can learn together under the guidance of caring, knowledgeable adults – well, what’s not to like?

If you lived on a planet where school had not yet been invented, you may very well wish for such a thing.

But while the schools of planet earth have many wonderful features – and they *really do* – there are also many things *not* to like about the way in which our school system is currently configured.

To illustrate, I will briefly alight on three ‘areas for improvement’:

1. Escalating absenteeism

The latest government figures on pupil absence in England reveal that there are currently around 1.7 million persistent absentees from school (22.4% of around 9 million pupils).

This is an *astoundingly* high figure, and one that has increased dramatically in recent years.

To be clear, a persistent absentee is someone who misses more than 10% of the school year. This may not sound like much – a 90% attendance rate sounds pretty high. But it amounts to around 20 working days, or four full weeks of school. And among these 1.7 million, many miss a lot more than four weeks. In 2022, around 150,000 were absent for more than 50% of the time.

When a young person is absent from school for several weeks in a single year, it generates a huge amount of activity. Phone calls are made. Letters are sent home. Parents and carers are called in. Homes are visited. Fines may be issued. Educational psychologists and other professionals may be called in to attend meetings and to write reports. Parents and carers may be threatened with custodial sentences. (Sometimes, astonishingly, they are *actually prosecuted* – although it remains unclear how this is supposed to help.)

Needless to say, all of this is incredibly stressful for the young people and their families. Indeed, that's kind of the point. It's *supposed* to create sufficient friction so that the young person will choose the path of least resistance and return to the classroom.

But still, these 1.7 million young people are choosing to vote with their feet – even though doing so brings about a range of ongoing unpleasant consequences for them and their families.

Clearly, they prefer the unpleasant consequences of non-attendance to the experience of going to school.

This should tell us something very important about how these young people experience school. At the very least, it should tell us that we need to do more to understand why this is happening – and why it is happening on such an unprecedented scale.

2. A spiralling mental health crisis

I won't go into too much detail on this, because Andrew Speight covers it brilliantly in his essay on creating a culture of well-being. But I will share a few figures, because the situation really is profoundly concerning:

- In 2020, one in six (16%) children aged 5–16 years were identified as having a probable mental health disorder – an increase from 10.8% in 2017. The increase was evident in both boys and girls. One in six: that's five in every classroom of 30.¹

¹ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/well-being/mental-health-statistics>

- 39.2% of 6–16 year olds, and 52% of 17–23 year olds, have experienced a deterioration in mental health since 2017.²
- In England, a quarter of 11–16 year olds and nearly half of 17–19 year olds with a mental health disorder, reported that they have self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point in their lives.³

Each of these trends was in place before the pandemic; they are even worse now. And behind these statistics, there are millions of heartbreaking stories like the one Andrew shares in his essay.

It's not just children and young people who are struggling, either. The mental health of teachers and school leaders is in terrible shape also. Each year, the charity Education Support carries out a survey called the Teacher Wellbeing Index. Their 2021 survey of over 3,000 education staff reported that:

- 77% of respondents experienced symptoms of poor mental health due to their work
- 72% are stressed (rising to 84% for senior leaders)
- 54% have considered leaving the sector in the past two years due to pressures on their mental health

3. One-third of young people leave school branded a failure – year in, year out

This year, around one-third of students will fail to achieve a standard pass in Maths and English at GCSE.

Indeed, this happens every year.

And until we change the assessment system, it will continue to happen.

This bears repeating. Unless we change the assessment system, one in three babies born today – all full of hope and potential with their big wide baby eyes – are destined to leave school branded a failure.

A FAIRYTALE WISH GONE WRONG

It's easy to see what Sloan Wilson was driving at.

What is perplexing – but also a source for optimism – is that the path that led us to this point was paved with good intentions.

² <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/well-being/mental-health-statistics>

³ <https://stateofchildhealth.rcpch.ac.uk/evidence/mental-health/suicide/>

In a well-intentioned effort to improve educational and life chances for current and future generations, our forebears created a school system that has many positive features. But despite all the passion and cleverness and care that characterises the teaching profession – and which drives much educational policymaking – we are where we are: 1.7 million persistent absentees... a spiralling mental health crisis... a culture of enforced failure.

And these are just *some* of the problems we face. We could point to the ongoing and ever-worsening crisis in teacher recruitment and retention; the deep-rooted problems with school inspections; the endless policy churn created by the short-termist thinking of electoral politics...

In a sense, we shouldn't feel too bad about this. We're trying to do something *really hard* here.

But we shouldn't go too easy on ourselves either because we aren't having this conversation in a moral vacuum.

The evidence is in.

Many young people and adults are suffering unnecessarily because of the way in which the schooling system is currently configured.

So let's reconfigure it.

THIS PROBLEM IS BIGGER THAN SCHOOL

So far, I've talked mainly about school. But education is far bigger than school.

Indeed, this is one of the problems with the education debate: it is far too school-centric.

We also need to think really hard about improving the lot of the hundreds of thousands of children and young people who don't attend school: the homeschoolers, the unschoolers, the so-called 'school refusers' – and those who attend alternative provisions, such as our precious (though all-too-scarce, and currently endangered) democratic learning communities.

One of the most alarming things I've learnt through hosting the Rethinking Education podcast for the last three years is how many profoundly distressed 'square pegs' there are – the families of all those young people with barriers to attendance, who often find themselves on the wrong side of a harsh bureaucracy with too few ideas for workable alternatives.

What can we do to improve educational and life outcomes for these young people, too?

The reason the education debate is so school-centric is that it is dominated by a small number of voices. These tend to be former teachers and school leaders with *big names* who tour the conference and consultancy circuit, training teachers and selling books and attracting Twitter followers.

To be clear, there are many wonderful people in this category who do some really impressive work. But education consultants with books to sell do not have all the answers, for the simple reason that they are only a small sub-set of actors within a vast educational ecosystem.

To my mind, the first step in unpicking the nest of interconnected problems outlined above is to understand that there are many people with skin in this game, from incredibly diverse backgrounds. And all too often, their voices are not heard or even respected within the education debate. Specifically, I'm talking about:

- Children and young people (those in the school system and those outside it)
- Parents and carers (and other family members)
- Classroom teachers (who often complain that they are underrepresented at education conferences)
- Support staff
- Alternative educators
- Homeschoolers
- Unschoolers
- Support workers such as educational and clinical psychologists, social workers, school nurses and counsellors
- Education researchers

In her brilliant TED talk *Why you think you're right – even if you're wrong*, Julia Galef talks about the importance of having a 'scout mindset'. Instead of having a 'soldier mindset', where we don our metaphorical combat gear and snipe at real and imagined enemies across the barricades of social media, we need to make for the high ground in order to establish a richly informed, accurate picture of the terrain.

By way of analogy, if we're going to get a handle on how to unpick this nest of interconnected problems, the first step is to examine the nest from every conceivable angle. This means coming together, giving *everyone* air-time, and listening deeply as we share our stories and perspectives.

This was the thinking that underpinned the inaugural rethinkingED conference, which in turn led to this wonderful collection of essays.

AN EDUCATION CONFERENCE WITH A DIFFERENCE

The rethinkingED conference (which looks set to become an annual staple) is an attempt to summon together a vast and growing community of people who, together, can adopt a collective 'scout mindset' and help one another gain a more complete understanding of the challenges we need to overcome – and the solutions

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we may need to implement – if we're going to create an education system that works for *all* young people.

Together, we can rethink, re-imagine and re-shape the educational ecosystem so that we can help every young person find their feet, find what they love – and what they hate and want to change – to learn to understand themselves and their place in the world, and to figure out how they too might contribute to making the world a better place.

With this in mind, the rethinkingED organising committee made a concerted effort to assemble a group of speakers you don't usually find at education conferences. And for a first attempt, it was not too shabby! We had around 100 speakers and around 500 delegates. To give you flavour, we had sessions led by:

- Children and young people
- Parents and carers
- Psychologists
- Classroom teachers, headteachers and senior leaders
- Alternative educators
- People whose work focuses on issues like equality and climate change
- People who lean more toward traditionalism
- People who lean more toward progressivism
- People who think traditionalism and progressivism are unhelpful labels that we need to move beyond
- Education consultants with books to sell (and mighty fine books they are too!)
- Plus we were joined by international friends and colleagues from the US, Australia, Dominican Republic, Zimbabwe, South Africa – to name just a few...

All the fun of the fair!

WHAT DOES RETHINKING EDUCATION LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

In this special edition of the *Buckingham Journal of Education*, we bring you a representative sample of some of the creative, compassionate, richly-informed thinking that was on display at the inaugural rethinkingED conference.

Each of these contributions is a brilliant example of what rethinking education looks like in practice. It involves paying close attention to what's going on, gathering your thoughts, formulating them into some sort of order, and using your voice to shape the world – individually and collectively.

On reading this remarkable collection of essays, I found myself asking a series of questions that all began with the same two words: "What if...?"

First up, we have an incredible speech that was delivered to the entire rethinkingED conference by Lachlan Pratt, a home-educated young man aged ten. Here, Lox cuts straight to the heart of the matter with his clear-eyed analysis:

“When a child goes to school they are hardly ever listened to and are not treated as equal beings. Children are not grown ups in waiting... We need to feel empowered by all of you adults not squashed and patronised... Why are we sending our kids to a place where they are made to feel like they are inferior? A community place to learn together, yes. A coercive and stressful environment, no!”

Lox’s injunction to ‘be a guide and provide feedback only when invited’ should also provide pause for thought. This is an idea I first encountered in an epic 5-hour podcast interview with Professor Ian Cunningham, who also spoke at the conference last year.

Ian runs the Self-Managed Learning College in Brighton, a democratic learning community that does what it says on the tin. The young people (aged 9–17) are free to manage their own learning. They can choose what to learn about, when, with whom, for how long and so on. They can also choose whether to ask for feedback on something they have been working on. Sometimes they do; often, as I discovered when I worked there, they don’t.

As a former school teacher, I had never questioned the idea that feedback should be provided to young people – often graded – in the belief that it’s ‘good for them’.

What if it isn’t? What would this mean for how we think about assessment in schools?

Sharing insights gained through her work as a clinical psychologist – and as a parent of two self-directed, home-educated children – Dr Naomi Fisher shines a light on the ‘side effects of school’.

Reflecting on her experience dealing with the many young people who found themselves unable to attend school because it made them anxious or worse, Naomi writes:

“I started to think that what I was seeing wasn’t about any sort of emotional dysfunction in these children. Instead, the symptoms they were reporting to me seemed to be side effects of the way the school system managed children and child behaviour... We’re doing our best to improve things for young people, but the assumption is that the problem is them and their emotions, when in fact we could see their emotional responses as the effect of a system which isn’t working for lots of children.”

This calls to mind a famous quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

What if these ‘side-effects’ are actually just ‘effects’? What if it’s the inflexible, one-size-fits-all school system that pushes so many children and young people into troubled waters?

Ty Golding and Cat Place, two inspirational headteachers from Wales, provide a fascinating summary of some of the exciting developments taking place over the Welsh border.

Often, people say ‘we need to decide what the purpose of education is’. In Wales, they have done just this. The Curriculum for Wales is a purpose-led reform programme which emphasises the importance of agency and recognises schools as ‘learning organisations’ that view the professional learning of adults as being just as important as the learning of children and young people.

The scale of ambition in the Curriculum for Wales is nothing short of astonishing, with concurrent reforms to curriculum, leadership, accountability, equity and inclusion, and teaching. This is a national exercise in trusting the teaching profession to draw on their immense shared professional experience and to do what they believe to be right for the learners in front of them. All of which raises a series of intriguing questions:

What if trusting teachers and school leaders is the key to unleashing a wave of people-powered innovation? What if the Welsh reforms succeed in realising their four purposes? What will this mean for Wales – and what will it mean for other countries?

Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) is a legal mechanism whereby a child or young person with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) can receive special educational provision despite being unable to attend a formal educational setting. Currently, it is incredibly difficult to get an EHCP – and even when you have one, it is incredibly difficult to get an EOTAS package.

In her essay, Laura Kerbey makes a compelling case for EOTAS packages on the basis that they are equitable, tailored to the needs of the individual, transformative, autonomous and safe. All of which begs the question:

What if we made EOTAS packages available for every young person who needs one – regardless of whether they have an EHCP?

Sarah Seleznyov and Andi Silvain are the co-headteachers of School 360, a new school in London that is a brilliant example of rethinking education in action. From their mission statement (*Learn together, think differently, change the world*) to their values-led curriculum... to their focus on pupil agency, social justice and parental engagement... to their commitment to anti-racism, anti-discrimination and the climate crisis... to the annual camping trip, the roof garden and the family

gardening club... to a curriculum underpinned by oracy and storytelling... to project-based learning with authentic, real-world assessments... to the recognition of the fundamental importance of play... to the weekly focus meetings in favour of parents evenings... to having the courage to say to inquiring parents ‘we don’t know yet – let’s find out together!’... Sarah and Andi paint a rich picture of a school that does things differently.

What if all schools were like this?

In another compelling example of someone ‘rethinking education’ within the current constraints of the system, Vaughan Connolly explores the ways in which schools use (and often squander) that most scarce of resources – time. Intriguingly, Vaughan’s research has led him to conclude that schools rethinking their use of time by increasing non-contact time for their teachers are likely to retain those teachers for longer, and raise their results in the process.

What if every school could improve results by reducing contact time? What if we could successfully scale up this cost-effective way to simultaneously improve results, teacher recruitment and retention?

As Rosa Legeno-Bell points out in her fascinating essay examining the way in which imperial rhetoric around race and eugenics helped shape the modern education system, “only through a firm historical grasp of imperial myths can educators begin to challenge their own curricula and pedagogies...”

In recent years, many people have called for the curriculum to be ‘decolonised’, and Rosa makes a compelling case for it here. One reason to decolonise the curriculum is that the amplification of marginalised voices – and the celebration of our shared histories – may lead to the building of bridges between communities that have often been pitted against one other in the past.

As Rosa writes: “Decolonisation is no small task, but the rewards are vast. If educators work together to build a fairer and more representative education for our students, then we are playing a part in creating a kinder, less judgmental and more compassionate society for our students and our children.”

What if we could realise Rosa’s vision of a kinder, less judgmental and more compassionate society? What kind of a world would that be like to grow up in?

The final contribution to this collection is an astonishing, heartfelt essay in which Andrew Speight shares an unflinching account of how his experience of school adversely affected his mental health – and how he was able to help transform his school for the better by standing up and making his voice heard.

Andrew’s insights into how we can create a culture of well-being at five different levels provide an incredibly helpful framework to help us understand the scale of the task before us – and how we might systematically make progress on each of these five fronts. It’s a brilliant example of rethinking education in action.

As Andrew writes: “Despite the scale of this issue and the challenge it presents, we can be reassured that it is within our influence to work towards addressing the mental health epidemic... May we experience a rekindled desire to be kind to each other, and to build a kinder, and therefore more functional, system that works for everyone.”

What if all schools established a culture of wellbeing that enabled children, young people and adults alike to flourish and thrive?

CALLING ALL TRIMTABS

“Something hit me very hard once, thinking about what one little man could do. Think of the Queen Mary — the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder.

And there’s a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trimtab. It’s a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a trimtab. Society thinks it’s going right by you, that it’s left you altogether. But if you’re doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go. So I said, call me Trimtab.”

(Richard Buckminster-Fuller)

The essays in this collection are brilliant examples of trimtabs – people doing ‘dynamic things mentally’ that are already having a positive impact on the world around them.

If you’d like to become a ‘trimtab’ in the Rethinking Education movement, there are a few ways in which you can get involved:

- Watch the videos from the 2022 online conference – including most of the authors of the essays in this collection.
- Join the ‘Rethinking Education Megamind’, an online community of around a thousand people from all over the world. No single person has the solution to all the problems we face. But collectively, we do. Join the Hive Mind and play a small role in fixing this thing. It’s free to do so, and it’s an incredibly life-affirming corner of the internet. Visit rethinking-education.mn.co.
- Come along to a future Rethinking Education conference, either as a delegate or by applying to speak. This year (2023), the annual conference will be held on Saturday, September 23, at Parliament Hill School in North London. We expect that in the future, there will also be smaller, local conferences as well as international events. And if you can’t make it in person, you can contribute

to our online events, which take place throughout the year. Join the Megamind for regular updates.

Enjoy these essays. I hope they make you feel as educated, entertained and energised as I have been.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'J Mannion'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J'.

Dr James Mannion
Director, Rethinking Education

Dr James Mannion is the Director of Rethinking Education, an organisation dedicated to improving outcomes for young people through implementation science, self-regulated learning and practitioner inquiry. He has a MA in Person-Centred Education from the University of Sussex and a PhD in Self-Regulated Learning from the University of Cambridge. Previously, James worked as a secondary school teacher for 12 years and spent 8 years in school leadership roles. He is an Associate of Oracy Cambridge, a Founding Fellow of the Chartered College of Teaching and a By-Fellow of Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge. James is also the host of the Rethinking Education podcast and the Rethinking Education Hive Mind, a grass-roots organisation dedicated to creating an education system that works for all young people.