

## **EDITORIAL**

### **PUTTING THE CHILD BACK AT THE CENTRE**

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This edition of the Buckingham Journal of Education will be the last that I edit. I have enjoyed 4 years in the editor's chair. As editor I have been privileged to talk with some eminent educational thinkers and practitioners. I have as well as been able to provide opportunities to new authors many of whom are practitioners. It is through thinking, writing, and the application of pragmatic professional understanding, that the best practitioners can shape the best outcomes for pupils.

I hand things over to Dr. Bethany Kelly knowing that she will steer the journal onto greater relevance and academic rigour.

I was delighted that it had been decided to have an edition of the Buckingham Journal focused on the History of Education. I am an education 'lifer' who has been involved with schools since 1980 as a teacher working at every level in both state and independent schools, and latterly as a teacher trainer. I have lived through a lot of the recent history of education.

Perhaps self-indulgently, my intention was to review all the government led initiatives for education since the start of my teaching career, asking which changed my practice. This would become a personal reflection on the last 40 years of education. A quick look at the English Education Timeline, Gillard (2018) *Education in the UK: a history - Timeline* (accessed 03/12/25) shows the immense size of this task which outstrips my capacity in both time and inclination.

I joined a Bachelor of Education with Honours degree programme at Winchester University (King Alfreds College) in 1980. I chose the B.Ed. (Hons) route as I intended to become a Primary School Teacher. The B.Ed. (Hons) degree combined subject-specific study, for example, Mathematics, English and History with modules in education theory, child development, assessment, and classroom management. It was a course that was a product of 1970s pedagogy and assertively taught a child-centred approach to learning. Child-centred education is grounded in progressive philosophies that emerged

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during the Enlightenment and gained traction in the 19th and 20th centuries. We were introduced to thinkers such as Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), who advocated for education that respects the natural development of the child, John Dewey (1938) with his experiential learning and democratic classrooms.

Child-centred learning, rooted in the belief that education should respond to the needs, interests, and abilities of learners, held prominence in UK schools during the mid-20th century. However, recent decades have seen a resurgence of teacher-led, standards-driven approaches for some, often prioritising measurable outcomes over holistic development. I argue for a return to child-centred learning in UK schools, contending that such an approach is not only pedagogically sound but also compatible with modern learning theory. In the light of current intractable problems facing schools particularly post-COVID, I believe that child-centred education fosters engagement, deep learning, and adaptability, which are qualities essential for thriving in the 21st century.

The Plowden Report (1967) marked a watershed moment, endorsing child-centred principles such as active learning, creativity, and individualised instruction. These ideas were reinforced by developmental psychologists like Piaget (1970), who argued that children construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, and Vygotsky (1978), whose concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlighted the social nature of learning. Despite their historical roots these principles remain relevant. Leaving aside a personal appreciation of Piaget (1970), whose theory of cognitive development I still apply when faced with pupils who struggle to grasp some of the more abstract scientific concepts, I would suggest that they aligning closely with contemporary theories of cognition and motivation.

I would contend that modern learning theory, encompassing constructivism, cognitive science, and socio-cultural perspectives, strongly supports child-centred approaches. For example constructivism posits that learners actively build knowledge rather than passively receive information (Bruner, 1974). This principle underpins strategies such as inquiry-based learning and problem-solving tasks, which are central to child-centred pedagogy.

Cognitive science further validates these practices. Research on metacognition and self-regulation demonstrates that students learn more effectively when they have agency and opportunities for reflection (Flavell, 1979; Zimmerman, 2002). Child-centred classrooms, which encourage choice and autonomy, cultivate these skills. Moreover, neuroscientific studies reveal that motivation and engagement, hallmarks of child-centred learning, enhance memory consolidation and cognitive flexibility (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Socio-cultural theories, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on collaborative learning, resonate with child-centred principles. Group work, peer tutoring, and dialogic teaching foster deeper understanding and critical thinking (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). These practices are increasingly recognised as essential for developing the '21st-century skills' highlighted in

UK policy documents, including creativity, communication, and problem-solving (DfE, 2019).

A focus on child-centered learning offers numerous benefits for contemporary UK education. It enhances student engagement. There are acknowledged problems with school attendance and student mental health. Studies show that autonomy and relevance increase motivation, leading to improved attendance and reduced behavioural issues (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, rigid, test-driven curricula often disengage learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A child-centred pedagogy supports social-emotional development. Activities that prioritise collaboration, empathy, and self-expression nurture resilience and well-being, which are critical factors in an era of rising mental health concerns among young people (Public Health England, 2020).

It can be argued that child-centred approaches promote deep learning. Rather than memorising facts for examinations, students engage in enquiry, apply concepts to real-world contexts, and develop transferable skills. This aligns with the demands of a knowledge economy, where adaptability and lifelong learning are paramount (Fullan, 2013). Child-centred learning can advance equity. By tailoring instruction to individual needs, it mitigates the disadvantages faced by learners with diverse abilities and backgrounds (Taylor et al., 2015).

Critics argue that child-centred education risks diluting academic rigour and complicating assessment. Herein lies the problem. The current curriculum with its associated assessment processes, which are coupled to teacher accountability structures, can, in my experience, lead to conservative thinking from headteachers. Likewise the strident voices that contributed to the post-2010 General Election education debates are still there and it would be a politically brave decision to move away from the present structures with an accompanying allegation of dumbing down.

Do we need to rethink the language of standards? Rigour is not synonymous with rote learning; rather, it involves challenging students to think critically and solve complex problems. These are objectives well served by child-centred methods (Hattie, 2009). Assessment poses a genuine challenge, as standardised testing favours uniformity over individuality. Solutions include adopting formative assessment strategies, such as portfolios and performance tasks, which capture a broader range of competencies (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Additionally, Teacher Training must prioritise skills in differentiation and facilitation, ensuring educators can balance autonomy with guidance.

Perhaps pessimistically I believe that policy reform is essential to embed these changes. The current emphasis on league tables and accountability metrics must shift towards valuing creativity, collaboration, and well-being. We have seen in the last decade that international models, such as Finland's holistic curriculum, have offered compelling examples of how child-centred principles can coexist with high academic standards (Sahlberg, 2011).

The study of history is often justified as learning from the past. A critical consideration can help us see that child-centred learning is not a nostalgic ideal but a pedagogical imperative for the 21st century. Its principles, active engagement, autonomy, collaboration, are deeply compatible with modern learning theory and supported by robust evidence from cognitive science and educational research. In an era of rapid technological change and complex social challenges, UK schools must equip learners with more than factual knowledge; they must foster adaptability, creativity, and resilience. A return to child-centred education, coupled with thoughtful policy and professional development, offers a pathway to achieving these goals. Far from undermining rigour, it redefines it for a future where learning is lifelong and learner agency is paramount.

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