Subject to Change

Listening to and empowering young people and the public to set a new direction for education and learning.
About the authors

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Summary

4

Section 1

Smoke signals: who wants what kind of change and who gets to decide?

Listening to what the public think about change

Section 2

Out of kilter: 3 messages to shape a new direction

Message 1: It’s time to rethink what education is really for

New direction 1

Message 2: One-size doesn’t really fit anyone

New direction 2

Message 3: It really does take a village

New direction 3

Section 3

An appetite for change: what the people want

Questions, ideas and aspirations from young people, parents, teachers and employers...

Big questions to test and explore

The big change I want to see is...

Conclusion

38

References

42
Summary

After a period of profound disruption, our education system is at a crossroads. Now is the moment when its long-term direction of travel will be set.

Amidst this uncertainty we have the chance, and a duty, to ensure young people, as well as teachers, parents and employers, are in the driving seat.

The narrative gap in thinking about change in education post-pandemic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The pandemic has...</th>
<th>Narrative 1: Dominant</th>
<th>Narrative 2: Emergent</th>
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<td></td>
<td>created some new, temporary problems</td>
<td>highlighted and deepened existing problems</td>
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<th>And so we need to...</th>
<th>Narrative 1: Dominant</th>
<th>Narrative 2: Emergent</th>
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<td>introduce small changes to help children catch up and get back to how things were</td>
<td>take the opportunity to rethink what’s not working and change the system for the better</td>
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<th>Ideas and leadership should come from...</th>
<th>Narrative 1: Dominant</th>
<th>Narrative 2: Emergent</th>
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<td>politicians and (some carefully chosen) experts</td>
<td>young people, parents, teachers and employers</td>
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At the start of 2020, Big Change and IPPR set out to understand and shape the public conversation about the future of education and learning.

Through thousands of conversations we have found that a consensus is starting to emerge. Young people, parents, teachers and employers all agree that now is the time to rethink what education is really for, how young people learn and to change things for the better.

The appetite for change in education is universal

Now is the time to rethink the purpose of education and to change the system for the better

77% of all groups agree

79% Young people (18-24 yrs)
74% Parents agree
77% Teachers agree
78% Employers agree

Source: Polling by Parent, Pieg, Teacher, Tapp and YouGov
What we heard

MESSAGE 1
It’s time to rethink what education is really for

The problems with education are not just about how it is delivered but what it is trying to achieve, for individuals and society.

MESSAGE 2
One-size doesn’t really fit anyone

The majority feel the current system isn’t working for them – even those who are labelled ‘successful’ because they achieved a good set of exam results at 16 or 18.

MESSAGE 3
It really does take a village

Young people, parents, and employers want to work with and beyond schools to help young people learn and thrive.
Smoke signals: who wants what kind of change and who gets to decide?

Covid-19 has the potential to radically reshape our world, but we must not passively sit back and observe what plays out. Now is the time for public deliberation and democratic accountability. Now is the time for intelligent collective action.

International Commission on the Futures of Education (2020)

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After a period of profound disruption, our education system is at a crossroads. Now is the moment when its long-term direction of travel will be set.

Amidst this uncertainty, we have the chance, and a duty, to put young people, as well as teachers¹, parents² and employers, in the driving seat.

The pandemic delivered the most dramatic changes to education and learning that this country – or the world – has ever seen. The fixed and familiar aspects of education that usually dictate how kids learn and how teachers teach were taken away overnight. Schools closed their doors, exams got cancelled, school inspections stopped and lessons moved mostly online.

Learning and teaching during the pandemic was challenging for everyone. But for some it was far more challenging than for others. Once again a light was shone on the gaps in opportunity and resources between different homes, communities and places.

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¹ By teachers we mean teachers and school leaders.
² By parents we mean parents and carers.
³ By education we mean the formal system of schooling that occurs in England between the ages of 4 and 18. This activity forms part of the broader concept of learning which takes place everywhere, involves a much wider group of people and continues throughout life.

In 2020

1.5 BILLION
students were locked out of their schools.

OECD (2021)
As those who hold the traditional levers of power in the system line up to return it to normal, so they have created a certain narrative about what is needed and set a course to try and get there. And the people to whom education matters the most – young people, parents, teachers and employers – are passive observers without any real say in the direction of travel.

Coming out of the pandemic we have the chance, and a duty, to listen to these groups and provide opportunities for unity to be fostered. To bring their perspectives, insights and ideas together to shape a new shared story and pathway to determine what education and learning should be for our times.

But listening will not be enough and a new approach is required. One that taps into the ingenuity, energy and commitment of the collective. One that puts resources and power in the hands of people, especially the young, and enables whole communities to shape and create the outcomes they need.
At the start of 2020, Big Change and IPPR set out to understand and shape the public conversation about where education should go next.

A consensus is emerging.

Young people, parents, educators and employers all agree that now is the time to rethink what education is really for, how young people learn and change things for the better.

Over the past year, Big Change and IPPR led an ambitious national listening exercise to understand how the public was thinking and feeling about education and learning.

We knew that across the country the conversation about learning had exploded – in the media, in homes and online – and that key issues, like exams, seemed to be galvanising public debate. But what else had changed?

Was the pandemic prompting people to ask any really big questions about how we ‘do education’ or what’s really important for young people and their learning? What issues did they care about and what was the appetite for big changes?

Working with national and global partners, we went both wide and deep, using social listening, digital marketing, and polling to get to grips with large scale opinion, and holding focus groups and a Listening Post study to understand people’s experiences, feelings and ideas.

We also launched the Big Education Conversation: a national campaign to get more people - especially young people (13-25) and parents - talking about what education is really for and where it should go next.

Thousands of people aired and shared their views during this time. As well as anger and frustration, most clearly over exams, there was also hope, aspiration and big ideas for the future.

Figure 3: The appetite for change in education is universal
Source: Polling by Parent Ping, Teacher Tapp and YouGov
Listening to what the public think about education change

The future of education after Covid-19
30 interviews + new polling + literature review
Identified three areas where the pandemic could open up new conversations about the future of education in England.
IPPR, Big Change, City of London Corporation, Parentkind

Pandemic as portal
7 in-depth Listening Post conversations with parents, teachers and school leaders, and children
Identified insights about how different groups related to each other and the wider education system during the first Covid-19 lockdown.
Relationships Foundation and Big Change

Taking the temperature of key groups
5 focus groups + 6 interviews
Understood the appetite for long-term changes to education and learning among young people, parents, teachers and school leaders, and employers.
IPPR and Big Change

56 PEOPLE TOOK PART

A New Education Story
23 authors sharing 18 original articles
Challenged the logic and assumptions underpinning the existing model of education.
Curated by Big Change, with contributions from Paul Saldberg, Simon Sinek, Andreas Schleicher (OECD), Rebecca Winthrop (Brookings), Tom Fletcher (Oxford University) and many more.

Listening to the voice of the school system to inform transformation
7 in-depth Listening Post conversations with parents, teachers and school leaders, and children
Identified insights about how different groups related to each other and the wider education system during the first Covid-19 lockdown.
Relationships Foundation and Big Change

Oct 2020

Co-design workshops with young people
8 workshops
Asked questions about their appetite for long-term change, the purpose and priorities of education.
Shape History, Pupil Power, Leaders Unlocked, Beatitude, The Times College, National Children's Bureau

44 perspectives involved

The Big Education Conversation campaign
Collecting data on the purpose of education and ideas for big change.
Led by Big Change and IPPR

4000 ideas and opinions submitted
4 million online results analyzed

What can social media listening tell us about the desire for education change?
Innovative social listening method (data scraping) used to understand how key groups were thinking and talking about education before and during the pandemic.
Brookings Institution and Big Change

Polling of key groups
Students, parents, teachers and employers
Asked questions about their appetite for long-term change, the purpose and priorities of education.
ImpactEd, ParentPing, Teacher Tapp, YouGov

Over 10,000 people surveyed

Fig 4: Subject to Change national listening exercise

Oct 2021
The Big Education Conversation asked young people, parents, teachers, leaders and employers to share...

- One big change they want to see in education
- What they think education should really be for in the future

The campaign took place over six weeks during June and July 2021, bringing people and organisations together in conversation about what education should really be for. Analysis shows that the level and quality of engagement was high and data submissions revealed the appetite young people, parents, teachers, and employers have to debate and shape the future of learning and education in this country.

4.5 MILLION
Digital reach across all channels

2,000
Total conversations (virtual and in-person)

25,600
People involved in conversations

4,000
Ideas and opinions submitted

Teachers know testing is important, but it shouldn’t be prioritised above all else

Parents want their kids to enjoy learning and are worried about their mental health

Figure 5: The Big Education Conversation campaign key stats
Source: Shape History and Author analysis

We want to see big changes to exams
All groups agree
Snapshot 2: Brookings’ social listening research

Research by the Brookings Institution used an innovative social listening methodology (social media data scraping) to analyse online conversations both before and during Covid-19 in England. It looked at what students, teachers and parents were discussing, and whether they were talking about the same thing.

Young people have been leading the charge. Young adults between the ages of 18-35 were the most active voices, making up over 76 per cent of all conversations, with 25-35 year-olds making up almost half the users in their study. In particular, the 2020 A-level controversy angered the young people directly affected but it also sparked a wider conversation about the role exams play in education.

#edutwitter

#edutwitter saw 104% increase in use over the first nine months of the pandemic.

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4 a computer software technique that involves the extraction of information from the Internet (social media posts, websites, blogs etc) for the purposes of analysis.
Section 2

Out of kilter: 3 messages to shape a new direction

MESSAGE 1
It’s time to rethink what education is really for

MESSAGE 2
One-size doesn’t really fit anyone

MESSAGE 3
It really does take a village

A lot of people talk about school being a mini-society. If we create school to be a place where it’s fair and democratic then that will trickle on to society.

Aliyah York - Pupil Power
It’s time to rethink what education is really for

The problems with education are not just about how it is delivered but what it is trying to achieve, for individuals and society.

We heard that...

The system as currently designed doesn’t reflect what most people value, nor does it support the breadth of young people’s talents and potential.

Those we heard from are clear that as a nation we need to redress the narrow focus on “in the moment” academic achievement, and centre learning on what young people and communities need for their future success.

I feel like schools are paying more attention to making sure that you pass the exams than you actually learn some stuff.

YOUNG PERSON – FOCUS GROUP
What for you is the most important purpose of education?

Through polling, different groups were asked to choose their most important purpose of education from a selection of five different purposes. The graphs show the spread of responses for the public as a whole and each group separately.

**General public**

- **A** Ensuring children enjoy learning and become good learners for life
- **E** Helping children understand themselves and others
- **B** Giving children a good understanding of the world around them
- **D** Preparing children for the world of work
- **C** Ensuring children achieve academically and get qualifications

**Young people**

- **A**
- 70
- **B**
- 50
- **C**
- 30
- **D**
- 10
- **E**
- 70

**Parents**

- **A**
- 70
- **B**
- 50
- **C**
- 30
- **D**
- 10
- **E**
- 70

**Teachers**

- **A**
- 70
- **B**
- 50
- **C**
- 30
- **D**
- 10
- **E**
- 70

**Employers**

- **A**
- 70
- **B**
- 50
- **C**
- 30
- **D**
- 10
- **E**
- 70

Our polling and responses to the Big Education conversation show the public appetite for a broad set of purposes for education. Enjoying learning, self-awareness and relationships, understanding society, and preparation for work are all considered more important than academic success. Though not unimportant, every group agrees that learning should be for life, not just exams.

*Figure 8: There is a consensus about the need for a shift in purpose in education across young people, parents, teachers and employers
Source: Polling by ParentingMatters, Teacher Tapp and YouGov*
One-size doesn’t really fit anyone

The majority feel that the current system isn’t working for them – even those who are labelled ‘successful’ because they achieved a good set of exam results at 16 or 18.

New direction 2

NOW
A one-size fits all system in which many are labelled or feel like failures

NEXT
A system that celebrates diversity, gives choice and allows everyone to enjoy success

We heard that...

Young people, parents, teachers and employers are all clear that our ‘one size fits all’ system is not working well enough for anyone.

Our education system has been built to achieve certain things. Essentially, to get as many kids as possible learning a fixed set of things in a fixed way, and then to prove it through tests and exams. What we have consistently heard is that this ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work for young people or those who support them. As things stand, diversity and individuality are not valued, injustice and unfairness is baked into the system, and teenagers’ wellbeing too often comes at the cost of “doing well” in high-stakes exams.

It’s not a one size fits all. We are all different, yet our knowledge is being tested the same way. It doesn’t work and it doesn’t make sense.

Young person, Big Education Conversation

Mental health and well-being are major topics of discussion related to education on social media... Many teachers are concerned with how to help students handle the stress in their lives, especially as it relates to schooling. Parents care about this too and amid COVID have added their voice to that of the teachers.

Brookings Institution, 2021
Rather than focusing our efforts on making young people fit the mould of an outdated and inflexible system, we need to take a fundamentally different approach that sets out to tackle inequality in new ways. One that starts with the needs and ambitions of the children, families and communities who need education to change the most. Because a system that truly works for them, will work for everyone.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on how different and often unequal the experience of learning is between young people. As pupils returned to the classroom a huge amount of attention focused on how to ‘catch up on lost learning’ and tackle the growing ‘attainment gap’ between young people from worse and better off families.

It can be easy to think that these inequalities impact a small minority of unlucky young people. That it is an important but ultimately marginal issue that can be solved with extra resources to double-down on academic support, rather than a fundamental rethink of the way young people are supported to learn and grow.

Instead, the Big Education Conversation has shown us that most young people – and those around them – feel that our current system is failing them in one way or another. This is even true of those who would be deemed ‘successes’ by the metrics measured by the system itself.

Every year

A THIRD
OF 16 YEAR-OLDS FALL SHORT
of achieving a grade 4 in their
GCSE English and maths.

THIS ISN’T AN ACCIDENT
but is a product of the way
our exam system is designed.

Source: Authors’ analysis
**It really does take a village**

Young people, parents, and employers want to work with and beyond schools to help young people learn and thrive.

**New direction 3**

**NOW**

Schools hold all the responsibility for educating young people

**NEXT**

All young people have support and agency in their learning across school, home and community

**What we heard...**

Young people, parents and employers recognise the value of schools and those who work within them. During the pandemic teachers and school leaders have gone above and beyond the call of duty. Schools are, and should remain, the bedrock of our education system. Because what happens in classrooms really matters.

But if the pandemic has shown us anything, it is that learning can and does happen everywhere - often directed by children and young people themselves. The artificial divide created between where children live and where they are educated evaporated. The roles of and relationships between teachers, parents and young people themselves shifted massively.

What, when and how young people learned changed over night. And that presented both challenge and opportunity, with some children thriving and others missing out altogether.

It seems that all this change may have triggered a realisation. Not only about the great importance of schools and teachers, but about the potential of parents, the wider community, and young people themselves, to play an even greater role.

Around the world, parents and families have emerged as essential education allies amid the pandemic, and developing effective ways of partnering with them that neither ask too much nor expect too little has the potential to not just improve schools but transform entire education systems.

Winthrop and Eshadi (2021)
To truly change outcomes for young people we need to put them at the centre of vision, ideas and action. Focusing our collective efforts on working with them to understand and then create the conditions that support them to learn, grow and enjoy success on their own terms. Everyone has a role to play in raising the next generation and there is no better time to harness the untapped potential that exists within the broader ecosystem.

I think there is the danger that we just ask schools and teachers to do more and more and things become add-ons... I think there is room for parents, the wider community and employers to support.

**EMPLOYER INTERVIEW**

Parents are not the enemy, listen to us. We love our kids, we support them before starting school, during and after when they get jobs.

**PARENT, BIG EDUCATION CONVERSATION**

Learning ecosystems comprise diverse combinations of providers (schools, businesses, community organizations as well as government agencies) creating new learning opportunities and pathways to success.

Local Learning Ecosystems, Emerging Models

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**Figure 10:** Young people are the centre of an ecosystem of people and organisations willing and able to support their success.
Section 3

An appetite for change: what the people want

Whenever I hear people say that ‘change is hard’ I think, yeah, change that nobody wants is really hard.

Professor Todd Rose, co-founder of Populace, faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

There is a large appetite to connect about education issues, but conversations are siloed and unaligned across students, teachers, and parents. The exception is key moments related to COVID-19 that united conversations.

Brookings Institution (2021)

Questions, ideas and aspirations from young people, parents, teachers and employers...

Big questions to test and explore

- What are the outcomes that we collectively care about and should prioritise? With and for young people, and for wider society?
- What will it take for all young people to get the learning opportunities they want, need and deserve?
- If we took a broader view of success for young people then how might their achievements be recognised?
- How can the energy and passion of young people as agents of change in society be supported as part of their development?
- How could ecosystems of support for young people’s learning and development be created and sustained?
Young people, parents, teachers and employers had clear priorities and ideas for change.

The big change I want to see is...

We let children explore what to learn and to become what they want to become.

Isabella, Student

Celebration of non-conformity! Differences are accepted and even applauded.

Erin, Student

An education system that enables all children to flourish because they learn about emotions, how to regulate them and develop resilience.

Claire, Employer

A non-whitewashed curriculum that includes all students.

Hannah, Student

Pedagogy based on practical application of things we need to learn.

Darshan, Student

Make education relevant and irresistible for every child.

Alison, Teacher

Less focus and pressure on exam results, and more holistic preparation for thriving in life.

Lindsay, Employer

Children need to be respected more: both as people and as learners.

Alison, Teacher

Commitments to social and environmental justice.

Rachel, Teacher

Move away from testing, testing, testing to learning, sharing, living.

Angela, Citizen
Conclusion

With this document we want to inspire and challenge in equal measure. We have undertaken a year of listening to the public, and especially young people, to understand how they are thinking and feeling about education. We have gone deep and broad, using new methods of enquiry to get a real picture of the demand for long-term, transformative changes.

What we have heard leaves us with a clear conclusion: there is significant untapped demand for change in education and learning. Young people, parents, teachers and employers, are willing to ask big questions about what education is really for and how learning needs to be different. They see what isn’t working and want to work together to find solutions, and to set a new direction.

However, amidst the hope and ambition for the future, we have also heard frustration about the past. Tolerance for more top-down change is low, particularly among young people, teachers and school leaders. The new, and only, route to the lasting change we need is to empower and activate people in communities with youth leading the way.

The Big Education Conversation must be the start not the end of the dialogue about how to create new and better ways to support young people and their learning. We can show that a new way is possible; where the commitment, passion and insight of young people, parents, teachers, leaders and employers can be unlocked to support change in their communities and for the country.

Society is no longer passing the baton to the next in line in a continuing trend of incremental change. We are witnessing a fundamental departure from politics as usual, as young leaders respond to the demands of even younger activists acutely attuned to the injustices and inequalities of their era.

Time Magazine (2020)

In 2022, we will work with an enabling coalition of partners, to launch Subject to Change - a national project that combines powerful insight, collective action and public engagement to create a new direction for learning. This will give young people, parents, teachers and employers the chance to answer the big questions they are asking about where education and learning goes next, and to work together to find solutions.
Thank you!

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- Pupil Power
- Leaders Unlocked
- Beatfrees
- The Limes College
- National Children’s Bureau

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Big Education Conversation Partners
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- Association of Colleges
- Big Education
- Blagrave Trust
- Bounce Forward
- CfE
- City of London Corporation
- Coney
- DisperseEd
- Economist Educational Foundation
- Esmée Fairbairn
- HeadsUp
- Family Links
- FE
- Forum for the Future of Education
- George the Poet
- HeadsUp
- Parental Engagement Action Network
- London Interdisciplinary School
- Meet the Parents
- More Than A Score
- Our Shared World

Oppl
- Parent Ping
- ParentKind
- Parental Engagement Network
- Porticus
- Pupil Power
- Real Ideas
- Reclaim
- Rekindle
- Relationships Foundation
- RestartED
- Schools of Tomorrow
- SSAT
- Team Square Peg
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- The Difference
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- Tortoise
- TybedWales
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Laybourn-Langton L, Quilter-Pinner H and Treloar N (forthcoming), Making change: what works?, IPPR and Runnymede Trust


Winthrop R and Eshadi (2021), Know your parents, Brookings Institute, https://www.brookings.edu/essay/keep-your-parents/
**About Big Change**

Big Change was founded 10 years ago to rethink how charity could be a catalyst for positive change. We are impact and insight-led, working with and through others to create a society in which all young people are set up to thrive in life, not just exams. In the UK we back pioneering leaders and projects at an early stage in line with our 10 big hopes for change and globally we lead an insight network of leaders from across the education ecosystem who are focused on how to reimagine and transform our education systems. Over the past 18 months we have brought together the learning from this local and global work to scope and design Subject to Change: a new system-changing project that will empower young people and the public to set a new direction for learning in England.

**About IPPR**

The Institute for Public Policy Research is a registered charity and Britain’s leading progressive think tank, with offices in London, Manchester, Newcastle and Edinburgh. Founded in 1988, we are dedicated to the better country Britain can be through better public policy. Completely independent, we work with leading figures in politics, academia, business and society. We give voice to progressive ideas and policies to successfully influence policymakers from all parties and none. We are obsessed with the impact of our work. In recent years we have conducted significant work on education and learning, including setting up the charity, The Difference, which looks to prevent school exclusion in England, and delivering a significant multi-year policy programme called New Skills at Work. We also have a long-track record of running commissions including the influential Commission on Economic Justice in 2018.