

Comment on
Naomi Fisher *The 'how' and 'why' of the classroom*
<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/how-and-why-classroom>

John Raven

Version date: 23 April 2021 (modified)

The following comment is published in the on-line version of *The Psychologist* under Naomi Fisher's article at the above link.

Wow. What else is there to say? Except to thank Naomi.

Well. Actually. There is a great deal to be said ... and it is central to the future of psychology.

Naomi is right. Most people agree that there is more to education than learning stuff to pass examinations. And, interestingly, most people also agree that, while gaining certificates is important, knowledge of the content on which they are based is rarely important. They seldom use that knowledge in their jobs or their lives. To *get* jobs (or access the next stage in the "educational" system) - yes. But *in* their jobs and lives: No. How could it be otherwise? Knowledge has a half-life of a year. Unless they rehearse it, people forget 50% of what they have learned after one year, 50% of the remainder after two; and 50% of the remainder after three ... and so on. Only about one third of graduates pursue careers in their area of speciality.

But Gavin Williamson is right. Most research on educational effectiveness shows that knowledge of content, and even things like "reading ability", are best advanced by having pupils sitting in rows facing the front and being taught. Most project work going on in schools is of little educational merit.

On the other hand, the system is a sham. As it stands, what the system currently claims to offer hard-working children is a chance to enhance their competitive advantage in a race in which their abilities are judged, not by any absolute standards, but by reference to where they stand in relation to others, that is to say, in a norm-referenced system in which the bar continuously and automatically rises. But, by and large, the educational system does not succeed in altering children's competitive advantage. The rank order of children stays much the same from infant school to post-doc study. By and large, even remedial education does not "work".

Let us explore these issues a little further.

Most people agree that the main goals of education are to nurture qualities like initiative, problem-solving ability, and the ability to understand and participate in society. Even more importantly, although they do not quite put it like that (because it is so clearly in contradiction with existential reality) they concur that the most important goal is to draw out the talents of each individual pupil.

Yet schools rarely do these things.

Why?

Spearman noted one of the sources of the problem more than a century ago. He argued that neither measures of *g*, nor the tests from the correlations between which his *g* had emerged, had any place in schools. This was because they distracted the attention of parents, pupils, teachers, and politicians from the goal of education ... which, as the word education itself implies, is to draw out the diverse talents of the pupils.

Despite his warning, these tests ... and the wider over-arching concept of “ability” ... dominate schools.

In other words, the sociological function of the system, which is to contribute to the manufacture and legitimisation of hierarchy, has driven education out of schools.

Phrasing the issue like that enables psychologists to wash their hands of the problem: it is someone else’s problem to deal with it.

But this is not really so.

One thing it reveals is that psychologists have failed to study the networks of social forces which strongly determine human behaviour. Yet psychologists claim to be specialists in helping people to understand and predict human behaviour.

How are we to conceptualise, map, measure, and harness these external forces?

But this is only one of our problems.

In the century since Spearman wrote, few psychologists have occupied themselves with the task of clarifying the nature of the multiple talents of which he spoke or the processes required to nurture them.

Now, as Naomi Fisher and others have noted, these talents can only be observed and nurtured when pupils’ motives are engaged.

This poses enormous problems for traditional psychometrics. Qualities like creativity and initiative are only displayed *in the course of carrying out some valued* activity: inventing a new product, creating mayhem in a classroom, putting a distressed person at ease. They are not generalised dispositions of the kind envisaged by psychometricians.

By the same token, dispositions like these can only be nurtured through developmental experiences which somehow engage with people’s individual’s motives.

These observations pose enormous problems for those who wish to orchestrate class(room)-wide processes to nurture these vitally important dispositions.

In reality, doing so requires teacher competencies going way beyond those laid down in job descriptions ... indeed far beyond what most people would consider the call of duty.

OK. So far, so good. Or bad.

But let us loop back to the thousands of studies of “what works in education” which support Gavin Williamson’s claim. (Hattie has provided a meta-analysis of no less than 800 *meta*-analyses of these thousands of studies).

Yes. Well. We have already called that research into question by asking “learning what?”. Learning quickly-forgotten answer to examiners’ questions? Learning to adventure into the unknown? Learning how to establish satisfying relationships with others? Learning how to create political mayhem?

Now then. Hear this. These thousands of studies are actually seriously unethical if not criminal. By not mounting comprehensive evaluations of *all* the effects of the programmes being studied ... their desired and desirable, undesired and undesirable, personal and social, short and long term consequences ... they make it impossible for the benefits of the extraordinary teachers mentioned above – and the harms inflicted by the others – to show up. Pupils are denied recognition of their talents and teachers who pursue the most important objectives of education castigated for spending “time off task” and jeopardising their pupils’ position in a norm-referenced, competitive, hierarchy.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg. For not only can the most important outcomes of educational practices not be assessed using measures developed within the current psychometric paradigm, the processes to be used to nurture them – which have to be tailored to the individual pupil’s motives (in the way many parents do) – cannot be studied by focussing on the kinds of “variables” studied in most classroom research. Indeed the notion of “variables” in such situations is itself questionable.

And, then again, there are enormous problems in catering for diversity in a society which, in a schizophrenic sort of way, is simultaneously concerned with equality and manufacturing hierarchy ... and in which, in reality, there are enormous, largely unspoken, differences in values. These rapidly come to light if teachers or schools set out to nurture qualities like “the ability to think for oneself” or “critical thinking”.

In conclusion, therefore, psychologists clearly have a great deal to answer for by way of accounting for, and remediating, the role they have been playing in advancing what amounts to a largely psychologically destructive, if, on the whole, sociologically effective, “educational” system.

The problems strike at the heart of psychologists’ traditional preoccupations, thoughtways, and methodologies, indeed at their very image of science ... and what it takes to be a scientist (or, indeed, a professional) ... itself.

Moving forward will be a difficult task. But it would be unethical not to embrace it.

DeBoer, F. (2021) *Education Doesn't Work* <https://freddiedeboer.substack.com/p/education-doesnt-work?token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjoxMTU1MzI5NSwicG9zdF9pZCI6MzQxODQ5ODksIl8iOiIwdzhtaSIsImVhdCI6MTYxODIzNjI2NiwiZXhwIjoxNjE4MjM5ODY2LCJpc3MiOiJwdWItMjk1OTM3Iiwic3ViIjoicG9zdC1yZWZjdGlvbij9.b4HpFI3oQrxaERaMxojatB6t4lp1dzIGWbyChUeDP4I#footnote-8>

Raven, J. (2020). 'Closing the gap': Problems with its philosophy and research – A keynote address prepared for BPS Education Section Conference, September 2019 *The Psychology of Education Review*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Special Issue, 2020 pages 2 – 40. ISSN: 1463-9807. <https://shop.bps.org.uk/the-psychology-of-education-review-vol-44-no-3-special-issue-2020-0>

Raven, J. (1994). *Managing Education for Effective Schooling: The Most Important Problem Is to Come to Terms with Values*. Unionville, New York: Trillium Press. Also available at: http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/fulllist.html#managing_education