



technology, children, schools and families

# **The dynamic relationship between knowledge, identities, communities and culture**

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## **Summary**

This review outlines significant issues in current cultural and knowledge-related change in England, with particular emphasis on their impact on education and on young people. It draws together evidence to suggest that 'culture', 'knowledge' and 'creativity' denote areas of practice whose meaning varies according to their social location, and argues that issues of inequality and social differentiation – including differentiation on grounds of ethnicity – strongly affect how young people are positioned in relation to them. It concludes with reflections on two antithetical future scenarios. In the first, existing tendencies towards polarisation are present in even sharper form. In the second, equity becomes a stronger working principle. The review speculates on the consequences for the education and cultures of young people of each of these possibilities.

**Keywords:** culture, identity, knowledge, community, young people, creativity, social differentiation, ethnicity, class

## **Introduction: a new educational settlement?**

Over the last 70 years, the English education system has been twice remade – first in 1944, and then in 1988. These episodes introduced important institutional change, but they went further than this. In each case, they configured new relationships between education and other kinds of social arrangement, both economic and cultural. The 1944 Education Act established education as key to economic growth, and made school for the first time central to the experience of working-class teenagers; the changes brought about by the Education Reform Act (1988) connected education to an emerging knowledge economy, and laid the basis for a culture of attainment and competition, in school and beyond. In each case, educational reform was driven by powerful forces of social and political change: broadly social democratic in the first instance, Conservative – that is to say, market-orientated – in the second. In each case, too, a political revolution was involved, in which some social actors came to the fore, while others faded from the scene. Thus 1944 promoted local education authorities and teachers' organisations to a

position of power, while 1988 saw these actors largely replaced by the rising influence of school managements, and, later, private providers.

The educational energies set in motion by '1988' carried through into the New Labour years, and in many ways were strengthened and systematised then (Ball, 2008). This review seeks to take the measure of their impact. But it also addresses wider issues. '1988' was part of a larger programme of transformation, often called 'neo-liberal' (Harvey, 2005) and to make sense of issues of knowledge, identity, culture and community, means that the interaction of education with the other elements of this programme needs to be addressed. It is by taking the measure of these combined transformations that the review tries to think its way into the future. Will the period 2010-2025 see such a profound re-shaping of the education system as those of 1944 and 1988? Will it accelerate, or divert, the cultural and social energies set in motion in the 1980s? Will the social and occupational arrangements associated with the famously uneven patterns of wealth distribution created through neo-liberalism harden into permanent structures? We can start to answer such questions by looking at what social research is telling us about the present.

## **Grounded, differentiated cultures**

Social theory, Majima and Savage (2006) point out, is prone to make the claim that some time in the late 20th century, a transformation of the human personality occurred, that can be described in terms of 'individualisation' (Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2001), detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1994) or an accommodation of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). These accounts depict a world in which people have become increasingly 'reflexive' about their lifestyle choices and their values; they rely less on traditional modes of thinking, and are, compared with earlier generations, less influenced by the cultures to which they belong. Majima and Savage are sceptical; they regard these claims as being 'empirically ungrounded'. For them, values and meanings are in a strong sense culturally located. They grow out of mundane experience, and are more susceptible to immediate material pressures than to long waves of cultural change. Specifically, 'attitudes and values' arise from the processes through which people seek to differentiate themselves from some social groups and claim affinity with others. (2007, p297). These processes occur in a 'politically charged environment'; they are products of 'wars of manoeuvres' between social groups and positions (2007, p312). If we want to understand culture, therefore, we need to understand it in terms of social location, of difference and of contestation.

These arguments direct us towards two kinds of understanding. The first prioritises the material position of young people, in terms of the influence upon them of the job market, of education, and of their communities. The second emphasises cultural difference. In both cases, the intention is not to construct 'youth' or 'young people' as unified categories, but to look at patterns of change from a perspective concerned with their *varied* impacts on the young. French researchers, reflecting on the youth uprisings against police violence and economic insecurity in 2005-6, have written of the need to think in terms of 'deux jeunesses', those of the banlieues and those outside, whose conditions and prospects differ widely, though over both there hangs the shadow of 'precarity' (Mauger, 2006). A similar emphasis runs through this paper.

## **Knowledge**

Knowledge is increasingly understood in terms of its economic value. One of the main tenets underlying education policy is that 'information and knowledge are replacing capital and energy as the primary wealth-creating assets'. (Ball, 2008, p19) This claim is sometimes linked to an expectation that the workforce of the future will be increasingly knowledgeable and more highly skilled. From this stems the 'promise' that underlies policy exhortations to young people, that they should seek higher levels of qualification,

and longer periods in education, in return for rewarding jobs. However, the nature and extent of the knowledge economy have been called into question by many researchers in ways that suggest a very different configuration of knowledge from that sketched by policy. At stake in this questioning are issues of qualification, skill, quality of experience and reward. These issues, of course, are played out among the adult workforce, but their backwash effect in education, training and the social positioning of young people is considerable.

According to Castells (1998), knowledge economies are, in terms of their social relations, divided economies, with the categories of 'symbolic analyst' and 'generic labour' standing on opposite sides of a social divide. Other writers elaborate this point. Nolan (2004) writes of an 'hour-glass economy', in which the occupational structure is polarised between relatively secure high-skilled work, and a mass of lower-skilled, lower-paid and insecure employment. Brown (2003) and Brown and Hesketh (2004) tell a similar story, in which, while management, professional and technical jobs are expanding, so too are routine service jobs. Ewart Keep points out that these projections of polarisation are of crucial importance for education 'because the assumption is that a knowledge-driven economy and an associated labour market demand for ever higher skills is just around the corner is implicitly seen as one of the main means by which expansion of all phases and forms of post-compulsory learning can be justified and learners motivated' (Keep, 2005, p548). If this assumption is incorrect, then the motivating promise of 'good jobs for all' is unlikely to be believed. Lebaron (2006) writes in this context about the 'devalorisation' of educational qualifications: levels of educational attainment have risen, and expectations have been heightened, yet access to secure jobs, to housing and to an 'autonomous' adult life is harder to come by. In such a situation, education, for a sizeable section of the youth population, loses legitimacy (Bendit 2006).

So far, we have discussed knowledge in terms of training and qualifications – issues which cover only part of the field. Another set of arguments, running much wider than the 'skills' debate, concerns the relationship to the economy of the whole body of knowledge generated by populations – some of it certified and explicit, some of it 'tacit' and informal. This is the context in which some theorists have developed the idea of 'mass intelligence' or the 'general intellect' (Dyer-Witthford, 1999; Virno, 2004; Dowling, 2006). Knowledge is now the 'principal productive force' (Virno, 2004, p100); and 'immaterial labour' the defining form of work. Immaterial labour is an elastic concept that includes both the kind of knowledge work associated with 'mental' labour, and what Michael Hardt's calls 'the affective labour of human contact and interaction' which through 'the creation and manipulation of effects' can bring into being 'a feeling of ease, well being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community' (Hardt, n.d.). Whatever type of immaterial labour is emphasized, the tendency is to argue that it is produced in the course of the 'ordinary' exchanges of daily life, as well as through more specialized training. To understand the contemporary workforce and its capacities, one thus needs to think outside the workplace, and outside the educational institutions which have traditionally served it. Dowling explains that the ability to manage affect that was the basis of her waitressing work depended on social skills acquired outside the restaurant. Dyer-Witthford claims that the new communicational capacities and technological competencies developed through young people's media practices are both 'the premises of everyday life' and an economic resource that employers can exploit. Constantly on-line, immersed in a continuous, electronically mediated communicability, young people acquire the know-how required to perform immaterial labour. But this 'know-how' has a complicated relationship with business requirements. It may well be the case that management seeks to make 'the worker's personality and subjectivity susceptible to organisation and command' (Lazzarato, 1996, quoted in Dowling, 2006), but in practice, subjectivity also contains a surplus of 'excessive' human capacity, underemployed in the contemporary workplace.

These understandings complement, in a different theoretical idiom, the recent findings of sociologists of work, who identify a gap between the capacities of worker and the requirements of the enterprise in which they work. Pursuing this argument, Warhurst and Thompson (2006) develop a number of themes. They are sceptical about claims for upskilling, suggesting that firms' investment in ICT tends more to routinise than to make complex the demands of work; and following the Canadian research of Livingstone and Schottz (2006), they suggest that 'current labour processes' are not effective in 'utilising the existing skills of workers'. Higher education may have created a 'mass of potential knowledge workers' (2006, p788) but for an important section of the workforce, what is required of them by the work process is much less than their education and experience have rendered them capable of. Moreover, any upskilling that may be required 'appears to be complemented by deteriorations in other work aspects, namely autonomy and discretion' (2006, p790). The 'knowledge gap', in this case, has less to do with the deficiencies of school-leavers, than with the unfulfilling aspects of work. It is for reasons connected to the cultural surveillance and control that are exercised in the workplace, argues Willis (2003), that working-class energies have directed themselves away from production, and towards consumption, as a source of fulfilment and a resource for the construction of identity.

This is not the whole picture, though. More innovative enterprises, write Warhurst and Thompson, are keen to 'identify and utilise' the knowledgeability of their workforces, wanting to 'introduce organisational structures and practices that facilitate initiative and innovation in the form of creativity and continuous improvement' on the part of workers, whether routine or expert (2006, p794). Hartley, in a review of contemporary educational discourse, adds that it is not just at the top end of the labour market that such capacities are thought to be required. There are sections of the economy – personal services, for instance – which are 'high touch' more than they are high tech and in which emotional intelligence is an asset which management needs to tap (Hartley, 2003). (Here Hartley echoes some of the argument of Hardt, above.) This reading of economic need validates new educational approaches, to which issues of 'creativity' are central. In Anna Craft's words, the 'economic imperative to foster creativity in business has helped to raise the profile and credentials of creativity in education more generally' (1999, p11). This, in terms of educational history, is creativity of a new type, going well beyond the traditional arts-based model – an approach exemplified in some of the work sponsored between 2002 and 2009 by Creative Partnerships. The key point that educationalists must absorb is that adapting to new social and economic complexities is not something that can be learned systematically, as a set of rules but rather requires attentiveness to what James Scott (1998) terms 'metis', practical knowledge, that stems from the subject's ability to draw from the entire range of their experience, to articulate that which in other circumstances would remain tacit, and in doing so to respond productively - creatively - to new challenges. Creativity is not only a set of skills, but a modality of life.

The pattern of argument here is a complex one, in which the possibilities of a fuller development of the personality, of the sort at which educationalists have traditionally aimed, is mixed up with more instrumental ideas of what it means to be creative. As the French sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello put it, work has become 'simultaneously more autonomous and more constrained' (2005, p430), and a similar tension is likely to run through schooling, so that 'creativity' comes to mean both the promise of a new and more liberated way of 'doing education', and a preparation for a working life in which to be 'creative' is to be an economic asset as much as a free individual.

## **Social influences on the cultural**

Michael Rustin (2008) makes a distinction between policy norms and what, following Lockwood (1964), he calls systemic conflict. Since the late nineties, he suggests, English

society may well have experienced consensus at the level of policy, with few disagreeing with 'Third Way' approaches to problems of economic and social change; but this should not cause us to overlook the continued existence of deep-rooted systemic tensions. He specifies two kinds of tension in particular. The first is 'current levels of social inequality', which mean among other things that 'educational outcomes and therefore employment prospects for the lowest third of the population remain obstinately poor' (2008, p278). Rustin is doing no more here than confirming a wealth of research data, which attests not only to continuing inequality but to rates of social mobility that were lower at the end of the 20th century than during the post-war decades of educational reform and occupational change (Sutton Trust, 2005). Cultural patterns and senses of individual and collective identity are, and will be, profoundly affected by the closure and exclusion involved in this impasse. Indeed, Gayo-Cal, Savage and Warde (2006), in their attempt to draw 'a cultural map of the United Kingdom', refer to 'entrenched cultural divisions within the social body', identifying patterns not just of cultural diversity, but of antagonism, 'Young, poorly educated males' are deeply at odds with the cultural attachments of wealthier groups, without, according to the researchers, having alternative, positive preferences of their own (2006, p219, p226). Thus here too the concept of 'deux jeunesses'- two stratified kinds of youth experience - is salient.

The second tension identified by Rustin has to do with social solidarity, with the norms and collective practices which, for classical sociology, contribute to social cohesion. Again what are at issue are enduring tendencies, rather than episodic quirks. Referring to work by Layard (2005) and Offer (2006), and adopting arguments similar to those of Wilkinson (1997) and Oliver James (2007), Rustin suggests that 'improvements in living standards seem to be accompanied by no increases in self-reported happiness' (2008, p278). On the contrary, inequalities and 'social epidemics' of family breakdown, of depression and addiction produce effects of 'ill-being'. As others (for instance, Buckingham, 2000) have pointed out, young people and children are strongly affected by such tensions. Economically and culturally, they have benefited from the growth of the youth market for consumer goods: as Willis (1990) showed, commercialised, 'commodified' products provide vital symbolic resources for the creation of youth identities. But such commercialised engagement is also seen to put children in moral and sometimes physical danger (Buckingham. 2000). Socially, children and young people are the focus of considerable anxiety, both as victims ('stranger danger') and as threats ('feral youth'). Educationally, the pressures of a performance culture seem to contribute to low levels of happiness (UNESCO. 2007). It seems right to understand these various tensions as long-lasting, as inter-connected, and as powerful shapers of culture and identity.

However, this is not the only way in which the social and cultural positioning of young people is described. Majima and Savage (2007) in their longitudinal study of cultural attitudes in the period 1981-1999 claim to detect a shift towards 'more rebellious and conscientious' attitudes. Cunningham and Lavalette, in a study of school-student participation in the anti-war movement of 2003, identified similar attitudes (2004). It seems reasonable to predict that, among a section of children and young people, the environmental and social crises that one can envisage for 2025 will provoke similar responses. Solidarity, lost in one area, may be regained in another.

## **Ethnicity**

The growing demographic importance of ethnic communities, and of mixed heritage populations, is generally recognised (Finney and Simpson, 2008). The kinds of inter-community relations which are connected to these trends are much more disputed, as are the associated issues of identity.

Broadly, there are three positions in the identity debate. None of them is simply a commentary on cultural trends; each seeks to shape the reality they describe in a desired direction. The character of 'identity', both individual and collective, will be strongly affected by which model(s) emerge from the contest as dominant.

The first model is based on a theory of communities divided primarily on lines of ethnicity and leading 'parallel lives'. (Cantle, 2005). Meaningful interaction is here 'virtually non-existent' (Burnett, 2007), and communities develop their own separate identities and belief systems. This diagnosis has been politically influential and has supported a drive to consolidate a general sense of Britishness, 'a political identity (created) through active membership of the nation state, which regulates individual behaviour and provides for collective action' (Cantle, quoted in Burnett, 2007, p117.) A second, alternative model, supported by recent social research (Wetherell, 2008), emphasises less the separateness of communities than the interaction between them. In the process of interaction, 'new, complex, hybrid forms of identity are emerging among second and subsequent generations of migrants as part of the normal process of identity change over time' (Wetherell, 2008, p780). These identities, it is argued, in the great majority of cases, include a strong British component. Not all identities are hybridised, of course: some groups, including white British working-class people, 'try to hang on to older cultural forms and senses of belonging'. And, in all cases, ethnically-based identities are articulated, in different ways, with social class.

A third model accepts much of what is said about hybridisation, but is much less certain that it necessarily creates what Gilroy celebrates as 'a convivial mode of interaction where differences have to be negotiated' (Gilroy, 2005, p438, cited in Wetherell, 2008). Yousuf notes that 'growing numbers' of people have 'dual or multiple loyalties' that cross national boundaries: 'globalisation of communications allows people to align themselves with any social, cultural or political group anywhere in the world' (2007, p362). Her account is different from that of others who write about hybridity, however, because she accentuates the element of potential conflict between such loyalties. In globalised times, to separate the 'inside' of the national state from the 'outside' is not possible. At particular moments, where the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside' is one of tension, then potential conflicts are activated, and the attachment of some groups of citizens to what they customarily see as 'their' state becomes strained: 'loyalties can be recalcitrant and unpredictable' (2007, p363). Evidence collected by Liz Fekete (2008) develops the point further. In a world where there is no 'over there' – no international space entirely separate from that of the national state – the response of states to perceived threats to their security adds to internal tensions, with particular consequences for some minority groups. In the wake of the London bombings of 2005, and what Muslim communities experienced as a backlash, Fekete described a process of cultural and social withdrawal, 'a kind of counter-culture, a refusal to participate, on the basis of "I don't want what I can't get."

Thus, while the salience of ethnicity to culture and identity is beyond question, the modes through which it will be experienced – convivial, defensive – are harder to predict.

### **Education: differentiated expansion**

Education is, of course, shaped by forces that have their origins elsewhere, in the economy, or in wider patterns of social change. But it is also a force in its own right, constructing knowledge, allocating social positions, shaping identities. Making sense of trends in education is therefore vital to understanding the future patterning of knowledge, culture, communities and identities.

We can begin this work of making sense by noting two long-term, interlinked tendencies, summed up in the phrase 'differentiated expansion'. Education has vastly expanded, in ways that affect all social groups. Expansion has occurred along several axes: 'vertically', one can speak of the development of under-5 and post-16 education; further steps towards the massification of higher education; the demands of lifelong learning. 'Horizontally', the formal curricular work of the school is increasingly accompanied by pre-school and after-school provision. As the summer rituals surrounding examination results show, the majority of the school population has been drawn into processes of certification and has a strong emotional investment in them. As we shall see, whether one looks at the span of a day or the course of a lifetime, education occupies an ever-larger and personally important part of it, so that Bernstein's diagnosis of a 'pedagogisation' of society (2001) looks more and more accurate. Yet this rich landscape of education is highly differentiated: access, attainment, quality, resources and occupational destination are all strongly conditioned by gender, ethnicity and social class. Understandings of 'knowledge', 'identity' and 'culture' have therefore to grasp both general patterns of experience in a pedagogised world, and specific, differentiated situations.

## **A disarticulated system**

Ball (2008) describes the current school system as 'disarticulated', based increasingly on diversity of provision. Diversity has allowed opportunities for the exercise of parental choice, with 'skilled chooser' parents, mainly middle-class, able to secure advantage for their children (Gewirtz et al, 1995). This is a competitive system, in which those who can afford it have developed the habit of buying resources to support their children, over and above what is offered by the school. Buckingham and Scanlon (2003) describe parents' investment in home-based ICT; Ball (2007, 2008) shows the ways in which parents make use of the growing market in private provision (home tutoring, for instance) in an attempt to ensure success. Competition, also, is not just a matter of securing access to 'good' primary and secondary schools. It extends upwards to university level, with a growing status distinction between groups of universities, and with assessment systems that increasingly register the small differences in exam performance that make a difference to university admission. Here, too, individuals need to develop the skills of choice and calculation, so that, according to some researchers (Brown 2003), education is more than ever seen as a 'positional' rather than an 'absolute' good.

Are there any reasons to think that these strong tendencies, which have been in motion for nearly two decades, will lessen in their effects over the next 15 years? To answer the question, several possibilities need to be taken into account. One is that government investment in early years education and in targeted programmes of student support will lessen some of the effects of social disadvantage, and weaken the effects of middle-class advantage. Another is that the habits of 'skilled choosing' will be learned by working-class parents and students. A third is that the cultures of schools – because they need to motivate rather than disengage students – will make a turn away from 'performativity' towards an agenda that emphasises other needs. We have already seen how this might occur under the banner of 'creativity'. It is conceivable that 'personalisation' might also support such a change. Leadbeater (2008) thinks that a personalised agenda based on mentoring, family support, individualised timetables and a meaningful curriculum would transform the school experience of large numbers of working-class students, and claims to see the beginnings of such an agenda already, in some schools, taking shape. A pre-condition of success, he argues, is that schools should be capable of acts of 'cultural recognition', which understand and positively evaluate the meaning-making capacities of students, and of the communities they come from. Extending Leadbeater's argument, one might envisage schools recognising, too, their students' investment in popular culture.

Against these possibilities might be placed the stratifying influence of labour markets, an influence whose pressure on the school it is hard to see diminishing. Also relevant is the capacity of more privileged groups, demonstrated frequently in educational history, to keep ahead of the game (Crouch, 1998), or to turn to their advantage policies which were drawn up with equal opportunity in mind. From this point of view, it is possible to see how, when making an informed choice of secondary school has become a capability within the reach of all parents, the skills of choice are replayed at a higher and more complex level, in relation to A level pathways and to higher education. Likewise, 'personalisation' might become an effective means of providing for the privileged, as much as it served the needs of less privileged groups; while the content acquired by the 'creativity' agenda could quite feasibly vary according to class and status. Finally, as the Ajegbo Report on cultural diversity (2007, p34) pointed out, the capacities of schools to respond to the cultures of non-privileged students have often been limited: it is one thing to set out a policy of personalisation, another thing to construct a school that can deliver it. While one line of policy may offer support to the development of students' voice, another may endorse practices of exclusion from school, or strong forms of surveillance and discipline, that tend to discourage it (Monk, 2005). It may be, too, that although schools have acquired many new capacities, especially in the area of 'effectiveness', there have also been significant losses along the way. Between 1970, say, and 1990, attentiveness to the languages, dialects and cultures of school-students was well-developed in some curriculum areas (Burgess and Martin, 1990) and was linked to an often-productive questioning of the relationship between the formal knowledge of the school and the everyday experience of its students. Arguably, since 1988, this interest has been pushed to the margins of a teacher consciousness shaped by the requirements of national curricula and literacy frameworks.

## **Identity issues**

Schools are places where attempts occur to realise the designs of policy – to produce responsible citizens, capable workers and so on. But if we limit ourselves to such topics, we do not fully capture the 'identity work' that occurs in schools – work which involves the responses of the school population as much as it does the intentions of policy-makers. Ethnographic research in schools has, since the 1960s, uncovered various and localised patterns of sub-culture that are often resistant to the official culture of the school, and that are important sites for the formation of student identity. Willis (1990) showed the extent to which such identity formation made use of commercial culture – clothes, music, pub culture - partly because of its lack of connection to formal education. Phoenix (2005) presented evidence to suggest that this identity work was significantly differentiated by class. Others, more recently, have researched the affordances for identity formation that electronic media provide (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). One important and consistent finding of research is that the identities that some groups of students make for themselves are both resources from which they can achieve a sense of self-worth and group solidarity, and, at the same time, a route to educational exclusion. This was the conclusion of Paul Willis's classic work 'Learning to Labour' (1977), and it has been reiterated by other researchers since. Most recently, Louise Archer and her colleagues (2003, 2007) have shown the processes through which students construct identities that equip them well for aspects of urban life, while disqualifying themselves from prospects of educational success. The problems that arise from such choices are all the more difficult because the identities which students construct are plainly seen by them as a valuable resource, rather than the result of a mistaken choice. It is reasonable to predict, that if inequality continues to be a feature of the social life of young people, then so, also, for some groups, will be what Willis calls the 'desperate work' of (counter-cultural) identity formation.

Elsewhere, in a disarticulated school system, other kinds of identity will be constructed, whose cultural markers will be different. Still salient here are the distinctions between high and low culture which framed discourses about culture and education in the post-

war period (Jones, 2009, forthcoming). A complete polarisation of these terms is unfeasible, since the vast growth of the culture industries has blurred the distinction between the two spheres, and high culture itself, now more thoroughly exposed to commodification, has incorporated popular forms. (Anderson, 1998); even the most culturally privileged of students will have a knowledge of popular media culture. Nevertheless, markers of cultural difference, arranged along an axis of 'high' and 'low', facilitate the processes of 'distinction' that is vital to class and group identities (Bourdieu, 1986) and high culture continues to supply elite groups with cultural capital.

## Conjecturing the Future

What can these sketches of the present tell us about the future? One set of possibilities insistently presents itself: 2010-2025 will not see a profound rearrangement of the education system. The main reason for thinking this is that the social and political energies that are needed to bring about transformative change are lacking. A decade before 1944, it was obvious that there existed a powerful demand for 'secondary education for all'. Likewise, in the decade leading up to 1988, the existence of a Conservative project, capable of addressing the social and economic tensions of the 1970s, was plain to see. Nothing comparable exists now, and for this reason it is plausible to construct a future based on the projection of current tendencies, rather than the emergence of a radically new scenario. And what applies to education applies, *a fortiori*, to the wider tendencies that shape knowledge identities, cultures and communities.

On such a basis, one might construct a scenario like the following:

Conflict beyond British borders catches Britain in its flames. A narrow and embattled national identity is reinforced. Race and religion become conduits through which global tensions flow. Environmental issues likewise become a battleground: climate change, global shortages of food and natural resources, provoke a competition for survival.

Economic and social polarisation continues. For large sections of the population, precarity – intermittent and partial access to the labour market – becomes a way of life. In the absence of social housing, the dependency of younger on older generations grows. Education remains a field in which processes of differentiation are intense, and where the pressure to perform is the basic principle that regulates institutional life.

The problems of youth are at the heart of the country's social conflicts. The promise that educational achievement will enable security and fulfilment is seen as a rotten one. One response – following the model of France in 2005/6 and Italy in 2008 – is spectacular outbreaks of protest. Another is the everyday 'refusal' of the school by large sections of its population.

There develops also a culture of refusal and defiant marginality. In an effort to re-engage their students, schools attempt to relate to it – under a variety of banners, from 'creativity' to 'thinking skills' to 'emotional intelligence'. But the pressures of performativity, the difficulties faced by teachers trained to work with a fixed and orthodox curriculum, the intensity of students' refusal and the overwhelming effects on the school of social breakdown, make this attempt, in many urban schools, a failure. Aspirations to 'cohesion' are still voiced by policy-makers, but increasingly ring hollow. Private sector education, meanwhile, continues to guarantee future security, and in those schools (academies, trust schools, well-located church schools) that form large enclaves of relative privilege within the public sector, another kind of education is evolving. Though performance-focused, it sees the necessity of creativity in a knowledge economy, as well as the advantages it can confer. It is here teaching and learning

mutate away from the mould in which they were fixed by the national curriculum and by testing. Authentic reform occurs, but is, as always, limited by social situations.

Yet, were other sorts of social energy to be released, culture and education might be configured in very different ways.

Accepting their relative decline, governments of the West withdraw from conflicts whose blowback has heightened domestic tensions. Responding to public clamour, governments co-operate to mitigate the effects of climate change and to apportion the planet's resources equitably. Strong environmental movements monitor what they do, and make the fate of the earth the central issue in political and social life.

Economic production is reshaped on environmentalist principles. Public investment and redistributive taxation diminish inequalities, and in this new context, the employment and housing prospects of young people improve. As the occupational structure comes to resemble less an hour-glass than a broad-based, low-angled pyramid, so students become more attached to an educational system whose promises they can see as reliable.

The lessening of economic insecurity lifts pressure from the school. Education is less likely to be seen as a positional good, possession of which is only valuable if it confers advantage. Equity becomes a stronger working principle in education, while differentiation diminishes. A new assertiveness among teachers means that they play a greater role in innovation, and can respond without anxiety to cultural change and the tensions that accompany it. Students find that their symbolic creativity is recognised and valued, and that the school has become a place where they can experiment, refine and develop the creativity of home and community.

Argument, debate and protest become ordinary features of the life of schools and communities, which engage continually with the 'real life' issues. They contribute to the common stock of intellectual resources that is needed to devise responses to social and environmental problems that exist on a planetary scale. They provide a context and a resource for cultural production.

Neither of these scenarios will come to pass, but they at least measure out the spectrum of possibilities that is open to education and culture. One end of that spectrum, darker in its colours, is closer to realisation than the other. But, as ever, what will happen is not written in the stars, nor even in the best efforts of policy-makers. Identities, knowledges, cultures – even schools – are less ductile than policy sometimes imagines, and there are surprises in store for us, beyond current horizons.

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