

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson
House of Commons
London
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Deputy Directors Joe Billington and Paul Baker in the Department for Education
Professor Becky Francis, Curriculum and Assessment Review, Chair.

4th February 2025

Dear Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson,

Just over a year ago, I was commissioned by Policy Lab as part of its MANIFEST programme, to spend a year in the Department for Education. Their aim is to evaluate how artists can work within government departments to improve the process of policymaking.

Artists are comfortable with not knowing, often guided by curiosity and instinct, they play, explore and ask questions. When embedded in different situations, communities and places, they can embrace the oddities, the hidden, the disconnected. They can reimagine, bring people together and have new conversations in order to help reconnect and see things in a new way.

Some months into my journey in DfE, learning about the breadth of work they do, from early years and care, to adult education and careers, I followed my instincts and focused on schooling. It felt close to my heart, my son, now 6, was beginning his own journey at the local primary school. At the same time, my dad's journey was coming to an end, as he died at the age 78. I began to wonder, will my son reach the age that my dad did? It'll be nearly 2100 if he does, what will the world look like? How will his schooling prepare him for that world?

Whilst researching futures & strategies within DfE I was pointed to the Policy Paper, Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems. I was particularly interested in Action Area One; climate education. I interviewed some of the civil servants and external advisors that contributed to the paper.

I've been exploring complexity, systems and reimagining new ways in the face of our multiple planetary and social crises in my artistic practice for over 15 years now. Using Action Area One as a springboard for conversation, I convened a group of experts, practised and researched in education and climate & ecological breakdown, together with civil servants from DfE, to explore what the children beginning formal education in September 2025 will need from their schools to support them through their lifetime?

At a similar time, you wrote to Professor Becky Francis CBE, inviting her to chair the first curriculum and assessment review in over a decade. In that letter you spoke of 'evolution, not revolution'. I'm writing this letter to you to share what that might mean when framing education in schools through the lens of multiple crises including climate & ecological breakdown. Much of what was heard in the workshop fits with evidence that points to the need for rapid transformational change, rather than small incremental changes. When it comes to the vast challenges we face, it is a case of more revolution, than evolution.

Climate education has been thought of as a 'bolt on' approach to the curriculum. Although there is of course information to be delivered and facts to process, climate change and its consequences is not simply a subject to be taught. Preparing our children for the precarious world of deep uncertainty, extreme dangers and challenges they will be living through, is different from teaching children the scientific and technical facts that caused it.

Action Area One goes a little further in the right direction in its hopes for climate education. It works on the principle that children also need hope to counter despair. So hope is proposed in the form of agency.

"We must offer them not just truth, but also hope. Learners need to know the truth about climate change –through knowledge-rich education. They must also be given the hope that they can be agents of change, through hands-on activity and, as they progress, through guidance and programmes allowing them to pursue a green career pathway in their chosen field"

Whilst on the surface this makes sense and follows a certain logic, it doesn't acknowledge the fragility, framework and values held within the current system. It's this unstable ground that makes being able to deliver and truly sustain these pockets of hope deeply problematic. Maybe this is what you meant behind 'evolution not revolution'; not imposing more work load, stress and changes on an already exhausted and overloaded school system and teaching profession?

Climate education can not be separated from education as a whole. Offering projects of hope in an unsustainable system without making space and support to acknowledging the fear, anxiety and grief that many children are already feeling when exposed to truths, (wherever the source), runs the risk of doing even more damage.

In the workshop we explored what (climate) education; action area one, or, as I came to call it, Reimagining schooling for the end of what we know, should really be. How do we school for a precarious world of deep uncertainty and not knowing?

Both the workshop and wider body of evidence points to a need for transformative change (or as you refer to it, revolution), in order to create a curriculum and assessment process that works towards nurturing the whole child and working as a whole school. This means embedding critical thinking, philosophical inquiry, creativity, two way communication, collaboration, empathy, emotional wellbeing, co-learning, connection, play and sense of belonging into all learning.

Transformation (or revolution) is needed to move away from schooling being a didactic, knowledge-rich approach which imposes fixed milestones for children to meet. Instead, education should embrace place- and community-based learning that is socio-emotional, collaborative & cooperative, exploratory & arts-based, culturally responsive, action – orientated, experiential & participatory and problem & project based ways of learning.

Transformation (or revolution) is needed for children to understand the larger story as to why these crises have come about and where their place is within the story, so they can be supported on a journey to decolonize and de-industrialise their thinking and understand the need for a just transition. Transformation (or revolution) is needed to establish everyday practices that support children's mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health as we navigate the changing world. Learning should be connected to natural cycles, fostering a deep appreciation of nature and an awareness of our place within it. It should cultivate an understanding of what requires care and how to care for it. Additionally, we must build a culture of kindness and sharing, create spaces and language for grief, and engage disillusioned learners.

Transformation (or revolution) will be needed to work with teachers, pupils and communities to adapt their existing buildings, systems and infrastructure to make them resilient and sustainable. This will enable schools to continue functioning, providing protection and supporting learning despite extreme weather conditions. School dinners and food systems must be transparent, resilient, and healthy. Additionally, there is a need to reintegrate essential life skills into education, including food growing, energy production, water harvesting and flood management, making and mending clothes, building, coding, and computing.

Transformation (or revolution) is needed if we are to remember what it is to be a whole human and to value wise over smart, intrinsically motivated over reward focused, risk taking over fear of failure, nature based over classrooms, child directed learning, play and exploration over didactic, active & embodied over knowledge-rich, collective over competitive.

It was my initial intention to address this letter to Professor Becky Francis, but it is your request, alongside our inability to see the filters and lens by which we see the world, that set the boundaries of imaginations. The evidence is there and the work and research has already been done by so many organisations. This current Curriculum and Assessment Review could be a last gift to our children, to offer them different ways of knowing and being and to help them live and die well in a time of not knowing.

Regards,

Ruth Levene