

Education and school - the present and the potential futures - points for contemplation



Jón Torfi Jónasson

On November 11th 2022, the School of Education held a seminar on the future of education from different perspectives to honour Jón Torfi Jónasson, who has for a long time taught and researched education at the University of Iceland. A special issue of [Netla](#) was also published based on the same rationale. Towards the end of the meeting, Jónasson presented a list of topics and he argued that they tended to be marginalised in the educational arena but certainly deserved thoughtful discussion. Education needs such discourse. He presented these points with the following preamble: *Educational discourse has always been complex and continues to be so. I suggest that there are certain basic tenets that should be brought to the fore and debated, perhaps before other issues are taken up in the school or educational discourse; often mundane issues that tend to marginalise the most important ones. I make certain claims that I feel are very important, which at the very least need to be debated. I briefly attempt a clarification in each case. Only the first statement is specifically Icelandic.*

[The article in Icelandic](#) - [The article in Polish](#)

Icelandic education is doing well overall

The Icelandic school system is more open, more flexible and does less tracking than most foreign systems. It is doing very well in many ways. Many energetic young individuals

emerge from our school system and its related activities. On the whole it is well staffed by professionals. Nevertheless, there are challenges that must be properly acknowledged and emphatically addressed. The most serious are two: a) Those related to children with learning difficulties, or facing mental or social problems at school or at home and b) challenges facing children whose primary language or cultural background is not Icelandic. I feel that our system and authorities are taking these issues seriously, and in many ways sensibly. They should turn their attention to these but simultaneously ensure that the system overall has the financial and professional support to keep up the excellent work found widely in the system and ensure all such work is facilitated and sustained.

School can do much, but not everything

We must be alert to the fact that school cannot correct or eliminate underlying robust social inequalities (but it must be ensured that it doesn't sustain or amplify these). It is out of the question that it can single-handedly address, with the view to correct, many of the challenges society presents, both at governmental, municipal and family levels. But still, school often can play a substantial role in addressing current social challenges. Perhaps a larger role than it realises or is prepared for. The potential role of school in moulding and developing an egalitarian society and the well-being of individual students or groups must be brought to the fore in discussions about school and education.

We know much about our futures and education must take note

We should attend to the potential futures to a much greater extent than we normally do in any educational or social discourse and stop seeking shelter in the statement that any future is difficult to predict. Even though this is certainly true, we can still discover much about what is happening and will happen, but we have not made a sufficient effort to find out. Therefore, we have unnecessarily fuzzy ideas about our futures. The enduring claim that any future is unforeseeable is based on an indefensible view that the futures are so uncertain that it does not make sense to predict anything. Much is known. As examples, we know much about the fourth industrial revolution, rapidly changing labour markets and there are developing or new industries wherever we look, which demand a host of new skills and mindsets. The enormous computing capacity of large computers no longer sets any limits to programming and we know about the expanding computing capacity of small computers that are woven into all aspects of our lives. We know all too well about the usurping of a variety of valuable minerals or compounds, and huge climatic changes (whatever is to blame) and the immense threat to both fauna and flora on the global scene. There is already a massive movement of people for various serious reasons, and substantial cultural changes that reach into all corners of our lives - indeed culture and cultural issues demand our increased attention. We know about the changing ways people communicate, and interact

both privately and in the world of work. There are serious changes in childhood due to marketisation especially through extensive social media platforms and smart devices. We know about exponential accumulation of solid knowledge in all scientific fields, not confined to those most often mentioned, such as communication, artificial intelligence, molecular biology (e.g., genetics) and ethics, all of which should be particularly attended to. These should be presented as an evidential basis for the argument that educational content should change, probably be transformed. Wherever we look, much is changing in front of our eyes, and we realise this will continue, most probably at an increasing pace. We don't need to pretend that no insight or prediction is possible. The massive new substantive knowledge about everything noted above, often within new, rapidly emerging disciplines could underpin and sharpen our understanding of these developments. Of course, there is much we don't know, but it would be very unwise to let this take control of our thinking and even put it to sleep. It seems imperative that education becomes more forward looking, e.g., by discussing and understanding what is happening and how we cultivate the capacity to face and solve the challenges ahead. This will not happen, nor be sustained, without full participation of teachers and students. That is not a romantic request but a very pragmatic necessity.

Current technology and school

Technology, specifically, will have a wide ranging and dramatic influence on practically all aspects of our lives, and we should pay particular attention to this. But there is no pressing need to acquaint young people with the current technology for its own sake as much of it will be obsolete by the time they leave school. But its essence should be probed and understood. More importantly, the technology should normally not be used as a tool or platform to teach traditional stuff because, it may be argued, if computers can teach it, they can do it. We can then utilise them directly for those tasks, and the time in school may be used to cultivate different things. But we should certainly use them to help us move on into many totally new worlds that are worth attending to and exploring and technology should certainly be harnessed for those purposes.

The present matters

Even though a substantial role of any school is to be mindful of the futures and consider their preparatory role, then the role a school must play in the current life - the present - matters no less to any of its pupils, be it a child, an adolescent, a youth, or an adult. These people are living their lives, enjoying or tackling it and it should be recognised that school has become a substantial part of any student's life. Sometimes it is practically a second home. The current wellbeing of everyone in the system is important for its own sake but it is certainly also a prerequisite for any education to take place. This aspect of education must in no way be belittled or undervalued, which we sometimes tend to do when we are too

preoccupied with the potential futures. Education is a challenging undertaking indeed but it also needs to be a constructive endeavour that respects the makeup and context of those taking part.

The relationship to the world outside school is important

The school must also acknowledge that the world outside its boundaries is multifaceted and connecting to it can be of immense value for education. The school, as an institution, should make a considerable effort to ensure a solid connection to its rich cultural, social and natural environment. This should be seen as a major priority for education.

Research and government action are less related than is often thought

Research and all kinds of data are invaluable ways to understand the world, to see how things connect and reveal complexities and grasp their nature, but also to see all kinds of deficiencies that invite action. But the world of science must acknowledge the extent to which it is based on the past, or sometimes the present, and especially how difficult it is to harness current knowledge or data in order to break out of the box and step into the futures. It is possible, but doesn't happen automatically, as often assumed. Far from it. And the choice of the best route to act is not implicit in data. Thus, their worth tends to be overrated. Our values are not necessarily an inherent part of our knowledge. Deliberation and decisions concerning the values which we cherish and want to nurture are at least equally valuable as are scientific knowledge and data. All governmental or social decisions and actions are political - in the best meaning of the word - and this should not be apologised for; their political nature and direction should be acknowledged and debated on that basis.

Deliberating the nature and role of education is a priority

That discussion should be an integral part of the educational process - not a decorative add-on. Good discussion about the aims of a professional task is the hard kernel of professionalism. And all the points noted above should be a part of this discussion. When we accept our major responsibility to seriously probe what role education and school should play in the present or when preparing for our futures, our attention should be even more focussed on thinking about the meaning and role of school and education than it is on deliberating the futures, as important as such contemplation also is. The role of education comes first, then the futures discussion. This would place the focus on education as a multifaceted cultural endeavour benefitting each individual, but no less to ensure that everybody else also gets the same space to manoeuvre, in the present and in the future.

Furthermore, this demands that the capacity of each and every educator to engage in this debate, is fostered, cultivated and harnessed.



About the author

Jón Torfi Jónasson (jtj(hja)hi.is) is professor emeritus in education at the University of Iceland. [See his webpage here.](#)

Article published February 24th 2023

SKÓLAÞRÆÐIR
TÍMARIT SAÐARA EKKIÐLEGS OG SKÓLAÞRÆÐIR