# Coming back stronger: a contribution to a conversation about Camden's education strategy

## Christine Gilbert, Chair, Camden Learning

## Introduction

There is much to admire about schools in Camden. They perform well in the public accountability framework, with results above national averages and all schools judged good or better by Ofsted. Their leaders are inspiring and the people working in them are committed and passionate.  Nevertheless, children from poorer families in Camden – in common with those elsewhere – continue to perform less well than pupils from homes with more obvious advantages. Last year, a report from the Education Policy Institute[1] found that, on current trends, it would take 560 years to close the gap between children from poorer homes and their peers. The current crisis will only have widened that gap.

The nature and scale of the pandemic means its impact is likely to profound. No one can be sure exactly what the changes will be or how permanent they will prove. Education leaders in Camden now are rightly focused on managing schools' immediate problems and planning heroically for a return to at least a form of pre-pandemic normality. They have to address not only learning issues but also concerns about the health and well-being of children, young people and their families – as well as increasing support for teachers and other staff. To sustain and adapt these initiatives, particularly those that represent longer-term improvements in how schools work, will be a challenge, but it remains a priority nonetheless. Whatever the demands of the moment, we need to think about the future. We must continue to capture best practice within Camden and beyond and share knowledge across the system to develop a long-term education strategy for Camden. This thinkpiece is a contribution to that goal.

Extra time is a luxury our children, especially the most disadvantaged, cannot afford. We need to think more radically about the sort of education system we want locally and why. We need to have that conversation with everyone invested in building a better future in education in Camden to create a strategy that works for all. We need to take the opportunity to 'build back better'[2].

How do we do that? I think improvement rests on five essential building blocks. We must:

1. Anchor development in a place-based model of change
2. Provide more resources for children at-risk
3. Leverage technology
4. Re-imagine a broad, inclusive and more relevant education for all
5. Build capacity through collaboration

Yet if we are to establish a firm foundation for these building blocks, it's important to define exactly what the purposes of education are. The section below offers a proposal for debate.

---

[1] Education Policy Institute (EPI) in partnership with the Fair Education Alliance (FEA), 2019, Education in England: Annual Report 2019
[2] World Bank Group, 2020, The Covid-19 Pandemic: Shocks to education and Policy Responses

## The purposes of education

Education has the power to transform lives. It nurtures and develops individuals and allows them to thrive. But it also has an important role in helping individuals grow as good citizens, ambitious for change and able to contribute positively to their communities and society. Education can shape the values of future generations to create a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable society. The Black Lives Matters movement shows just how much that is needed. Recent protests give voice to deep inequalities and raised issues about human rights. The demand is for safety, equal respect and dignity, equal participation and freedom from racism. Education should be at the forefront of breaking down the barriers established by racism.

We all want our young people to leave school knowledgeable, confident learners but they need to be equipped and empowered to become 'champions of peace and justice' too[3] We want them to be socially responsible change-makers. This means not just greater knowledge and understanding but a greater propensity for action as well.

Could we do more in schools to harness children's energy and creativity so they are better prepared to become agents of generational change? Without adding to an already overcrowded timetable, how can we prepare them better to manage a complex and uncertain future and build a better one?  Could the current crisis spur us on to reimagine our education system and create the changes needed locally and nationally?

## 1.  Anchor development in a place-based model of change

Over the last few years, Camden Learning has developed a place-based, school-led partnership. Schools themselves have taken responsibility for their own collective performance, supporting each other and helping to improve outcomes for children and young people. This is not traditional top-down accountability but lateral, shared responsibility, rooted in an ambitious local vision and professional networks.

Camden Council acted as 'midwife'[4] to Camden Learning and commissioned it to address local issues of quality and equity that could not be tackled by autonomous schools working alone[3]. The council understood the needs of the area and built on what it knew worked. It knew, for instance, that Camden schools engaged well with local communities and were skilled at getting things done. This blend of democratic accountability with the professional and moral accountabilities of schools, which underpins the work of Camden Learning, gives powerful legitimacy to its work

Schools have chosen to join Camden Learning because they share an overriding commitment to place and community. They feel a sense of belonging to and pride in the area. They see the partnership as a way of helping them make the ambitious difference they want to make to the lives of children and young people. And in turn, by promoting equity, fostering wellbeing and nurturing the educational growth of the community, schools make an important contribution to the civic leadership of Camden.

Collaboration is a key element of this place-based system. The big issues that confront us locally, whether it be the condition of the planet or community cohesion, require us to think holistically as we care for our 'common home' and the communities within it. A joined up,

---

[3] UNODC, 2019, Empowering students for just societies: a new resource for teachers
[4] Kershaw, 2016

collaborative response to them is essential if we are to create a system that supports children and families to lead better lives.

There is universal agreement that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged are likely to struggle the most with the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. This includes families on benefits, those living in inadequate housing and those who experience a range of problems from poor mental health to domestic violence. The last few months have seen increasing levels of poverty and stress for these families. But we have also witnessed a great deal of community support and solidarity. We should not forget that. Our response to this crisis has opened up the possibility of a more place-based approach to integrating access, support and services for those most in need.

In developing our strategy, what more might we do to ensure every school plays its part in making our local eco-system more agile and resilient? What can we do to ensure that it serves children and families, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, better? And how can we create the opportunities in school and beyond to build a generation of change-makers, with impact in their local communities?

## 2.Provide more resources for children at risk

The crisis has exposed the many inequities in our education system and has underlined the fragility of children struggling with a concentration of disadvantage. Children who are vulnerable for economic or other reasons often need a range of support.  It is right that our expectations for disadvantaged children are as high as for their better off peers. But the pandemic has made it clear that these can only be realised if more resources are provided by the state. This is made all the more urgent by the real possibility of a global economic slowdown that will affect the poorest in society most. Better-off families will invariably find ways to support their children to learn.

Societies with a larger gap between rich and poor are bad for almost everyone. In countries with wide income inequalities, such as the UK, there is a high correlation with a range of social and environmental problems – ill-health, obesity, mental illness, drug abuse, low life expectancy, child well-being, educational performance, teenage pregnancies, imprisonment rates, social mobility, violence, trust and lack of community life[5]

In considering the more vulnerable, it's instructive to compare the investment devoted to them and that assigned to other 'priority' areas. For example, Nesta highlights the disparity between the resources for technological research and development directed at the commercial and military applications of artificial intelligence (AI) compared to 'AI solutions to solve some of our biggest societal challenges'[6]. If we are to empower all our citizens in any meaningful sense, particularly the youngest and most disadvantaged, then surely this disparity in investment has to change.

Targeting resources at the poorest children and their families isn't an unaffordable luxury. It should be seen as an investment in social justice and in creating a fairer society that benefits all. Capturing the key elements of a good education in a charter or pledge could provide a focus for debate about what resources poorer children should rightfully be entitled to. This debate might usefully encompass consideration of *how* resources should be provided. Of course, some would go straight to schools. but should some be given direct to families to

---

[5] Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), The Spirit Level

[6] www.nesta.org.uk

enable some element of choice about what they might be spent on? Could this create a sense of greater agency and investment in their children's edcuation?

## 3 Leverage technology

The pandemic exposed another glaring inequality. Once schools closed, the digital divide between families came into stark relief.  Unequal access to devices, broadband connectivity, space to study at home and access to adults with the time and skills to support children in their learning have all widened inequalities. A survey from the Institute for Fiscal Studies[7] in May found that:

- pupils from better-off families were spending longer on home learning
- their parents were much more likely than the less well-off to report that their child's school was providing online classes, access to online videoconferencing and chats with teachers
- pupils from better-off families had access to more individualised resources such as private tutoring
- they had a better home set-up for distance learning, including space to study
- their parents reported feeling more able to support them.

This points to increasing inequalities as an inevitable consequence of school closure.

At the same time, during the pandemic, there has been growing and widespread acceptance of the need for devices and free broadband as an educational lifeline for all children. This need will outlast the pandemic. The crisis has shown clearly how essential digital infrastructure is as a basic prerequisite for learning. And as such it should be funded by the state.  As a consequence of the experiences of the last few months, a secondary head in Camden has budgeted to buy devices for all her new Year 7 intake. The school intends to pay for these for children in receipt of free school meals or entitled to pupil premium.  For the other children, the school had established a scheme for parents to pay £10 a month until the device has been paid for and belongs to them.  If we are to close the education gap in any meaningful sense, poorer children must be entitled to the digital resources that are needed to support them in their learning.

We live in a digital world. The pandemic has only underscored how dependent we are on the internet for the delivery of so much that we deem essential. To deny disadvantaged young people the opportunity and the skills to access that world will only entrench inequality. An entitlement to a device and decent wi-fi post pandemic for the least well-off is therefore essential.

The crisis has generated huge change in the development of teachers' skills and confidence in the use of technology and this is likely to have a major impact on their approach to teaching and learning. Until now, discussion about the power of technology to reshape the education world, often illustrated with all sorts of differing scenarios about the impact of artificial intelligence and automation, had not resulted, for the most part, in changes to teaching and learning in schools.  Interestingly, the PISA survey of 2018 indicated that England scored highly on the availability of devices, software and internet but was ranked

---

[7] Institute for Fiscal Studies, 18 May 2020 Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning

lower than other countries on 'regular discussions with teaching staff about the use of digital devices for pedagogical purposes'[8]. The pandemic has changed all that.

At the beginning of lockdown, many teachers lacked training, confidence and expertise on remote learning. Nor did many know how to engage parents in supporting home-learning. But since then, teachers' skills and confidence in planning and providing distance learning have grown week by week. There is no reason why this knowledge cannot be put to long-term use.  Indeed, schools seem convinced that blended learning will become a feature of school life over the next few years.  They see the possibilities opened up by digital learning complementing and enriching more traditional teaching. This might well generate opportunities for children learning together across schools in Camden and beyond. It is a short step to providing some programmes or courses online across a group of schools, perhaps in a shortage or minority subject. If these were arranged across schools in an area, 'real' meetings could form part of the overall course. It might extend also to students working in groups with the universities or businesses we have in Camden.

The experience of recent months has shown remote learning has significant benefits. Schools report that online learning has really worked for some students in ways teachers had not anticipated– the quiet student, the shy student who's reluctant to speak in class but happy to use a chat line, the easily distracted student who may have proved disruptive in class but is now focused and enthusiastic about  learning and many others. A number of very challenging students have produced more work and made better progress by working online than when they were in school.  This has generated discussion about different models of inclusion. There are several school refusers who are now engaging and enjoying online learning, in some instances with their peers as well with teachers. One boy, who had not been in school for a year, started to 'attend' the school's online provision and to engage well. Rather than always trying to bring children back to school, should we be thinking more imaginatively about individual needs, what constitutes 'school' and build social interactions around a different model? And how might that influence our education strategy?

Yet however education develops, it will always rely on that essential connection between the teacher and the learner.  At its best, technology can access a huge range of resources and support new ways of teaching that encourage more active participation by learners individually or in small or larger groups. Teachers report that their role shifts in this context to that of coach, mentor and assessor.  It has enormous potential, in particular, to support disadvantaged students beyond the school day.

This growth in teachers' technological skills and expertise skills could well enable schools to build their capacity to innovate so young people learn better. Andreas Schleicher says: '*The opportunities that digital technologies offer go well beyond a stop-gap solution during the crisis. Digital technology allows us to find entirely new answers to what people learn, how people learn, where people learn and when they learn*[9].  It will be important for the new education strategy to build on this increased expertise in schools so students have enhanced opportunities to learn

The last few months have also generated numerous examples of teachers participating in, or indeed, leading, professional development or training online. Most autumn training programmes have been planned on that basis with many incorporating virtual professional networks and online collaboration. In the longer term, professional development is likely to be an area of major and lasting change. There is considerable research to show support for

[8] PISA 2018, OECD
[9] OECD 2020 Ref 6

continuing professional development is significantly related to teachers' job satisfaction. How might Camden Learning work with schools to build on what's been learned and lead the changes?

High- performing education systems prepare children for the future in terms of universal digital access, a focus on 'student and teacher digital competence and a balance between a knowledge-rich curriculum and the development of twenty-first century skills'[10]. In the current Covid-19 environment of remote learning, there is much to draw from the examples of recent months.  Successful use of technology for learning depends upon the development of independent learning skills, critical thinking and metacognition.  How should this be built into our education strategy for Camden?

## 4 Re-imagine a broad, inclusive and relevant education for all

A major concern throughout the pandemic has been its impact on GCSE and A level examinations. Important though academic results are they are neither the core purpose of education nor indeed the primary reason for a young person's success in life. Testing and examinations have a grip on our education system, particularly in secondary schools, that is not mirrored in other parts of the world.  Almost all countries have some form of examination system as young people come to the end of their statutory schooling. But few have the sort of intensive testing regime we have twice – at 16 and then again at 18. It is a legacy of the time when most young people left full-time education and moved directly into the labour market at 16. The current crisis gives us the opportunity to think about what is tested and how, though we would need to influence the government to bring about significant change.

Last year, Robert Halfon, the Education Select committee Chair, called for a radical rethink of the current education system, including scrapping GCSEs[11]. His is not a lone voice. A YouGov poll[12] at the same time indicated 73% of parents said that there was too much emphasis on examination grades in secondary schools. That same poll also found that 82 parents believe that the pressure to perform well in GCSE exams is bad for children's health and wellbeing.

PISA[13], the international study of 15-year-olds undertaken every three years, reported last year that: *'*Pupils in England, were, on average, less satisfied with their lives than pupils across the OECD countries. They were also more likely to feel miserable and worried and less likely to agree that their life has a clear meaning'*[9]*.  Most worryingly, in the three years since the previous PISA study (2015)[14], the life satisfaction of 15-year olds in England fell faster than in any other country with comparable data.

The pandemic will only have heightened concerns about children's wellbeing. After many months at home, many will have lost the habits schools would have inculcated – how to listen, how to study well, how to work with others, for example. Children would have lost the face-to-face support they would have had from their teachers. The poorest will have been stuck inside poor housing with little scope for outside play. They will have experienced the pressures of increasing poverty and stress with some seeing family members become ill or die. The learning gaps between most disadvantaged and other children will have widened.

[10] OECD, 2020
[11] Robert Halfon, towards a 21st century education system, Cabinet War Room, 11 February 2019
[12] YouGov poll commissioned by the Edge foundation,
[13] OECD, PISA 2018
[14] OECD, PISA 2015

That's why the importance of wellbeing is so crucial. But it would be a mistake to think that a good wellbeing programme would suffice and then children can get on with the real business of schools. Wellbeing needs to be built into the ethos, curriculum and practices of school life.

Many schools in Camden have built a strong focus on equalities and human rights into all aspects of school life. Following the recent protests about racist violence, they were among the first schools to challenge themselves harder about their approach to anti-racism and involved young people in those discussions. However, the racial disparities in the pandemic have raised fundamental issues and questions for schools. An early focus has been on the curriculum. This needs to ensure it has strong roots in Black and global histories, achievements and cultures. Autonomous schools remain responsible for their own curriculum though, for maintained schools, that has to be rooted in the national curriculum. Does the latter allow schools to make the changes that need to be made? How can schools find time to tackle the fundamental issues of stereotyping and discrimination that need addressing at all levels if change is to happen? But how can they afford not to?

It is important that Camden's new strategy is rooted in the determination to create a more inclusive edcuation system. This is a system that removes the barriers limiting participation and achievement, respects diverse needs, abilities and characteristics and eliminates all forms of discrimination in the learning environment[15]. This feels a huge task but the question of how we ensure a high-quality educational experience for all has to be at the heart of all we do.

Immense changes to the world of work, mainly as a result of technological change and innovation, have long been predicted. And while we cannot be certain exactly what these changes will be, we do know that the future won't be like the past. Academic achievement is important but on its own it is not enough for what will be needed. How can all learners be best prepared for this level of uncertainty? Particularly pressing is the drive, already underway, to improve the quality, breadth and take-up of post-16 education in Camden so it better meets the needs of all young people.

As the CBI/Pearson annual education and skills surveys show, employers value qualifications as indicators of achievement and ability but they identify attitudes, behaviours and skills as the biggest drivers of success in work[16]. Employers prize creativity, originality, team-working, problem-solving and the ability to learn – skills that no machine can replicate

Last year, the CBI published a report showing nearly half of all employers found most young people are not ready for the world of work[17] Employers want 'character' and broader skills to be embedded in the school timetable. They argued that the government should rethink GCSEs and reform the Ebacc to ensure it encompasses a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, especially in relation to creativity.

There is growing evidence that it is our most disadvantaged young people who do not develop broader skills. The Sutton Trust Report[18] found people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend schools with less extra-curricular provision and are therefore less likely to receive the broader benefit these activities confer.

---

[15] UNESCO, Inclusion in education en.unesco.org
[16] CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey Report 2019, Education and learning for the modern world and CBI/Pearson education and Skills Annual Report 2018, Educating for the modern world

[17] CBI, 2019, Getting young people 'work ready'
[18] Sutton Trust, 2017, Life Lessons: Improving essential skills for young people

What knowledge, skills and attitudes are essential if we are to address the purposes of education set out above and how could they developed? Many of these can be addressed in classrooms but they need social action and volunteering activities too. Can we persuade the local community to provide community or work-based experiences for all young people?

There are many steps that must be taken to develop a broad, inclusive and relevant education for all. As part of our engagement on Camden's strategy for education, we need to create some consensus about what a good education for the future should look like and then set out clearly each child's entitlement to it. We need to challenge the extent to which the system is truly inclusive and consider how a new strategy can help address the many barriers to learning that continue to damage the lives of young people and society.

## 5. Build capacity through collaboration

Partnership working and collaboration within and across schools are essential elements of Camden Learning's approach. School leaders are at the heart of this but if we are to grow the capacity needed for a thriving education system, we should create more opportunities for collaboration.

Collaboration underpinned the way in which Camden Learning and the council worked with schools, including governors, parents, young people and local communities during the pandemic. Camden Learning supported schools individually and collectively in managing the challenges of the crisis. But it also connected, on their behalf, with other agencies and stakeholders, both internally and externally. Using the expertise in local schools, Camden Learning led the design of initiatives to support 'recovery and renewal' in schools, particularly for the most disadvantaged children and young people. The collaboration evident within and across schools during the pandemic, including the mobilisation of strong ties with parents and communities, should be built on systematically as part of the new strategy.

Through all the difficulties of the crisis, it has been inspiring to see how collaboration has improved the lives of children and their families. We saw many examples of schools working closely and practically with families as pressures mounted at home. Schools understood there was no point in focusing on home learning if children were hungry, for example, or subject to the stresses of domestic violence. They became much more socially involved in their families' problems and issues. As we shape a new strategy, we need to reflect on whether and how this collaboration between families and schools could influence the local system we are building.

Many schools have given considerable support to parents in supporting home-learning. Where schools had already set up good systems of online communication, they were able to use these not just to communicate well with parents but also to enable parents to engage well with each other. In some school communities, parents found peer support invaluable and a powerful support for their own learning. Online video parents' evenings proved successful with some schools indicating that they are likely to adopt this approach permanently. More parents attended and the discussion was longer and more personal.

Given their involvement in home-learning, parents may well be keen to engage more with schools to foster the education of their children. How might our strategy build on this and indeed, on developing more opportunities for parents to learn together?

High-performing systems value their teachers[19]. They ensure they well supported professionally throughout their career.  Greater collaboration between schools, particularly involving teachers, has the obvious value of increasing collective capacity. It also has the benefit of enhancing the quality of teachers' own learning. Teachers in Camden have spoken with enthusiasm about the opportunities afforded by co-designing improvement initiatives created by Camden Learning. They enjoy the creativity of working collaboratively to establish better practice and this builds social and professional capital. How can we extend collaborative approaches across schools?

Camden Learning has long recognised that collaborative practice requires organisational investment. Over the last few years, inventive ways have been found of resourcing opportunities for teachers to work together on key issues and priorities. Growing confidence and expertise in using video calls and virtual meetings during the pandemic may well have helped too.  It has generated interesting examples of teachers thinking and planning together across schools flexibly and without much cost. Research shows that the impact of collaborative approaches is consistently positive[20].  Investing in teachers to work together on key issues, for example, developing a stronger approach to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter debate, must remain a core part of Camden Learning approach   There may also  considerable value in setting up small-scale initiatives or research – perhaps just two teachers working at classroom level across schools, most of which could be done remotely. As Pasi Sahlberg[21] argues, a focus on details can uncover important relationships between teaching and learning.  Collaboration solves problems but it also stimulates the motivation of teachers. It gives them confidence and pride in their work, with the potential added bonus that they stay longer in Camden and indeed, the profession.

We have seen examples of collaboration across schools, and between parents but Camden Learning is also well placed to support the broader aspects of children and young people's social, emotional and cultural development.   Camden Music Festival is inspirational for all involved, but are there other ways too in which Camden Learning can initiate greater collaboration between children and young people? For example, could a focus on engaging students in a range of creative or sporting activities not only be positive for the individuals involved but also support community cohesion more generally?

Camden Learning provides a strong foundation for a collaborative, school-led system for improvement. It makes connections across schools and communities which support learning for both adults and children. What more could it do to establish effective forms of collaboration and peer development that support the more equitable system we all want?

---

[19] OECD 2020
[20] EEF toolkit
[21] Sahlberg, P. (2017) *Small data for big change: What does it mean for teachers?* ATA Magazine, Summer 2017. Available online: www.pasisahlberg.com (accessed 15 April 2020).