

2018 Text 2 QB: Write an opinion piece, suitable for publication in a national newspaper, in which you acknowledge what you see as the strengths of the education you have received, criticise what you see as its weaknesses and make suggestions for its improvements

‘He who opens a school door closes a prison’, with these words Victor Hugo illustrates the transformative power of an effective education. This, however, poses the question, what constitutes a ‘good’ education? In this article, I will reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the education I have received under the Irish education system. In addition to this, I hope to reflect upon possible changes that could strengthen this education. As you read this article, I ask you to reflect upon your own education, whether you identify with the issues raised here, and what education means to you.

One of the shining lights of the Irish education system is its breadth of choice and subject matter. In my six years of second-level education, I had the opportunity to study eleven subjects at Junior Cycle and eight at Senior Cycle. This was in stark contrast to my friends from my time in the UK, who were limited to just three subjects at A-levels.

This breadth within our education offers a number of benefits and opportunities. By studying subjects from Chemistry to Politics to Maths, I was able to dip my toes into a number of subjects and disciplines. At the age of twelve, or even fifteen, I was in no position to constrain myself to a narrow range of options for my future, as I doubt many of us are. Instead, I was able to explore many potential paths, leading to a much more confident and informed choice surrounding university at the end of Sixth Year. Furthermore, this broad education allowed me and my peers to gain an appreciation of intersections between subjects, and a much more comprehensive education as a result. Therefore, I can say without reserve that this range of choice and learning was a key strength of my education.

However, this is not to say the education I received was without fault. Though my education was broad, it was lacking in a development of key skills and suffered from an emphasis on rote learning. I’m confident every reader can recollect the sleepless nights spent memorising theorems, or committing to

heart essays “as Gaeilge”. Unfortunately, many of our exams and assessments rely on the robotic regurgitation of facts, without underlying understanding.

This emphasis on rote learning is a significant weakness detracting from the development of key skills such as critical thinking. When I was tasked with the memorisation of formulae in Chemistry, I simply committed these numbers and letters to memory, without understanding what they were or why they were mixing together. This was an experience with which many of my peers could relate. A focus on pure memorisation within exams such as the Leaving Certificate diminishes the space and opportunity for students to reflect on their learning and gain a comprehensive understanding.

This examination of the various strengths and flaws present raises the question: what can we do? How can we adapt our education system to equip students for the new world, to instil in them the necessary skills and qualities to succeed? At its heart, effective education is about empowerment. It is about widening students’ perspectives, providing a platform to pose questions, developing balanced perspectives and learning the skills they need. Education should not be a mere memory test. Education should not aim to fill students’ heads with facts, but rather awaken in them a sense of curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. It is through this approach that we will deliver effective education.

How can an empowering, effective education as outlined above be delivered? The first key step is an engaged presence of student voice in the development of education. Students should not only be the recipients of education, they should act as a driving force and have a presence at the table at which decisions are made. From this, we can understand the lived experience of education and work to adapt it. Furthermore, methods of assessment must be re-evaluated. Rather than relying on memory tests alone, alternatives such as projects, continuous assessment and adaptations to exam layout should be examined and incorporated across the board to address problems such as rote learning.

Finally, the presence of skills-based learning must be strengthened. Skills such as research, teamwork and critical thinking can be implemented across curricula. The development of these skills plays a crucial role in preparing students for later life. These skills are transferable to academia, apprenticeships, the world of work or any path students may embark upon. Through projects, adapted assessments and effective curriculum development with the engagement of all stakeholders, this can become a reality. Ultimately, these suggested improvements have the same goal at their core: empowering education for

an evolving world. It is with this goal that education can be improved and it is this goal that must be kept at the forefront when discussing education.

As a whole, I was in a privileged position to receive the education I did. It enabled me to explore many paths, to taste many disciplines, and to make an informed choice about my future. However, it also relied heavily on rote learning, often ignoring the need to develop skills alongside this. Therefore, our education system must adapt to emphasise skills-based learning, to change assessment practices, and to empower students. As you finish this article, I invite you to reflect upon this: if you were Minister of Education for a day, how would you create an effective education system that opens doors and promises a brighter future for us all?