

ABOUT TIME: ACCOMPLISHMENT AND CHARACTER

1. Introduction

This brief paper is no more than a sketch of a radical new approach to thinking about time (school-time, learning-time) and how we make best use of it.

Over the last thirty years in England, we reformed almost every aspect of schooling imaginable (and some of those aspects we reformed several times over) but we've never given serious thought to time. This is surprising when you pause to think about it; the outcomes of our education system are precisely the product of what pupils and teachers actually do all day and all year.

What benefits might we secure from a re-think of time?

1. Improved learning outcomes, including the recovery of both lost learning and lost opportunity during the pandemic
2. A much wider range of learning opportunities beyond the academic curriculum enabling a stronger focus on developing our young people as rounded human beings; we could call this "character", as Gandhi did
3. A much wider range of providers of educational opportunity offering choice to everyone far beyond anything currently available
4. Greater equity in relation not just to academic outcomes but also social and cultural capital. Every child could access the opportunities out of school that parents with the will and the means provide for their own.

2. Building Blocks

We now have a **National Funding Formula**, which means we can calculate accurately the cost of per pupil per day.

We also have a **defined school year**: 190 days for pupils; 195 days for teachers. These definitions were established more than 30 years ago and have not been changed, even though the world around us has changed dramatically.

We have a **Pupil Premium** based on the insight that pupils from low-income backgrounds need extra support to match the accomplishments of others.

We do not have a defined minimum number of hours for either a school day or a school week. This is a problem.

3. Proposals

For primary schools:

Keep the teacher year as it is currently - **195 days**

For the pupil year, extend the learning year to **195 days** but reduce the formal school year to **188 days**. All 195 days would be fully funded.

Use the extra **seven learning days** to guarantee for every primary pupil a "bucket list" of opportunities to which they would have access during their primary years. These would include:

- Theatre visits
- Concert visits
- Museum visits
- A visit to the Palace of Westminster with a guided tour and an introduction to democracy and how it works
- Visits to the local council chamber and offices
- Visits to workplaces
- Visits to universities
- Outward Bound activities
- Visits to professional sports clubs and stadiums

This list is just illustrative. Some of the options could be absolutely guaranteed; others would be options at the discretion of the school.

Beyond this the only further requirement would be to establish a minimum number of hours in the school week, based initially on the current average, with time for catch up classes as necessary.

For secondary schools:

Keep the teacher year as it is currently - **195 days**

For the pupil year, extend the learning year to **195 days** but reduce the formal school year to **185 days**, thus creating **10 learning days** per year for learning beyond school.

Whereas in primary schools the "bucket list" activities would be collective class activities, in secondary schools each pupil would have a tailored programme for those 10 days. That programme would be agreed between the form tutor, the pupil and his/her parents.

The programme would be made up of planned short courses with defined content and explicit learning outcomes.

Potential providers might include:

- Theatres
- Orchestras
- Museums
- Democratic institutions such as local councils
- Workplaces
- Universities
- Country estates, gardens and castles
- Nature reserves
- Outward Bound centres
- Sports clubs
- Language schools and exchange providers.

This list is just illustrative; the possibilities are almost endless.

The per pupil, per day funding for these ten days would follow the choices of individual pupils.

All providers of these learning opportunities would have to be registered and subject to inspection.

The courses a pupil completed would be recorded on their school record and listed alongside exam results.

Also, as for primary schools, there should be a guaranteed minimum number of hours in the school week, based initially on the current average.

4. Imagine the Benefits

For pupils, imagine the currently unfulfilled dreams that could now be fulfilled (“I want to climb Snowden”; “I want to understand the science behind Cristiano Ronaldo’s diet”; “I want to play my flute with the accompaniment of a professional pianist”; “I would love to know what it was like when the Vikings burned Lindisfarne”; “What exactly happens inside that Nissan factory?”)

For potential providers (especially as they try to reimagine their roles after the pandemic) there would be huge opportunities to attract new young, funded customers (The V and A – a five day course in “Fashion at the Tudor Court”; The Lloyd George Museum in Crickieth – “From Poverty to Wartime PM”; Outward Bound, Ullswater – “An Introduction to the Skills of Climbing and an Ascent of Helvellyn”; The Leeds Conservatoire – “Conduct a Professional Orchestra by the End of the Week”; The Met Office in Exeter – “The Science and Mathematics of Weather Forecasting”)

For teachers there would be no need for any teacher to change direction but exciting new career opportunities would open up (‘I used to teach history full-time at a school in York; now I am part-time there while, in collaboration with colleagues from other local schools, I contribute to a series of short courses in the history of York - “Eboracum and the birth of Constantine”; “The Reformation” with visits to St Mary’s Abbey and Fountains Abbey; “The Battle of Marston Moor” including a visit to the battlefield.’) (‘I work part-time in the Exeter Maths School and part-time with the Environmental Science Department of the University of Exeter providing courses on the Science and Maths of Climate Change’) etc.

5. Funding it

Teachers pay would not be affected by this proposal as the length of the teachers’ year would be unchanged.

All pupil learning days at both primary and secondary levels would be fully funded at the standard rate and varying this rate over time would become a transparent way of thinking about future funding levels in spending reviews.

Given that under these proposals the pupil learning year would be five days longer than it is currently, an extra 2.5% on the budget would be required. Personally, I would be more generous and add more like 4.0% both because of the potentially huge character-related and motivational benefits and because it would be important, especially at the outset, to catalyse providers to come forward.

The Pupil Premium is an important innovation but in practice all too often over the last decade it has been seen as just another chunk in a hard-pressed school budget. The result is that it doesn’t deliver the equity gains it was intended to deliver. I would suggest that, as part of this reform of time, at least half of it should be devoted to the individual pupils for whom it was intended. They would then be extra-empowered in the choices they could make in the 7 or 10 extra learning days.

6. Implementing it

There would of course be major practical considerations to think through if this agenda were taken forward. How in practice would a secondary school plan tailored programmes for 1000 individual pupils? How would schools, pupils and parents know what visits/courses were available? How would the range of providers be registered and with whom?

None of these is insurmountable; they are just practical problems to be solved.

Were we to proceed with these ideas, I would suggest three initial steps:

- i.) Piloting the approach in perhaps 25 secondary schools in a range of social and geographic locations and a similar number of primary schools
- ii.) Establishing a new regulator of out of school learning that would set itself up to register potential providers and design the approach to quality assurance
- iii.) Modern technology solutions to the problems mentioned above should be developed.

7. A separate but aligned idea about exams

An overhaul of the examination system is clearly overdue. To inform the future of all examinations, I suggest developing a radically new approach to examinations in MFL as follows.

Abolish GCSEs and A-Levels in MFL.

Replace them with graded assessments, on a basis similar to music exams. Progression in French (or any other language) would be from Grade 1 to Grade 8, with the latter being the appropriate level for university entrance. Thus, for example, a pupil would take grade 3 French when the teacher/pupil thought they were ready, regardless of age.

This approach could be appropriate in other subjects too, but MFL makes sense as a place to start for two strong reasons. First, the nature of progression in language proficiency lends itself to this kind of approach. Second, MFL in schools is currently such a disaster area that the risks of innovation are close to zero.

It is worth considering how an approach of this kind might also encourage the development of outstanding online materials, related to the grades, and therefore enable the adoption of blended approaches to teaching and learning. This in turn might make affordable many languages which are currently unaffordable (because small classes are expensive).

For recent immigrants, such as those currently arriving from Afghanistan or Syria, it would be possible for them to get credit – they might even pass grade 8 right away – in Pashtun or Arabic respectively.

This idea surely has significant potential.

Sir Michael Barber
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