

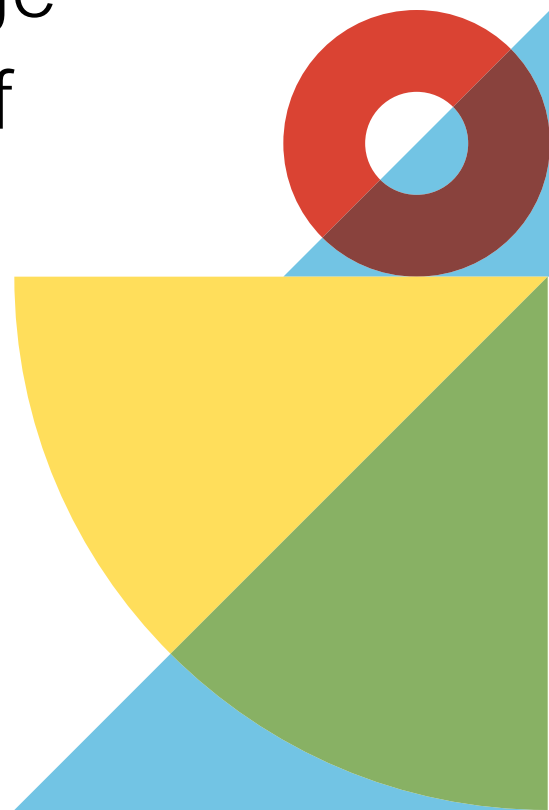
Essay 04

No Parent Left Behind

How Parents Can Change the Global Landscape of Education

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When I was 18, I intentionally tried to fail my public exams.

I did so for two reasons. First, it angered me that all my education and learning in a subject could be distilled down to a single grade. It didn't feel representative of the highs and lows of my education.

Second, my parents desperately wanted me to go to university and I desperately didn't want to go. I thought that if I failed my A Levels, they wouldn't have a choice, a university wouldn't accept me, and I could do what I liked. The school was designed to serve the selection needs of universities and was not designed to serve the needs of everyone. I felt it was like a conveyor belt and, at the time, one I was trying to get off.

My parents wanted me to go to university because of their cultural norm. I don't think they had any ambition for me in terms of what I studied, or what I would go on to do. As a parent, if your child made it through school and got accepted into university—job done! They were just doing the same as everyone else.

Now I'm a parent. My daughter is in school and the cultural pressures are on me. Is she doing well enough? Is she being stretched enough? How can we help at home with math as well as reading? What areas are more challenging for her? And, of course, there is no escaping the big one: How does she compare to the other kids in her class? How does she fare in tests?

I want to be able to play an active role in my daughter's learning at school so that I can support her at home. I want to feel like a critical part of her team, but in reality, I often feel intimidated by the school and redundant in her learning journey.

Aged five, my daughter comes home with language I often don't recognize from my own education. Hers is a world of digraphs and descenders, number bonds and chunking, phonemes, and sound mats. Can I



really help if I don't know my Kung Foo Math from my Cuisenaire Rods?

My best example is when her reading journal came home with just the words "Orange Band." I wrote to her teacher complaining that without context—or even a recognizable book scheme—this meant nothing to me and I needed some guidance. The reply from her teacher was clear: "If you don't know what to do, try Googling it." In other words, I really don't have the time to help you as well as the thirty kids in my class. I did Google "Orange Band" and discovered that it was an American pop/punk band from Los Angeles. Not very helpful and nothing to do with primary level literacy.

As parents, if we wish to change the global landscape of education, there are three things I believe to be fundamental: The teacher's relationship with parents, parents' relationship with formal assessment, and the latent power of parents in co-designing schooling.

THE TEACHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS

Teachers have a genuine challenge in relating with parents. Striking the right balance in communication is complex when the parent demographic is so diverse. Schools who play to the lowest common denominator can end up patronizing some parents using a level of language, literacy, and understanding they believe will alienate others. Their ability to differentiate between pupils in the classroom is transferred to their work with parents.

In that context, if you are a "parent", that is often all you are. I know teachers who are also parents who find the rigidity of that relationship particularly challenging. When they are in the role of parent, they cannot be recognized as a fellow teacher too.

Whilst parents are almost universally self-taught, teachers are professionals. Their training covers the range of skills and competencies they need. Some aspects of their role will consistently see them leading, particularly in teaching knowledge. They must be in charge in the classroom and create the right learning environment for their class.

The parent is typically the expert on his or her own child. This expertise can help the teacher become better in their behavior management of

individual children then aggregated to a whole class. This is similar in role modeling, mentoring, and in child protection, other core functions of being a teacher. Many parents are struggling, some may be poorly educated with low aspirations, and a few will be a danger to their children. However, by unbundling what a teacher is, it may be possible to develop a more differentiated relationship with parents.

On this basis, it is possible for teachers and parents to have a valuable exchange and create a relationship of mutual understanding. I think it would be helpful, for example, for teachers to have a report from the parents about the child. This could reflect the child's home life in the same way that a school report reflects a child's school life—with a particular focus on behavior and a child's motivations and passions. As more home-school communication is delivered online, this feels more manageable as real-time reporting.

My child's school uses parent and grandparents' knowledge on an ad hoc basis to support teachers in their instructional role. I recently visited a parent-promoted school in Canada that is active in engaging that resource by design—but this feels unusual. What if each class set aside time to have a workshop run by a volunteer parent? On my street, we have parents who are animators, journalists, politicians, welfare dependents, architects, accountants, builders, theatre technicians, and chefs. They all have expertise to offer. What if this were expected in every school? Busy parents would find the time, even if it was just once, and I believe many would be inspired by the opportunity to do more.

In order to help with formal learning, parents would benefit greatly from an overview of what is being taught during the term or year. Sharing the teachers' planning could include links to brief teaching methods and a glossary of terms so that parents can support learning at home without being told we are “doing it wrong” by our children.

PARENTS AND FORMAL ASSESSMENT

By being more familiar with their child's learning, parents would have a better understanding of how their child is doing. Parents everywhere want reassurance that their child is doing OK, and often are protective of formal testing because it provides objective feedback. But educators who hanker after spending less time and money on testing children could find parents as powerful allies once they have better involved parents in



the learning itself.

When my aunt was fifteen, she came home from school one day and announced that she was dropping three subjects; French, History, and Art. Furthermore, the private school she attended was supporting her decision. My grandfather was furious. In a meeting with the head teacher, it was explained that my aunt would get better exam grades if she dropped these three subjects and concentrated on the others. It was unlikely she would get good grades in French, History, and Art—in fact, she might not even pass. My grandfather was having none of it. He told them: “I’m not paying you to get my daughter to pass exams, I am paying you to educate her and that’s exactly what I wish you to do.”

In this anecdote, I don’t think my grandfather was particularly enlightened or forward thinking, he was using common sense. But it is also a reflection of a school culture in which the outcome that matters, above all else, is test scores. This has worsened as exam results are now widely used for school accountability.

I know firsthand from teachers that they often have a clear choice between educating children or teaching them to pass tests. They do not have the freedom nor time to do both. Either learn to speak French so that you can hold a conversation, or get a good grade on the exam. In English, just study the chapter and the themes for the test, or read the whole book and discover a passion for reading.

The irony is that the currency of these tests for getting a job is diminishing. More employers from Google to the U.K. Civil Service are screening for demonstrable skills over qualifications as a proxy for skill. A friend of mine, who works as head of corporate PR for a FTSE 100 company, says that when they recruit they have no interest in qualifications, only experience. You need education to be able to put together a quality CV and cover letter (she throws anything with grammatical or spelling errors straight in the reject pile), but the English grades themselves are not important. You need to do the work, but you do not need to ace the test.

Every parent’s paradox is that they know that good grades only reflect a component of success at school, yet all they need to value is what is easily measurable. Ken Robinson’s “creativity,” Angela Duckworth’s “grit,” and Sugata Mitra’s “curiosity” all resonate and we know they matter. These are things I believe to be at the core of a great education, but I don’t believe we should be finding ways to measure them.

PARENTS' ROLE IN CO-DESIGNING SCHOOLING

I want my child to be continually developing as a person. That is my responsibility as a parent, but I need help from the school. Together we can deliver that: I can support teachers in knowledge development and use the school's help in developing my child's character and other areas of personal development.

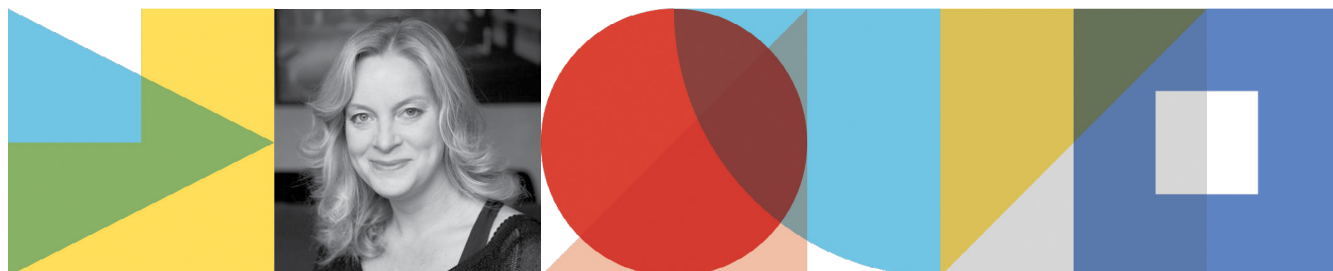
This vision of co-produced schooling needs a paradigm shift. It needs a co-designed service. What would this look like? Starting at school level, let us survey parents and ask some key questions.

What values do you believe are essential for a developing child?
What part of the current curriculum is essential?
What should we be teaching that we are not?
What skills will they need for the future?
What role would you like to play in the education of your children?"

These are loose examples, but asking these questions at scale would begin a relationship of utilizing parents as a resource. Include them in the design of education and then consider the skills and talents available to support the delivery. This progresses parents from a latent to an active resource.

The resulting prize is a school that keeps dynamically re-aligning itself to the evolving values and views of the parent body. The teachers have allies at home who can help with their range of responsibilities, and an understanding of the individual children and how better to support them. The parent body becomes a group supporting each other, supporting teachers, and better supporting their children.

As an 18-year-old, I failed in failing my public exams and I did get a degree after all. I am not a teacher, but I am an education professional. In my work, I bring together educators, policymakers, academics, and education business leaders to exchange ideas about school reform. I attend countless events that do the same. At the best events, we listen to students. But in all of these conversations, parents are never included. We even leave our own experience as parents outside the discussion. No one has a more invested interest in the future of education than parents do. Just imagine the potential we could unlock.



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Claudia is the director of learning at Suklaa (suklaa.org) and the co-founder of Oppi Festival (oppivenice.com). Suklaa deliver international conferences, whole school training, team building and education consultancy, often around design thinking or change management. Oppi is a not for profit education festival intent on building a meaningful global network of talent and expertise to consider how we can solve some of the challenges facing education across the world.