Fit for the Future

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This report is a think piece which argues that for schools to be really successful in the future we require entirely new thinking, not the fitting of new ideas to an existing creaking structure – the new learning community cannot be created by endless loading of new activity on the old way of schooling.

Prologue

This project started life under another name and grew very rapidly from another research idea. It was conceived as preparation for the taking up of a new post in a school based on the European mainland and at the centre of European affairs. The school is both British and International and has an age range of 3–18. An obvious line of enquiry centred on transition from key stage two to key stage three since both were on one campus. There would be other benefits from the exercise too, such as the beginning of a process that would make links with European schools and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Interest in key stage two/three transition is high and topical. There are tentative moves around the country to try 'fresh start' models, which involve putting together the primary age range with the 11–16 age range. Perhaps the organisation and philosophy of the Brussels school and other European schools would help this debate, albeit in circumstances less fraught. There are also at least two instances in the country where the concept of a learning campus across age ranges is being put into operation. And the government has also announced the launch of a collegiate project for secondary learning in six authorities. My project seemed clear and very worthy. Its working title was 'Mind the Gap'.

The title is the clue to what happened next. As I began the investigation and smugly congratulated myself on the straightforwardness of it all, and especially the neatness of the title, the trouble began. A search engine visited in the first days of the work revealed 47,000 entries on transition from key stage two to key stage three! We are all at it. There is hardly a secondary school in the country that is not priding itself in its prospectus or elsewhere on its liaison work with primary partners. Schools are working hard in many places to look together across phases at issues. Local authorities are also busy in this field and their collective representative body has written well on the topic with some clear examples of good practice. Middle schools, fighting for survival, are pointing out that they have dealt with this in the very concept of their existence.

But the emphasis almost everywhere is overwhelmingly on social continuity and on the social success of transition. There are literally thousands of assertions from individual schools, local authorities, and Excellence in Cities web sites of the outstanding nature of their transition arrangements. There is no doubt that much good practice exists in helping young people adjust socially and with a sense of security and excitement from smaller primary organisations to larger secondary ones. There is very strong evidence too of

highly effective liaison, statistical and otherwise, on previous pupil performance. There are many examples of warm relationships between primary and secondary schools, with teachers observing each other teach, supporting each other's learning, sharing materials and ideas.

Yet no one disagrees seriously with the government assertion that there is a dip in performance by many children between the end of key stage two and the early stages of key stage three (DfES, 1999). It began to become clear that most practice serves to reinforce the organisational needs of both primary and secondary schools and does not address the learning needs and styles of 11–12 year olds. There is evidence too that this is particularly the case for many children in an inner city context. There is also a gender issue to do with boys being moved into a new context at a particular stage of maturation.

In the poorest cases, key stage three becomes a diluted and poorly paced version of the key stage four examination programme, stranded between the genuine sense of enquiry experienced by younger children and the seemingly necessary obsession with GCSE points scores at 16.

Mind the Gap! And then it struck me – where was the gap? The image after all comes from the London Underground. It is the warning given where the nature of the rolling stock no longer coincides with the shape of the platform and causes the passenger, therefore, to make the safety adjustment so that the passenger adapts to the system and not the other way round.

And so it is with our huge amounts of work on transition. It is a collective cry to the learner/customer of 'Mind the Gap'. We are trying to load onto a system very similar in age to the London Underground burdens and expectations it cannot bear. We are consuming needless personal energy in forcing inadequate structures to innovate and adapt on a scale that cannot be done as the system stands. It became clear that a study of the best aspects of transition would merely contribute further to the heroic efforts already being made to make our existing structures work. And if this is true of transition, it must also be true about many other parts of our system.

Yet this is also the best time since 1944 to think creatively about education. We have an historic opportunity now in a government that has made education an overriding priority. And for initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones and specialist schools to be really successful we require new thinking by educational professionals; not endless fitting of new ideas to an existing creaking structure with cries of 'mind the gap' to mask the problem.

So, the new title is 'Fit for the Future'. And the contention is that there is a great prize for educational professionals and for government if we are willing to think in new ways about organisation. In future years we will be able to say that the most radical phase of that national commitment to education, commonly held to have begun in 1870, had its origins in the innovative climate established by New Labour in 1997. And it was realised

by an impressive combination of political vision and commitment matched by professional creativity.

The gatekeepers

Those of us who today are in positions to make decisions about the future structure, nature and content of schooling are entirely products of the educational and social thinking of the last half century: the period 1950 to 2000. This is an obvious truism, but in education and its politics, the obvious and apparent are often missed. Our careers have been created by that huge social and political movement immediately after the Second World War which attempted bravely and without adequate resource to make education, health, housing, the utilities more accessible to the whole population. The hope was that although the playing fields of Eton would still exist, the playing fields of the new grammar, technical and secondary modern schools (where they had any) would also produce a well educated and confident population able to thrive in a post war world that would be more equal and free than that which had gone before. A country that had made huge demands on itself and its population during wartime really hoped to make itself a better place.

This better place, however, did not keep pace with its original aspiration and found the complications of a cold war, the growth of a commonwealth, the ambivalence towards Europe to be constant diversions and confusions. The connection between a national purpose and education strategy was often missing.

As a result huge national and local energy was also expended, not in creativity but in maintaining structures to administer the systems of education, health and housing that had been established in the early post war period. The first principles upon which they had been founded were rarely revisited. And an economy that piecemeal gave the comforts of a consumer society too much of its population could afford complacency and short termism.

So today's decision makers are self evidently the success stories of this period. We benefited from the 1950/60s grammar schools and from the 1960/70s early comprehensives. We benefited also from expansion of the university system, from university maintenance grants and from a system not focused on outcome. But above all, and without being too aware of it, we benefited from other people's failure. Without our conscious understanding of it we were part of a rationing system. Not a leveling rationing system that had been used in time of war and national crisis and which was both overt and accepted, but a rationing system that was never expressed as such and which was unpredictable in outcome.

Grammar school places were limited not just by the ability to perform well in a certain type of test at a certain age but also by the vagaries of local provision. The percentage of places varied from 10 to 25 according to local county or county borough arrangements. Particular cities also had complex local arrangements. The city of Carlisle, for instance, in the 1950s had a three-tier system. The boys' and girls' grammar schools for the top

few percent with Oxbridge an accepted aspiration, a next tier of selective schools which provided the borough engineers, bank officials and primary teachers of the city, and a third layer of secondary moderns which furnished the unskilled labour for the railways, biscuit and canning factories.

In such circumstances comprehensive education could not come soon enough, but when it did come to most of the country it came in terms of vision and energy as a pale shadow of the vigourous national commitment that characterised the 1944 Act. Comprehensive reorganisation did not rigourously address the necessity of outcome. As the 2001 Green Paper 'Building on Success' says of the comprehensive system of the 1960s and 1970s:

> Established in opposition to a very rigid and unfair system of selection between schools at the age of 11, the need to differentiate provision to individual aptitudes and abilities within schools often took second place. Inclusion too readily became an end in itself, rather than the means to identify and provide better for the talents of each individual pupil, not least those with high academic abilities and those requiring a high quality vocational or work related route post-14.

Those of us who worked hard and well in those early comprehensive days need not become defensive about this charge as it seems true in the mass if not in particular instances. I taught in one of Birmingham's first comprehensive schools and some years later was deputy head of a Black Country borough's first purpose-built community school and later again headteacher of what was the first comprehensive school in a northern city. Local pride in these schools was great but in the 1970s and early 1980s local and political scrutiny of the actual outcomes for the local community was non-existent.

So we, the privileged group with our rationed prizes, are now in a position to design schooling for the future. Many of us came through the gates manned by the 11-plus and other guardians. We proudly worked in comprehensives that opened gates to everyone at eleven but failed to notice our system establishing new gates further up the age range. And although the vast majority of younger adults are products of the comprehensive system, access to the knowledge economy is as socio-economically determined as ever. (As a recent survey of Internet use commissioned by the Fabian Society shows, 51 per cent of British adults now have access to the Internet; this falls to 23 per cent in unskilled groups and to 19 per cent on large city council estates.)

Now, at the beginning of this century, our actions could determine the chain of education events for the next 50 years. An eleven year old in school now retires in 2050. The European Union has declared its intention of creating 'the largest knowledge based economy in the world' with 12 billion euros from a social fund of 60 billion earmarked to make this happen. It will not happen in the United Kingdom until we finally remove both our gatekeeping mentality and our gatekeeping structures from our system.

Our best chance

Our best chance is to capitalise fully and creatively on the aspirations for education of this government. No other western government has had the courage to link so explicitly its educational health to social and economic development. It is most unlikely that there will not be another government in our working lifetime that will say in its election literature, "Education will be our number one priority". This statement comes before promises on personal prosperity, the needs of business, unemployment, the National Health Service, crime and Europe.

If our educational establishment cannot capitalise on this degree of priority, coupled with the European Union's aspiration for a knowledge based economy, then the best chance in this new industrial revolution is lost. Political aspiration abhors vacuum. If the education profession cannot find radical and creative ways of fulfilling this aspiration, short-term political solutions will crowd in to fill the space.

An opposition mind set persists as a result of the reforming brutality of those years. Our inability to reform ourselves meant reform imposed, some of it necessary, not enough of it understood or accepted. The endless defensive mockery directed at Education Secretaries of State from 1979–97 has persisted in a weaker form against New Labour. There is such a need for a more consistently mature approach if we are to be convincing as real and eventually dominant partners in the next phase of what should be radical development.

Yes, resources matter and yes, teacher shortages are serious, but here is a government giving the national message that what we are engaged in is the nation's top priority. We must have the collective maturity to show our understanding of this aspiration but also then show that we are best placed to meet this aspiration.

To do this we need to think in a new way that breaks free from existing structures. This is where the real challenge begins. In so much of the evidence examined about transition there are many earnest statements about the needs of the learner. There is not the same degree of understanding of what that could really mean. We need to face the really challenging fact that the aspiration is for the benefit of the learner and the learning community, not for the benefit of the traditional teacher and the traditional school. The new learning community cannot be created by endless loading of new activity on the old way of schooling.

And in 2002, government thinking is again stretching ahead of existing mainstream activity. The emphasis is specifically on the needs of the individual, on the need for greater diversity at 14 and beyond, on the welcome need for a European dimension in languages from primary school age. The White Paper 'Schools Achieving Success' has an introduction that begins:

> Education remains the Government's top priority.

The same introduction ends with this certainty:

> We will not rest until we have a truly world class education system that meets the needs of every child. Whatever it takes.

Getting there

'Whatever it takes' is not the traditional language of civil service drafting. It has an air of urgency, colloquialism and the action movie about it. It is the populist language of unassailable commitment with just a touch of menace. It is on the side of the learner and that is a very clear message.

The task is no longer just about leading individual schools and therefore finding ways in which new entrants from each key stage can be made to feel that they belong. The task is about leading education stripped of gatekeepers and barriers to learning. In the early 1980s under a previous government, half of this truth was discovered and it was realised that individual parents and children needed to have more ownership of the education process. This was not done with the touching idealism but to all intents and purposes by turning education into a commodity.

The individual family became a consumer of education and a valued customer with money to spend. Who needed formal vouchers when every child came with a price on his or her head? As many headteachers overnight became the nation's newest sales force selling schools and their products, market forces plus public accountability would soon sort out the world of education and, after a fashion, it did.

The present government clearly understands these mechanisms but has added a completely new and, what is interesting, an educational component to the equation by introducing the possibility of differentiation on a large scale. The emphasis on diversity and on targeted intervention has seen enormous development of specialist schools, Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities programmes. Within these schemes are summer programmes for able children, programmes for gifted and talented children, partnerships between state and private schools and public and private enterprise

The emphasis of so much of the above is on the needs of the individual and in many instances the needs of the deprived community. It is fascinating to observe so far our professional failure to grasp the individual learning possibilities that this new diversity offers. We see this as 'selection by the back door' and relive our old opposition to the gatekeepers without realising that we are being gatekeepers ourselves by failing to lead towards a new system that is only about individual learning and not about traditional schools.

There is so much much anecdotal evidence of educationalists worrying about what this does for schools and teachers. We should be recognising instead that this is a radically different view of education that is recognising at state level the concept of individual and community learning requirements. This is precisely the emphasis that a knowledge

economy needs. However, we are, government and educationalists together, also in danger of missing the obvious next step that makes creative sense of the steps taken so far.

The real issue surrounding transition is that we have primary schools and secondary schools existing as separate beings and in theological terms we are trying to breath life into a 'holy spirit' of learning transition which has a life of its own, coexists with the other two and creates a perfect trinity. We are also at government and professional level doing exactly the same with our impressive platform of individual learning initiatives and existing schools. We are consuming huge amounts of professional energy and personnel in liaising with coordinators and committees to link schools and initiatives and communities together. In one edition of the Times Educational Supplement in early February 2002 there were 100 posts advertised for coordinators of one sort or another to help implement policy at local regional and national level. If this is a typical week, we are taking the equivalent of the teaching staff of a very large secondary school out of the teaching front line on a regular basis. Something has to go for individual learning success to become universal. We must accept the end now of the autonomous established school as the only basis for delivery.

The end of the school and the beginning of leadership

The leadership of an individual school in England today is paradoxically at its most autonomous and at its most circumscribed. Headteachers have more power and responsibility in staffing, financial and premises matters than ever before. All legislation since 1980 has established more and more managerial power at school level. However, until the publication of the most recent White Paper, their relationship to the core of the role – leading teaching and learning can be circumscribed by their own and their colleagues perceptions of the National Curriculum, testing and public accountability and national strategies in general. And it is in leading learning that the new system must deliver a vehicle to establish the knowledge economy. The OFSTED database establishes beyond doubt the direct link between confident leadership and good learning outcomes.

OFSTED reports every year now that leadership in school is improving. The key stage two strategy is acknowledged as successful. Results continue to improve at key stage four. NCSL is the first national establishment of its type in the world. It is an acknowledged part of the government's commitment to a high quality profession.

The argument could be made therefore that there is so much evidence of incremental improvement that we are set fair for year on year success. Be patient and watch the steady increase in resources plus the growth of confident leadership make a steady difference. Let us take no risks. We want our existing schools and system to work better and to do better and in many ways this is attractive, cautious and possible. And it would be a bigger prize than that achieved in the long term either by the 1944 Butler reforms or by the 1960s/70s comprehensive reforms. At last a government and a profession that had seriously reduced the trailing edge of underachievement in our system. This scenario will happen now and the thinking on school leadership will rightly deserve much credit for

establishing consistency and guaranteed leadership competence in all schools. There is a duty to deliver consistency and to eliminate incompetence and confusion from our system. There would be severe criticism if this basic threshold were not reached throughout the country, regardless of phase, location or socio economic circumstances. And, given the failure of any previous administration to do this, perhaps this is sufficiently and pragmatically ambitious.

However, there is a counter argument that follows. Given that this course is set, we can afford in addition to use such a competent base to say to government that we have won back both the trust and authority to drive forward also on the futures agenda, which is a very different animal from anything so far envisaged.

So it is not enough; it is not enough to be better than those previous attempts, it is essential to be radically and speedily successful in a world where the following is happening

- the technology of learning no longer needs the Victorian classroom whose purpose was to maximise the number of pupils a teacher could physically see at once
- our knowledge of learning styles and of emotional intelligence directs us away from one style for all
- the content of e-learning is moving away from shallow content to world class university standard (the work by Columbia University in New York is currently an outstanding example)
- lifelong learning is becoming essential in a world where no one set of skills matches one occupation for good
- more and more processes which once required physical and mental activity are now mechanised (and often not done in this country)
- we are moving from a synchronous society to one which is becoming asynchronous
- markets for every product are becoming customised
- multinational providers are developing hugely attractive entertainment and education channels that modify both the expectations and tolerance of the learner
- technology speeds change at a rate beyond the ability of historic structures to cope

Questions cascade from the merely representative list above:

- how does our model of strictly age related learning prepare us for this changing world?
- what are we really doing about lifelong learning (apart from using the term a great deal)?
- what are we doing about the design of spaces for learning?
- what is the role of the private provider?
- what about pedagogy and technology?

- will the individual learner and family use technology to free him or herself from the age related and environment related issues of school before we adapt what we do?
- will other cultures/nations get there first?

But, the most worrying and challenging question of all strikes at the heart of current thinking and strategy. Just when we think that we at last have addressed the issue of a long trailing edge of underachievement in our society, will we find that we have helped those less successful groups to participate in a society that is about to cease to exist in its present form. This becomes a nightmare, valuable resources directed towards the right issue but freezing it in the wrong time An historian said that Cromwell's foreign policy was a perfect analysis when he formed it as a young man, but 20 years out of date by the time he had the power to implement it

We could examine all nine statements in detail but let us look at just one as an exemplar. One of the first historians to become curious about the effect the industrial revolution had on the mass of people as opposed to the inventors and politicians that my generation learned about at school was E.P. Thompson. His work on the Industrial Revolution concentrated very much on its perceived effects on 'ordinary people'. He maintained that a major effect was a change in the perception of time. Working hours were defined in strict hours with very precise starting and finishing times. The clock moved from being an object of great beauty and workmanship in the finest houses and public places and for the first time became a universal household item. Our schools growing from the late stages of that industrial period were and are characterised by exactly that notion of time as well. The debate about the four term years etc. concentrates on the long summer holiday being a remnant of medieval times when Oxford and Cambridge closed for everyone to supervise their harvest on their estates. Schools carry this anachronism to this day. But do we notice that the very imagery of school, in fact the dominant imagery of school is to do with its Victorian notion of regulated time, nine till four, the school bell, 'Last lesson in the afternoon'. In many schools still the most powerful leader after the head is the person who is the arbiter of time. Timetablers are the time managers of the institution parceling knowledge in regulated lumps and often becoming heads in the process. The National Curriculum was expressed in percentages of time giving variable prestige according to time allocation.

And look now at what is happening outside this box. The rest of society is rapidly becoming asynchronous and individual in its use and concept of time. The Internet is available 24 hours a day. Video recorders free people from being at a particular place at a particular time for entertainment, either at home for the favourite television programme, or at the cinema in vast common communion. This year for the first time, email and text mail traffic in telecommunications in the United States is greater than the traffic generated by direct one on one phone calls. People do not even need to be at the other end of the phone any more in order to communicate. Hot desking means that there need not be one office space for every employee. Novels written in Britain are typeset in Malaysia in a different time zone. Consultants advise clients in London from converted

crofts in the Hebrides. University academics have tenure in the United States but live in London.

The fixing of time with place with work and with home has ceased, especially for those of us who triumphed over the gatekeepers early enough in our education. Yet we are in danger of seeing the relationship of school to locality still in the way that the mill owner saw his mill and the terraced cottages of his workers.

In Victorian times, classroom design followed the work place. But we in the twenty first century as the work place changes out of recognition because of a new notions and use of time are still explaining to local authorities how we intend to use our 190 school days and which days will be for training and which for teaching and we are still filling in our school capacity forms for the DfES and local authorities calculating on a formula from last century how many spaces we have for groups of 30, how many for 15 and so on. Even when we become specialist schools – the cutting edge of the new world – we have mandatory discussions with DfES architects in terms of traditional school construction and classroom size.

There is no claim here that this observation is new or original. The claim is that this is just one example of many which illustrates the need for a blue skies venture towards the future. There is the need to lead the education process not schools as they once were

Leading learning for all

The technology is in existence for us to track and monitor every learner at every stage of his or her career. Every school student already has a unique reference number and every adult has a National Insurance number. Learning and training online has already been pioneered by commercial organisations. Is it not ironic that the largest and most successful ICT distance learning exercise ever mounted in the UK was by Camelot to train the nation's shopkeepers to operate lottery terminals; we have no inhibitions it seems in mobilising the nation's service sector to feed our own fantasies on consumer heaven (and good causes). The technology exists for us to allow students to work at any time and also in any place and for us to monitor that work. The knowledge exists about individual learning styles and preferences so as to maximise individual learning opportunities. And such knowledge and technology is advancing all the time. The worry often expressed in future scenarios is that as always the middle classes will seize the opportunities newly offered and increase yet again distance between themselves and those in inner cities and in large urban estates. The shift of resources through Excellence in Cities and other funded initiatives is meant to counter balance that, but it goes to institutions not people. The traditional school and a new group of school and local authority administrators then plan together how this new and valuable resource reaches those most in need. There is evidence of effectiveness but is this the most efficient and imaginative way of making a difference? The creative and managerial energy being used to make it all work needs now to be turned to making it different

How radical do we need to be and how radical are we prepared to be are the key questions. What is not in doubt is the need for radicalism. The only doubt is whether it will be professionally led or driven independently of educationalists by social and commercial forces. We are obsessed with the organisation of provision, not by what is provided and how it is accessed. But, when the questions of real content and real access are asked we enter dangerous territory. There is suddenly no room there for those in the world of education who have failed to grasp the plot. There is no room here for those afraid of accountability, for those out of sympathy with change who hark back to an easier life when scrutiny and responsibility for outcomes was unheard of. Nor is there much room for politicians at local or national level who want very short-term measures. There is needed instead the courage for a huge leap forward that changes fundamentally the relationship between government, learner and teacher.

This government rightly sees itself charged with the responsibility of developing an inclusive society for an increasingly devolved United Kingdom within a growing European Community. Our only resource is our human capital. A high personal level of education, skills, social and cultural confidence is a minimum entry requirement for each citizen to enable full participation and reward in the society envisaged. There is no room for a trailing edge here just as there was no room for mass illiteracy and innumeracy in Victorian England.

Questions

This paper now sets out three radical questions that need to be addressed in order to devise a new way forward. The questions invite necessary debate on the triangle of interests that make up the living educational world, the interests of the learner, the teacher and government. Where do responsibilities really lie in this relationship and how does a new set of requirements for a new world change those responsibilities?

The first radical question concerns the role of government. Does the government have to set the goals and framework, devise the strategy, find the resources **and** be the provider in this?

The second radical question concerns the relationship between the educators, the learners and the learners' community. Can the educators ever be fully accountable to the learners and their communities whilst there are so many confusing and conflicting lines of accountability? To whom is the individual teacher actually accountable today?

The third radical question concerns the individual learner, the learner's family or local community. What measures or incentives need to be established to make each individual learner feel and act as fully accountable and responsible for his or her own learning?

This paper now invites a debate around these questions. It suggests that the mind set and organisational patterns of the new ICT driven society are no longer compatible with our inherited school structures. In the short run, the computer will be to the school what the printing press was to the medieval scriptorium but this time we know it is happening.

This is the last chance for the educators to run their own reformation and the questions above are the key to successful reform. The questions are too great for one short paper to answer, but let us establish some pointers that will bring structure to the beginning of the debate.

What will the next 50 years mean for educational leadership, for government planning, for the private sector (if public/private is any longer a meaningful distinction), for the economics of learning provision, for internationalism, for personal and community responsibility?

The questions demand debate on the economics, the pedagogy and leadership and the sociology of education for the new world. The participants in this debate must be practitioners and consumers as well as government and advisors. This is an important message for the present government approach to problem solving generally. A government with such a vigourous agenda is tempted to find all the answers quickly and to find them by itself. This debate needs an additional feature of enabling the active participants to help with the answer and to distribute responsibility for solutions to several levels.

An attractive suggestion is to use the new DfES Innovations Unit for education in a multi dimensional way. There is obviously a need for a highly focused clearinghouse of good and successful practice which can share and reward good innovation. However, the unit should also sponsor and encourage the macro debate on the future, and why not start with the questions above and commission the design of radical new models? The interlinking of the stakeholders in new ways is an inevitable consequence of the questioning.

What happens to educational leadership if it becomes completely separated from administration with a fierce emphasis on learning outcome and access for all? What happens to classroom teaching and whole class teaching if individual learning styles and needs become more recognised?

What happens to the economics of education if educational resources go directly to the family according to perceived need on the lines of the present family credit model? Suddenly all family units become important customers and perhaps the most displaced and dysfunctional units become very valuable indeed.

What happens to league tables, the examination season, and examination boards if assessment becomes individual and computerised at any place and at any time? What happens to the concept of year groupings if assessment ceases to become strictly age related?

The OECD International Futures Programme '21st Century Transitions' has us moving from this century on a journey from the mass era to the learning society. In this picture the individual moves from traditional mass production assembly line worker to empowered team worker to future consumer/producer to artist, where creativity and

freedom to initiate are the dominant modes. Our own thinking must initiate and create a new learning environment for our people.

The concluding paragraph is being written in Brussels exactly at the moment that the new Euro currency is being introduced. The new notes used now by 300 million people share common motifs of bridges and doorways. These are fitting symbols for a political aspiration that wishes to unify Europe after hundreds of years of conflict. An educational project that began by examining the bridges and doorways between two phases of education now finishes by asking what are the bridges and doorways we need for fully inclusive and empowering education for all.

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