

## Editorial

### The evolution of education

In *The Evolution of Everything*,<sup>1</sup> Matt Ridley professes a general theory of evolution that applies to everything, from society to money, technology, language, law, culture, music, violence, history, education, politics, God and morality. Everything inexorably changes, but as it does so, it demonstrates path dependence; changes in present circumstances are limited by changes in the past, even though those past circumstances may no longer be relevant. It results in descent with modification, and persistence due to selective advantage in a set of ongoing circumstances. Ridley believes that Charles Darwin's special theory of evolution through natural selection, resulting in cumulative complexity (as expressed in *The Origin of Species*, 1859), can be applied to the full breadth of human society and culture. He asserts that there is no top-down master plan; just local rules creating global structures. Everything proceeds from the bottom up: there are no 'skyhooks' (i.e. God, the government, central banking systems, Great Men, etc). He turns from these insights to the presentation of a political ideology that we do not share, but his initial ideas are provocative enough to stimulate interesting questions of relevance to our field.

Is the history of education characterised by inescapable, undirected, unplanned, emergent and selective change? What drives the evolution of education and what are the units of selection? What is it that enables some educational theories, policies, practices and settings to survive and reproduce while others falter? What makes some (im)possible and (im)probable? Are educational ideas and behaviours the result of random mutation or agentic intentionality? What political, cultural, social, economic and other factors in the surrounding environment promote or suppress certain educational characteristics and traits over others? Are there antecedent conditions, and chains of events, that limit educational choices, thereby setting structural and institutional trajectories?

In this issue, Spencer Weinreich's article investigates Edward VI's 1549 treatise attacking papal supremacy. Analysis of the two extant manuscripts in French, including a draft copy with annotations by the king's French tutor (Jean Belmain) offer unique insights into the mechanics of Tudor royal pedagogy, the sources upon which the twelve-year-old king drew, and the extent to which the treatise contained original thought. Weinreich describes how hundreds of—mostly pedestrian—interventions of Jean Belmain on the manuscript of Edward VI provide clues to the interactions between teacher and pupil, and the interweaving of language instruction and doctrinal inculcation. Whilst grammar and spelling mistakes are corrected, the influence of the teacher can be seen as primarily negative; the text is condensed and sections deleted. Further, some of the suggested corrections are ignored; that which is taught is not necessarily that which is learned. Using the evolutionary analogy, if 'ideas' are the unit of analysis, then the stark contrast between the draft and final copies of the treatise begs questions about the intellectual environment in which they were or were not selected for reproduction. The determinants of selection might range from the personal predispositions of pupil and teacher, to transnational conversations in theology and political philosophy, and global struggles for temporal and spiritual power. It is clear that Edward VI's treatise can only be understood contextually and relationally, containing many merged and subordinated voices, and as part of a chain of intertextual meaning extending into the past and future.

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Ridley, *The Evolution of Everything: How Ideas Emerge* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015).

Our second article is Minho Jeon's study of Korean Seodang (Village Schools) during the time of the Korean Enlightenment (1876-1910). It looks specifically at the reasons why village school education continued to spread, alongside modern western education, and why it eventually became the foundation of public schools during the Japanese colonisation of Korea (1910-1945). Following our ecological model further, here the unit of analysis is a particular type of institution, evolving—albeit under different names—alongside newly introduced and competing institutional forms. The political, economic and social processes of modernization and the transnational movement of educational ideas disrupt the educational environment, but certain traits of Village Schools confer selective advantage. The intersection of Confucian culture and classical Chinese in the curriculum, coincided with the entry standards of particular professions and was bestowed with a privileged status by higher socio-economic groups. At the same time, it is clear that individual politicians and policy-makers (governors and mayors) acted both to catalyze and inhibit change.

Front cover designs of a series of a Japanese school publications provide the basis for Tatsuya Sakai's article. The author suggests that the changes apparent in this visual source can be used to identify and trace changes in the wider educational context and intellectual environment during the inter-war period in Japan (1925-1941). Like Jeon's study, Sakai highlights conflict between different ideological currents, including Western child-centred approaches to education and distinctively Japanese notions of academic instruction. Only the second of these was adaptable to the increasingly nationalistic political and social situation: 'New Education' did not survive and thrive. The evolution of the school's anthologies of students' writings, published under the title '*Mebae*', can be understood ecologically as part of an inter-acting and inter-dependent network of theories, policies, practices and settings that influence, and are influenced by, factors both internal and external to the dynamic educational ecosystems of which they are a part.

Another substantial contribution to this issue comes from Donald Leinster-Mackay: it is a research report discussing matters pertaining to the provenance of Stowe, a leading English public school, established in 1923. Beyond the philanthropic gift of Stowe mansion for the purposes of founding a new public school, the instituting of Stowe school is attributed to demography and population: there was a shortage of public school places for preparatory school boys. The reputation and popularity of public and preparatory schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had resulted in overcrowding and long-waiting lists. Expansion was also deemed necessary due to new developments in British universities and the influx of boys into preparatory schools from the Dominions, the USA, Russia, Poland and Asia. Just as an increase in the population of any species within the same habitat creates competition for resources (such as food, water and territory), so questions were raised about the extent to which there was a market for a new public school. In this case, concerns that the establishment of Stowe might divide the existing, and potentially declining, public school market can be interpreted as 'intraspecific competition' (i.e. competition between members of the same species), as opposed to 'interspecific competition' (i.e. competition between individuals of different species). This nomenclature can be used to differentiate competition between public schools themselves, and competition between public schools and other types of secondary education (e.g. state-maintained grammar schools). Either way, according to evolutionary theory, competition for resources within and between species relates closely to the process of natural selection.

Lastly, this issue contains 'Major Accessions to Repositories in 2015 Relating to Education', prepared by Jonathan Doney. It presents the relevant accessions to over two hundred record

repositories throughout the British Isles in the previous twelve months. It is a resource that signposts readers to the raw data through which to observe the evolution of educational systems, institutions, organisations, leaders, policies, laws, practices, practitioners and so forth.

We are not the first and will not be the last to signal the potential applicability of evolution and natural selection as metaphors or analogies by which to understand human history and social change. We are also not the first to point out the dangers of doing so.<sup>2</sup> Matt Ridley's *The Evolution of Everything* arguably exemplifies some of these hazards. Nevertheless, his provocative publication has provided us with a thematic framework for discussing histories of education pertaining to diverse phenomena in very different times and spaces, and hopefully we have provided you with a stimulus for an interesting evolutionary-themed thought experiment!

Rob Freathy and Jonathan Doney

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Nisbet. *Social change and History: Aspects of the Western theory of development* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).