

THE CONVERSATION

Beware the digital entrepreneurs who are opening their own schools

June 15, 2016 10.35am BST

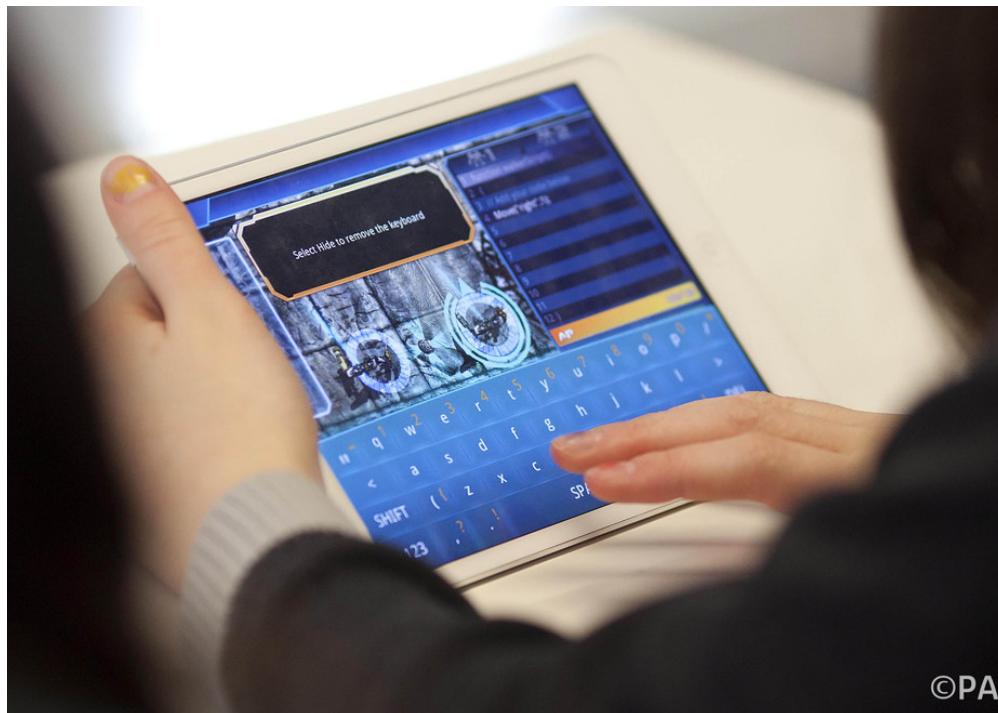
Ben Williamson

Lecturer in Education, University of Stirling

The Conversation's partners

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

View the full list



Coding has become a core part of the curriculum. David Parry/PA Archive

To children who love computer games, it could be a dream come true. In early February, Nicky Morgan, secretary of state for education, announced plans to open two new free schools focusing on computer programming skills in 2017. The schools – in London and Bournemouth – are founded by Ian Livingstone, a video-games entrepreneur, who was also a major player in the recent introduction of computing as a subject in the English national curriculum.

Livingstone's involvement in schools shows once again how education policy is being influenced by high-profile business people. In the process, they are transforming the role of the school: making it more like a business than a democratically governed public institution.

Alongside the controversial Department of Education white paper proposal to encourage all schools to join multi-academy trusts and replace parent governors with professionals, the two new schools – called Livingstone Academies – are typical of the future direction of school governance: more private influence, and less democratic community engagement.

Lobbying education

Livingstone is known best for his role as a video-games entrepreneur who launched the successful Tomb Raider franchise while executive chairman of Eidos. Wired magazine named him one of the most influential people in the UK's digital economy.

In 2011, Livingstone co-authored a report called **Next Gen** with researchers from the charity **Nesta**, which supports growth in the digital sector. Their report demanded more “rigorous teaching of computing in schools” and recommended putting computer science into the national curriculum for schools in England. Commissioned by Ed Vaizey, then minister for culture, communications and the creative industries, it was intended as a review of the skills needs of the video-games and visual effects industries, long seen as economically valuable sectors of the UK economy.

The subsequent formation of a **Next Gen Skills lobbying coalition** including Nesta, Google, and Microsoft, finally convinced the Department for Education to support the development of a **new computing curriculum** in 2013. Livingstone himself remains chair of the group, working with Nesta to create partnerships between industry, policy and educators.



Livingstone: from gaming to schooling. Matt Crossick / PA Wire

Livingstone's Academies extend his influence from demand-side policy lobbying to direct supply-side management of educational institutions.

Start-up schools

Planned to open in partnership with the **Aspirations Academies Trust** – a successful multi-academy trust that is itself partnered with the US-based **Quaglia Institute** – the Livingstone Academies focus on the “creative application of digital technologies”. Their aim is to equip students with: “The skills and qualifications required to play an active and successful role in today's knowledge-based, interdependent, highly competitive, fast-changing digital world.”

The schools' website says that the schools will be run in “partnership with the digital industry to ensure that students gain the skills and knowledge that are central to a successful life as a digital citizen in modern Europe”. In practice, the schools feature specialist facilities such as science labs, design studios, and even on-site “business hubs for start-up and tech businesses”.

The emphasis on preparing young people for work and citizenship in the digital economy reinforces many of the key demands that Livingstone himself has been making while overseeing Next Gen.

This is clearly a successful campaign from a political perspective. In the **government press release** announcing the new schools, Morgan said: “The free schools programme is proving to be a vital outlet for our society's most creative and innovative people to spread their excellence to future generations.”

Livingstone said he hoped his move would:

Encourage other digital entrepreneurs to seize the opportunity offered by the free schools programme in helping to give children an authentic education for the jobs and opportunities of the digital world.



Policy entrepreneurs

The establishment of the Livingstone Academies is part of a wider education reform movement both in the UK and the US. Businesses and entrepreneurs are currently jumping on new schools policies to push their own interests in education, often through charitable foundations and trusts as well as lobbying organisations. Impatient with the slow pace of educational change, US entrepreneurs from computing companies such as Google and IBM have even created their own alternative **start-up schools** instead. The Livingstone Academies demonstrate how free school policies and multi-academy trust proposals are now making entrepreneurial influence more possible in English schools.

In this political context, charitable business people such as Livingstone are becoming important policy entrepreneurs. They are able to influence national policy through lobbying, and run schools according to private interests at the same time. As with the computing curriculum more generally, the Livingstone Academies are being set up to meet government agendas around the digital economy. These agendas are being steered by entrepreneurs such as Livingstone, and will be met by running schools more like businesses where pupils are taught to become little digital entrepreneurs of the future.

Current policies make it increasingly possible and desirable for business entrepreneurs to both demand and supply educational reforms. Working via charitable trusts and foundations, private hands appear poised to displace democratic discussion and collaboration in schooling.



Coding
Computing
free schools
Privatisation of education
Nicky Morgan
 Tweet121
 Share22
 Get newsletter