

Campaign for Real Education

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“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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NEWSLETTER

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Editorial

The Autumn school term has seen the launch of yet another revised version of the National Curriculum. It promises to be more rigorous. It will apply to all local authority schools. Whilst academies are free to set their own curriculum most lack the courage to do so and are happy to use the Government’s version, safe in the knowledge that it will ‘pass muster’ with Ofsted inspectors. The previous versions of the National Curriculum from 1988, 1995, 1999, 2002 and 2008 all fell by the wayside. Is this one going to be any more successful?

According to the Prime Minister it will be “rigorous, engaging and tough”. The intention is to match the best education systems around the world. In practice, this means the teaching of more demanding topics at an earlier age. In mathematics, for example, pupils will be introduced to simple fractions (halves and quarters) from the age of 5. They will be expected to know their ‘times tables’ by the age of nine. This is still a couple of years behind many independent schools. Nevertheless, any attempt to introduce a little more rigour into the classroom should be welcomed.

Significant problems remain, however. As with so much in education, things are rarely quite what they may seem. The new National Curriculum for history is illustrative. Almost all of the content is defined as “Examples (non-statutory)” that “could” be taught. In reality it is a ‘free-for-all’. There is no requirement to teach anything about the World Wars or Churchill, let alone landmarks such as the Norman Conquest, Magna Carta, the Reformation or the British Empire. Nelson, Wellington and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) do not even get a mention under the list of non-statutory examples of what “could” be taught. Prescribed, instead, are topics from world history such as Benin and Baghdad. Significantly, the Curriculum promotes the seductive idea that all knowledge of the past is provisional and that children should construct the past for themselves; a ‘fake’ and impossibly time-consuming process for children. History teachers are delighted. Our past belongs to them.

More generally, and for all its good intentions, the new National Curriculum faces a real problem of implementation. How can pupils in Year 5, for example, be expected to start the new curriculum having missed the preceding four years of it? What about Year 9 pupils, who will be taught the new Year 9 curriculum having missed the previous 8 years of that curriculum? There is some overlap of content but teachers will have reason for feeling aggrieved.

The Government is looking overseas for support. Maths teachers from China are now arriving in England to show our teachers how to teach maths to a higher level than that demanded by the previous curriculum. Back in the 19th century we used to send religious missionaries to China but now, in the 21st century, they are returning the 'favour' by sending mathematical missionaries to us!

If Nicky Morgan, the new education secretary, wishes to improve standards of attainment in mathematics and in other subjects she should read the CRE's latest pamphlet. Written by one of the country's most successful head teachers it argues for a return to 'whole class' teaching. This is the method widely employed in the world's most successful education systems but ditched here in the 1960s. It can be accessed from the front page of the CRE website.

How much easier life would be for Government if it could solve deficiencies in our education system by the stroke of a pen, by publishing yet another version of the National Curriculum. As Nicky Morgan, the new Education Secretary, is about to find out, the success or failure of any reform will depend on the cooperation and capabilities of those who have to implement it.

With the general election now drawing near, we are including in this newsletter a manifesto to improve our education system. Had successive governments taken fuller note of the CRE's advice in the past it would not be confronted by many of the educational problems it faces today. For many years those in power chose to ignore our warning about such matters as ineffective methods for teaching children to read, disastrous grade inflation in public examinations and serious deficiencies in the National Curriculum. Better late than never, but the slow learning curve of those in power has proved expensive, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of the life chances of children.

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An education manifesto for the 2015 general election

The UK is falling behind many other industrialised nations in terms of basic literacy and numeracy levels. According to the OECD our 16 to 24 year-olds are actually less competent in the 3Rs than the older generation of 55 to 65 year-olds. In the matter of education, successive governments have failed our young people. The Campaign for Real Education believes that the time has come for meaningful change. Our manifesto is addressed to all political parties. It proposes change in six key areas.

1. The Curriculum

Diversity and choice within the curriculum and between curricula will enhance the prospects of our education system meeting the needs of the 21st century. It will, also, ensure that the best emerges

- a. The current National Curriculum is a ‘one size fits all’ model based on age-related ‘key stages’. We propose a more flexible structure that will allow pupils to progress between ‘key stages’ in accordance with their ability, regardless of their age.
- b. There should be more flexibility within the curriculum for children at secondary level to follow either a vocational or an academic pathway.
- c. The non-compulsory status of the National Curriculum for academies, free schools and independent schools should be extended to all schools.

2. National Assessment

- a. National tests at 7 and 11 should be simplified and take up less time to administer.
- b. GCSE currently exercises what is, in effect, a monopoly at 16+ and its credibility has been undermined by grade inflation. It should be abolished and replaced by a dual-exam system leading to either vocational or to academic qualifications.
- c. In order to prevent grade inflation public examinations at 16+ and 18+ should be ‘norm referenced’. This will mean that a specific percentage of candidates will attain each grade. The top 10% of candidates will be awarded an A-Grade, the next 20% a B Grade and so on.

3. Parental choice of school

Local communities, based on the jurisdiction areas of current local authorities, should determine, as far as is practical, the types of school that they wish to have within their locality. This should include, but not be confined to, comprehensive schools. Where a community wishes to have grammar schools, these should be set up alongside high quality vocational schools. Bi-lateral schools, incorporating both academic and vocational sections should, also, be made an option.

4. Early Years and Infants

As resources allow, the spending priority for the education budget should be with younger children where it is likely to have the greatest impact and to make the greatest long-term difference.

5. Teacher Training and Ofsted

At the heart of the UK's failure to match the best performing education systems around the world are our teacher trainers and Ofsted inspectors. For too long they have been promoting and enforcing failed teaching methodologies on our schools. A 'root and branch' reform is needed of the rules and regulations under which they operate. We must ensure that trainee teachers can experience, and be encouraged to use, a variety of teaching methods, including traditional 'whole class' teaching that is used widely in the high performing schools of the Asia-Pacific region.

6. Higher Education

Too many young people are being encouraged to undertake university degree courses that lead to disillusion, high personal debt and to unemployment or under-employment. Post-school vocational training and apprenticeships should be greatly expanded and should build on post-14 vocational courses at school. Polytechnics should be restored to meet the demand for vocational courses.

Digital technology

Baroness Greenfield, one of the world's leading experts on brain physiology, has warned of human brains changing in response to increased exposure to the virtual world of computer screens. 'Mind change' she has suggested may be as great a threat to our children as 'climate change'. Children's addiction to this virtual world is being encouraged and fed by an obsession with digital technology in UK schools. Now, we learn that research by the Japanese government has shown that the more time that children spend on their smart phones, the worse they perform academically. In mathematics, pupils spending four hours or more on their smart phones perform 19% lower on national tests compared to those who limit their smart phone time to 30 minutes or less. Across all subjects the deficit difference averaged out at 14%. In the city of Osaka a ban on the use of smart phones in schools has been introduced.

A ban on mixed-ability teaching?

Rumours have been circulating that the Tory general election manifesto will include a commitment to the banning of mixed-ability teaching. Apparently, the plan is for Ofsted to award the coveted status of "outstanding" only to schools that 'set' pupils according to ability. There are no rumours that the Government is going to ban its enforced mixed-ability exam, the GCSE.

The argument for ability 'sets' is well rehearsed and based on common sense. The essential message is that children are best taught in groups of similar ability. It allows pupils to progress at a pace broadly in line with their intelligence.

All children can cope with 'dumbed down' lesson content but not all children can cope with more difficult work. In mixed-ability classes, therefore, the temptation is always to 'lower the bar', on the basis that lesson content has to be 'accessible' to everyone.

The proponents of mixed-ability teaching will argue that in a mixed-ability class the work can be 'differentiated' to suit the needs of each child. Different groups of children, it is claimed, can be working on the same topic but at different levels. In practice, it usually means the teacher trying to teach three different lessons at the same time to three different groups of youngsters in the same classroom!

For all the protestations of the mixed ability fanatics this method of teaching does not work well for most children, most of the time. It cannot work. Pupils need a teacher's attention and a teacher's instruction to be available throughout a lesson. They need the 'whole-class' teaching methods that underpin so many of the most successful education systems around the world.

And this, of course, is the heart of the problem. Mixed ability teaching is not only

problematic in itself, it comes with its required teaching method of so-called child-centred learning. This antithesis of ‘whole-class’ teaching, based on group work, is now the predominant teaching methodology in all our state schools and for all classes, including those where the children are set according to ability.

In its purest form, mixed ability teaching becomes ‘personalised learning’ in which each child is a group unto him/herself. It sounds perfect but the gap between the rhetoric and the reality is wide. ‘Personalised learning’ usually means that a child is stuck in front of a very impersonal computer screen with a teacher making the occasional appearance to sort out defects in the wiring or the software.

So, should we hope that the rumours about ‘setting’ are true and that schools should have to go along this path to be judged outstanding? No, not in our opinion! Schools need be judged on how successful they are and not on their commitment to a particular teaching methodology. That is dangerous territory. Another government might decide to enforce the opposite.

Over the past half century it has been mixed-ability teaching, and its associated offshoot of ‘child-centred’ learning, that has been promoted and praised by inspectors. Indeed, mixed ability teaching remains the norm in primary schools, with children sat around tables, many with their backs to the teacher. Each table gets a morsel of teaching and of teacher-time in their turn, with whole-class teaching kept to a minimum. What a waste! Banning mixed ability teaching groups will not address the real problem - this fake ‘child-centred’ learning methodology that dictates teaching of all pupils.

Teachers need to have their eyes opened. They need to be learners, again. A ‘root and branch’ reform of teacher training and of in-service training is required; and it has been required for a very long time.

Educational Research

Tens of millions of pounds is spent each year from the public purse on educational research. Some of this research is worthwhile but much of it can be more damaging than helpful. The promotion of failed teaching methodologies in schools, such as so-called ‘child-centred’ learning, the disastrous ‘real books’ approach to teaching reading and the relegation of knowledge in favour of fake ‘skills’, is underpinned by such research. Indeed, the entire edifice of our current education system, even the crazy world of hyper-grade inflation in public examinations, has been built on it.

Now, a new piece of such research has hit the headlines. It comes from the Department for Education’s “Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE)” and is entitled “Students’ educational and developmental outcomes at age 16”. It states that its research “was designed to answer questions relevant to

policy.” More or less, though, this is government research to justify government policy.

Many of its conclusions are common sense. Should we be spending public funds for such insights as these?

- “Students who had attended a more academically effective primary school for maths went on to gain better GCSE maths grades”
- “Attending a higher quality secondary school ... predicted better GCSE English”
- “Students who spent more time on homework during Year 9 were almost 10 times more likely to achieve 5 A*-C ... than those who did less homework.”
- “All [children] were influenced the most between 3 and 16 years by their families.”
- “The benefits of good teaching and good schools were found in each key stage.”
- “Students’ examination attainment is strongly influenced by the education level of their parents.”

This EPPSE project began in 1997, at a time when around £70m was being spent annually on educational research. Was such high expenditure worthwhile? The following year Ofsted commissioned a study to find out. This study recognised that some educational research was of high intellectual quality but that much was “partisan in nature” raising “severe doubts about methodology” and was “of dubious value”.

By stating the obvious, at the expense of the public purse, the latest EPPSE report may feel that it has avoided the possibility of bringing educational research into further disrepute. If so, it has not been entirely successful.

One of its conclusions is that, “Attending a pre-school, compared to none, predicted higher total GCSE score”. Now, this may feel very comforting for those parents who deposit their one-year old with the local nursery for up to 12 hours each weekday. Indeed, “The Sunday Times” headlined its coverage by proclaiming, “The nursery kids are all right”. It even went so far as to state that, “far from feeling guilty”, these parents “should be slapping themselves on the back for choosing daycare for their children over a child minder or even staying at home to look after them themselves.” In fact, the report’s conclusion in this area is an irrelevance. It is based on the situation in the mid 1990s when universal free pre-schooling was not available. However, these days, most stay-at-home mums/dads are able to take advantage of this free provision – three hours per day - for their children. Their infants have the

best of both worlds. The EPPSE report compares only those pupils who did not have any pre-schooling with those who did. How different things are now! 12 years in the future, I suspect that we will see the best results being achieved by those infants who had pre-schooling plus parental time.

Too often head teachers, have to remind ‘well-off’ working parents that their financial resources are able to buy everything their young child needs except for the one thing that matters most, the one thing that they cannot purchase – time!

No Comment

"We are not a laboratory for social engineering...When it comes to social mobility we are part of the solution, not the root of the problem."

Richard Harman, Chairman of the HMC, addressing its annual conference, 28.9.2014

"Pupils are not prepared to listen unless they are entertained."

Evidence from primary school teacher to Ofsted survey on pupil behavior. September 2014.

"A-levels in modern foreign languages will be marked more fairly from next summer, the exams regulator, Ofqual, has promised."

BBC report, 26.9.14

"The biggest threat to civilisation is human stupidity,"

Professor Brian Cox in an interview with Mailonline, reported 30.9.2014