

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 ‘Silly Season’ arrived early this year with a report from the Royal Society of Arts suggesting that all pupils start off the academic year with an ‘A’ grade. Since the only direction from ‘A’ is downward, this august organisation suggests that failure be banished and redefined as “not yet”. Little, it seems, has changed in the world of education. The RSA is simply affirming an educational culture based on the notion of ‘equality of outcome’.

This newsletter brings contributions from the Director of The Centre for Market Research in Education, from a parent and from a classroom assistant. All three offer valuable insights into what is happening in our education system and, indeed, what should be happening.

Ultimately, we depend on politicians to steer education in the right direction and away from the worst excesses of the educational establishment. Backed, as it is, by ‘expert’ after ‘expert’, by a National Curriculum and national tests, by public examinations, by a vast budget, and by Ofsted ‘enforcers’, parents and pupils might have expected better from the school system. Instead, the education edifice built by successive governments is largely a monument to failure. We are locked into mid-table mediocrity in international league tables of educational performance in reading, maths and science. Schools are criticised by employers for producing too many youngsters who lack even basic skills. Universities have to run remedial ‘catch-up’ classes for newly arrived undergraduates. “If you seek his memorial, look about you,” states the Latin inscription on the memorial stone to Christopher Wren in St. Paul’s Cathedral. The same can be said of our education ministers and their ‘apparatchiks’ since the great educational revolution began back in the late 1980s. It has left us with an economy that is becoming ever more dependent on immigrants who either possess

the high-level skills sought by employers or who are prepared to get out of bed in the morning to do manual work such as fruit picking.

Academies and Free Schools

The major expansion of the academy programme and the introduction of free schools promised much. With control over both their budget and their curriculum it was claimed that these schools would have the same independence as those in the private sector. Of course, this could never really be the case. Accountability was simply shifted from the LEA to the DfE under a system that has become more centralised. Some of these new schools have been very successful but not all, and nagging concerns remain. One chain, E-Act, had been running 34 academies until it was recently stripped of 10 of them because of concern about performance.

Large academy ‘chains’ have the advantage of being able to make cost savings on the ‘bulk purchase’ of goods and services that are not available to a ‘stand alone’ free school or academy. The same advantage is available to local authorities. Are these large academy chains, then, simply the new LEAs?

It might, indeed, be better if a regional ‘hub’ could run certain ‘services’ and negotiate discounts on bulk purchases. It is administratively demanding and expensive for single academies and free schools to have individual responsibility for such things as building repairs, contracts of employment, meals, transport and so on. There would be considerable savings to be achieved through buying on behalf of a few hundred schools. Budgets need to be directed towards the classroom. The cost of a business administrator for a single or small group of academies should never dwarf the salary of the Prime Minister.

The freedom given to academies and free schools needs to focus on educational matters, especially freedom over the curriculum and teaching. We do not want local authorities enforcing fashionable but failed ideas on teachers. That is the freedom that is really worth having because it is a freedom that will help pupils. Sadly, even in this area, the academy and free school initiative is not being consistently successful. Most of these schools continue to be locked into the National Curriculum and to failed notions of ‘best practice’ centred on so-called ‘independent’ or ‘personalised’ learning.

Baseline Assessment

The Government has announced that from 2016 all 4 year-olds will face formal assessment. From this ‘baseline’ the progress of a school will be judged. In theory this is very sensible and most schools already employ a form of such screening. However, ‘testing’ at such a young age is not sufficiently reliable as a foundation for

building an entire edifice of assessment. Even the so-called experts in assessment will admit, off the record, that for infants it is more reliable to look at the qualification of the mother than to use formal testing! Since school performance and performance-related pay will be judged, in part at least, on the advances made from the baseline teachers will be inclined to mark harshly in order to show lots of subsequent progress! The whole initiative has been devised in consultation with the teacher unions, who seemed delighted.

At last, some good news!

15 year-olds in England performed above average at problem-solving tasks related to real-life according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). They came 11th out of 44 developed nations and ahead of our European neighbours, other than Finland. It seems that our youngsters may not be as quite as mediocre as was suggested by their performance on the recent OECD PISA tests of maths, science and reading. They probably just need better teaching. Even on these problem-solving tests, however, we remain some way adrift of those Asia Pacific countries that also dominate high attainment on the PISA tests. Interestingly, Singapore, which has retained GCE O-Level exams, is top of the pile for problem solving as well as being near the top for the PISA tests. Around one in six pupils in England (16.4%) were unable to reach the ‘baseline level of proficiency’ on the problem-solving tasks. This is more than double the ‘failure’ rate of South Korea, Japan and Singapore. Overall, then, well done to our pupils, but still some way to go.

We need a more diverse, competitive and entrepreneurial provision in the education sector according to the Centre for Market Research in Education. James Croft, its Director, explains.

“By and large, British families do not choose the education their children receive. For the majority of parents that choice is made for them, by the distance from their front door to the school gate, and whether they have the means to buy into the catchment of another school or avail themselves of a private alternative.

Advocates of local schooling maintain that if better off parents showed greater loyalty to their local primary or secondary the peer effect would ensure we would have a good school in every community. Rather than diverting resources into new schools, the government should be investing in improving existing schools.

However, experience suggests that school improvement on this model, with no competitive challenge, can at best deliver only slow, incremental progress towards raising achievement, and not without significant investment. Massive increases in

public spending on education in the decade to 2010 – which saw teaching salaries rise to amongst the highest in Europe, recruitment of tens of thousands of teaching assistants, generous capital funding for ICT infrastructure and improvements to school ‘learning environments’ – gave schools more than adequate resources to effect change, but did not translate to improved educational outcomes. According to international benchmarks, national attainment relative to overseas competitors in fact fell in this period. Increasing spending is clearly not enough.

Neither can the right outcomes be engineered from the centre. At the time of the 2010 general election, the Conservatives seemed to recognise that, after more than a decade of national strategies and ‘guidance’ from Whitehall, the integrity of the teaching profession was then severely compromised. The message was clear that responsibility needed to be restored to head-teachers and that teachers needed to be freed up to get on with the job. But central government has in fact become even more prescriptive in assessment, curriculum and pedagogy, while balking at the challenges of deregulating teacher qualification, and root and branch denationalisation of pay and conditions. Academies have theoretical freedoms in these and other areas, but the existence of these national frameworks, together with the Ofsted accountability framework, does little to encourage entrepreneurial initiative.

At the Centre for Market Reform of Education (CMRE), we believe that this problem of inadequate incentives is central to the challenge of educational reform. Under the current system, teachers effectively get paid for showing up; managers, essentially, for ensuring that the school operates according to processes, and on resources, that are determined by government and regulators; while school leaders have only to perform satisfactorily to be deemed to be doing well. No one’s career is really on the line if children fail to make progress.

We also believe that the incentive structure cannot be fundamentally changed for the better without a move towards a more market-based education system that gives parents real choice in relation to what is best for their children, and provides autonomy to tailor their services in response to demand. While the government has made progress in establishing precedents for schools being governed and led by people from outside the system, the free school policy has brought choice to only a very few neighbourhoods, and more recent applicants are under increasing pressure to conform to established ‘best practice’. To harness the competition effect, there must be room for these new school entrepreneurs to innovate. But in addition the government must remove market entry and operational constraints on private education service providers. There is now a substantial body of evidence that overturns the idea that profit-making businesses have a poorer record on quality than their not-for-profit counterparts, and accommodating the profit-motive is the only way to achieve the competitive market dynamic that the economic literature consistently finds stimulates achievement and efficiency gains.

CMRE exists to provide and interpret the relevant evidence for policymakers concerned with these issues. If you would like to support our work, and/or to subscribe to our e-newsletter, send a request for further information to info@cmre.org.uk. We hope that you will assist us in putting the case and galvanising support across the education sector and beyond for market reform of education.”

James Croft is Director of the Centre for Market Reform of Education (CMRE)

A view from the classroom – the perspective of a teaching assistant

I have been working as a teaching assistant at a successful further education college for several years. I work with students who are taking Level 1 and Level 2 vocational qualifications and with foundation level GCSE maths students. Here is how it looks from my perspective.

The vocational qualifications have no value

Students are obtaining qualifications that have little or no value in the real world. Apprentices who complete level 2 qualifications leave college with little understanding of their subject. Almost all the teachers I have worked with consider most of their students to be unemployable. The problem is not that course syllabuses lack content, but that students are not required to demonstrate much knowledge of that course content in assessments. For instance, in order to meet a criterion on a Level 1 NVQ course I supported, students had only “to attempt” to write a method statement. They did not have to include specific details of the task, they did not have to make a *good* attempt at describing the method, they had only to make *an* attempt.

Targets and the erosion of standards

In order meet pass rate targets and ensure future recruitment teachers and support staff give huge amounts of extra help to NVQ students who should fail. It invariably involves telling students what to write. I have seen teachers, out of desperation, doing multiple-choice exams for their students before getting them to sign their names on the test. I have seen support staff and teachers type up work for the students, carefully incorporating poor grammar and realistic spelling errors. I have seen teachers fill out entire workbooks in faked handwriting because the college gets paid so many pounds per booklet.

The abuse of support

The definition of what constitutes a ‘support need’ is being stretched to the limit. It upsets me to think that students who lack commitment and discipline are using resources that could be used to help students who have a genuine ‘support need’.

Recently, I came across a group of students who had all come from the same school. They were in a GCSE Maths foundation level class hoping to improve on their D grades. They asked if they would have ‘readers’ in their GCSE exam. None of them had dyslexia or any other learning disability. They wanted, and were used to getting, reading support in the exams in order to cover up a lack of ability – hardly the point of an exam and misleading to potential employers who may assume that a maths exam qualification includes an ability to read the question paper.

Teaching methods

Teachers are required to teach in a prescribed, ‘child-centred’ manner that has to be fun and has to focus on ‘independent learning’. Producing independent learners is a noble aim but it does not work unless basic skills are in place. The young people I work with do not have literacy and numeracy skills beyond what one might expect of children at primary school. They are, also, unmotivated. It is unhelpful and unrealistic to expect them to learn independently.

Personal responsibility

Although students are encouraged to become independent learners they do not have to take any responsibility for their education. Where underperformance occurs teachers, alone, are deemed responsible. The youngsters know that they will get as many second chances as they want and they know they will pass. The bar will move to wherever they want it. There is no failure, no competition and little reason to try. The students, pleasant enough individuals, enjoy thinking they are getting away with something. The tragedy is that the education system is allowing it and, by allowing it, our young people are being betrayed.

The writer wished to remain anonymous.

A Parent's View

Children need the same protection in the classroom as that provided by the television 'watershed' and by cinema film classification.

We live at a time of much concern and regulation regarding child protection. A 9 o'clock watershed operates for TV and an age classification is in place for cinema. It is surprising that no such controls are in place in our schools. More or less, they have a free rein to expose their students to 'literary' material of a type that is potentially harmful, disturbing and exploitative. Schools may play lip service to promoting non-abusive language and behaviour in their 'code of conduct' but, it seems, anything goes when it comes to what is being taught in lessons or what is on offer in the library.

I was shocked to discover that my 14 year-old was studying a play entitled "Mogadishu" which required her to 'act out' themes such as racism, homophobic bullying, sexism, self-harm and suicide. And all of this wrapped up in 400 expletives including over 200 uses of the 'f' word, and 12 uses of the 'c' word. In defence of using the play in the classroom one head teacher stated that it "had been recommended by examiners and other schools' drama departments." He added that theatre performances of the play were packed with groups of school children. According to him, "students allowed themselves to be moved by its themes rather than be hung up on the sometimes gritty vernacular."

Clearly, there are no moral constraints in many schools, and this has created a climate of freedom to use the most extreme material on the grounds, it seems, that it is 'relevant'. "Mogadishu" reflects the worse sort of reality in the worse sort of London comprehensive school. And perish the thought that parents might be considered as having a point of view on whether it is a suitable choice by the school for GCSE Drama.

Using texts such as "Mogadishu" risks desensitising youngsters. Foul language and behaviour that is both abusive and self-abusive is portrayed as commonplace. Have schools that choose such texts already become desensitised? The tired argument that disturbing themes and swear words are also to be found in Shakespeare and Chaucer does not stand up to scrutiny. The language used by those writers is archaic, from a different era and does not reflect a child's reality. 'Mogadishu', on the other hand, brings the current language of the gutter into their everyday existence. It becomes very real. Its capacity to disturb pupils today is much, much greater than the language of the medieval or Elizabethan/Jacobean world.

A head teacher's justification for teaching "Mogadishu" on the grounds that it holds up a mirror to our society is seductive but shallow. "Mogadishu" reflects a very

narrow vision of society. It is not the 'norm' for most children but, seen through the vision of this play could, indeed, seem to be the 'norm' to immature youngsters. This makes choosing the play rather exploitative. It may shape how a child views the world in a depressing and negative way. As one person commented, "It doesn't reflect society, it creates it." Its use in schools is a subtle way of undermining what 'is' and 'isn't' acceptable. It blurs the boundaries and, in the view of many parents, this is not what young people need at a stage when they are trying to make sense of the world and where they fit in to it. At their impressionable age pupils deserve better.

Schools act in 'loco parentis'. Feeding young minds with potentially harmful material is a serious breach of that trust. I told my daughter's school that the play in question had 'gone against everything I had ever taught my daughter'. And in that I mean about acceptable attitudes, language and behaviour. Why, in her early teens, should she be subjected to "Mogadishu"?

It is time that children were offered the same protection in the classroom as that provided by TV and cinema. If you agree please sign the petition:

<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/60223>

Geraldine Stockford

Question and Answer

My son is in the final year of primary school and has passed the 11+ for entry into a leading grammar school in September. I am concerned that the homework that he is receiving is too easy and would like him to opt out of it. I would, then, set homework that is more appropriate to his level. Do I have the right to withdraw him from school homework?

You do not have a 'right' to withdraw your son from school homework. When you sign up for a school you, also, sign up for its rules and regulations and that includes homework. If you consider the work set is too easy you should, in the first instance, discuss the matter with your son's form teacher. Good homework assignments should match the needs of all children, including the most able. This is usually done by an element of differentiation, extension work or, as appropriate, 'open-ended' tasks. If you do not get a satisfactory response you should talk to the head teacher and, as a final resort, you could approach the governing body. However, be aware that schools are far more effective when parents, teachers and pupils are pulling in the same direction. Of course, you are free to set any work at home for your son as you wish and as you feel he needs.

Remember that children of all ages need an appropriate balance between academic and non-academic activities, including ‘play’.

No Comment

“...When we took over in my own school they had a bell...which I thought was very uncalming. We now have a piece of piano music...”

Education Minister Lord Nash, Hansard, 25/3/ 2014

“The Musicians of the RMS *Titanic* ...played music, intending to calm the passengers, for as long as they possibly could and all went down with the ship.”

Wikipedia entry on the TITANIC

“Pupils’ school results are soaring after teacher got them to read ...to a dog. School bosses say Flossie [the dog] relaxes the kids because she is attentive but doesn’t interrupt to correct mistakes...Ten-month-old Flossie is also helping the kids with road safety on walks, and even foreign languages...”

The Daily Star, 26/3/2014

“The losers are the kids. No zeros! That really relates to the real world doesn’t it? No zeros! Just like real life. No failure! Just like in real life. No failure... These people are flat out ‘bozos’. They’re damaging your kids by not providing them with an education.”

Canadian broadcaster Roy Green in conversation with Campaign for Real Education Chairman on coast-to-coast radio, covering Canada and the USA, regarding ‘no-failure’ culture in schools, 30/3/2014

“A school hailed as the answer to getting children ready for the world of work is to close just two years after opening. The Hull Studio School, sponsored by Hull College, opened in September 2012. Now the HCUK Trust, which runs it, says there is not enough interest and has applied to the Government for its closure this summer.”

Hull Daily Mail, 27/3/2014

A Leeds school is to teach English as a second language to all its pupils, including native English speakers, in an attempt to tackle poor grammar.

BBC Report , 25/3/2104

"Look at the maths discoveries that came from Britain. Calculus. Logarithms. Standard deviation. The popular use of the decimal point."

Education minister Liz Truss demonstrates illiteracy in this official DfE version of a speech she made on 12/3/ 2014

"We are determined to eradicate illiteracy...and it is vital we continue to set high aspirations for all schools and pupils."

Liz Truss quoted in the Daily Telegraph, 31/3/2014

"Comprehensive schools prevent pupils from poor backgrounds achieving their potential, a study has claimed. Researchers compared reading standards in countries which have retained grammar schools with those which have phased them out, such as the UK. They found that family wealth played next to no part in a child's achievements when they were taught according to ability. But a disadvantaged background was more likely to count against youngsters in countries that shun selective education."

Daily Mail report on a study by France's National Institute for Demographic Studies, 15/3/2014

The response by a teacher on Mumsnet to a parent who expressed concern about the classroom use of a play containing over 400 swear words:

"As a teacher, I will say very bluntly how sick and f...ing tired I am of parents like you who think they are experts on all f...ing areas of the curriculum, educational theory, examination technique, classroom discipline etc because they once went to school." [Expletives not modified in original.]

Mumsnet, 12/2/2014

Recommended Reading

Recently launched website: www.theconservativewoman.co.uk

Note: "conservative" not "Conservative"

"Seven myths about education" by Daisy Christodoulou

Published by Routledge (2014)

"Prisoners of the Blob" by Toby Young

Published by Civitas (April 2014)

Free download at www.civitas.org.uk