

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 CBI July 2014 report on “Education and skills” should set alarm bells ringing in Government. Its Director-General states: “Businesses feel very strongly that the education system must better prepare young people for life outside the school gates, or risk wasting their talents.” According to the report nearly half of employers have to provide employees with remedial courses in basic literacy and numeracy. The huge investment in education over the past twenty years or so does not appear to be having much impact. The report concludes that the skills gap is getting worse, with 58% of firms pessimistic about the prospect of recruiting the highly skilled staff they will need in the future. The CBI wants Ofsted to be reformed in order that “academic progress and “the development of character” can be prioritised. However, it also argues that an academic pathway should not be seen as the best way forward for all pupils. Instead, it calls for a high quality vocational alternative. In terms of what employers are seeking, “attitudes to work”, “general aptitudes” and “literacy and numeracy” are ranked ahead of formal academic results. Concerns about educational standards include “worrying areas of weakness” amongst university graduates. The CBI makes it very clear that educational failure endangers the future of our economy.

The Campaign for Real Education has been expressing the same concerns for years. Too often, we have been a lone voice. Those with the responsibility and the power to change things, the politicians, have failed. It is to the very people within the educational establishment who have caused our educational failure that ministers have handed over power, time and time again, to ‘solve’ the problem. There is little prospect of this strategy changing. Michael Gove promised us new and tougher public exams and, in response, one board has produced, for final approval, an A-Level English syllabus featuring texts from Dizzee Rascal and Russell Brand. Education Secretary after Education Secretary has simply not understood what they are dealing with in terms of the educational establishment. Mostly, they have been supine and pusillanimous. Is Michael Gove an exception? He has a genuine commitment to reform and is prepared to upset people to achieve his goals. Unfortunately, he is often more successful at upsetting people than at implementing reform. The general failure of politicians in educational matters is fundamental and is highlighted in the CBI report, which states: “We’re hearing the right noises from politicians of all colours, but the need for genuine reform on the ground remains.”

Amidst the current educational hand-wringing, some particularly revealing educational news has emerged. Government statistics show that 63% of ‘disadvantaged’ (free school meals) youngsters from inner London entered into higher education in 2011 – the most recent figures available. Surprisingly, this represents a higher percentage than for ‘better off’ (non-free school meals) pupils in other regions

of England. From the prosperous south east of England, for example, only 49% of these ‘better off’ pupils proceeded to higher education. In one south east county, East Sussex, only 18% of disadvantaged youngsters made the transition, as against 74% in Camden (north London), 63% in Hackney (east London) and 61% in Lewisham, south London. Over 80% of inner city pupils in London are immigrants. A culture of high aspiration amongst these communities underpins the success of inner London schools. The relative success of immigrant children stands in the stark contrast to the abject failure of many children from white, working class backgrounds. It is an issue that our self-congratulatory educational establishment is very far from addressing, let alone resolving.

The teaching of literacy – a parent’s view from Steve Nicholson

“As an infant, in 1958, I was taught literacy four hours per day, equal to twenty hours per week. This constituted around 1,500 direct literacy-teaching hours by the age of seven. By 1994, in contrast, my infant son was receiving only one hour’s literacy teaching per day. Since his class was divided into five ‘ability groups’, taught separately, each child received only a fifth of the direct teaching allocated to literacy. His five hours per week of being taught literacy were, in effect, reduced to one hour per week. Thus, my son received only around 200 hours compared to my 1,500 hours. I thought my son had a problem, but I now realise that the problem was to do with the reduction of well over 1,000 hours in literacy teaching compared to my infant schooling. The ‘literacy hour’ became statutory in the late 1990s and remained so until 2011 when greater flexibility was allowed. It seems, however, that an hour per day literacy teaching remains the norm.

The consequence of less time being spent on literacy, alongside the demise of whole class teaching, puts more responsibility on parents. Any supposed ‘gains’ in using small groups or ‘ability sets’ for infant literacy are lost by the huge reductions in teaching time that teaching a whole class achieves. Therefore, if we wish to drive up standards, we must first drive up the hours of tuition for all those that need it. A start can be made by restoring more whole class teaching!”

The Expansion of Higher Education

As record numbers of youngsters enter higher education (around 40%), including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is time to consider where we are heading. A recent ‘Which?’ survey reported that:

- 46% of 1st and 2nd Year Students felt their degrees are not worth the cost in fees.
- 51% felt that the quality of teaching was lower than they had expected

According to *The Economist*, 28% of students ‘drop out’. In addition, data from the Office of National Statistics shows that 47% of recent UK graduates are in non-graduate jobs and that 9% are unemployed. Graduate employment prospects should improve this year but our economy shows no sign of absorbing the huge graduate surplus. This problem is not confined to the UK. In China, for example, almost 50% of 2013 graduates have been unable to find graduate level jobs even in that booming economy.

Matters are made worse for young people in the UK by the fact that average student debt for undergraduates who started their courses in 2012 is likely to exceed £50,000. For students in England the debt will be nearer to £60,000. Many more of our school leavers might benefit from steering clear of academic courses and seeking out work-orientated training. Instead of expanding universities we should be reviving the more vocationally- based polytechnics. The Swiss model is one from which we can learn. There, 20% of pupils attend academic secondary schools and move on to university. The other 80% follow a vocational pathway, closely linked to the work place from age 14, and concluding

for the more talented with vocational courses of higher education. Total unemployment rate in Switzerland is only around 3%. We need to stop serving the vested interest of universities and, instead, look after the best interests of our youngsters and of our economy.

Tightening the GCSE monopoly

The discredited GCSE exercises an almost complete monopoly within the academic examination market at age 16+. Some schools, including many in the independent sector, have tried to by-pass it by choosing the slightly more rigorous international version – the IGCSE. This loophole has now been closed. The Government has announced that from 2017 the IGCSE will no longer count in the school league tables. It will join the index of forbidden exams, alongside the ‘gold-standard’ GCE O-Level. Education Secretary, Michael Gove, seems to think that the newer and tougher GCSEs he is bringing in, with an ultra high grade, will regenerate our degenerate examination system. Rather than allowing different examinations to be in competition, such as GCSE and O-Level, and letting the best emerge, he has decided to strengthen further the GCSE monopoly.

This means he is just strengthening the collective hand of the educational establishment that has hijacked the exam system and that largely opposes his ideas of rigour. At the margins we may see some change, but behind the ‘window dressing’ the edifice of the failed examination is likely to remain.

The Chief Inspector – heir to a 1960s ideology?

Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector and former grammar school boy, was in messianic mood when he recently spoke at the Sunday Times Festival of Education. He proclaimed that “the future is comprehensive” and that “Comprehensives must be unambiguously academic.” He wishes to fulfil Harold Wilson’s dream that comprehensive schools will be “a grammar school for all.” Wilshaw talks about “a discredited sixties ideology” that still infects too many schools whilst, himself, proclaiming the 1960s comprehensive school ideology of Harold Wilson! Worse, according to Wilshaw, “there is only one school model [comprehensive] that can realistically educate all our children to a standard they and the country deserve.” How delusional! Such 1960s fanaticism has no place in our education system. Schools need to match the needs of pupils. Academic pupils need an academic education and so we need lots more grammar schools. Non-academic pupils should not be force-fed an academic diet. They need to master the academic basics and be taught vocational skills that will make them employable. Alongside grammar schools we need excellent vocational schools. Comprehensive schools, grammar schools and vocational schools – why not allow local communities to decide?

Magna Carta – an optional extra in history lessons

In the wake of the Trojan Horse affair the Prime Minister has ordered immediate action to promote “British Values” in our schools. Teaching children about Magna Carta will be, according to The Sunday Times, “the centre-piece of a fightback against extremism.”

Given the importance of Magna Carta, and its coming anniversary, it is strange, indeed, that Mr Cameron is saying one thing whilst, effectively, doing another. The Government’s new National Curriculum for History emphasises that teaching about Magna Carta is entirely optional:

“Examples (non-statutory) This could include... Magna Carta and the emergence of Parliament”

In contrast, there is to be no option with regards to teaching one of these: “early Islamic civilisation, including a study of Baghdad c AD 900; Mayan civilisation c. 900; Benin (West Africa) c. AD 900-1300.”

Reading in the 21st-Century – an international perspective by C. Ikehara

[This article appeared, originally, in *The Korea Times*. The author has kindly written this abridged version for our Newsletter]

“The art of letters will come to an end before A.D. 2000. I shall survive as a curiosity.” (Ezra Pound)

A bit premature, perhaps, but that quote comes to mind as more and more articles reporting on the decline of reading, catch my attention.

That situation is not limited to the United States. About ten years ago, a *New York Times* article quoted a Japanese professor of literature and prominent book critic as saying, “In Japan, literature is no longer mainstream culture”.

Goethe reminds us that, “The decline in literature indicates a decline in the nation. The two keep pace in their downward tendency.”

Does that mean that "writers" will someday be spending all their time churning out gossipy articles about the latest young rising movie star or pop singer? Or will they be putting in a lot of overtime, "writing" the captions of oversized color photos of beauty pageant winners?

Could articles ever be "easy" enough, or will visuals eventually "triumph" over text? Will readers begin thinking that they exist only to be entertained and start thinking that something must be horribly wrong if they find themselves getting bored—for even half a second?

In the past, there was a greater emphasis on reading because it was felt to promote critical thinking - not only teaching the necessity of sorting fact from fiction, distinguishing the true from the false, and recognising the possible from the impossible, but also preparing us for tough moral choices that had to do with making a clear distinction between right and wrong, differentiating the innocent from the guilty, and ultimately recognizing good from evil. This was well expressed by Samuel Johnson: “The supreme end of education is expert discernment in all things —the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and the genuine to the bad and the counterfeit.”

And whatever happened to cultural continuity? Electronic diversions might be great for the economic good times, but don't traditions provide us with the values and inner strength necessary to persevere and cope with the bad times?

Should not serious reading be seen as the tradition of traditions since the lessons and values learned from the teachers of literary masterpieces serves as a bridge between the generations?

Any teacher not doing all they can to preserve traditions is, in effect, hastening their demise.

No comment

“Ministers and the education establishment felt, ‘We need to look good, therefore we will dumb things down and we will cheat the exam system to prove we’re all doing a good job’.” Dominic Cummings (former close advisor to Education Secretary, Michael Gove) interviewed in “The Times”, 16th June 2014.

“There is no reason why children in England cannot achieve the same standards as those in Japan, Singapore and China. We put in more resources in England than in these countries and we have the best generation of teachers ever. Yet our children are two to three years behind by the age of 15.” Education Minister, Liz Truss quoted in “The Times Educational Supplement”, 1st June 2014

“University students are spending six hours a day or more on social networking sites, looking at YouTube or sending text messages to friends, according to new research.” Mail on Sunday, 22nd June 2014

Ofsted Report on Oldknow Academy (Birmingham)

“Overall effectiveness...Outstanding”

January 2013

Ofsted Report on Oldknow Academy (Birmingham)

“Overall effectiveness...Inadequate...Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.”

April 2014

“Playing cricket can deter young people from joining gangs and committing crime, research suggests. The report on ‘StreetChance’, which offers cricket sessions for pupils in deprived areas, found it enabled them to mix in different social groups. It found being part of a team or club helped divert youngsters away from crime and anti-social behaviour.” BBC News Online, 3rd July 2014