

Campaign for Real Education

www.cre.org.uk

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

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NEWSLETTER

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Editorial

What will the new era of Conservative majority government mean for education? In all probability, further significant change is unlikely. The task given to the education secretary, Nicky Morgan, is to consolidate rather than to innovate. The ‘toxicity’ of the Michael Gove ‘brand’ amongst the educational establishment has made our political leaders wary, for the present, of further school reforms. This is understandable but it is a pity. The ‘Gove revolution’ applied more to organisational structures and curriculum/assessment documentation than with what happens in the classroom in terms of teaching and learning. It was far from being a completed revolution.

The Government is naïve if it imagines that all that is now required is a further expansion of its academy and free school programme alongside a requirement that most pupils sit the ‘E-Bac’ of five academic subjects at GCSE.

Sadly, the motivation behind many schools converting to academy status has been a desire to wrest budget control from their local authority. Freedom over the curriculum and over teaching methods has figured much less in the decision to convert. As with local authority schools, most academies are addicted to, and dependent upon, the National Curriculum and to ‘child-centred’ and ‘personalised’ learning.

They understand that this approach is favoured by Ofsted. Consequently, in the area that matters most, the classroom, academy or free school status offers no guarantee that teaching will be any different from the local authority school. True, parents might expect a more motivated management in a school that has chosen to convert to an academy but the Government’s plan to force failing schools to convert offers less assurance in that regard.

Meanwhile, the Department for Education continues to pay lip service to the principle of educating children in line with their ability but is unwilling to implement a strategy to deliver this crucial responsibility. The failure to provide schooling that relates to the varying aptitudes of children, and the unwavering commitment to the 'one size fits all' comprehensive school model linked to an all-ability GCSE examination, helps to explain decades of under-achievement.

However it is done, academically able youngsters need an academic education. Equally, children whose abilities are more practical need a vocational education. Beyond a basic competence, especially in literacy and numeracy, force-feeding academic subjects to non-academic pupils is destructive of worthwhile learning and not in the best interests of either individual pupils or of the country as a whole.

Given the current skills shortage it should be self-evident that high quality technical/vocational schools need to be made available alongside academic schools. The 'bog standard' comprehensive school education has had its day. An 'EBac for all' policy will only have real merit and purpose if it is attained by the age of 13 and is a starting point for the next stage of schooling - academic or vocational - rather than being set as an end point to our antiquated 14-16 GCSE all-ability examination system.

The new government, like its predecessors, shows few signs of having grasped this point. The proposed expansion of apprenticeships is to be welcomed but vocational learning needs to start much earlier. We need alternative vocational and academic pathways within the secondary school system and probably beginning in Year 9 at the age of 13, a common cut-off point in the private sector.

Teachers as agents of the state

The Government has put teachers on the 'front line' in its fight against terrorism. Guidance being sent out to both primary and secondary school heads informs them that radicalisation must be treated as a "safeguarding issue". A Whitehall source told "The Times" that radicalisation "is grooming and should be dealt with in the same way as child exploitation. The extremists use the internet to recruit young people and schools should be teaching about the dangers of that."

In an apocalyptic opinion piece in the same newspaper, headlined "Cameron prepares to drain the terrorist swamp", Rachel Sylvester writes of this battle as "a defining issue of his [Cameron's] time as prime minister."

What are classroom teachers, struggling to meet more and more academic targets, going to make of this latest responsibility to be imposed on them? Their response might justifiably be the proverbial: “When you are up to your a*** in alligators it is difficult to remember that the initial objective was to drain the swamp.”

The ‘baggage’ of social work and surrogate parenting attached to teaching these days grows ever more burdensome and includes, for example: female genital mutilation, forced marriage, anti-homophobia, obesity, financial literacy, healthy eating, drug abuse, how to use a toilet, how to eat with a knife and fork, sex and relationships education, anti-gang measures, anti-social behaviour, internet porn, ‘British Values’ and now, radicalisation.

With all of this, and more and more of the same, how on earth are teachers going to have time to properly cover the traditional school curriculum centred on academic subjects, the arts and physical education? Should politicians be dumping so many of society’s ills on the laps of schools?

Small wonder that four in ten new teachers quit the profession within a year. Most of us become teachers in order to teach, not to become social workers, police officers, care assistants, promoters of political correctness, arbiters of ‘British Values’ or, now, with the new anti-radicalisation responsibility, an arm of MI5.

This latest measure, combatting radicalisation, illustrates an alarming muddle in Government thinking. The previous initiative with regard to so-called “British Values” requires schools to teach to pupils, tolerance and understanding of a full spectrum of views and beliefs, even those with which they may disagree. The underpinning philosophy is ‘value-relativism’ – all opinions are equally valid. On the academic level this is why Russell Brand and Dizzee Rascal are now offered alongside Shakespeare and Jane Austen for A-Level English. How worthy each is to be studied for advanced level is dependent on your personal point of view. This may dumb down the study of literature but it is unlikely to threaten national security.

However, once we set the beliefs of religious fundamentalists alongside the beliefs of western democracies and, in line with “British Values”, see them as different but equally valid, we are in dangerous territory. Through its “British Values” initiative our hapless Government is promoting the likelihood of radicalisation rather than diminishing it.

Chris McGovern

The butterfly effect: see the movie...

It's a little, ten-minute, film, and it suggests that the well-meaning Frank Field MP has got things wrong when he says:

“What happens to children before they ever see their primary school teacher is more important in determining what kind of jobs they will gain.... The income-related gaps in abilities that are all too apparent during the first weeks of primary school remain immune to the efforts of even our best teachers.”
(*Sunday Times* , 26th June 2015)

The belief that disadvantaged children are irredeemably educationally disadvantaged – and that real education is therefore futile - pervades our education system.

An educational charity, *Real Action*, and an educationalist, Irina Tyk, do not subscribe to this prejudiced view. Since 1999, at the charity's two hour Butterfly Saturday reading classes, disadvantaged primary-age children have been taught reading, with Irina Tyk's Butterfly Book; then grammar with her Butterfly Grammar Book; and, most recently, high-level comprehension, literary appreciation and critical thinking with her (as yet unpublished) Junior Butterfly Reader. The children's inner London neighbourhood has the nation's highest level of child deprivation. The teaching, you will see from the film, is whole-class, structured, scripted, inter-active, direct instruction, with children seated in ordered rows. A year's improvement in reading age they gain, in an average 20 hours' fast-paced Butterfly teaching. Their joy, as well as erudition, comes across in this endearing film, made by actress Rachael Stirling.

This is *the butterfly effect*. And this is the link: <https://youtu.be/h3vcrvX6nD4>

Butterfly teaching should be adopted by primary schools: little children, of all backgrounds, would quickly become independent readers. They'd be highly educable. The charity is seeking funding for a further project: to implant it in primary schools. To assist them contact admin@realaction.org.uk . Check out their website: www.realaction.org.uk .

Katie Ivens

The viewpoint of a grandmother/classroom assistant

I am the grandmother of a beautiful and bright 11-month old who is happy and learning fast. I fear much of this will be lost when she is ‘handed over’ to school. Judging by my own experiences as a parent and a teaching assistant and by the alarming facts about our still failing education system, so eloquently detailed by Chris McGovern and others, she will be at the mercy of a school where well-qualified, dedicated, energetic, enthusiastic teachers are still the exception rather than the rule.

I believe the rot set in over 30 years ago. It needs to be addressed now. It should begin with the reform of teacher training. Before anyone is accepted for training they should have to prove, through a rigorous interview, that they like children. Many teachers do not. Trainee teachers need to be able to communicate, listen, articulate well and have a broad spectrum of general knowledge and experience. Their training must be to an exacting standard undertaken by those who recognise the value of “Real Education” and who respect, encourage and nurture the best and who are then able to go on to respect, encourage and nurture our children.

This standard of training should be necessary for teaching assistants, too. They should not be subjected to the box-ticking NVQ culture – an apology for a qualification – but the full-time two years I undertook. Trainers should be prepared to fail students who fall short. Why do we allow those who cannot spell, write or speak properly to become teachers? My younger son, aged 6, was asked, frequently, to spell words for his teacher. This was not in order to check his spelling but, as she admitted, to enable her to spell correctly.

A teacher who had an obvious dislike of children taught my elder son. Indeed, she seemed to have a phobia about young people. She could no more engage or excite her pupils, or make her teaching enjoyable, than she could fly to Mars. In those days she was between ‘poor’ and ‘dreadful’. Unbelievably, 25 years later, I found myself, as a teaching assistant in her class. By that time she was in the teaching category of ‘dreadful’ to ‘appalling’ and was desperate to retire. She hated her job and was still making the children’s lives miserable. In other fields of employment employees are sacked if they wreck the lives of others. Why do we fail to sack such teachers? The damage done to our children is corrosive and permanent.

Having read the CRE paper written by Irina Tyk about “Whole Class Teaching”, I agree with almost every word. As she says, “The good teacher sees inattentiveness in his pupils and is quick to correct his failure to be interesting”. Good teachers, given a more flexible curriculum, a longer school day with

longer terms and more efficient time and financial management, should be able to get the best from each child by making every minute interesting. Most of all they should make their teaching challenging. Without challenge where is the sense of achievement and success? It is 2015 but we still have a very long way to go if we are provide our children, including my granddaughter, with the education they need and deserve.

Hilary Christian

Should homework be scrapped?

Eve Jardine-Young, the head teacher and former sixth-form pupil of the prestigious and high-achieving Cheltenham Ladies College, may abolish homework at her school. She has told *The Times* of her concern about “an epidemic of anxiety” that is afflicting young people. Setting children homework, she fears, may be adding to already high stress levels. From September, weekly meditation classes will be introduced and pupils will be given twice as long to walk between lessons.

The sounding of another alarm bell over the mental health of young people should not be ignored. Last year, a survey by *The Children’s Society* of 50,000 12-year-olds across 39 countries indicated that in terms of subjective wellbeing (how they view their own happiness) English children are near the bottom of the table in 32nd place.

Eve Jardine-Young is right to highlight a real problem. At issue, however, is not the existence of the problem. The issue is how we should help children to confront it and to overcome it.

Getting rid of homework has some superficial and newsworthy attractions. Significantly, Jardine-Young regards homework, aka ‘prep’, as “Victorian” and these days, amongst our educationalists, there are few more damning indictments. How sad that an age in British history that brought so much progress, innovation and worldwide influence should now be so denigrated and disowned. Ironically, it was the age that produced some of our greatest schools, including Cheltenham Ladies College!

“Out with the old and in with the new”, is our current educational mantra. Equally, it could be phrased as, “Out with the baby as well as with the bath water”. The need to be ‘new’, to be ‘radical’ and to be ‘modern’ has as firm a grip on the independent sector as it has at Tony Blair’s “bog standard” comp.

Quite why homework should be seen as bad escapes me. If a school succeeds in its responsibility to inculcate a love of learning, then homework is educational nourishment, to be sought rather than shunned. Good teaching should inspire pupils and provide them with a desire to know more. Homework can satisfy that desire and, even when it may seem onerous, it provides a discipline that prepares children for life.

Of course, the challenges of some homework, as with all learning, can be stressful. Good teachers, though, will ensure that the ‘prep’ they set is worthwhile and that it reinforces what has been learnt and provides a stepping stone for the next stage of learning. I cannot be the only teacher whose pupils leave the classroom with a desire to know more, to read more, to understand more – in other words, to do some follow-up work at home.

And what about those children who not only want to do homework but who need to do it in order to consolidate their understanding? Failure to master a topic through a

lack of homework can be a lot more stressful in the long term than a structured and balanced programme of homework.

The head of Cheltenham Ladies College is unlikely to reduce pupil stress levels by abolishing ‘prep’. Such a decision may, even, have the reverse effect. Instead, she should do some homework of her own and take a close look at her school’s ‘mission statement’:

“To support and guide girls in becoming self-determining, fulfilled and resilient women who value, serve and enrich the communities to which they belong in a complex and changing world.”

The clue to reducing stress levels is in valuing, serving and enriching others. If this sounds Victorian and old-fashioned then perhaps we have something to learn from the past, after all.

Obituary: Sir Chris Woodhead (1946-2015)

Telling the truth about our education system can be a painful experience. The amount of venom it generates is in direct proportion to extent of the truth told. This was well understood by former Ofsted chief, Sir Chris Woodhead, whose death has been widely reported.

We should be grateful, indeed, that he was prepared to take the flak that went with ‘telling it how it really is’. Not even Michael Gove provoked such hostility from the educational establishment, the ‘Blob’. Woodhead’s attack on under-achievement, wasted talent and deceitful manipulation of results was always more potent because he was coming from ‘within’ the profession. Unlike Gove, Chris Woodhead knew what it was like to be on the ‘front line’ in the classroom.

The crop of recent obituaries has praised his courage in confronting motor neurone disease rather more than the courage needed to launch an assault on the big battalions of self-interest and self-congratulation that determine the education of our children. This, some have described, is “controversial”, as if launching a rescue bid for pupils drowning in a sea of mediocrity is a matter for debate.

As Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, Woodhead became something of a ‘hate figure’ to the ‘Blob’. His claim that 15,000 teachers were incompetent and should be sacked caused uproar within the profession. In this matter, of course he under-stated his case. It takes a lot more than 15,000 incompetents to reduce standards to the level of being three years behind the best education systems around the world.

Chris Woodhead was as honest as he was courageous. He was head and shoulders above the current brigade of educational commentators and policy-makers and he will be sorely missed.

Book Review

***Changing Schools – Perspectives on five years of educational reform.* Edited by Robert Peal. Published by John Catt Education Limited**

Can you imagine Mo Farah being asked to start an Olympic 10,000 metres race fifteen minutes after the other elite athletes have set off? Given the relative decline of the UK on league tables of educational attainment, this is our starting point in the race to make our schools, and through them our economy, globally competitive. The challenge we face as a nation is to build an elite system of mass education that will allow us to compete in the race with some prospect of staying in touch with the front-runners.

Although they do not spell it out quite so graphically this is, in educational terms, the question being addressed by an important collection of essays just published – “Changing Schools – perspectives on five years of educational reform”.

In essence, the challenge that they are seeking to address is how are schools in England ever going to catch up with the best around the globe? As one contributor, Jonathan Simons, observes, we need a school system to match the best internationally in which *“the average standard is high, the top performers are world beating and in which the system is broadly equitable”*.

Robert Peal, the editor, made his mark last year with his invaluable publication *“Progressively Worse – The burden of bad ideas in British Schools”*. Whilst that book sought to explain how our education system has got it so wrong for so long, this new one is far more concerned with where we should go from here. Its perspectives are more forward-looking than reflective and anyone seeking possible directions of travel for our schools should read the essays closely – parents as well as those working within the education world.

Broadly, the contributors provide an optimistic vision of the future but they are far from delusional. Ultimately, as Peal concedes, *“recent political reforms have created the conditions in which English state schools are finally able to change their own cultures for the better”*. This theme of recent reforms providing schools with an opportunity to improve, but no more, runs through the essays. *“Whilst the general principle of teacher and school-led improvement is a good one”* comments Daisy Christodoulou, for example, *“many schools lack the capacity to make these improvements”*.

An engaging disconcert for the judgement of Ofsted is a welcome feature of a piece by Katharine Birbalsingh, who recently set up the Michaela Community Free School in north London. If British children are ever to fulfil their potential they will need a knowledge-rich curriculum. Birbalsingh knows this to be true and is brave enough to state that, *“if any Ofsted inspector says any of our staff is anything less than good because they expect to see all-singing and dancing lessons with no regard to memory, I will hit the roof...we want what is best for our pupils. We believe that a knowledge rather than a skills based curriculum is best”*.

In a short review it is impossible to do justice to the quality of all eight essays. They are as insightful as they are challenging to some long-held orthodoxies of the ‘Blob’, the educational establishment. The optimism of the writers is admirable. I suspect, however, that the nagging doubt expressed by some of them, regarding the capacity of the ‘Blob’ to self-improve, is understated.

GCSE History as politically correct propaganda

The EU referendum promised for 2017, or sooner according to some reports, will coincide with the teaching of a new topic for GCSE history – migration to Britain. Given that this topic is, also, likely to have considerable prominence in the public debate it is instructive to consider what will be taught about it in the classroom.*

Two of the three major exam boards have included 'immigration' in the new exam to be taught from 2016. Currently, the specifications are awaiting final approval by the exam regulator, Ofqual. The version to be offered by the OCR Board – "Immigration to Britain c.1000 to 2010" – is illustrative.

The board is very clear about its aim for the new history exam:

"We have updated traditional and popular topics at GCSE and combined them with new and innovative options that aim to address comments in the wider historical community regarding the prevalence of white, male dominated history...."

"One of the ways that we are addressing this is by working with BASA ["The Black and Asian Studies Association"] on our new migration options in paper 2 and paper 3 (J410/08 and J410/11)."

The OCR Board then quotes an endorsement from BASA:

"This course will enable students to learn the long history of how the movement of people – European, African, Asian – to and from these islands has shaped the story of this nation for thousands of years. The history of migration is the story of Britain: in 1984 Peter Fryer wrote: 'There were Africans in Britain before the English came'...We are delighted to be working with OCR to offer a course which will both open up an analysis of Britain's place in the modern world and allow every student a personal connection with our shared history."

A bold BASA 'kitemark' is firmly and prominently attached to the top of the syllabus itself.

As Education Secretary, Michael Gove called on schools to stop the trashing of our past. Disastrously, he lost his battle to require the teaching of the landmark personalities and events of British history as part of the national curriculum. Now, we can see that GCSE history, too, is being subverted to provide a vehicle for politically correct views on history in general and on immigration, in particular.

This new syllabus will ensure that, at the same time as the EU referendum campaign and debates on border controls, pupils will be given some strong and seductive arguments in favour of seeing current immigration as a natural evolution of a long historical process. According to campaigning think-tank MigrationWatch UK, however, current levels of immigration, resulting from 'free movement' within the EU, are at levels unprecedented in the history of Britain and are far from being a natural evolution:

“There have always been episodes of migration to Britain but...those episodes were small and demographically insignificant until the Second World War... In the late 1990s the pace and scale of migration increased to a level without historical precedent... This massive increase dwarfs the scale of any previous inflow in our history.”

This crucial numerical aspect of the immigration narrative is missing from the syllabus. The EU receives a passing 'fag end' reference at the end of the syllabus – “issues raised by EU 'open borders” – but there is no requirement specifically to consider the issue of numbers raised by MigrationWatch UK.

Pupils will hear a lot about a group of African soldiers stationed on Hadrian's Wall but less, I suspect, about the enslavement of Britons by the African Emperor, Septimius Severus who died in Eboracum (York). The enslavement of Britons by an African, after all, does not fit the desired narrative of immigrants having a monopoly of being subjugated or maltreated.

19th century Irish 'immigration' fits the subjugation idea much better and is specified for teaching. However, these Irish were born UK citizens as fully as those born in the home counties. The new syllabus veers towards equating deprivation with immigration.

For all its importance, immigration is a political minefield these days and not a straightforward topic to teach. History GCSE should not be a vehicle for promoting particular viewpoints, such as that of the BASA. Equally, it should not be a vehicle for promoting racism or xenophobia. The OCR should not be in the business of boasting a 'kitemark' of political correctness, it should be focusing on a balanced presentation of the past that allows for the input of MigrationWatch UK as much as the Black and Asian Studies Association.

*The impact of 'knowledge-lite' history teaching is explored in a new pamphlet published by The Campaign for an Independent Britain entitled “Generations Betrayed” by Chris McGovern.

No Comment

“According to a professor at the University of Warwick in England, parents who read to their kids should be thinking about how they’re “unfairly disadvantaging other people’s children” by doing so.”

National Review (USA), 6th May 2015

“Online education is set to be a \$100bn industry, but if it is really the future, why are so many IT moguls choosing traditional schooling for their own children, asks Andrew Keen.”

Sunday Times, 14th June 2015

“Teachers have altered exam answers, inflated GCSE marks and even told pupils to copy coursework from textbooks. Whistleblowers told Channel 4’s Dispatches programme that the practice is well known but few teachers will speak out as they fear for their careers.”

Daily Mail, 15th June 2015

“The radical head of Barrowford Primary School near Nelson in Lancashire says no child should be defined as naughty and her school operates with no punishment and no rules policy... Rachel joins us on the sofa today to explain her radical approach.”

ITV This Morning, 2nd July 2015

“Are international students satisfied with the quality of their university experience while studying in the UK? Almost 24% of all the complaints received by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator during the last year were from international students, which should send some key messages to the sector.”

Thushari Welikala, The Guardian, 3rd July 2015