

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

2016 will be another important year for education. It will see the publication of the latest OECD assessment of pupil attainment from around the world. The so-called PISA tests (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) have been criticised by some educationalists in the UK but they remain the most authoritative data that we have for measuring the performance of UK pupils against their peers abroad.

In recent years politicians of all parties have started to acknowledge that the enormous improvement in public examination results since the late 1980s has been the consequence of grade inflation and of a general ‘dumbing down’ of standards. Confronted by the evidence of a relative decline in educational attainment, Michael Gove took some steps to limit the collaboration of our political establishment with our educational establishment. We supported his reform of both the National Curriculum and of the GCSE/A-Level exams. Nevertheless, we remain sceptical as to whether the reforms go far enough in terms of restoring knowledge and academic rigour.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the direction of educational travel has been in the opposite direction. Their governments have ensured the continuing dilution of knowledge by entrenching a ‘skills and concepts’ curriculum based on cross-curricula ‘areas of learning’. Far from being a “Curriculum for Excellence” the Scottish version is already causing alarm bells to ring. Literacy standards are falling and the Scottish government has

been forced to plan for the imposition of standardised national tests on its primary schools.

Formidable challenges face all four parts of our United Kingdom in terms of providing a quality of education that matches the best in the world. Here are five of the priorities that need to be addressed by government education departments in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast:

1. Improve the quality of teaching

For too long, teaching methodology in Britain has been addicted to the dogma of so-called 'child-centred learning'. In contrast, the world's most successful education systems, those of the Asia Pacific, use the 'whole-class' teaching methods we ditched long ago. This means that pupils sit facing the teacher and they are taught as a unit. All of the children are involved in the lesson all of the time. By the age of 15 these Asia Pacific pupils are up to 3 years ahead of ours.

Sadly, it is mostly only 'child-centred' teaching, not 'whole-class' teaching, that is praised and rated as "good" or "outstanding" by school inspectors. Inspections are rather less about what children learn than about the 'process' by which they are taught. This can be well illustrated by a report from June 2105 that I have in front of me. England's Ofsted rates the school concerned as "outstanding" in all areas. It notes: "The school's preferred approach is for teachers to work as partners with their students, as 'first amongst equals'." The GCSE results that followed shortly after the inspection provide a different perspective – an 8% pass rate at grades A* to C!

According to the OECD we are the only country in the developed world in which grandparents outperform their grandchildren in terms of literacy and numeracy. It is not difficult to work out why. They were in school at a time when 'whole class' teaching was the norm in Britain, too.

2. Raise the attainment of the lowest attaining pupils, especially the white working class.

Too many schools are letting down their pupils and the white working class, especially the poorest, are being let down most of all. Only 28% of white working class boys in England on free school meals achieve 5 GCSE passes at A* to C grade

It is a sad truth that being allocated to a sub-standard school can be the educational equivalent of being placed on death row. Too many pupils at these schools walk the green mile to no worthwhile qualifications, no employment and no future. We are storing up problems for the future if we do not address the issue.

3. Provide a choice of educational pathways for teenagers

Children need to be educated in line with their ability and general aptitude. By the age of 14 we should not be chaining all of our youngsters to a purely academic curriculum. Many youngsters would be much better served by a vocational curriculum that focuses on specific employment skills - building, nursing, catering, engineering, farming and so on.

In England this needs to be part of a re-structuring of education that is in line with the new requirement for all youngsters to be in education or training until the age of 18. GCSEs for 16 year-olds will become redundant and should be scrapped. For 18 year-olds, 'gold standard' vocational qualifications must have equal status with equally 'gold plated' academic qualifications.

A clearly defined vocational pathway, as well as an academic one, is offered by Scotland's new "National Qualifications". In this decision, at least, Scotland has acted sensibly. It is a development that should inform debate elsewhere in the UK.

4. Restore better order and discipline in our classrooms

We must never 'give up' on any child but, equally, we must protect the majority. Exclusion units for seriously disruptive pupils need to be expanded both within schools and separate from them. They need to employ high quality staff and to work towards rehabilitation and reintegration back into mainstream schooling. However, the rights of the majority to learn must come ahead of rights of the minority to disrupt.

5. Review the promotion of 'value relativism' in our schools by which all views are regarded as equal.

"Give three good reasons for joining Isis. Seen from the point of view of a victim, of course, it is atrocious. But how do you think it is when seen from the point of view of a soldier of the faith? Isn't it rather a challenge, rather a good way of getting to be important? Rather fun being awarded some female slaves? And you are one of the good guys too!"

This 'learning task' for pupils comes from the "Resources" section of *The Times Educational Supplement* website. It meets the "British Values" requirement placed on schools in England to promote "mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faith and belief". Such 'value relativism' - the notion that all views are of equal value - permeates thinking in schools across the UK. Translated into classroom practice it is, at best, an excuse for 'dumbing down' the curriculum and, at worst, a 'green light' for radicalising pupils. Intervention in this matter is urgent.

All five of these 'priorities' may seem like common sense to those outside the educational establishment. Sadly, and all too often, common sense has not prevailed in the education debate. The Campaign for Real Education will continue to give a voice to what we believe are the views of most people in the UK.

Chris McGovern
Chairman

Testing times for times tables

The National Curriculum for mathematics was introduced nearly three decades ago. The intention was for it to raise attainment. How extraordinary, then, that Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, now feels it necessary to declare "war on innumeracy." It seems that too many youngsters are leaving primary school without mastering their times tables - the most basic building block of arithmetic. Eleven-year-olds are to face formal online testing: including 6×4 , 7×8 , 8×12 and so on.

This initiative is very sensible, of course. Try doing multiplication and division sums without knowing your tables and without pressing the correct buttons on a calculator. Three cheers, then, for the Government's recognition that the times tables really do matter. Three hoots of derision, however, from the Asia Pacific education superstar states for our having thought for so long that these building blocks of learning can be taught so late.

The latest version of the National Curriculum does expect pupils to know their tables by the age of nine rather than by the age of eleven under its predecessor. This is certainly a move in the right direction but needs to be seen in the context of most children in 'high-flying' Shanghai knowing their tables before they even start school at age 7.

In the 1950s – grim, grey and grimy as they mostly were – there was a widespread expectation that children should master their tables in the infants department, at an early age. This remains the case in the better independent

schools. When I moved from a state school to a preparatory school I was easily able to teach multiplication and division to Year 3 pupils (7-8 year olds) because, more or less, they knew their tables. True, I needed to reinforce things, but such knowledge was soon firmly embedded. With these foundations in place real progress in maths was possible.

To regard tests on times tables for 11-year-olds as somehow too onerous and stress-inducing for pupils is a symptom of a very sick and undernourished system of teaching and learning. In educational terms, too many of our schools are on the equivalent of 'life support'. They are simply unable to cope with even the lowest and most undemanding of expectations.

According to the OECD, we are the only country in the developed world in which grandparents outperform their grandchildren in terms of both numeracy and literacy. A major reason for this extraordinary betrayal of our young people is that, for years, we have been setting the academic bar too low.

Teachers genuinely fret about placing demands on children. Instead of making tests a regular part of day-to-day learning many are inclined to view with horror the whole notion of assessment. Consequently, the main externally marked national tests sat at age 11 cause panic in the staffroom and this panic is soon 'picked up' by pupils. Stress breeds stress!

We simply cannot go on in this manner. The way forward lies partly, at least, with teacher training and teaching methodology. Pupils would benefit greatly from more whole-class teaching. Not only is this less stressful for teachers than the so-called and largely bogus 'child-centred' learning with which teachers and Ofsted seem so obsessed, it is usually much more effective. It is a 'win-win' teaching method that helps explain why pupils taught in the best education systems of the Asia Pacific are up to three years ahead of pupils in the UK.

The anniversary of Rudyard Kipling's birth went unmarked

The 150th anniversary of Rudyard Kipling's birth in Bombay (30th Dec 1865) did receive much attention. As the first writer of English to win the Nobel Prize for literature one might have thought that his birth would have been worth commemorating; not least, because of our obsession with 'celebrity'. Why is the greatest 'celebrity' of the greatest empire the world has ever seen, George Orwell's "prophet of empire", at best, ignored and at worst reviled?

Sadly, he is widely regarded as out of step with the way we are supposed to think these days. The labels, 'racist' and 'imperialist' are indelibly associated with Kipling. They damn him as much as they damn his hero, Cecil Rhodes.

Both men, though, were representative of their time and, as with most sweeping generalisations, the labels present only part of the picture.

Kipling may have seen imperialism in terms of the “White Man’s Burden” but his British soldier knew that:

*“Though I’ve belted you and flayed you,
By the livin’ Gawd that made you,
You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din!”*

Knee jerk denunciations of Kipling and of the British Empire and of all it stood for have, too often, become the common currency of intellectual debate in our universities and in our classrooms. Such narrow-minded prejudice is the antithesis of ‘real’ education. What service do we do our youngsters when we encourage them to make such simplistic judgements? How many teachers and lecturers are referencing Kipling’s opposition to fascism? As early as 1933 he had warned that “The Hitlerites are out for blood” and by 1935 he had identified Mussolini as an unhinged egomaniac. He denounced Oswald Mosley in similar terms.

Young children, of course, are more inclined towards a favourable opinion of Kipling but how long will it be before “The Jungle Book”, too, is placed on an index of forbidden books? The Friends’ Central School in Philadelphia has just banned Mark Twain’s “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” on the grounds that it is not “inclusive”. In the UK we are moving in the same direction. The [“whatculture.com”](http://whatculture.com) website, for example, has a section headed:

“10 classic children’s book that are actually racist”.

Here they are:

1. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*
2. *The Secret Garden*
3. *Tintin in the Congo*
4. *Noddy*
5. *Pippi Longstocking*
6. *Doctor Dolittle*
7. *The Chronicles of Narnia*
8. *The Little House on the Prairie*
9. *Sherlock Holmes*
10. *Peter Pan*

Playing the 'race card' is the nuclear option on today's educational battlefield. It brooks no opposition and has become the last refuge of educational scoundrels and charlatans.

Shackled, as teachers are, by the need to see the world – past and present – through a lens of political correctness, 'educators' are cutting the roots of our national identity. And, as we know, when the roots are cut the plant dies.

Racism is absurd but so, too, is seeing and judging the past through the eyes of the present. Racism may have been a feature of British imperial rule but it has been a feature of human behavior throughout history – white on black, black on white, white on white, black on black and so on. It is still with us. The Rwandan genocide is a recent example.

It is the absurdity of racism that we need to present to children, not a distorted, one-sided picture of the past. It is time, then, to inject a bit of insightful humour into the debate. I suspect that young people, including those at Oriel College, Oxford, could learn a 'thing or two' about racism from the BBC's 1970s "Likely Lads" comedy series. As head teacher, it formed part of an assembly I did on racism. The message registered more, I think, than any diatribe against Kipling and the British Empire.

Bob: *I bet we could go right round the world and you'd have a pat response ready.*

Terry Collier: *I've travelled man, I've seen a bit of the world now you know.*

Bob: *What do you think of Koreans, for instance?*

Terry Collier: *Not to be trusted. Cruel people. Much the same as all Orientals.*

Bob: *That's a third of the world's population dismissed in a phrase. Russians?*

Terry Collier: *Sinister.*

Bob: *Egyptians?*

Terry Collier: *Cowardly.*

Bob: *Oh? I thought you might have saved that for Italians.*

Terry Collier: *No, no, they're greasy aren't they? Not as greasy as the French mind.*

Bob: *Germans?*

Terry Collier: *Arrogant.*

Bob: *Spaniards?*

Terry Collier: *Lazy.*

Bob: *Danes?*

Terry Collier: *Pornographic.*

Bob: *Well that's just about everyone. Oh, Americans?*

Terry Collier: *Well, they're flash aren't they?*

Bob: *So it's just down to the British, is it?*

Terry Collier: *Well, I haven't got much time for the Irish or the Welsh, and the Scots are worse than the Koreans.*

Bob: *And you never could stand Southerners.*

Terry Collier: *To tell you the truth I don't like anybody much outside this town. And there's a lot of families in our street I can't stand either. Come to think of it, I don't even like the people next door.*

Bob: *I see, so from the distant blue Pacific through the barren wastes of Manchuria, to 127 Inkerman Terrace, you can't abide anyone."*

It's grim up north according to the Chief Inspector

It's grim up north! That, at least, is the conclusion reached by Ofsted chief, Sir Michael Wilshaw, in his latest annual report on education standards. In 16 local authorities fewer than 60% of secondary schools are rated "good" or "outstanding". 11 of these authorities are in the north. Two others, Derbyshire and Stoke-on-Trent, are in the north midlands.

'This gap is a worrying one,' observed Sir Michael. "We don't want to see a divided country after the age of 11." Any prospect of a 'northern powerhouse' will have to be put on hold, it seems, until we can generate an educated workforce. In the meantime, heaven help us all, north and south and midlands, if the current supply of educated immigrant workers ever dries us.

In truth, though, the more worrying divide is not north - south, but east - west. Rather than Bradford, Birmingham, Bromley and Bournemouth, it is more Singapore, Vietnam, Poland and Britain.

Schools in the south of England may, on average, be doing better than schools in the north but things look less than rosy for all of our schools once we look eastwards. According to the OECD not only are some of our European neighbours doing a lot better than us, pupils in parts of the Asia-Pacific are up to three years ahead by the age of 15. Worse, a separate OECD report indicates that we are the only country amongst 24 developed states surveyed, in which 55-65 year-olds outperform the 16-24 year-olds. We come 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy - below Estonia, Poland and Slovakia. Not much of a return on the 900% increase in spending in real terms since the 1950s!

Sadly, we have, in relation to other countries, gone backwards in recent decades. Today's grandparents are at the top end of attainment internationally for their age group in terms of literacy and numeracy. Their grandchildren find themselves in mid-table mediocrity – more Millwall than Man. Utd. Pointing this out should not be seen as a harking back to some mythical 'golden age' of education in the 1950s. Far from it! The post war English education system, for all its deficiencies, just happened to be more successful in international terms than the current system.

By focusing attention on a north-south divide in England the chief inspector is side stepping the real and growing chasm that is developing internationally. That the quality of schooling in Blackpool and Bradford languishes behind Bromley and Bournemouth is rather less concerning than that attainment in even our highest attaining pupils trail behind the lowest attainers in Shanghai.

If we wish to narrow this international divide we need to raise the quality of our teaching force. The persistent line from Government is that "we have the best generation of teachers ever in our classrooms".

Last November's survey by the National Literacy Trust told a rather different story. A majority of teachers confessed to not feeling competent to teach the National Curriculum grammar, spelling and punctuation required of Key Stage 2 children (age 7 to 11).

Our chairman mentioned this particular example of teaching quality at a debate he spoke in recently at King's College, Cambridge. A leading figure from the 'Teach First' programme responded. She stated it was of no real importance whether or not a teacher knew how to correctly use certain punctuation marks and she was sure that many of her student audience would have the same problem.

This, apparently, is no impediment to being a good teacher. "Teach First" is an excellent initiative but I wonder if expectations are high enough, both at "Teach First" itself and amongst those at school who are charged with continuing the training.

A likely consequence of sloppy teacher training is sloppy teaching. If we are to address effectively the educational divide identified by the chief inspector, we need to recognise that the widest gap of all is international rather than national. In addition, and as a matter of urgency, we need to stop kidding ourselves about the quality of our teacher training and of many teachers.

Nicky Morgan puts education on a 'war footing'

Education secretary, Nicky Morgan, has announced that a task force of 1500 SAS style elite teachers are to be recruited and parachuted into weak schools. In addition, she has set schools the target of raising from 39% to 90% the percentage of pupils taking the so-called English baccalaureate of five core academic subjects. Meanwhile, a return to externally marked tests at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7) is on the agenda.

The secretary of state seems to be putting the education service on a war footing. Her predecessor, Michael Gove, had already created an atmosphere of confrontation between government and teachers; not least over his decision to 'beef up' both the National Curriculum and public exams. Nicky Morgan's new initiative has heightened the tension.

Is the truth about educational attainment in this country finally begins to hit home with our politicians? Certainly, beneath the usual veneer of self-congratulation, a rising sense of panic appears to be hitting the Department for Education. It is not clear what may have finally tipped the balance in favour of some bold action. The recent revelation that 78% of white working class boys from deprived backgrounds are effectively unemployable when they leave school only added to existing concern.

A most interesting statement by the education secretary in her announcement referred to the debasement of public exams between the years 2000 and 2010:

"Teenagers got more certificates, and school results seemed to improve. But the qualifications weren't credible in the jobs market - they weren't real. They were, to be frank, a fraud on the young people taking them."

Disingenuously, she is referring only to the Labour government failings in education policy from 2000 to 2010 and only to vocational exams. She rightly describes many of these as being: *"pseudo qualifications, which claimed to be equivalent to academic qualifications."* She could, equally, however, be describing the 'academic' GCSE examination brought in under a Conservative government in the late 1980s. It is a shining example of dumbed down standards and grade inflation.

Alarming, a survey just published by the National Literacy Trust reported that 52% of teachers admit that they lack the ability to improve pupils' literacy.

Since such an admission is embarrassing for teachers to make, the real extent of ignorance is likely to be somewhat higher.

In order to raise standards we need competent and confident teachers. Many teachers who have been educated over the past quarter of a century have huge gaps in their knowledge. Ignorance of English grammar is but the tip of an iceberg. That most teachers today were subjected to a sub-standard National Curriculum and a dumbed-down public examination, both of which have now been confined to the dustbin, is hardly their fault.

The inability of many teachers to teach confidently, even at the mediocre level required by the recent curriculum reforms, is the real challenge facing the education secretary. She has started to recognize the problem of under-achievement in many of our schools. If she is to find a solution, she needs to 'come clean' about the causes.

Teaching quality in higher education

Should universities be allowed to increase tuition fees in line with inflation? This question may seem superfluous at a time when deflation remains a concern. Nevertheless, it features centrally in the Government's consultation paper on higher education. In all probability, the real value of the current maximum fee of £9000 will, in time, be whittled away and governments do need to plan for the future. The question of future fee increases, then, has to be addressed.

The Government's proposal is that any fee increases must be linked to teaching quality. In other words, in 'market-economics speak', universities should be given financial incentives to ensure that they are offering a high quality and 'value-for-money' product to their customers, the students. The suggestion here, of course, is that some universities are providing sub-standard fare for their customers.

Most students, though, seem happy enough with their courses. The most recent National Student Survey (2014) showed an 86% satisfaction rate – a ten-year high. The fact that no Russell Group university made the top ten suggests that there may be room for improvement in some quarters but the general picture looks rosy enough.

The Government is probably right, however, to guard against complacency creeping into the system. As with so much in education once one scratches below the surface, it is often the case that all is not quite what it seems.

A few years ago *The Guardian* reported allegations that some students were being placed under pressure by their universities to give their courses a high rating. It claimed that a lecturer at London's Kingston University had told his students to give the university good scores on the National Student Survey on the perfectly understandable grounds that, "if Kingston comes bottom ... no one is going to want to employ you because they'll think your degree is shit."

These days, concern about the reliability of the data from the National Student Survey seems to have been swept under the carpet or suppressed. It was not always so.

Back in 2008, Lee Harvey, the director of research and evaluation at the Higher Education Academy (HEA) told *The Times Higher Education Supplement* that the National Student Survey was a "hopelessly inadequate improvement tool." The HEA has a responsibility for professional standards in higher education. He was subsequently suspended from his job and, then, resigned.

Fortunately, we do not need to rely entirely on the National Student Survey for information about the extent to which students are prepared to express any dissatisfaction with their courses.

Last year, for example, the Consumers' Association reported that 46% of 1st and 2nd Year students felt that their degree was not worth the cost in fees. Furthermore, 51% felt that the quality of teaching they were receiving was lower than they had expected.

Around the same time 'The Economist' reported a student 'drop out' rate of 28%. These 'drop outs', of course, were not part of the constituency for the National Student Survey.

The Government is right, then, to be seeking more quality control in higher education but, in the interests of our economic well being, it should stop obsessing about 'academic' courses. It would be far better to convert half of our universities into vocationally-orientated technical colleges or polytechnics.

According to a survey by the online recruitment company totaljobs.com almost 50% of all recent graduates wished they had steered clear of academic courses, opting for 'something more vocational' instead.

If fees are to be increased, higher education qualifications need to lead somewhere.

No Comment

"Is it a bit snobbish to know the times tables?" BBC question to the CRE, 5th January 2016

"Girls Educated in Single-Sex Schools at a Huge Disadvantage"
Headline to an article by Richard Cairns, head of Brighton College, in latest edition of *Independent School Parent* magazine.

"Nursery workers are being urged to be on the lookout for signs of radicalisation in parents..." Guardian Jan 5th 2016

"Stellar exam results, charming, well-disciplined pupils, inspiring teachers, a boggling range of extracurriculars and high expectations abound. If David Cameron can send Nancy to a non-fee-paying school, then so can you." Tatler Magazine January 2106