

Campaign for Real Education

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

Chairman: Chris McGovern

Vice Chairmen: Jennifer Chew OBE, Katie Ivens Secretary: Priya Dutta

Newsletter

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Editorial

At the Cambridge Union’s first debate of term recently, I proposed the motion that, “This House believes that Oxbridge is a finishing school for the privileged.” My central thesis was that a new privileged class – those who go to good schools, whether that be in the private sector or in the maintained sector - is replacing the stranglehold on privilege once held by private schools in Britain.

A ‘great divide’ is opening up between, on the one hand, good schools in both the maintained and independent sectors and, on the other hand, sub-standard schools, mostly in the state sector. If you are on the privileged side of this divide you are in a position to compete for a place at Oxbridge. Sadly, most of our children are being educated in the two thirds of state secondary schools that are either unable or unwilling to enter youngsters for Oxford or Cambridge.

This is, nevertheless, an improvement on the situation of 50 years ago. Data collected for the 1963 Robbins Report on higher education indicated that even if you went to grammar school access to Oxbridge greatly favoured the privately educated. Only 27% of entrants to Cambridge and 34% to Oxford came from maintained schools. By the early 1970s state school entries had risen to 43%. These days, on the surface, things seem much fairer with, roughly, a 60:40 split in favour of state school applicants.

Rather than being a vindication of the comprehensive school system, however, these figures probably reflect the considerable efforts of the two universities to recruit more state school students. Constrained by the insufficient number of maintained schools that will even engage in admission applications, the process continues to flounder. It is not made better by the fact that around 30% of state school applicants come from the tiny number of surviving grammar schools in the UK.

It seems that Oxford and Cambridge simply cannot find enough state school candidates who are deserving of a place. Even with the elements of positive discrimination that exist in the admissions process these days privately educated pupils are five times more likely to win an Oxbridge place than those at state school and a hundred times more likely than state school children on free school meals.

This is not surprising in view of the comparatively poor performance of our state schools when judged against standards internationally. Given, however, that state school Oxbridge applicants are coming from only a third of state schools, the imbalance in application numbers between private schools and good state schools is much less marked than might be supposed. In addition, whilst only around 7% of pupils attend private school up to the age of 16, this increases to 14% for sixth formers.

That a 'great divide' exists within the maintained school sector is well recognised by those who have money and influence in our society, including our politicians. Tony Blair secured places for his sons at the prestigious London Oratory state school. Harriet Harman's son attended a London grammar school. Both Michael Gove and David Cameron have sent their respective daughters to the outstanding Grey Coat Hospital state school. Jeremy Corbyn in contrast stuck to his 'anti-selection' principles and wanted to turn down the place his son had won at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in favour of his local and failing comprehensive. His wife saw the value of a good school and divorced the aforesaid Jeremy.

Former grammar school boy, Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector, and a strong opponent of academic selection, had to admit in his latest annual report that too many comprehensive schools have a "demotivating culture" and a "worrying lack of scholarship". There could scarcely be a clearer declaration of the 'great divide' amongst state schools.

In his recent speech to the Conservative Party Conference the Prime Minister spoke up powerfully for social justice. I re-worked part of that speech for the Cambridge Union debate:

“The opportunity to win a place at Oxbridge doesn’t mean much to an able but under-privileged child if hypocritical politicians and the influential privileged classes can snatch away the places at the best state schools.

The opportunity to win a place at Oxbridge doesn't mean much if your parents or carers can't afford to buy a house in the catchment area of a good state school or pay for tutors to get you into the local grammar school and ensure you get top grades at A-Level.

There will never be fair opportunity with regard to winning an Oxbridge place without bridging the Great Divide between those privileged enough to go to a good school and those deprived of that privilege. “

I told the packed Union that by supporting the motion they would be voting for bright and intelligent youngsters like themselves but who, unlike them, do not have a vote and do not have a voice and will never make it to Oxbridge.

My side’s case was roundly defeated by a vote of 3 to 2. Our clever opponents managed to persuade the chamber that the words “finishing school” in the motion had to be taken literally rather than metaphorically. There are some things it seems that outweigh “privilege”. I suspect that the outside world sees things rather differently but that the Union was prepared to engage in debate on the matter does, at least, offer some hope.

For highlights of the debate: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=C9e75uCI4HM>

Chris McGovern

Reassurance regarding the new National Curriculum

Former schools minister, Liz Truss, has been promoted to the cabinet as Environment Secretary. At the recent Conservative Party conference she sought to reassure delegates that part of her educational legacy will be a new and more intellectually demanding National Curriculum:

“Thanks to our new rigorous National Curriculum children will be learning about where food comes from and the proper names for trees and animals.”

Some readers may feel that the minister’s boast about the restoration of academic rigour is not entirely convincing.

Schools and counter-terrorism legislation

Ofsted, it seems, has a new priority for its inspection of schools and it does not relate to any traditional notion of education. Instead, since July, schools and “childcare providers” are, according to the DfE, “subject to a duty under section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, in the exercise of their functions, to have ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’. This duty is known as the Prevent duty.”

Any head teacher doubting the importance of this new “duty” would be well advised to note the observation of Andrew Gregory of *Victus*, a leading provider of training in support of “Prevent”. He had this message for schools in a news release dated October 4th 2015:

“In my discussions with schools’ leaders who have recently received an inspection from Ofsted, all have told me that implementation of the Prevent Duty was at the top of the inspector’s agenda.”

So, there we have it! The new priority for teachers is no longer literacy or numeracy, science or foreign languages, history or geography. It is policing toddlers and teens for signs of radicalisation.

BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme managed to catch up with a primary school in Birmingham that has been much praised for its implementation of the “Prevent Duty” and may become a model for schools across the country. The school concerned has already referred three children to “the authorities” after they were deemed to have shown “signs of extremism”. The age of these children has not been reported but lies between 4 and 11 years.

The school’s head teacher told the BBC that radicalism can be spotted readily enough: “It might even come out in a geography lesson or a history lesson. Something that is inappropriate, or a change in a child, a

change of their attitude, a comment they may make...”. Apparently, out-of-school residential trips can be particularly informative, as when a Muslim pupil wanted a prayer room even though his school does not provide one. Another sign would be a pupil who says that Muslim girls should be wearing a headscarf when they are off school premises.

Current concern about radicalisation in schools is understandable but it can easily descend into the witch-hunting hysteria depicted in Arthur Miller’s “Crucible”. We may not yet be into a period of ‘McCarthyism’ but there are signs that we are travelling in that direction.

Ironically, if anyone should be in the dock for radicalising our children it should be the education secretary, Nicky Morgan. Her requirement for schools to promote tolerance and understanding of those with whom one may disagree, under her “British Values” agenda, is an open invitation for radicalised teachers to promote extremism in the classroom. If all views need to be tolerated and understood, teachers will need to present liberal democracy and intolerant theocracy as different but equal points of view – ‘value relativism’. And why on earth is she sticking with a National Curriculum for History that places Islamic and West African history on a prescribed list but makes all of the defining landmarks and personalities of British history, including Magna Carta, Churchill and the two World Wars, optional?

For their catastrophic own goals it is the education secretary and her advisors in the security forces who should be in the dock, not young children who request the use of a prayer room or who speak out of turn in a geography lesson.

Positive Developments

A personal view by Will Orr- Ewing

The CRE was formed in 1987 to raise standards and improve choice in state education. Since then, standards have in large part declined and choice has hardly fared much better. However, some recent developments do give grounds for optimism – and I feel that three were worth highlighting in particular.

1. The success of educational research
2. Some benefits of social media
3. Free Schools and Academies

The success of educational research

As Robert Peal has described in his book [Progressively Worse](#), and as the CRE has long pointed out, educational policy in this country has tended to be informed more by the philosophical prejudices of politicians and educationalists – most of whom have favoured progressive theory and teaching methods – than by research. In recent years, this trend has begun to be reversed, most prominently by Tom Bennett. Inspired by Ben Goldacre, author of [Bad Science](#), Bennett has used his books and conferences to question much of the research on which the progressive education orthodoxy has rested. Group and project work; learning styles; multiple intelligences; educational technology and many other modern educational fads have been shown wanting – by nothing more than subjecting to rigorous analysis the studies on which such orthodoxies have based their claims.

Many educational researchers, some of whom have already been highlighted by [the](#) CRE, have responded to the new esteem with which such research is held. To name just a few,

- **Daisy Christodoulou** disputes the idea that the 21st Century requires a new education, that education should be based on skills rather than knowledge and much more besides in her [7 Myths about Education](#).
- **John Hattie** compared 800 research papers to show that, amongst other things, Direct Instruction (championed initially by Siegfried Engelmann) had one of the highest chances of success, in his [Visible Learning](#).
- **Daniel Willingham** and **E. D. Hirsch** have shown the importance of a knowledge-rich curriculum in their books, [Why Don't Students Like School](#) and [Cultural Literacy](#).
- [Joe Kirby](#) and others meanwhile ensure that new educational research is oxygenated and debated via their regular blogging (see below).

Of course, this emphasis on research to justify every educational initiative will itself require watching. It seems to undermine time-honoured traits such as experience and intuition. As Claire Fox said at the Festival of Education this summer, no research paper will ever convince her that coding is more important than King Lear. However, that individual teachers can read such work as the above to inform their own teaching practice – with less fear than the CRE founders had – is very much to be welcomed.

Some benefits of social media

Seen by some as upholding the best traditions of free speech and others as unleashing man's worst instincts, "social media" has in recent years ensured that few educational topics have avoided being subjected to eager, often ferocious, debate. Like the researchers already mentioned, these bloggers and Twits have grown influential enough to slaughter a few sacred cows.

Andrew Old, who keeps the blog [Scenes from the Battleground](#), was the first blogger to achieve major notoriety – and his blistering attacks on school discipline, OFSTED etc. have galvanised support and action from both government and the profession.

Other notable bloggers who have caught the eye of ministers (Nick Gibb is known to read educational bloggers regularly) and teachers are:

- David Didau, [Learning Spy](#)
- Joe Kirby, [Pragmatic Reform](#)
- [Laura McInerney](#)
- Kris Boulton, [To The Real](#)

There is a longer list [here](#).

There is a slight danger of groupthink amongst this tribe of Twitterati; they are a close-knit group who constantly refer to each other's work. Like the new breed of researchers, though, they constitute an important perspective that is independent from the superstructure of the UK education system, and that continues in the fine tradition of the CRE!

Free Schools and Academies

Building on Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis' reforms, the last Coalition government attempted to set as many schools free from local authority control as possible. They built 255 new free schools and, by 2015, 60% of all English secondary schools and 14% of primary schools had become academies. It is said that when he retires in five years' time, the Prime Minister wants to be able to point to 750 new free schools as part of his legacy.

Gove's academies programme has not been an unmixed blessing. It has the potential to consolidate power in the Department for Education, and has done little to counteract the deadening influence of both [Ofsted](#) and

the national curriculum. However, it cannot be doubted that they have given parents and teachers more choice and a chance of higher standards. It is hard to imagine how school groups such as [Floreat](#), with its commitment to knowledge and character education, and [Michaela Community School](#) in Brent (motto: Knowledge is Power) would have been able to have been offered to parents, outside of the independent sector, without such reforms.

For a rare time in UK education, then, it is not all doom and gloom. As Toby Young recently wrote reviewing Robert Peal's [Changing Schools](#), "the really striking thing...is not the substance of the essays, but the tone. [They] make a bipartisan case for the improvements they've made over the past five years...in a calm, measured voice." The current culture is a bit dry, a bit pragmatic, perhaps, but one in which choice and standards are arguably in better shape than they have been for some time.

Truths and untruths – the impact of digital technology on learning

"The untruths about the value of computers in the classroom have gone a trillion times around the world before the truth has even begun to **get** its shoes on" – to paraphrase Mark Twain. But, at last, some truth about the impact of digital technology on learning is beginning to emerge. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has just reported that education systems around the world that have invested heavily in computers have seen "no noticeable improvement" in their results on the authoritative international PISA tests for reading, maths and science.

Worse, it notes that, "If you look at the best-performing education systems, such as those in East Asia, they've been very cautious about using technology in their classroom." It adds that, "Those students who use tablets and computers very often tend to do worse than those who use them moderately."

An added rebuttal to the exaggerated claims made by the computer evangelists who bedevil British education came with the finding that, even if one focuses solely on digital skills, Singapore comes out top even though it has only moderate use of technology in schools.

Countries with the highest use of the internet in class, including Australia, New Zealand and Sweden have suffered “significant declines” in reading performance. The OECD did not gather data on internet use for the UK but we have amongst the highest classroom usage in the world and have slipped into mid-table mediocrity on the PISA tables – behind Poland, Estonia and Vietnam and miles behind some of the Asia Pacific states. Significantly, the cities and countries that do best on the PISA tests are, also, those that make least use of the internet in the classroom, including South Korea, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Japan.

I do not believe that this new evidence should persuade us that the new technology does not have a role to play in education. The problem lies in how it is being used and the extent to which it has become a master rather than a servant. With annual expenditure on educational technology in British schools running at £619 million and, according to the OECD, standards of literacy and numeracy below what they were in the 1950s, we need to consider where the technology is taking us and what we are getting for our money.

A report in June from “Childwise” indicated that children aged 5 to 16 are now spending an average of six and a half hours a day in front of a screen. This compares with three hours in 1995. The growing addiction of children to the virtual world of computers already appears to be causing real problems both inside and outside of the classroom. Shortened attention span, tiredness and irritability are obvious signs now being detected by teachers. Nevertheless, many teachers are so wedded to digital technology that they are acting as classroom ‘pushers’ of the addiction; digital junkies promoting it vigorously to their pupils. Such are the ‘side effects’ that the ATL teachers’ union felt obliged to debate them at this year’s conference.

We ignore the damage being caused to our children at our peril. Back in 2011, and as reported in *The Public Library of Science Journal*, scientists in China discovered a wasting away of grey matter in the brain amongst its millions of computer addicts. It grew worse over time and affected, amongst other things, concentration and memory. It also reduced inhibitions and led to “inappropriate” behaviour. Dr Aric Sigman, a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, described the Chinese research as a ‘wake-up’ call but few in the educational world or DfE seem to have been listening. He commented that we should not need photos of the brain to realise that sitting in front of a computer screen is not good for children’s health. We now know that the physiological effect

of computer addiction on the brain is the same as the effect of addiction to heroin or cocaine.

Last weekend I spoke on these issues to a group of school governors from the independent sector and urged them to read two important and recent publications. I believe they are essential reading for all teachers, teacher-trainers, parents and older children and, also, for government ministers and civil servants:

“Mind Change” by Susan Greenfield

“The Internet is not the answer” by Andrew Keen

And Andrew Keen has discovered that many of the super-rich computer industry bosses from Silicon Valley in California have come up with their own solution to the downside of digital technology. They send their own children to private and exclusive Waldorf schools that, effectively, ban computers in the classroom on the grounds that they have “ a negative impact on key aspects of children’s learning”.

At Barrowford Primary School “a child is not to be defined as naughty”. Does this policy work?

Speaking at a Downing Street reception earlier this year David Cameron was fulsome in his praise for, amongst others, the headteacher of Barrowford Primary School in Lancashire. With education secretary, Nicky Morgan, alongside he described this headteacher as one of those teachers who is: “Delivering the best schools and skills for our young people, so that they can fulfil their potential and get on in life, is a central part of our long-term economic plan.” He added: “With such dedicated and inspiring teachers in our schools I know we can ensure our children get the best chance to succeed. It was an honour to celebrate their commitment at this reception.”

In their recent inspection report, Ofsted inspectors reached a different conclusion. It rated the school as "inadequate". This reflected the pupils' comments to them that: "No one minds if we don't do our best work." In addition, they witnessed, in concentrated form, the long standing orthodoxy in our primary schools - so called 'child-centred' learning. Learning through pseudo 'exploration', 'discussion' and 'discovery' appears to have been the order of the day at Barrowford with the unsurprising consequence that children's learning and progress was poor.

Inspectors seems have been equally unimpressed by the school's approach to order and discipline; an approach that, if one were being

kind, might be described as 'experimental'. It is based on a 'no blame' culture devoid, it appears, of any meaningful boundaries. Incidents of bullying or harming other pupils are not punished but, instead, subjected to "restorative conferences" that are supposed to "heal the damaged relationship". The school has made clear in its policy documentation that "a child is not to be defined as naughty". Apparently, naughtiness does not exist. It has been re-defined as making "a wrong choice". The strongest 'ticking off' that is permitted for a teacher seems to be to tell a misbehaving pupil that "you have emptied my resilience bucket."

Not even Ofsted inspectors could be taken in by this 'tosh'. For once they managed to spot a fake education when they saw it in action. The school's self-indulgent, 'new age' trendiness has been exposed for what it is - a sham. It is the children, of course, who will suffer. Rather than equipping them for the real world they have been feeding them an educational junk diet that might fit well with some adult hippie fantasies but ill serves the children.

For heaping praise on the school's headteacher I would like to confine the Prime Minister to sit alongside her on the 'naughty step'. But, in the context of Barrowford School, the best I can do to reprimand him is to let him know that he has emptied my resilience bucket ... and, I think, the resilience bucket of many parents.

Spare a thought for Regina Hungerford

Spare a thought for Regina Hungerford. She is the 54-year-old teacher and Girl Guides volunteer of 25 years from Merthyr Tydfil in south Wales who has just been convicted of common assault. Her offence was to have 'lost it' with a 17-year-old lad who decided to play music from his mobile phone in her maths lesson. She threw his phone out of the window after he responded to her request to switch it off by saying: "You can't make me."

It seems that in slamming down a book in frustration the teacher also managed to hit the boy. Not that the pupil concerned was too sure that any physical contact had been made. He told the court: "I remember Miss Hungerford swinging the book but I can't be certain that she hit me."

The court, nevertheless, decided that the boy *had* been the victim of an assault and found the teacher guilty. She has been given a 12-month community order and required to do 60 hours' unpaid work. In addition,

she will have to fork out £620 in prosecution costs, £520 for the criminal courts charge, plus a £60 statutory surcharge.

Given that she now has a criminal record Mrs Hungerford is likely to be struck off the teaching register and, thereby, lose her teaching job and any prospect of finding another one. Her unpaid work with the Girl Guides is also likely to be terminated.

Who wants to be a teacher? Above everything else, teaching needs to take place in an ordered classroom. Pupil behaviour in too many state schools these days is out of control. The use of smart phones in many schools, far from being banned from the classroom as the Chief Inspector has urged, are promoted as a panacea for our educational failings. Barmy? Yes! And you will not see much evidence of them being used to play music, or anything else, in the best education systems around the world.

When school management provides a disciplined environment, the job of a teacher can be rich, rewarding and energising. Without a clear behaviour code for pupils, however, the job, inevitably, becomes stressful and debilitating. Small wonder, then, that teachers wishing to do a good job, can 'lose it'. Disorder may not bother the second-rate, trendy, 'let kids express themselves', teacher. They are not the teachers that get into trouble. It is, too often, the most dedicated teachers who suffer the most from the failure of management to implement a structure of behavioural rules that discourage pupils from telling their teacher, as in this case: "You can't make me".

So, spare a thought for this teacher and mother of two who just wished to be allowed to do her job of teaching and whose life has now been ruined.

The Grammar School Row

A satellite grammar school is to be opened in Sevenoaks and comprehensive school zealots are enraged.

The "one size fits all" mantra is being threatened and the "high priests" and "high priestesses" of misguided egalitarian educational dogma fear a dam has been breached.

What's not to like about accepting the clearly expressed wishes of a local community? What's not to like about democracy? What's not to like about challenging a school system that fails most children? For failing most children is certainly built into the current system, as our performance on the OECD international league table of educational performance at age 15 makes clear.

The argument against grammar schools on the grounds of selection is, a non-starter. Selection is ubiquitous in the state school sector. It is based on a parent's ability to buy a house in the catchment area of a good school and, if necessary, to hire tutors

The argument for grammar schools is that children should be educated in line with their ability and aptitude. We need grammar schools for academic children just as much as we need gold standard vocational schools for youngsters whose aptitude is practical rather than academic. These are the youngsters who should go on to earn lots more money than many of those who are more academically inclined. Bricklayers in London, for example, are currently earning between £50,000 and £100,000 pa, and there is a severe shortage.

It is remarkable that, according to the OECD, Britain is the only country in the developed world in which grandparents, educated under the old tripartite system of the 1950s and 1960s, outperform their grandchildren in terms of educational attainment.

Less remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that Northern Ireland, which has kept its grammar schools, consistently outperforms the rest of the UK in terms of public examination results.

No Comment

*“South Korea's government has announced controversial plans to control the history textbooks used in secondary schools... The new textbook, which will be called *The Correct Textbook of History*, will be written by a government-appointed panel of history teachers and academics.”* BBC Online News 12th Oct 2015

“Just as in the 1960s, when Britain turned to Jamaica to find tube and bus drivers, today the demand is for teachers to fill England's classrooms.”

The Guardian 11th Oct 2015.

“...the number of families taking children out of traditional schools is rising relentlessly. Latest estimates put the number of home-schooled pupils - educated by their parents or cyber-schools - at 40,000, reflecting a chronic dissatisfaction with the present system.”

Daily Mail 1st Oct 2015

“Thank you so much for fighting our corner and trying to rectify this grammar school injustice. Your voice is really giving us parents strength and hope.”

A example of one of the many letters written by parents to the Campaign for Real Education.