

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

There is one long-term consequence in Britain of the current coronavirus pandemic that is unlikely to be reported. It is that in the future, the doctor who treats your illness, the engineer who builds the bridge you are driving over or the financier who is handing your money, may have only made the grade into that job via an over-generous examination prediction.

The cancellation of this summer’s public examinations has caused considerable angst amongst pupils and their parents. Several years of preparation for exams that do not take place is quite a blow for most, if not all, of this year’s exam cohort.

Pupils might take some comfort, though, from the fact of examiners’ generosity towards candidates in recent decades. Indeed, the chief regulator of the examinations’ watchdog, Ofqual, once told The Sunday Times that, ‘All our kids are brilliant’. Examination ‘pass’ marks of under 20 percent in recent years are to be regarded as evidence of the universally high intelligence of young people. This year’s 16 and 18 year-olds, therefore, should have little to fear.

The coronavirus, in fact, might turn out to be quite a bonus because in most cases pupils will be awarded grades beyond what they deserve. A seminal piece of research for University College London back in 2016 analysed the data for nearly 1.4m students who progressed to higher education. It discovered that:

Only 16% of applicants achieved the A-level grade points that they were predicted to achieve, based on their best three A-levels. However, the vast majority (75% of applicants) were over-predicted – i.e. their grades were predicted to be higher than they actually achieved.

Once again, the Department for Education is placing expediency above doing what is right. It might be argued that the integrity of our public examination system is already so degraded that the basis on which grades are awarded matters little. To award grades, though, on the basis of fake predictions plunges the degradation of our examinations to a new low level.

The value of the examination currency is being reduced to junk status – akin to the German mark during the Weimar Republic, the Zimbabwean dollar under Robert Mugabe or, more recently, the Venezuelan currency.

Chris McGovern

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1. School Closures

The closure of schools across the UK was inevitable. Around a quarter of teachers were self-isolating and a similar proportion of parents were keeping their children at home. Against a background of rising panic the pressure on schools was becoming intolerable.

Teachers’ concern about the risk to which they were being exposed within the school environment were well-founded. For once, the health and safety concerns of the profession had a ring of truth. Young people may be at minimal danger from the serious consequences of infection but middle-aged teachers are more vulnerable.

Some schools remain open to provide meals and care for pupils at risk and for those who rely on a free school meal. In addition, the children of key workers – nurses, doctors, police etc – will have access to school-based supervision. This is sensible and necessary.

An abundant set of new problems now face families. How effectively will schools be able to provide home-based learning? What provision can be made for children who do not have internet access or a computer? How many grandparents, more endangered by the virus, will have to take on a child minding role? And so on . . .

2. Home schooling your child – an opportunity as well as a crisis

Parents who are home-schooling their children during the current Covid19 lockdown are struggling to make sense of how children are taught maths these days. ‘It’s clear things are taught very differently from when I was at school,’ one mum told The Telegraph. ‘Not sure who will be teaching who in the next few weeks. I dare not open the maths folder – kryptonite,’ commented another.

digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/172/reader/reader.html?

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How much easier it has been for parents in virus-hit China and South Korea. The more traditional teaching methods used in these states are comparatively easy to understand. Their use explains why, according to the OECD, our 15 year-olds are lagging up to three years behind those in much of the Asia-Pacific.

A BBC investigation discovered that pupils in South Korea equated the level of GCSE mathematics to what they had learnt in primary school. Fifteen minutes was all it took for them to complete a GCSE maths exam.

bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-wales-38115296/south-korean-students-finish-welsh-gcse-maths-paper-in-15-minutes

Nor can we here in the UK take any comfort from the performance of our social elite, including those who can afford expensive private schooling. Back in 2014 the OECD was reporting that the children of factory workers and janitors in the Asia-Pacific were attaining more highly than the offspring of lawyers and doctors in the UK.

telegraph.co.uk/education/10645090/Chinas-poorest-beat-our-best-pupils.html

The Department for Education could not for ever turn a blind eye to this educational calamity. It has recently been encouraging schools here to learn from and adopt aspects of Asia-Pacific teaching methods aka teacher-led 1950s style UK teaching.

Chinese teachers have even been enticed to our shores to convert teachers here to teaching methods that actually work. They are engaged in a evangelical mission for maths teaching that parallels our despatching of missionaries to China to win converts to Christianity during the 19th century.

The most recent OECD PISA tests suggest that the initiative is having some success. The UK is up from 27th to 18th in mathematics.

bbc.co.uk/news/education-50563833

This is almost back to where we were when the first PISA maths test was introduced in 2003.

The second-rate teaching of maths, though, remains widespread. Indeed, a substantial proportion of those teaching the subject in primary schools have no more than a grade C in GCSE – the equivalent of a certificate of incompetence in the subject. Child-centred group work based on ‘discovery’ methods has a seductive attraction since they allow teachers off the hook of subject competence.

In the UK traditional teaching methods, even simple ones such as the rote learning of tables and of number bonds, are still frowned upon in many schools for stifling creativity and self-expression.

Worse, the Blob’s view tends to be that we have nothing to learn from the Asia-Pacific. Rather, they have everything to learn from us. The Blob, for once, is not completely wrong. In the teaching of the arts, for example, especially in our independent sector, we are amongst the best in the world. The minds of so many in education, however, are closed even to the possibility that our UK ‘experts’ may have got some things wrong with regard to other subjects.

Parents who are now having to home-school their children should have the confidence to rely on common sense. Exposure to the teaching gobbledygook that is likely to be sent out online by some schools could be an eye-opener. A bit of the professional mystique surrounding the process of teaching, based as it often is on the bogus, hocus-pocus, witch-doctoring powers of the Blob, may soon be rumbled.

Around 60,000 children are already home-schooled in England. This represents a doubling in the past four years. For some children, learning at home is an escape from poor teaching, from bullying and from boredom. If parents are determined, able and capable they may see the current school closure as much an opportunity as a crisis.

3. The BBC's *Noughts + Crosses* and the case for Black History in schools

The BBC's new drama series, 'Noughts + Crosses', has been hitting the headlines for its treatment of racial issues. It presents an alternative dystopia in which Britain ('Albion') suffers under African ('Aprican') hegemony, following centuries of colonial rule. The white Nought population suffer similar treatment to that experienced by blacks in South Africa under apartheid and in the US South under the Jim Crow laws.

Set within a white Romeo (Nought) and black Juliet (Cross) context, the drama evolved from novels for young adults by former Children's Laureate, Malorie Blackman. A row has, inevitably, erupted over criticism of the drama for being too woke, too divisive and too likely to whip up racial tensions.

Mixed-race and former Brexit Party election candidate, Calvin Robinson, wrote in the Daily Mail that 'Noughts + Crosses' is, 'less a TV show than a political statement. In places, at its worst, *Noughts & Crosses* stoops to naked race-baiting, stirring up antipathy under the pretence of attacking racist attitudes.'

[dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-8076381/](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-8076381/)

The author of the novels was not slow to respond:

'To those accusing me of being anti-white or stating I must hate white people to create such a story as *Noughts + Crosses*, I'm not even going to dignify your absurd nonsense with a response. Go take a seat waaaay over there in the cold, dark and bitter haters' corner.'

[theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/07/noughts-crosses-malorie-blackman-daily-mail-critic-race-bait](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/07/noughts-crosses-malorie-blackman-daily-mail-critic-race-bait)

Robinson's concern, though, about the drama feeding racial tensions and a sense of grievance amongst the black community is legitimate and well-intended. Equally, I have some sympathy for Malorie Blackman's reaction. Showing that some black people can be as racist and vile as some white people may not be the author's only intention but it emerges from the drama as true and unquestionable.

Many viewers and commentators on 'Nought + Crosses' might be surprised to learn that African power in Britain is not entirely fictional. According to Roman historian, Dio Cassius, our now largely forgotten emperor from the Roman Province of Africa, Septimius Severus (193-211 AD), even went so far as to decree genocide for rebellious Brits living north of Hadrian's Wall.

At the head of an invasion army that was probably the largest ever to arrive on these shores he told his soldiers: "Let no-one escape sheer destruction . . . not even the babe in the womb . . .'. Severus died in York before the order could be carried out. As an advisor to Michael Gove in the writing of the National Curriculum for History I failed to persuade him to include Severus as a specific topic.

The fact of an African emperor presiding over and, where necessary, enforcing further slavery on Brits is largely forgotten these days; not least in school history lessons. There is a growing call, however, for more black history to be taught in our schools:

'Black History Month in the UK is officially in October, but an educational group, The Black Curriculum, is pushing for the British school syllabus to be changed, so that black history is taught throughout the year.'

[bbc.co.uk/news/av/education-51650417/black-history-should-it-be-part-of-the-wider-curriculum](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/education-51650417/black-history-should-it-be-part-of-the-wider-curriculum)

This demand should be rejected. Any requirement for schools to teach history through the lens of black history will lead to the subject being distorted and narrowed. Teachers will need to seek out historical topics that lend themselves to a black history narrative.

Of course, where relevant, black history should be taught and at any time of the year. The truth is, though, that most of our history cannot honestly lend itself to this politically correct approach. What, for example, was the black dimension to the reign of Alfred, or to the Norman Conquest or to Magna Carta?

An African presence in Roman Britain has proved especially contentious. It should not be. Children should know about racial diversity in the Roman Empire in general and in Roman Britain, in particular.

There, evidence suggesting a presence of Africans in Roman Britain is incontestable. For a while, indeed, Severus ruled the entire empire from York (Eboracum) and died there.

[telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/06/mary-beard-misogynistic-race-row-bbc-cartoon-us-academic-claimed/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/06/mary-beard-misogynistic-race-row-bbc-cartoon-us-academic-claimed/)

What promoters of black history leave out of the story of Africans in Roman Britain is they that were here as part of a foreign army of occupation. They murdered, massacred and mutilated in the time-honoured Roman fashion. Referring to the British, the Roman politician and historian Tacitus summed up the role of that army, including its Africans, in his 'Agricola':

'Because they did not know better, they called it civilisation when it was part of their slavery.'

He added:

'To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace.'

enq.translatum.gr/wiki/Tacitus

The black history lobby needs to overcome its obsession with Africans as victims for whom penance must be done in the school curriculum. Africans were enslaved and so were non-Africans, including white Brits. The enslavement of Britons described by Tacitus, however, lasted close to four hundred years - rather longer than that Britain's so-called triangular slave trade with West Africa.

Over millennia, across the world and, even, today, political leaders, regardless of race or colour have promoted slavery. Britain's political class, though, was the first to abolish the trade in slaves. Within Britain, itself, slavery had not had any legal status since the collapse of feudalism.

Fantastical arguments, such as the one proposed by Diane Abbott discredit the case for teaching more black history:

'The earliest blacks in Britain were probably black Roman centurions that came over hundreds of years before Christ.'

bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/dabbott_01.shtml

Black history has, nevertheless a part to play in our national story, especially since the expansion and decline of Empire in recent centuries. When it is presented in the classroom or by the media, however, we need to be given the whole picture. Whether playing the part of enslavers or enslaved, different races differ little in terms of mindset.

Taken at face value, which is difficult and most likely will not happen, the BBC's 'Noughts + Crosses' drama shows that black and white, white and black, are very much the same when it comes to the human characteristics of goodness and evil. History shows that, too. This should be the lesson for young people. Ditch the sense of grievance whichever side of the fence you are on and look at the whole picture.

4. Restorative justice in schools – cure or cause of pupil misbehaviour?

It was Children's Book Week recently and across the country pupils, especially the younger ones, were dressing up as their favourite fictional character.

This being 2020 – a year in which the dogma of 'restorative justice' is gaining an ever tighter grip on many schools – the *à la mode* dress-up costumes should have been Little Miss Naughty and Mr Mischief. In too many schools their hour has come!

Ours is a golden age for any child who chooses to misbehave, both within and beyond the school gate. No longer can we expect, as routine, that teachers be allowed to teach, pupils be allowed to learn and law abiding citizens be permitted to go peacefully about their business. Whether on climate change strike or running feral in our classrooms or on our streets, a minority of children no longer feel constrained by traditional boundaries of what was once regarded as acceptable behaviour.

There has never been a better time for young people to be selfish, unruly and disruptive. Notions of blame, shame and punishment are so last century! The cards, these days, especially in schools, are too often stacked

in favour of genuine troublemakers. Within any classroom someone will always be in charge. For the vast majority of pupils it is helpful if that person is the teacher. Too often, sadly, it is not.

Much the same can be said of the streets. Generally, most people prefer the police to be charge. Too often, this is not the case.

In some schools, indeed, things are beginning to fall apart as a consequence of a growth in disruptive behaviour. This was made clear in a report (Dec 2018) by the Policy Exchange think tank entitled, 'It just grinds you down'.

Persistent disruption is endemic in English schools . . . 75% of teachers think that low level disruption occurs frequently or very frequently . . . 72% of them know a colleague who has "left the teaching profession because of bad behaviour". It is also having a major impact on pupils' ability to learn, according to a majority of teachers.

policyexchange.org.uk/publication/it-just-grinds-you-down/

According to a YouGov poll in 2018 most teachers agree that pupil behaviour is deteriorating. It was highlighted as a key cause of stress.

tes.com/news/exclusive-pupil-behaviour-getting-worse-say-most-teachers

Around a third of teachers leave teaching within five years of qualifying and many cite stress as reason for getting out. Poor pupil behaviour, of course, adds to this stress.

theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/24/almost-third-of-teachers-quit-within-five-years-of-qualifying

Teachers rely heavily on heads and senior staff to support them in matters relating to the disciplining of pupils. Instead of helping the teacher, however, it is becoming the norm for the disruptive pupil to be backed. 'Restorative justice' is, these days, determining the treatment of miscreants in many schools.

A survey by the educational app, Teacher Tapp, discovered that 55 percent of secondary schools and 40 percent of primary schools employ 'restorative justice'. Over a quarter of teachers, however, were prepared to admit that 'restorative justice' is regarded by the badly-behaved as an 'easy get out'.

The Nasuwt teachers' union has pointed out that its own survey suggested that teachers regard 'restorative justice' as causing a deterioration in pupil behaviour. In essence, the process consists of teacher and pupil giving their own version of a disciplinary incident to a mediating member of staff and within a 'no-blame' culture.

The misbehaving pupil can get away with telling a pack of lies but the best outcome that a teacher can hope for is a 'sorry Miss', but no further action. Quite a laugh, really, for the naughty child who, by persistently disrupting lessons, may have damaged the education of thirty other children.

There is plenty of guidance for schools on how to conduct a restorative justice meeting. Here are a few online extracts from a prominent publisher. They set out how to expertly question a pupil who is being disciplined:

1) What happened?

This is an opportunity to model the empathy and respect we want the pupil to develop. At this stage, the objective is for the pupil to feel understood and heard.

- Listen (use facial gestures and body language, and small words eg. 'yes', 'okay', 'I see', 'um'... to demonstrate active listening) . . .

2) How were you feeling and what were you needing?

Simply identifying and understanding the underlying feelings and needs that cause behaviour can often be enough to resolve it. A Feelings and needs card can be really helpful for this. –

- Suggest feelings and needs if necessary
- Respond with empathetic body language and facial expressions . . .

3) What were you thinking?

The objective at this stage is to help the pupil express their perspective at the time of the incident . . .

4) Who else has been affected? What do you think [they] might be feeling?

The objective at this stage is to help the pupil develop empathy and emotional intelligence towards others . . .

5) What have you learnt and what will you do differently next time?

. . . If there doesn't seem to be an easy solution, for example, they are bored in maths and they have rejected all ideas about how they could make it more fun for themselves, revert to empathy and sympathise with the challenge.

trackitlights.com

Some aspects of 'restorative justice' are sensible enough and have long been part of disciplinary procedures in schools. A problem arises when the pendulum swings too far in favour of the pupil. Under pressure from the politicians and from the police to exclude fewer children from school, head teachers are in a quandary.

The term 'restorative justice' sounds a seductive, 21st century tone of respect for others. It alleviates justifiable concerns about some children being marginalised in school and ending up in criminal gangs. Certainly, no child should ever be thrown on the scrap heap. The rise and rise of restorative justice and the concomitant 'no-blame' culture that goes with it is, though, having an insidious effect on schooling. The majority of children suffer and teachers are demeaned by having to fight their corner against recalcitrant children who now hold most of the cards.

The breakdown of order and discipline in some schools leaves the majority of pupils and teachers as casualties. An element of 'restorative justice' may, sometimes, help to resolve pupil-behaviour problems but it should not be centre-stage. When that happens, power is handed over to the classroom bullies. Small wonder that so many teachers are throwing in the towel.

5. Assessing Ofsted – where the evidence leads

Are you aware of 'what an effective job Ofsted has done in shining a light for almost three decades on the performance of our schools and colleges'? This is the assertion of former education secretary Baroness Nicky Morgan. It is made in her foreword to a recent report by the Policy Exchange think tank, entitled *The Watchmen Revisited*. She adds: 'Ofsted's annual report is a key moment in measuring the overall improvement of the English education system. [Those of us who want to see continued rising standards should support the role Ofsted performs.](#)'

The baroness is certainly right to stress the important responsibility Ofsted carries as the watchdog for our school system. As a former Ofsted inspector myself I have to admit, sadly, that its record since its creation in 1992 has been largely that of the dog that did not bark.

Until recently, for example, the GCSE fiasco of dumbed-down exams and huge grade inflation was presided over by Ofsted. Our knowledge-lite but PC-heavy national curriculum was, similarly, presided over by this inspectorate. The same was true of the decline in standards of literacy via the phonics-averse and so-called 'real books' approach to the teaching of reading. That, too, happened under the watch of Ofsted.

Chris Woodhead, chief inspector from 1994 to 2000, tried to rattle the Ofsted cage but was effectively marginalised by the organisation he headed and, after a brave fight, felt the need to resign. When Michael Gove took over as education secretary in 2010 he staged a fightback, but he was outwitted by the educational establishment while Ofsted's inspectors stood quietly on the sidelines.

Ofsted failed, with the exam regulator Ofqual, to discharge its responsibility to warn Gove that his introduction of tougher exams would mean nothing if grade boundaries were lowered. This has now happened, with Gove labelled as a toxic part of our educational history.

Probably the greatest damage perpetrated by Ofsted on our children has been to oblige teachers to deploy fashionable but ineffective teaching methods. Under the seductive guise of 'child-centred' learning these have, in effect, been enforced by inspectors.

In her insightful book [Seven Myths About Education](#), Daisy Christodoulou points out that, generally, teacher-led lessons are marked down and child-centred lessons are marked up by inspectors. ‘Ofsted require teachers to give children the control of the classroom . . . they warn teachers against giving too much direction . . . some of the lessons Ofsted praise are very bad lessons.’

A new Ofsted inspection framework introduced in 2019 focuses on the quality of education more broadly than individual lessons. In theory, therefore, teachers have less to fear if they use methods that work rather than methods that promote fake ideologies about ‘child-centredness’. This scarcely matters, however, since these days schools are saturated with educational quackery.

To speak up for the inclusion of a greater element of more didactic teaching is utter heresy. Few, if any, such heretics will make it beyond the process of applying for teacher-training. A vigorously enforced filtering system will keep all but the most covert from getting into the classroom.

To the educational establishment, it is inconceivable that there might be a much better and more cost-effective way of teaching children. ‘Look at China, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea or even Estonia,’ you might argue. ‘No,’ is the Blob’s answer. ‘We know best. We have nothing to learn from bloody foreigners with a different culture.’

The Policy Exchange report has some difficulty in fully facing up to the home truths about Ofsted that I have highlighted. It does, however, ask, ‘whether Ofsted has gone beyond statutory requirements and Department for Education guidance to create its own education policy’, which self-evidently it has. It even wonders if ‘Ofsted has a preferred method or approach’. It wants to raise this question, though, only within the narrow confines of ‘the length of Key Stages and on how to prepare learners for life in modern Britain’.

To avoid upsetting Ofsted, Policy Exchange balances these questions with praise based on some fundamentally flawed assumptions such as ‘Ofsted has therefore played a critical role in ensuring that over 80 per cent of children are now taught in Good and Outstanding schools’. Only by redefining the words ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ can the use of them be justified. International comparisons, employer surveys and remedial courses being run by universities all give the lie to Ofsted’s school quality assurances.

The Policy Exchange report does, nevertheless, provide a valuable but highly sinister insight in relation to faith schools:

‘It is also important for Ofsted to recognise that, however unintentionally, some of the language they have used has created a perception amongst some faith communities that Ofsted has a secularist agenda. The term “muscular liberalism” was repeatedly cited to us as a concern by individuals of many different faiths, as was the perceived suggestion by Ofsted that freedom of religion should be limited to the private sphere.’

Ofsted has a key role to play in our education system but has, for too long, played that role badly. I applaud the Policy Exchange report for recognising that ‘there have been too many occasions when a secularist bias has been displayed’. The report does us a service when it stops distorting the evidence in order to praise Ofsted and follows where the evidence actually leads.

6. Continuing the Gove revolution?

‘THE Gove revolution must continue.’ This is the opinion of Jon Moynihan, chairman of a pressure group established in 2016 called ‘Parents and Teachers for Excellence’ (PTE). He was writing last January in the *Daily Telegraph*. The evidence, according to Moynihan, is clear:

‘Bit by bit, and over the past three years especially, the number of children leaving school without Cs in Maths and English has dropped so significantly that over 100,000 more English children are now leaving school with these basic qualifications than would be the case [had the same percentage failure rates persisted.](#)’

Moynihan applauds what Michael Gove achieved as Education Secretary (2010-14) and claims that some young people are now reaping the benefits. True, Gove achieved toxic status amongst the educational Blob, but surely this only confirms that he must have been getting something right. By sacking him, Prime Minister David Cameron was accepting some political realities, but has the time now arrived to re-charge the Gove revolution in education? Is Moynihan right?

He certainly provides an accurate diagnosis of educational malnutrition and sickness in our schools. ‘The situation is beyond dire,’ he argues. There are ‘hundreds of thousands of children leaving school each year illiterate and innumerate’. For this catastrophe he correctly blames ‘doctrinaire, nonsensical, evidence-free theories peddled by progressive educationalists’.

So far, so good, then! Mr Moynihan recognises the problem. That, though, is the easy bit; rather like working out that blackened skin, buboes and fever are symptoms of bubonic plague. Nonetheless, most educationalists, aka ‘charlatans’, according to Moynihan, have not been inclined to accept this diagnosis of what is staring them in the face.

Moynihan’s admiration for Gove seems to rest on the fact that the Education Secretary acted on what he found by putting in place a mechanism for reform. This included an expansion of the academies and free schools programme. More importantly, it involved a restoration of academic rigour to the national curriculum and to public examinations.

Did Gove believe that, by putting in place a mechanism for improvement, his job was done by the time he left office? If so, he was mistaken. A mechanism for improvement is necessary, of course, but to be able to exercise some control over that mechanism is equally important. In this area the Gove revolution has already been significantly undermined.

Moynihan clearly senses that something is going wrong but is struggling to understand what and why. A venture capitalist and prominent backer of Vote Leave, Moynihan doubtless had his heart in the right place when he helped set up the PTE group.

The declared intention of PTE is to provide all children with ‘an excellent education’ and to achieve this ‘by putting teachers and parents in charge of schools’. Significantly, perhaps, this does not extend to meeting the wish of a majority of parents for an [expansion of grammar school provision](#). In the interests of fairness and social mobility, an end to our postcode selection for the best comprehensive schools would be too radical a step even for these revolutionaries!

More worrying is the failure of Moynihan to see that the claims he makes for the achievements of the Gove revolution are at best lacking in credibility and at worst they are delusional. Gove’s tougher examinations may have been accompanied by more ‘passes’ but the true reason for this remarkable success appears to have escaped Moynihan. And it is certainly not the reason provided by the boss of the examination regulating body Ofqual that [‘All our kids are brilliant’](#).

It is a reflection of the fact that we can have any pass rate we desire. This is engineered via a piece of exam board chicanery known as ‘comparative outcomes’. The difficulty of the questions is irrelevant. Last summer, a so-called ‘pass’ (grade 4) for GCSE maths [could be achieved with just 18 per cent of the marks](#).

Nor is the examination currency any less devalued at A-level. The *Times* summed up the collapse with this headline: ‘A-level maths pupils need only 14 per cent to pass this year’. It reported that: ‘Grade boundaries for the Edexcel exam, which emerged a day before A-level results go public, showed that the board had also awarded an A grade to those who got 55 per cent of the answers right. [Students with 45 per cent have been awarded a B, and those with 34 per cent will get a C.](#)’

It is difficult for those who spend most of their time outside an institution to understand what goes on inside. This is true, above all, of education. I admire Jon Moynihan for trying to breathe some life back into Michael Gove’s moribund school revolution. Parents may be rather thin on the ground on his PTE Advisory Council but it does include some well-intentioned educationalists and a few insightful ones, too.

Through no fault of his own, however, and like so many others, Moynihan is somewhat out of his depth in understanding Gove’s revolution. He has not spotted that the emperor never had any clothes to show off and his PTE advisory group are either unable or unwilling to put him right.

According to the *Schools Week* website, the PTE campaign ‘has been orchestrated by James Frayn, communications chief at the Department for Education under Michael Gove, and Rachel Wolf, [a former adviser to David Cameron](#)’.

Such a pedigree is unlikely to be overlooked by the teaching profession.

According to the OECD, after all, our teachers still have to deliver school improvement to match pre-Gove attainment when, for example, the UK came eighth in the [PISA international maths tests](#).

Rather like Gove himself, there is a becoming naivety about Moynihan with regard to school reform. One so much agrees with so much of what he wants. For his ideas to take off with most teachers, however, he and his PTE group will need to get more ‘real’ and more streetwise.

7. Vocational qualifications – removing false hope

Britain’s educational establishment, backed by governments, never tires of singing its own praises. Exam results are forever improving, teaching is fully imbued with ‘best practice’ political correctness and digital technology saturates our classrooms. What’s not to like? The realities of grade inflation, socio-political brain washing and mind-changing tech addiction are rarely discussed.

It is impossible, of course, to completely cover-up systemic failure. The OECD’s so-called PISA tests show us running up to three years behind the best education systems around the world. Employers’ organisations have been telling us for a while that 20 percent of school leavers these days lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Most universities, meanwhile, including Oxbridge, feel it necessary to offer pre-degree remedial courses.

The intrusion of reality into the hubristic, fantasy world of education has just become even more evident. It relates to the crucial, but educationally-low-status, issue of what is on offer to 16-19 year-olds in terms of vocational and technical qualifications. The government has published a report on, *what drives schools, colleges and training providers (also known as centres) to choose certain qualifications over others*.

gov.uk/government/news/drivers-of-choice-for-vocational-and-technical-qualifications

We are supposed to be re-assured by the claim that:

... schools, colleges and training providers take a broad view and consider a range of factors when deciding which qualifications to offer. These can be categorised broadly as: students’ needs; the capacity or facilities of the educational establishment itself; and the needs of employers.

It now seems that not even the Department for Education can sustain the façade. It has recognised that this training qualifications window-dressing is self-interested and disingenuous. The more punters a college can reel in, the more cash, around £4000 per head, it gets. The provision of post-GCSE vocational courses has become too much of a money-making racket.

The Daily Telegraph and The Sun have highlighted a few of the courses currently on offer:

chocolate tasting,

cake decorating,

‘single eyelash extension treatments’,

‘angling skills’,

‘recognising, putting on and cleaning a saddle’ and ‘safe use of a powered pole pruner’.

‘independent living’

‘problem-solving with numbers up to 10’

‘home cookery skills’

thesun.co.uk/news/10953167/government-pull-funding-mickey-mouse-courses/

telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/13/chocolate-tasting-cake-decorating-courses-set-lose-government/

Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, has decided to pull the plug on over five thousand of the twelve thousand courses currently on offer. Fully attested Mickey Mouse versions are to be axed. He has announced:

Removing funding for qualifications that have no or low numbers of enrolments will help make sure students have a clearer choice of the qualifications on offer, and ensure they get the skills they need to progress.

bbc.co.uk/news/education-51478827

He did not need to be so defensive and semi-apologetic about doing the right thing! And proof of that is in the response of one leading course-provider. The head of City and Guilds told the BBC that dumping courses will be *disastrous for social mobility*. What humbug! Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector, was closer to the mark when she referred to the ‘false hope’ given to young people by offering courses for which there is no prospect of employment.

September will see the introduction of a new vocational/technical A-Level, to be known as T-Level. This potentially high-quality qualification has long been needed. It should provide a vital alternative to the traditional academic post-16 pathway. Amongst most other developed countries it is already a central part of the education and training system.

The current superiority of academic qualifications over vocational qualifications is unsustainable in a modern economy. If the government can ensure equal value and credibility for technical/vocational courses, without dumbing down, its T-Level initiative may, for once, provide it, and the country, with an educational winner.

8. We need to talk about the boys

GIRLS are out-performing boys at school. The latest league tables provide further confirmation. What is more, the attainment statistics have been showing [girls’ superiority over boys for at least thirty years](#).

Is this female superiority deserved? Robert Southey (1774-1843), from the Romantic school of poetry, might have thought so. A traditional childhood ditty attributed to him claims that girls are made of ‘sugar and spice and all things nice’. Boys, in contrast, are made of ‘snips and snails and puppy-dogs’ tails’.

Our simple-minded educational establishment, the Blob, seems to have embraced, however subliminally, these gender definitions. They fit surprisingly well with prevailing pedagogic dogma. Girls matter – a lot. Boys do not matter – very much. Such, indeed, is the level of inertia and complacency amongst our educational elite, including the Department for Education, that the continuing under-performance of boys is rarely up for serious consideration, let alone action. Poetic justice, then, as Southey might argue, that girls should be doing better than boys! There is nothing much more to discuss.

These days, boys are rarely seen as being as deserving as girls when it comes to ‘care and attention’. We live in an age when victimhood status is conferred more readily on females than on males.

True, there have been, and are, some appalling cases involving the treatment and exploitation of girls. The root of these cases has, invariably, been the reluctance of those in authority to challenge the strictures of political correctness. Albeit in a different context, discussing and tackling the continuing under-performance of boys in our school system is widely regarded as ‘off-message’.

With the growth of feral gangs, mostly boys, roaming our streets, one of the consequences of male marginalisation in schools is beginning to hit home and to cause panic. Dave Thompson, the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, is directly connecting our rising crime rate – mostly committed by males – with poor provision in schools and colleges. He is concerned about the potentially damaging impact of raising the school/college leaving age from 16 to 18. This is a consequence of Labour government legislation passed in 2008 and has been operative since 2015.

Thompson would like to see an investigation into what appear to be wasted years between the ages of 16 and 18:

‘Too often, though, the time between 16 and 18 is wasted on studying for low-quality qualifications . . . We’re not seeing young people enter the workplace until they’re 18 . . . As a result, I think particularly with young men, I’m not sure they’re maturing fast enough . . . The amount of time they’re actually in face-to-face time in class warrants some examination by bodies like Ofsted, [because I actually think the class time is fairly low . . .](#)’

Which gender group poses the most urgent problem – the 44 per cent of boys who ‘fail’ GCSE English and maths or the 36 per cent of girls who find themselves in the same situation? Whilst both groups matter, it is the boys who seem to be forgotten.

A BBC [report](#) quotes Mary Curnock, a former head of university and college admissions services, as admitting that she is ‘baffled by this yawning inequality’ and that it exposes a ‘massive policy blind spot’. She adds: ‘On current trends, a girl born today will be 75 per cent more likely to go to university than her male peers . . . By then, the gap between women and men will be larger than the gap between rich and poor.’

She has sounded a warning. We need to talk about the boys.

9. Street slang and disadvantage

The English have no respect for their language and will not teach their children to speak it. They spell it so abominably that no man can teach himself what it sounds like. It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him. German and Spanish are accessible to foreigners: English is not accessible even to Englishmen.

Preface to George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, 1916 edition.

PYGMALION was well received when it opened at His Majesty’s Theatre in London in April 1914 and cinema’s musical-version, *My Fair Lady*, (1964), has immortalised Shaw’s take on the Greek myth.

In a lesson for today, perhaps, as Europe edged towards war in 1914, the Press gave rather more prominence to the use of ‘a sanguinary adjective’ in the play than they did to events in the Balkans.

Eliza Doolittle’s ‘not bloody likely’ line brought the house down – with 75 seconds of laughter – and it caused a storm of debate comparable with that over Meghan Markle’s stance at the moment.

Whilst the *Daily Mail* was prepared only to print a reference to an ‘incarnadine adverb’ the *Daily Telegraph* was bold enough to pronounce that *Pygmalion* was ‘the jolliest stuff’.

The play should have particular resonance in our ‘woke’ times. What better way, after all, to illustrate the shallowness and superficiality of class distinction? Snobbery based on *how* one speaks rather than content of *what* one says has long been perceived as bedevilling British social attitudes.

On the other hand, if *Pygmalion* were written in 2020, would its ‘cultural appropriation’ of the working class lead to condemnation by our politically-correct inquisitors and witchfinders? Perhaps not. Because nowadays, rather than correcting or even banning the street slang of the likes of Eliza Doolittle, schools are being urged to embrace it.

In a paper for the journal *Language in Society*, Dr Ian Cushing, a linguistics expert at Brunel University, argues that: Banning language and non-standard grammar is a punitive practice which can make people feel stigmatised, discriminated against and that their language is worthless.

He rejects the notion that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of using language: I think some adults feel threatened by how kids speak, but kids having their own language is a big part of how they form identities and interact with different social groups.

He warns of ‘long-term damage’ to children if their use of language is corrected: [*Taking a punitive stance won’t teach good standards in any meaningful way.*](#)

I suspect that the liberal-minded socialist and very brainy G B Shaw might have taken a similar position to Dr Cushing. Nor am I unsympathetic to the context-appropriate use of street slang, dialect and, certainly not, of regional accents.

A problem arises, however, when underprivileged children are left in the employment gutter on account of their linguistic impoverishment and the fact that other boundary-bars maximising their potential are never raised.

Verbal expression matters in employment interviews and, more often than not, in job performance. Street slang works if you are Stormzy. Imitating Stormzy, though, without being Stormzy, works less well in terms of impressing those who may be determining your future.

In fairness to Dr Cushing, he admits that ‘standard English is important for job interviews or ceremonies’, but he wants schools to understand that ‘it is not necessary on an everyday basis.’ In any case, he argues, children ‘are very good at switching between very informal speech and formal depending on the context’.

This is certainly true for linguistic acrobats such as Cambridge graduate Sacha Baron Cohen – alter ego, Ali G. It is much more difficult for that 20 per cent of school-leavers who, according to employers’ organisations, are largely unemployable because of poor literacy. In the UK today, around nine million adults are functionally illiterate and [many of them suffer under-employment, unemployment or destitution as a consequence](#).

Tens of thousands of graduates, too, lack basic skills, including literacy.

Shaw’s *Pygmalion* is a wonderful parody of linguistic snobbery. It also shows that no one needs to be imprisoned by street slang. The passport to personal and social progress is through good teaching.

Professor Higgins may be exploitative and cynical, but he demonstrates how easily social barriers can be demolished by teaching the young how to ‘speak proper’. Dr Cushing does not do under-privileged children any service by telling schools to nurture rather than nullify street slang. If teachers do not help these children in this regard, who will?

10. Over-dosing on technology

‘MOBILE phones in class help learning, top teacher claims’. This headline appeared in the *Times* a few days ago. It was reporting the views of Jane Prescott concerning the use of mobile phones in the classroom. [She is headmistress at Portsmouth High School and the new president of the Girls’ Schools Association](#).

Rather than ‘demonising’ the technology, she declared, schools should recognise that ‘there are huge positives. Communication is easier and better for a start. It’s our responsibility in schools to show the positive aspects of having a mobile phone, what it really is for and overcoming the negatives’.

As significant benefits to having phones in class, she highlighted their capacity for allowing pupils to conduct research and to photograph homework tasks.

A leading article in the *Times* backed the Girls’ Schools Association president for what it described as her ‘novel idea to [welcome smartphones into the classroom](#)’.

On February 10, 2018, another *Times* article gave a rather different slant on mobile phone use in the classroom. It was headlined ‘Tech-free schools for children of Silicon Valley’. It began: ‘The Waldorf School of the Peninsula is small, exclusive and packed with the children of Silicon Valley executives who love the role that technology plays in the pupils’ education there. [That is, it plays no role whatsoever](#).’

Many bosses in the US technology industry are sending their own children to schools that ban smartphones and tablets until pupils hit the teens. Even then, digital devices are used only sparingly in the classroom.

The addictive quality of digital technology is widely recognised. The World Health Organisation includes ‘gaming disorder’ on its International Classification of Diseases. Baroness Susan Greenfield’s seminal book *Mind Change* sets out how young brains, in particular, are being rewired by the new technology.

Whose judgment should we trust when it comes to using smartphones in the classroom? Should it be the persuasive rationality of their latest ‘expert’ defender from the Girls’ Schools Association or should it be the personal judgment of those who make a great deal of money from their sale? More generally, should we trust consumers or producers?

In the past I have described some of the most addictive software used in classrooms as [‘educational cocaine](#)’.

Young people are already overdosing on technology and common sense should warn us that they need a respite. There are plenty of UK schools where classroom use of digital technology, including smartphones, is

at saturation level. UK pupils are, indeed, amongst the top users around the world. The most successful school systems globally, however, [are much less technology-orientated](#).

Overdosing on technology can do more harm than good.

The alternative to smartphones-learning is not, as the *Times* leader would have us believe, the rote-learning drudgery of Charles Dickens's wonderfully caricatured teacher-cum pantomime villain, Thomas Gradgrind. Indeed, the technology-free Waldorf schools, so favoured by Silicon Valley computer software moguls for their own children, could hardly be less Gradgrindian.

A Waldorf schools spokesman told the *Times* for its 2018 story that their tech-free schools are 'a very attractive option for people in the tech world for their children. All employers, tech world or not, are looking for graduates these days who can think independently, take initiative, are capable of collaborating, have curiosity and creativity'.

The article quoted Joe Clement, teacher and co-author of the book *Screen Schooled: Two Veteran Teachers Expose How Technology Overuse is Making Our Kids Dumber*: 'A lot of people are saying at the very least let's pump the brakes before we turn our kids' brains over to Apple, Microsoft, Google and HP.'

Four days before its endorsement of using smartphones in classrooms the *Times* carried an article entitled 'The Silicon Valley insider who says turn off your phone'. The insider, Tristan Harris, has briefed world leaders and has testified to the US Congress. He warns that the technology is leading to 'shortening of attention spans, addiction, disinformation, narcissism, outrage, polarisation. This is measurable. Half of teenagers and more than a quarter of parents feel "addicted" to their mobile devices, [a 2016 study for the charity](#) Common Sense Media found'.

Before jumping in to support the classroom use of smartphones and to belittle what it describes as 'technological jeremiads' dating back to the 19th century, the *Times* would have done well to have read the evidence of its own reporting. Digital technology has an important part to play in educating our children but overdosing on any drug is ill-advised and dangerous.

No Comment

But it wasn't until I, like countless other parents, had to do their job that I realised quite how amazing teachers are - and quite how desperately I miss them.

Sarah Vine, wife of former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, Daily Mail 24th March

Sweden has become an international outlier in its response to the deadly coronavirus outbreak by keeping schools open . . .

Financial Times 25th March 2020

An English teacher has amassed thousands of followers worldwide after just three online lessons during the coronavirus pandemic. . . I'm just an exhausted mum . . . But I'm not getting any washing done and my phone is melting!

BBC Education 26th March 2020

It's been a hugely challenging week for school staff on the front line, with many putting their own health at risk to care for children of key workers battling the coronavirus crisis.

TES 25th March 2020

I hope we'll look back on this period and think we did something remarkable. Though that may be tough consolation for students doing exams now.

Dr Doug Clow, who spent 20 years working on remote learning at the Open University and is now advising universities on coronavirus. The Guardian 25th March 2020