

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

Teacher unions, backed by some local authorities, seem determined to keep schools closed and teaching restricted for as long as possible during the current coronavirus crisis. In a 22-page document the largest union, the National Education Union (NEU), has advised its members of 169 health and safety questions that should be answered by headteachers before schools re-open. These include a no-marking policy, the regular sanitisation of library books and the provision of coronavirus counselling.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8336367/Is-Government-set-scrap-plans-reopen-schools-June-1-amid-huge-backlash-unions.html>

Classes of up to 15 children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 began on June 1st. 44 percent of primary schools, though, did not open according to the NEU. In some areas, few schools at all opened – only 8 percent, for example, in the North-East. A staged re-opening of schools in Wales is scheduled for 29th June.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/03/two-in-five-schools-in-england-yet-to-reopen-to-any-more-pupils>

The logic of the opposition to re-opening schools is that the lockdown can continue indefinitely. The NEU, of course, expresses a desire to reopen schools ‘when it is safe for them to do so’. And there’s the rub – because it will be the unions that will decide if and when its questions have been correctly and acceptably answered. The NEU mark sheet will be based, it claims, on ‘reliable evidence, peer-reviewed science and transparent decision-making.’

Such a process is beset by trip wires. What makes for ‘reliable evidence’? How will ‘peer-reviewed’ science be evaluated when scientific opinion differs even over the effectiveness of face masks? Who is to decide on the ‘transparency’ of decision-making?

Problems, questions and concerns, some legitimate, especially over personal protection equipment, are at the heart of the union’s position. Much the same is true of NHS and care-home workers on the front line. The difference being that nurses, doctors and carers are getting on with the job, regardless. The National Education Union appears to be less interested in solutions, answers and ways forward than in flexing some political muscle.

Given the media-induced hysteria, teachers find themselves in a strong position. [Not only is the TUC backing them](#), a large number of parents clearly agree with the continuing closure and are keeping their children at home.

Teachers and their unions have rarely exercised more influence on a national debate than during the current lockdown. With such power comes responsibility. The interests of children, especially the underprivileged ones, should come first. The skeleton schooling that has been on offer since the start of the lockdown has scarcely been used by the under-privileged. Only around 5 per cent of vulnerable [children are turning up](#). Hardly surprising – how many parents want their child to be identified as one of the non-key worker, poverty-stricken ones who is entitled to go into school for feeding and childcare?

We need a bit of honesty in the debate about re-opening schools. Many teachers, it is doubtless true, continue, against union advice, to work hard, especially in setting and marking online tasks for those pupils who have access to the internet. The lockdown for many, however, will have come as a welcome respite from the daily grind.

Back in 2017, before merging with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers to form the National Education Union, the National Union of Teachers published a survey indicating that half of young teachers were planning to [leave the profession within five years](#).

A further report last year by the new National Education Union was equally apocalyptic with regard to teacher morale: ‘Around one in five teachers (18 per cent) expect to leave the classroom in less than two years while two-fifths of teachers, school leaders and support staff want to quit in the next five years – blaming “out of control” workload pressures and “excessive” accountability, [according to a poll by the country’s biggest teaching union](#).’

Small wonder and inevitable, then, that many teachers will regard school closure as a welcome release. In setting its questions and tests for government over school-openings the National Education Union is placing what it perceives as the interests of its members over the best interests of children and, indeed, of the country. Many battle-weary teachers do deserve 'R & R' but obstructing the re-opening of schools is not the way to provide it.

Chris McGovern

01. Children's Commissioner under fire from the Blob

The Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, has come under fire after speaking up for under-privileged children by supporting the re-opening of schools.

Wikipedia has been used to condemn her as being prepared to accept many deaths in order to see her views to prevail. Spuriously using and abusing a BBC link it makes the following statement about the Commissioner:

Longfield also believes that face-to-face education is more important than the health of a child's family.^[4] Primarily, during the Covid-19 pandemic, she stated that delaying schools reopening would disadvantage children despite the likelihood that reopening schools would lead to the deaths of many of these children's parents, careers and teachers.^[5]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Longfield#cite_note-5

On the day before the limited re-opening of primary schools a CRE spokesman shared an LBC radio platform with a leading epidemiologist from the University of Oxford. The epidemiologist felt that the lockdown might, possibly, be ending too soon but eventually admitted that, statistically, children were more likely to be injured in a road accident on the way to school than harmed by the Covid 19 virus.

'Truth' comes in many forms. Wikipedia's Blob 'truth' is the educational establishment's version. Like the Covid 19 virus, it should carry a public health warning.

02. V-E Day and the denigration of Churchill

Friday May 8 marked the 75th anniversary of VE Day. The Early May Bank Holiday was moved in order to celebrate it. Fortunately, due to lockdown, the government was unable to send V-E Day teaching material to schools. Had it done so it would doubtless have been hi-jacked in order to denigrate Winston Churchill.

Back in 1995, on the 50th anniversary, a teaching video was sent to every school in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The 34-minute primary school version provided Churchill with only 14 seconds of indistinct coverage towards the end. It was more concerned about punching home the message that 'it was quite sexist in the war'.

The secondary school video also restricted mention of Churchill to a few seconds at the end, largely in the context of his losing the 1945 general election. Whilst Churchill's name was not mentioned in the coverage of events to 1945 other leaders were highlighted – Chamberlain, Hitler (16 times), Mussolini, Daladier, Stalin.

Anti-Churchill sentiment is widespread and growing in our education system even though, by the public, back in 2002, he was [voted the greatest Briton of all time](#). Subsequently, Mary Seacole, a Jamaican 'nurse' of Crimean War fame, [was voted the greatest black Briton](#).

A Victorian, she held strikingly similar views to Churchill on those matters of race and Empire that are nowadays used to demonise him. She described the Turks, for example, as degenerate Arabs and as worse than fleas and [she was quite happy to use the n***** word to describe black people](#).

No one is asking whether Seacole deserves her venerated status. A statue to her was unveiled a few years ago in the grounds of St Thomas' Hospital, opposite the Houses of Parliament.

Churchill, too, has his statues but they are as likely to be denigrated as respected. Even BBC newsreader [Huw Edwards felt free](#) to have a bash, live on air, during the State Opening of parliament:

Winston Churchill there, the statue on the left, and for me, far more important, David Lloyd George on the right-hand side.

I'm not taking any complaints from viewers on that, ok?

Can I just say that?

In comparison with what is going on in classrooms, however, this is small beer. As we approach the 75th anniversary of VE Day, the *Sunday Express* highlighted how schools are being encouraged to disparage our wartime leader. Under the headline “Winston Churchill ‘demonised’ in schools as ‘brainwashed’ pupils told he’s a war criminal”, it reported: “Secondary school pupils are being taught Winston Churchill was a ‘war criminal’ who wanted to start a Third World War.”

‘Lesson plans shared by thousands of teachers also suggest he made lame, drunken speeches and was [less important to British history than Sir Bob Geldof](#).’

The model lesson plan has been made available by Tes, formerly The Times Educational Supplement but these days an educational version of *Pravda* (Truth) during its Soviet heyday that, along with the *Guardian*, is regarded as holy writ by many teachers.

The idea here is for Churchill to be put on trial – hero or villain? Weighing up evidence is, of course, a historian’s stock-in-trade, but not in this way. Through carefully selecting and manipulating it, classroom history is invariably a one-sided ‘show trial’ and never more so than with Churchill.

The education establishment, the ‘Blob’, understands full well that if it can use classroom history lessons to bring down Churchill, the whole edifice of British identity will soon come tumbling down, too. Society can then be rebuilt in the best authoritarian tradition. It is succeeding.

And do not be fooled into thinking that this distortion of history to undermine Churchill is a one-off aberration. It is not. It is symptomatic of what has been going on in schools for some years.

A many-times reprinted textbook for secondary schools is Longman’s *Minds and Machines, Britain 1750-1900*. The authors explain how they put together a package of evidence about people in the past: ‘We have tried to imagine what they would tell us if they were to come back from the dead.’

Pupils are furnished with quotations from imaginary zombies purporting to be historical figures. On this fake evidence historical conclusions are supposed to be drawn on such matters as the British Empire. Amongst the authors of this dangerous tosh were senior government advisers with whom a CRE representative sat on curriculum committees as a lone voice of dissent.

At a time of frenzied educational iconoclasm, Churchill’s reputation does not stand a chance. The government were cheerleaders on VE Day but do not be fooled. World War II in general and Churchill in particular, along with all the other landmarks of our national past, have been relegated to the status of ‘examples (non-statutory)’ in the latest version of the national curriculum for history.

Boris Johnson is a biographer of our wartime leader. He should have commemorated the 75th anniversary of VE Day by restoring statutory status to teaching about Churchill and, indeed, about the World Wars in general. This would give them the same status awarded to ‘early Islamic civilisation’ or ‘Mayan civilisation’ or Benin (West Africa).

More importantly, Ofsted inspectors should report on whether history is being taught in a balanced and unbiased way. The subject, certainly, should not be used as a vehicle for brainwashing children into seeing Churchill as a potential war criminal.

03. Independent Schools rise to the challenge

During the current emergency, fee-paying parents, whatever the discount, still expect some schooling for their children. Independent schools have risen impressively to the challenge. Survival, after all, may depend for some on how well they measure up to the challenge.

Eton has gone so far as to make some of its digital study courses freely available to state school pupils. At the start of May, Simon Henderson, its headteacher, reported that 1,600 state secondary schools – around a third of the total – [had taken up the offer](#).

It turns out the Labour Party's 'Abolish Eton' contingent has been [barking up the wrong tree](#).

In terms of what is in the best interests of children at the moment, there is a stronger case for the abolition of the National Education Union rather than Eton College. The CRE is not advocating either, of course! For all the faults currently on display, trade unions are a key component of a free society.

How ironic, therefore, that the posh elite of Eton College is now doing far more than the National Education Union to support our nation's children. On the one hand, we have Eton offering free, online top-quality lessons. On the other hand, we have the National Education Union slamming a lid on the provision of online learning – partly on the grounds of health and safety and partly because 93 per cent of youngsters having access to digital devices is insufficient.

Should the union not be focused on ensuring the Government fulfils its promise to equip the unequipped seven per cent of children, rather than declaring what all cannot have, none shall have?

I wonder, though, if the union has a greater concern. The promotion of free, high-quality online teaching, such as that on offer from Eton and the Perse School, Cambridge, could be highly dangerous for those union members who happen to be less competent teachers.

The Prime Minister's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, has been in the news for allegedly stretching coronavirus lockdown rules in order to protect his infant son. The bile this provoked amongst some was not only a consequence of Cummings' triumph in the Brexit vote and the general election landslide. It was also consequence, for many teachers, at least, of the time Cummings served an adviser to Michael Gove when the latter was education secretary (2010-2014).

From this experience Cummings reached two significant conclusions:

1. 'Many teachers are so mediocre that they should be given a script to read to pupils and forced to follow standardised lesson plans.'
2. 'Removing the scope for thousands of classroom teachers to discuss their own ideas or set children tasks they have designed [should raise standards substantially](#).'

The script-reading that Cummings suggests may be unrealistic and would certainly be demeaning for teachers. A comprehensive, coherently planned and extensive bank of high-quality video lessons for classroom use could, however, be a game-changer for education, especially for the underprivileged.

Given the shortage of well-qualified teachers in subject areas such as maths and the sciences, an extensive bank of filmed lessons by outstanding teachers would rescue many teachers as well as pupils. It would, in addition, help bridge the gap between the best and the worst schools. It could be a magic bullet to raise standards significantly whilst resolving the teacher recruitment crisis.

By endeavouring to block online learning, the National Education Union is revealing an underlying fear that those teachers who are inadequate, but still union members, may not have a future in the profession if too many video lessons by outstanding teachers become available in the classroom.

As a consequence, during this time of coronavirus lockdown, the long-term interests of union members have been put ahead of the best interests of children.

04. Bring back the school desk to improve teaching and help combat Covid 19

We need to get the largely forgotten school desk back into primary school classrooms if we are to beat the coronavirus and get the economy moving again. As simple and as old-fashioned as it sounds, it is the most obvious way to ensure children socially distance. Old-fashioned desks with under-lid storage are the best antidote/PPE against the spread of the coronavirus.

Teacher-led lessons based on pupils sitting behind desks, in rows and facing the front, fell into disrepute decades ago in the UK. In her book *Seven Myths about Education*, Daisy Christodoulou noted that Ofsted inspectors favoured child-centred group work over any form of didactic teaching. Small wonder, then, that desks have never made a comeback.

Teachers, brainwashed by their training into unquestioning belief in the sanctity of ‘discovery learning’ and group work, long ago ditched the desk in favour of shared tables. There are few primary school classrooms these days that are not organised into five or six sets of tables pushed together.

Many children end up with their back to the teacher, wherever she, and occasionally he, may be standing. During ‘lessons’ the teacher and the necessary classroom assistants scurry between the groups. The different groups may or may not be doing the same thing at the same time and, equally, may or may not be of similar ability.

This form of classroom organisation has probably contributed more to the decline of standards in our schools, as measured by international comparisons, than any other post-war development in education. It forces teachers into adopting ineffective, sometimes useless, child-centred group work. According to the OECD, and with the possible exception of the United States, we are the only country in the developed world where grandparents outperform their grandchildren in basic skills.

How different things are in the superstar education systems of the Asia-Pacific, up to three years ahead of us by the age of 15 according to the OECD and a [BBC investigation](#).

Seventy years ago, most Singaporeans were illiterate. In the likes of Singapore, Shanghai and South Korea today, whole-class teaching is *de rigueur*: so 21st century! The classroom layout with rows of desks facing the teacher is as ubiquitous there as it is an aberration here. Nor is pupil behaviour much of a problem there. The more widespread disorder and disruptive behaviour in our classrooms is partly a function of how we organise the furniture.

The East Asians use a mix of traditional desks and single tables, usually with a storage component. If the organisation of desks in rows facing the teacher at the front of the classroom is good enough for our educational betters, it should be good enough for our kids. What is more, in addition to encouraging a return to more effective, whole-class, teaching methods, the return of desks will do more than any other measure in schools to combat the spread of Covid-19. What’s not to like?

05. My View: Leaning for a purpose - Vygotsky vs Piaget

by John King

*John King taught psychology for 30 years in FE and sixth form colleges.
He holds three masters’ degrees and a doctorate.*

Traditional didactic teaching (teacher explains, pupils listen and ask questions) is the norm in high-achieving school systems such as Singapore, Shanghai and South Korea. The success of such systems (and considerable research) demonstrates how effective didactic teaching is for transmitting knowledge. This begs the question: What’s stopping us from emulating that success by bringing didactic teaching back into our schools?

Our school system is profoundly influenced by the work of the Belgian child psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget argued that the way children think develops over four stages. These commence with infant thinking in images and recalled muscle memories. By the age of two, they start to think in words (symbols), but their

thinking is not logical. Around the age of seven children begin to think more logically, and around the age of eleven, they begin to be able to think scientifically and understand abstract concepts and relationships. It's easy to see how our education system has been built around these stages.

Piaget's theory rests upon two basic assumptions. Firstly, that what a child is capable of learning depends not on how they're taught, but on their stage of development. Since all children go through the same stages in the same order this would suggest that it would be a simple matter to import successful teaching methods from another country. Secondly, that children are 'lone scientists' who are naturally curious and create their own knowledge by carrying out their own experiments on the world. See, for example, an infant putting anything they can get hold of into their mouths to see what it tastes like!

I am going to argue that we would find that introducing more traditional methods to British schools will not work in the way Piaget's theory suggests, and I will do that by referring to another theory of child development; one put forward by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky argued that environment is critical to a child's development. Children learn, with the help of more experienced members of society such as mum or dad, to use 'cognitive tools' to help them think and remember better (e.g., taking notes, using a calculator), tools that are specific to the culture in which they're developing. As a result, rather than acting like lone scientists, children are better seen as apprentices - learning how to think and what to think about with the help of more experienced members of society.

Let's take a simple example to illustrate what I mean. We all know that as children we didn't look at a jigsaw and think 'That's interesting, I think I'll experiment on how those pieces should fit together.' No, our parents deliberately got out the jigsaw and we learned how to complete it by working on it with them. Notice that we were not interested in completing the jigsaw for its own sake (as Piaget would have it) we were interested because our parents seemed interested in it, and we were interested in pleasing them (in other words we could see how it was relevant to us). Importantly, we learned how to complete a jigsaw because that's a skill that *our* society sees as being important for children to master. There are many cultures in which completing a jigsaw is not something parents and children sit down together to do!

One of the big roadblocks to bringing in better education methods relates to Vygotsky's ideas about the socio-cultural nature of what is learned. In our society didactic teaching is seen as old fashioned and boring compared to alternative methods (that claim to be more 'interactive'), learning facts is seen as irrelevant (why bother when we can just Google it?), and young people have lofty ambitions (fuelled by media and advertising images, and from being told that they can be 'anything they want to be' regardless of effort or ability) coupled with a sense of entitlement stemming from being encouraged to see themselves as 'customers' who expect schools to 'educate' (and entertain) them.

To Piaget none of this would be a problem, learning would be immune to societal trends and fads, depending as it does, on the child's stage of development. Vygotsky, however, would argue that schools, rather than being separated from the rest of society, are inseparable from it and therefore find it difficult to maintain a separate academic identity. Seen from this angle it becomes clear that merely re-introducing traditional teaching into British schools is doomed to failure because the children and parents who are using the system do not see its relevance to their lives.

A second, and related, misunderstanding arises from Piaget's claim that children are curious about their environment. Educators have taken this to mean that children are motivated to learn *anything and everything*. Vygotsky takes a much more pragmatic view and argues that children are motivated to learn what they think is useful. We see this every day when young people seem to master new social media apps the moment they come out. They didn't need to go to class, they didn't need their teacher to cajole or threaten them to learn how to use it; they learned it because it was useful to them.

Combined with the trends outlined above, this means that many children no longer see education as being useful either in terms of who they see themselves as being or who they see themselves as becoming (their career aspirations). Because of a schooling-inflated sense of entitlement many cannot see the relevance of schoolwork (you don't need a degree to be a DJ or a rapper). In South East Asia young people are brought up to have far more sensible aspirations and to understand that the way to a good job is through a good education. As a result, they respect education and focus on their academic work rather than waste time daydreaming about the day they win X Factor.

In summary, there are a number of reasons, based around the values and perceptions of our present-day society, why it would be difficult to re-introduce traditional teaching methods. The bottom line is that far too many children cannot see educational achievement as being useful to them. We can't change society, but we

can, as individual parents and educators, be aware of these forces and understand that children have their own motives for learning. The best way to help them is to encourage them to form a 'learning identity' so that they will take the most from whatever way they are taught and be better able to resist the pressures they will come under from peers and the wider society.

06. Loo rolls and wafer biscuits

English Heritage boss tells us how to teach history

Small wonder, perhaps, that toilet rolls were in short supply as the Covid 19 lockdown took grip. English Heritage chief executive, Kate Mavor, has been promoting their use for home-school history lessons. Via *The Daily Telegraph*, she has been offering guidance on '10 history lesson ideas for children to engage in at home'. Toilet rolls and indeed toilets in general [are central to this home-schooling initiative](#).

The article is headlined: 'Why history is the most important lesson for lockdown (and how to teach it)'

The secondary headline reads: 'History gives us a sense of scale, argues Kate Mavor. Here are things to watch, eat and build with children, plus a history of toilets!'

The 'Ten great History at Home lessons' kick off with:

How to make Roly Poly pudding – the Victorian way

Toilet rolls come in for Lesson 2, focusing on the Middle Ages:

How to make a cardboard sword

'The "ingredients" include loo roll, kitchen foil and a mug and soon you'll be channelling your inner knight. Young squires might need some help from an experienced warrior when cutting out the pieces.'

In 2010 the then education secretary Michael Gove promised his party conference that he would 'stop the trashing of our past' in classrooms. He lambasted left-wing 'ideologues' who believed schools 'shouldn't be doing anything so old-fashioned as passing on knowledge, requiring children to work hard, or immersing them in anything like dates in history . . . the result of their approach has been countless children condemned to a prison house of ignorance.' He insisted that one of the 'under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past.'

He should have saved his breath. As one of his advisers in revising the national curriculum for history, I witnessed his collapse and surrender to the very ideology he had been attacking. His 'thesis' for revising the history curriculum in schools was shot to bits.

At the final meeting of our history working party he disingenuously announced: 'We have had [my] thesis, [your] antithesis and now we have synthesis.' Total tosh! What we had was his abject surrender. It is why, today, we have a national curriculum for history that does not require the teaching of any specific landmark event or personality of British history.

It turns out that what a much-missed libertarian, the late Dennis O'Keeffe, described as the 'Blue Peter Curriculum' in 1990 is very much back in force, as English Heritage is making clear. O'Keeffe [noted that](#): 'Too many students spend an inordinate amount of time painting toilet roll cores or mounting bits of coloured paper on pinboards. The Blue Peter Curriculum I call it. It has little obvious potential for our proposed educational renaissance.'

We are thirty years on, and we can see how English Heritage is moving history teaching forward. In addition to using toilet rolls as a teaching aid for medieval England, toilets in general have a broader role to play in the history curriculum:

Discover the top toilets through time

'It may not be glamorous but from Romans gossiping on the loo to medieval royal bottom-wiping to the invention of the modern flushing toilet, there are 2,000 years of toilet history.'

For English Heritage, model building must remain central when we study the past:

Build Stonehenge out of biscuits

‘Create your own mini Stonehenge from the biscuit tin. Shortbread is great for the larger sarsen stones while pink wafers and bourbons can be easily balanced to form the lintels. This is an easy – and tasty – way of understanding the layout of Stonehenge and to appreciate the overall scale of the iconic prehistoric monument.’

If Big Macs are more your children’s thing, English Heritage has something for them too:

Find out how the Romans invented the burger

But if only a party or playing around with make-up will keep your little blighters happy, try:

Host a party fit for Queen Elizabeth or A Georgian make-up tutorial

Do not imagine that only English Heritage is promoting knowledge-lite history. A few days ago, the *Telegraph* was reporting that ‘youngsters are no longer interested in a “male, pale and stale” version of the past and prefer to learn about people from different backgrounds, according to Tom O’Leary, director of public engagement at the Historic Royal Palaces. The charity, which runs Hampton Court Palace, the Tower of London and Kensington Palace, is seeking to bring to light stories of historic characters from a [more diverse range of backgrounds.](#)’

Needless to say, the BBC is also on-message in diluting a knowledge-based definition of history. It is all about ‘skills’, you see. We can all be historians because we can all be detectives. The Beeb does, though, have a few problems in distinguishing between a noun and a verb:

‘**Practise** – There are [lots of fun ways](#) to practice your historical skills online and offline.’

Small wonder that [Jack the Ripper](#) is such a popular topic in classrooms for study of the 19th century. The teachers’ rag, the *Tes*, provides a couple of hundred lesson plans on the serial killer! Who is interested in Nelson and Wellington or Gladstone and Disraeli when you can study autopsy reports on Jack’s victims?

This is the state of history teaching in our schools.

07. No Comment

‘Finland’s coronavirus infection rate has continued to decline despite the reopening of schools, adding to growing international evidence that classes can restart safely.’

Daily Telegraph 5th June 2020

‘We knew it was one metre, but we doubled it to two because we did not think the British population would understand what one metre was and we could not trust them to observe it, so we doubled it to be on the safe side.’

Professor Robert Dingwall, a government advisor, recently shared a senior public health specialist’s explanation as to how the two-metre distance was arrived at. (British Weights and Measures Association).

‘Thousands of pupils will sit common entrance exams this week [at home] – the only national exam to be held during the coronavirus pandemic.’

Tes 4th June 2020

‘CLASS WAR Militant union boss blocking re-opening of schools is linked to far-left group that supported Jeremy Corbyn’

The Sun 17th May 2020

“Our fears were unwarranted, because the children came in brilliantly. They were automatically social distancing. Even our reception pupils were stood at two-metre intervals down the line.” Headteacher, Emily Profit.

The Guardian 1st June 2020.