

Campaign for Real Education

www.cre.org.uk

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

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Newsletter

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Editorial

2017 is the CRE's 30th anniversary. Its central mission, then and now, is to combat “falling standards and damaging changes in state education.” In terms of raising levels of awareness the Campaign has had considerable success. All the main political parties, for example, came to accept that the dilution of content in the GCSE examination required attention. In addition, Conservative ministers, at least, have understood that an element of accountability should be built into the education system.

It would be delusional, however, to suggest that British education is in much better shape today than it was 30 years ago. True, certain battles have, largely, been won, such as over the recognition of the importance of phonics in the teaching of reading. To some extent, too, we have seen the downward spiral of ‘knowledge’ being addressed in England by the latest revision of the National Curriculum. Sadly, the same cannot be said of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Compared to many other countries, however, the level of educational attainment in the UK has gone backwards. Our 15 year-olds are now running up to three years behind the best performing states of the Asia-Pacific. The need for an educational renaissance and a restoration of the integrity of the public examination currency is more urgent than ever.

According to the OECD we are alone amongst developed countries in having school leavers who are less ‘skilled’ in employment terms than their grandparents. There could be no greater indictment of what has been going in our schools in recent decades. Employers are regularly lamenting the inadequate basic skills of too many school leavers and, even, of graduates. We rely on well-educated immigrants to plug the gaps.

The educational establishment is in denial of an attainment crisis. Indeed, they would have us believe the contrary. When failings are exposed, it is lack of funding that is usually blamed. The 900% ‘real terms’ increase in expenditure on education since 1953 is ignored. The fact that we spend more per pupil than most of those countries in more successful education systems is, also, ignored.

Rather, we have been informed that, “All our kids are brilliant.” These were the words used by, Sally Collier, chief regulator of the examinations’ watchdog, Ofqual, in an interview with the *The Sunday Times*. To make certain that this brilliance is recognised, she ordered exam boards to lower this summer’s A-Level grade

thresholds to ensure parity with last year's pass rate of 98.1%. Collier made her intentions clear: "I want the message to be that students have done fantastically well."

Given that a first tranche of more rigorous A-Levels were examined this summer Collier feels it is entirely legitimate and logical to manipulate the grade boundaries: "If we are not using the approach we are taking... we would see a fall in results this year and possibly a significant one."

Chicanery and dishonesty also steered the grading system for GCSE. A 'good' pass on the new Maths exam, equivalent to the old Grade C, required just 15% (sic) of the marks with one exam board and averaged out at 18% across all boards. Rather than this being regarded as a certificate of incompetence in the subject, as it should be, it is a passport to teacher training, including the teaching of maths in a primary school.

The truth is that, regardless of an exam's rigour or lack of it, Ofqual can have any pass rate it wants. Under the system known as 'criterion referencing' that came with GCSE in the 1980s grade boundaries are fully flexible. Under the previous O-Level system 'norm referencing' allocated a specific and permanent year-on-year percentage to a particular grade, regardless of the difficulty of the paper. It was not a perfect system, none is, but it prevented grade inflation and provided easily understood and reliable information to institutes of higher education, to employers and to the candidates themselves.

After 30 years of educational reform, then, what have we achieved? Dumbed-down degrees, based on fraudulent A-Level results, built on GCSEs that are a counterfeit currency version of the GCE O-Level we still produce for Singapore, the world's top performing education system, but ban here. On this foundation Ofqual, an organisation of nearly 200 permanent employees, the standards 'watchdog', is proclaiming, "All our kids are brilliant."

30 wasted years! How long can we go on fooling ourselves? The Campaign for Real Education has much still to do.

Lies, damn lies and statistics

According to the Joint Council for Qualifications 19,285 more girls than boys achieved A*/A grades in this summer's A-Levels exams. It has been widely reported, however, that boys outperformed girls at this higher level. They did so in terms of achieving a higher 'percentage' pass rate but not in terms of the number of candidates.

Should memory be forgotten when it comes to assessment and learning?

By chance, this latest assault on the credibility of our examination system has coincided with a speech in the House of Lords by Oxford University's eminent neuro-scientist Baroness Greenfield. She was addressing the need to improve understanding of digital technology at all levels of UK society.

In her insightful book, *Mind Change*, she pointed out the dangers of addiction to smartphones and tablets. This addiction is causing observable physiological change in the brains of children that may well prove more significant to the history of mankind than climate change. Now she is warning that, in effect, digital technology addiction is making the brain lazy and therefore making us dimmer. This applies particularly to children because their brains are more malleable.

She points that if children do not use it (the brain) they will lose it. The organ of the intellect needs 'exercise', much of which cannot be provided by addiction to digital technology. In addition, 'Learning, playing and socialising in the real world' beats the virtual, screen-based world for exercising it.

The billionaire computer moguls running Silicon Valley in California are well aware of the dangers highlighted by Greenfield. As the Sunday Times reported not so long ago, they are increasingly sending their

own children to elite Waldorf schools that severely limit the use of digital technology. They promote the digital drug for the children of others but not for their own. OECD data suggests they are right. Unlike in the UK, the most successful education systems limit the use of digital technology.

Two educational pathways are opening up. More digital technology, including freedom to ‘google’ in exams, or some constraints on the technology and a reliance on the human computer – the brain – when it comes to assessment. Eric Mazur or Susan Greenfield? We have to choose.

‘Covering up’ – north of the border

Scotland’s SNP government has been quick to claim credit for this summer’s public examination results - Nationals, Highers and Advanced Highers. They are seen as a triumphant vindication of how it runs education north of the border.

The pass rate, broadly in line with last year, remains at an historic high and a record number of Scottish youngsters have gained university places. "The whole country should rightly be proud of the excellence and achievement in Scottish education demonstrated by these results," boasted the euphoric Education Secretary, John Swinney.

These days anything short of a celebration of exam results is seen as undermining and belittling the effort made by young people. Questioning the value of the examination currency is regarded as a criticism of the candidates. Akin to a form of treason against the Scottish nation it has become a ‘no-go’ area for politicians. It came as no surprise, therefore, that opposition parties, too, showered their praise on the pupils.

Scotland’s educational establishment outguns even England’s when it comes to power and authority. In social and educational terms it is the ‘provisional wing’ of the SNP and its influence and ideas extend across the UK. Following this latest exam ‘success’ story the pro-Corbyn “Canary” website chirped in that “Scotland is leading the way in education,” whilst “England’s education system is failing a generation of children,” because it continues with national testing.

The notion that if English schools could be like Scottish schools all would be well for its pupils is as seductive as it is misguided. True, there was a time, not so long ago, when there was much to admire about the education on offer in Scotland. When the SNP achieved power a decade ago Scottish pupils were performing better than the UK overall according to the international OECD PISA tests for 15 year-olds. Whilst these tests are far from being infallible they have, since 2011, become the only international assessment allowed by the SNP government. The triennial PISA is the chosen litmus test of standards in Scottish schools.

The PISA results since the SNP came to power in Scotland, however, indicate declining attainment that is much at variance with the rosy picture painted by the recent public examination results. Indeed, matters could scarcely be worse.

The latest scores (2015) indicate that standards in Scottish schools have fallen from well above the UK average in literacy and numeracy to below average. In science, before the SNP took over, Scottish pupils used to perform at the level of the rest of the UK but have now slumped to well below that level.

Scottish government data – the Survey of Literacy and Numeracy – has confirmed the decline in pupil performance since the introduction of Scotland’s so-called “Curriculum for Excellence” in 2010. In May of this year the Scottish education secretary had to acknowledge the facts and admit that standards are “simply not good enough.”

In educational terms the SNP’s self-congratulation is tainted by its betrayal of a generation. The last thing that Scotland needs now is an educational standards ‘cover-up’ based on its public exam results.

Affordable independent schooling – a personal view by Will-Orr Ewing

The latest news from the Independent Grammar School, a new affordable independent school in Durham reads as follows:

“We have been delighted that, without advertising as such, we have had almost 100 expressions of interest. That confirms our view that there is a real demand for the kind of school we are proposing, and that we are likely to have more than enough children to make the school viable.”

IGS Durham offers a “no frills” independent school education to families who could not otherwise afford one, using “fresh, new teachers” in “unpretentious” facilities for £52 per week (£2,700 per year). Why are poor parents drawn to it when they can educate their children in schools with better facilities, more experienced teachers, for free?

The reasons [are](#) likely to be the same reasons a majority say they would choose an independent school over a state school if they could afford it.

The education of the individual child, rather than the education of a cohort – be it class, year group, school or local authority - is the animating principle of independent education.

State school pupils, in contrast, are confined to tabulated data sets in order that their ‘progress’ can be measured as a cohort. Schools are motivated more by an average lift in scores across these cohorts than they are by educating an individual child. This difference in emphasis, not always immediately obvious to parents new to the systems, underpins five key characteristics of independent schools:

1. Behaviour.

State schools tend to measure bad behaviour by cohort targets, such as whether the number of exclusions or trancies has risen or fallen, rather than think about the effect of bad behaviour on individual children. Bad behaviour is frequently cited (e.g. by the Independent Schools Council) as a top reason why parents choose the independent sector. And low-level classroom disruption is also frequently cited by stressed out state schoolteachers as their reason for leaving the profession.

2. High standards.

Because of their focus on the one rather than on the many, an independent school teacher is more likely to ask, “How can I stretch this pupil as far as he or she is able to go?” than “How can I ensure that as many of my class as possible get a grade C/level 4 at GCSE?”

3. Pastoral care and growth of the whole person.

For the same reasons, good independent schools do not just focus on the borderline ‘pass’/‘fail’ pupils in order to boost the pass rate of a cohort. They are much more likely to ensure that all pupils receive equal attention in all areas, both academic and non-academic. From this flows a genuine commitment to extracurricular activities and the development of confidence-building interpersonal skills such as public speaking.

4. Curriculum.

“All children will be asked to learn nursery rhymes and poems”, IGS Durham promises. “ Things that, once learned in primary school, may well remain with them for life.” An education rooted in individual growth understands the richness that a broad curriculum can bring. Independent schools seek to offer History, Geography, Foreign Languages and so on because they are valuable in themselves, not because they are the prescribed outputs of the National Curriculum.

5. Sense over nonsense

The easiest policy answer to any mental/social health scare is to make changes to the National Curriculum. State school children are now forced to learn a welter of “politicised” information pertaining more to their lifestyles (usually around sex, identity, gender, sustainable living etc) than their knowledge of a subject. Independent schools, freer from the state’s imperatives to prioritise such issues, can choose more judiciously – most of the time, choosing common sense over nonsense.

One of the most compelling advantages of a state school is that it is usually local, embedded in the life of a community, allowing children to make local friends from a variety of backgrounds. It is early days yet but if schools like IGS Durham can bring localism and diversity to the private sector, combining their offer with independent school levels of communication with that community, such affordable schools could begin to challenge the state sector up and down the country.

Who is at fault in the accountability row? A lesson from “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”.

The publication of this year’s SATs results for 11 year-olds in literacy and numeracy caused particular outrage amongst the educational establishment.

Kevin Courtney, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, complained to the Telegraph that:
“Today’s results...tell 39 per cent of 11 year olds that they have not reached ‘the expected standard’ for their age group and are not ready to begin secondary education...”

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers was equally enraged. Its primary school specialist opined that:
“We currently have a system in which the SATs hang over schools like the sword of Damocles.”

Whilst the union’s general secretary stormed:

“SATs are at the centre of a toxic accountability system that is driving teachers and leaders out of the profession.”

This response of the ‘Blob’ was entirely predictable. It was, nevertheless, depressing since this year’s 61% ‘pass’ rate is an improvement on last year’s 53%. There is some cheer to be had in the fact that, although the situation is bad, things may be moving in the right direction. As Nick Gibb, the schools’ minister, pointed out:

“Today’s results show sustained progress...thousands more children will arrive at secondary school having mastered the fundamentals of reading, writing and maths, giving them the best start in life.”

But with regard to accountability, the educational establishment behaves rather like Veruca Salt, the spoilt and petulant brat in Roald Dahl’s “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”. It cannot bear to face up to the truth of its responsibility for the long-standing under-performance of our schools and the betrayal of so many children for so long. Instead it is inclined to lash out and to demand it be appeased...or else.

Not that we should place all the blame on the Blob. It has got away with so much for so long because, for decades, and with only a few exceptions, government ministers have been incompetent or, more usually, have refused to stand their ground. Instead, they have courted the Blob and sought to please it. Government has created the monster that now holds the future of our children in its hands.

With a little paraphrasing, Roald Dahl’s explanation of what produced the obnoxious Veruca Salt could apply equally to the Blob.

“Is the Blob the only one at fault? For though it’s spoiled, and dreadfully so, the educational establishment didn’t spoil itself, you know. Who spoiled it, then? Ah, who indeed? Who pandered to its every need? Who turned it into such a brat? Who are the culprits? Who did that? Alas! You needn’t look so far to find out who these sinners are. They are (and this is very sad) dotting ministers that acted as MUM and DAD.”

Preparing for Brexit – a language lesson from Singapore

Should post-Brexit UK seek to become an Atlantic Singapore? By any reckoning, this Asia-Pacific tiger economy has been a remarkable success story since gaining full independence from the Britain in 1963 and being expelled from Malaysia in 1965.

Writing in the Daily Telegraph (Oct 1st 2107) Professor Lutfey Siddiqi of Singapore's National University noted:

“In absolute terms, five million Singaporeans export almost as much every year as 60 million Britons, running a trade surplus of 15 per cent compared to a six per cent deficit. Annual income is about 30 per cent higher than in Britain.”

He believes the Singapore experience is instructive for a nation in Britain's position. Singapore, though, presents the West with something of a dilemma. Its prosperity, racial integration and social stability are envied but its democracy is criticised for being too narrowly based and its social policies are commonly regarded as over dirigiste.

The Chancellor, Philip Hammond, is not a fan. He recently told ‘Le Monde’ that post-Brexit Britain will not be following Singapore's low-tax, low-regulation model for economic growth. We will remain “recognisably European” he promised. *The Financial Times* agrees. It urges him “to abandon the idea of a British Singapore before it does more damage to the negotiations with Brussels – and to the UK's domestic debate about its future.”

The sad truth for us about the Singapore option, however, is that it is built on high quality schooling. This means it cannot be an option for us. One cannot reject what is not on offer.

Singapore's founding father, Cambridge educated Lee Kuan Yew, understood that the foundation for economic progress and social harmony is education. Singapore achieved independence shortly after Ghana and, in terms of its economic development was in a similar state of development. Look at it now!

According to a *Forbes* magazine analysis of IMF data, by 2015 the island state had become the third richest in the world based on GDP per head and purchasing power parity. The UK came in at 23rd – roughly in line with its educational performance on the OECD PISA tables for the educational attainment of 15 year-olds. Singapore pupils are at the top of those performance tables, up to 3 years ahead of ours.

This progress to educational super-star status has not happened by chance. Rigorous teaching and learning is in the DNA of modern Singapore. Significantly, it includes the British produced GCE O-Level examination that is now, effectively, banned from being taught here since it is not classified as an ‘approved qualification’.

An underlying reason for the success of the Singaporean education system is the high priority Li Kuan Yew gave to the promotion of bilingualism. Whilst recognising the importance of a mother tongue - Mandarin, English, Malay or Tamil - for the purpose of cultural identity, he saw that it was essential to have English as a unifying language and to meet the challenges of globalisation and world trade.

And for those Singaporeans born, like him, to English speaking parents he saw it as vital to learn another Singaporean tongue. In his book “My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey” he describes his own uphill struggle to master Mandarin. Ethnic Chinese make up 75% of Singaporeans and, unsurprisingly, Singapore is one of China's most important trading partners.

Tony Tan Keng Yam, recent president of Singapore, summed up the importance of bilingualism to Singapore in a letter to the current prime minister:

“Singaporeans today are able to leverage on our bilingual and bicultural edge to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves around the world.”

As native speakers of English, the world language, the UK has a self-evident advantage when it comes to world trade and, not least, in the context of Brexit. The downside, however, laziness in learning foreign languages, is likely to become an increasing burden. The rest of the world is ready and willing to sell to us in English. If we wish to sell more to other countries, however, in a competitive market place, knowledge of the purchasers' language and, indeed, culture, provides a considerable advantage.

For this reason alone alarm bells should be ringing here about the state of foreign language teaching in our schools. True, primary schools in England are now required to offer a foreign language from the age of 7 but the quality of provision is patchy and many teachers are not qualified beyond GCSE.

The dire state of foreign language learning is most clearly illustrated, however, by entrants for GCSE and A-Level. Over the past two decades the number has almost halved. Although a foreign language is a requirement of the 5-subject EBacc for GCSE, the number of entries continues to fall - by 7% this year.

The Association of School and College Lecturers has warned that “languages are in such a fragile state that German is at risk of becoming extinct in state schools.” The knock-on effect is now being felt in universities with courses closing or contracting.

Singapore is not alone amongst successful economies in giving a high priority to foreign languages and bilingualism. For Brexit Britain to even contemplate, as an option, becoming an Atlantic Singapore it will need to do the same.

No Comment

“Our party in government has made huge improvements to our education system. Improvements that are transforming the opportunities for young people and for our country. And we should be proud of that fact.”

Justine Greening, Secretary of State for Education, Conservative Party Conference Speech, Manchester 1/10/2017

“More of 'one size fits all'; more 'control' and 'rigidity'; more data-collection for fatuous 'age-related' predictions and punishments for 'failure' to perform to those predictions; less 'teaching'- more 'coaching'; less and less 'learner-involvement'; a factory outcomes model in every way.”

Professor Bill Boyle, Manchester University, commenting on the Education Secretary’s speech to the Conservative Party Conference (TES 3/10/2017)

A survey conducted amongst more than nearly 5,000 students at independent and state schools by the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC), which represents the heads of the world’s leading independent schools, and Digital Awareness UK, reveals that young people are rebelling against the current state of social media, with almost two-thirds (63%) saying they wouldn’t mind if it had never been invented.

HMC Press release 5/10/2017

A quarter of primary school students were unable to finish the SATs reading test in May 2016, and exam regulator Ofqual has concluded that it was “unduly difficult” for some. The Independent (6/10/2017)