

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

The Coalition Government has served its term in office and it is time to take stock of its performance in the field of education. As the Secretary of State in charge for most of that time, Michael Gove certainly brought a steely determination to improve standards in England. Until his replacement by the emollient Nicky Morgan in July of last year, however, he did more to alienate the teaching profession than any of his predecessors. Was this a sign of failure or a sign of success? Was all the acrimony he caused worthwhile? Will his impact be lasting or did he, too, eventually become a victim of the education establishment, of what he liked to call ‘the Blob’?

In terms of expanding Labour’s academy programme he achieved more than he could have expected. A majority of secondary schools now have academy status. It would be pleasing to believe that this development was connected to a desire by schools for more freedom over what is taught. In fact, nearly all academies continue to slavishly follow the National Curriculum. The motivation for most of the schools that have converted appears to have been a desire for more control over spending than was permissible under local authority management. Academies, especially when part of a ‘chain’ can, certainly, operate with greater financial efficiency than some wasteful local authorities. Primary schools, being smaller, have less room for manoeuvre in terms of spending and have tended to ‘play safe’ by keeping with the support system that they see as being provided by local authorities. Only around one in eight have converted.

Controlled and funded directly by central government, academies are far from being ‘maintained’ versions of ‘independent schools’. Nevertheless, they are free from the shackles of local authority subject advisors whose enforcement of fashionable but failed teaching methodologies has done so much to dilute educational rigour.

On the whole, the performance of academies in terms of raising standards, albeit from a low base, has been promising. Much the same can be said of free schools; effectively, academies that start from scratch rather than being conversions of existing schools. Both academies and free schools have also given a jolt to local authority schools to improve. On balance, then, they have been a move in the right direction.

Reforming the administrative structure of schools does not, of course, ensure that educational attainment will rise. Tony Blair’s description of many comprehensive schools being “bog standard” applies as much to academies and free schools as to local authority schools. Since all schools are following the same curriculum leading on to the same academic exam, GCSE, at age 16, little that relates directly to raising attainment is changing. Even the option of International GCSE has, now, been closed off to state schools because of the Government’s decision to exclude it from its approved list of qualifications.

True, Michael Gove has revised the National Curriculum in order to make it more rigorous, and tougher GCSEs and A-Levels are on the way. This move should be welcomed but the extent to which the all-ability GCSE exam can ever meet the needs of pupils of widely different abilities remains very much open to doubt. Gove suffered a major defeat when he had to step back from his original proposal of simply scrapping the GCSE and starting afresh. Grade inflation and a lack of academic integrity have undermined the exam's credibility. A *Daily Telegraph* editorial recently went as far as describing the GCSE as a "terrible exam".

For a political party that is, ostensibly, committed to competition and to market forces the Conservatives have been making a poor showing with regard to schools and to public examinations. The expansion of apprenticeships is commendable but we need a rigorous vocational pathway to open from an earlier age. After the age of 14 there is little to be gained from forcing non-academic children to pursue academic courses leading to GCSE. Vocational qualifications need to move on from the Cinderella status they currently hold. If children are to be taught in line with their aptitude we need a vocational pathway that has a credibility that matches the academic pathway. This is the norm in other developed economies. In Switzerland, for example, around 80% of youngsters attend vocational secondary schools with the other 20% educated in academic schools. Too many UK teachers see kudos only in directing youngsters along the academic route. Aspiring to become a builder, an electrician or a plumber, is often seen as less worthy. This attitude fails to serve the needs of many youngsters and nor does it serve the needs of our country.

Whilst the creation of more grammar schools would allow academic pupils to be taught in line with their aptitude it needs to be accompanied by the provision of high quality vocational/technical schools that cater equally well for youngsters whose abilities are more practical. Rather than arguing the 'pros and cons' of grammar schools we should be discussing the best age at which to make the transfer to academic or to vocational schooling.

Allowing a choice of secondary school pathways was never on the agenda of the Coalition government. It has reformed the administrative structure of schools and tinkered with the National Curriculum and examination syllabi, but has done little to ensure that children are taught in a way that best suits them.

According to Ofsted, a record 81% of schools in England are now either "good" or "outstanding". If this represents genuine success for the Coalition Government it has to be seen in the context of the countries of the UK occupying mid-table mediocrity in the OECD tables of international attainment and the growing concern of employers about the poor educational standard of many school leavers. Education is a world of smoke screens and mirrors – few things are ever quite what they seem.

As Education Secretary, Michael Gove showed more courage than his predecessors in some, but not all, areas of the educational battlefield. His capitulation over National Curriculum History, for example, must have been a particularly galling defeat for him in the light of his promise to stop the classroom "trashing of our past".

Writing in *The Spectator* (April 4th 2015), Mr. Gove conceded: I am selfish, lazy, greedy, hypocritical, confused, self-deceiving, impatient and weak. And that's just on a good day. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, 'We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts...And there is no health in us.' "

This self-assessment is refreshingly honest but too harsh a verdict if applied to his term of office as Education Secretary. The Coalition's record on education was one of partial success but several missed opportunities. To some extent it has stemmed a tide of failure and underachievement in our schools. The task of the next Government will be to turn that tide around in order that we can begin to compete with the best education systems across the globe.

Current Affairs as GCSE History – a dangerous mix

Dim-witted examiners from the OCR Board, authorised by the Government, have decided to include the unfinished wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the new GCSE History syllabus.

Current affairs and history make dangerous bedfellows. The GCSE requirement for candidates to “develop an awareness of...how and why different interpretations have been constructed” is an invitation to give equal weight to the views of both the terrorist and the victim of terrorism. Constrained by the perspective of history this may be a legitimate classroom exercise. Teaching some ‘pros and cons’ for the terror inflicted by, for example, Boudicca, the Vikings or William of Normandy, has long been standard fare in many traditional history lessons. However, once the equivalence of different views, part of Nicky Morgan’s ‘British values’, is used as framework for teaching about contentious ‘current affairs’, we really are entering dangerous territory.

In GCSE history lessons, the British Government is about to contest ‘truth’ with Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, Islamic State and Jihadi John.

The Curious Incident of trying to get help for a child in need

Mark Haddon’s award winning novel, “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” has enlightened readers with regard to the issue of autism in general, and to Asperger syndrome in particular. The stage play version won seven Olivier Awards including “Best Play” in 2013. What is the reality for parents of such children? Here, one mother tells her story.

“BBC 5 Live recently highlighted the case of Malcolm and Jane Howitt from Cumbria having to spend £20,000 on fees, for two SEN appeals regarding their autistic child. More parents of children with autism in England are taking legal action against their local authority because they do not think their needs are being met.

I think that this is disgraceful. What about people who do not have this kind of money, without going into debt? What about their children? Funding cuts are affecting poorer parents much more than those parents who can afford to take legal action.

Cumbria Local Authority acknowledged there are "specific gaps in provision for autism." But what about the children who fall through these gaps, and don't get the help they need as we felt was the case with our son? The abolition of legal aid in family cases that do not involve violence means that parents like us cannot pursue legal action to protect our child.

My husband and I had the same problems with our local authority, Wigan, some years ago. They were reluctant to diagnose our son, even though they could see the autistic traits in him. There were problems all through school, from primary to secondary.

My son was born in 1987, and started primary school at the age of four in 1991. From the beginning there were problems with unusual behaviour. Three years later in the juniors the problems became worse. I witnessed this myself, as I worked in the kitchen in the school. I approached the headmistress and asked her if she thought that my son was dyslexic, because of problems at home with homework. He also didn't like change and got really upset if we even changed direction on the way to school - all traits of being on the autistic spectrum. The answer to the question was: "Ho! He is just laid back and lazy. He will grow out of it."

She also said a number of issues at home were affecting his schooling. At the time his dad was on dialysis, which he did at home four times a day, and she said that this must be having an impact on my son. She used to take him out of class and sit him alone in the school library to doodle the

morning away. When I approached her about this, she said he was disruptive in class. Basically she could not get any work out of him.

Six months after he had moved on to secondary school we had a meeting with an SEN teacher, who said he thought my son was on the autistic spectrum. He was 11 years old. This was the start of a nightmare. For the next five years it was a constant battle with educational psychologists and with various clinical, educational, and speech therapists.

Appointments were made and then delayed for six months or cancelled. My son felt that he was being 'picked on' a lot by teachers for behaviour that he could not, really, control. He was constantly running out of school. Although an SEN teacher recognized that my son was autistic another teacher cruelly labelled him as just the "the bad kid of the form."

Eventually, an educational psychologist did identify traits of Asperger syndrome but he did not take matters further. By this time 4 years had passed, and my son was not even attending school on a regular basis. The LEA never made any enquiries. As the time for my son to leave school came closer we were advised by a specialist in family welfare to resolve our concerns by going to a legal tribunal with the L E A. However eight months before his leaving date, the LEA asked that the case be struck out.

The following paragraph is from part of the letter I sent to the Authority's Director of Education at that time, in Nov 2002:

*"It is clear that by his final year at the ***** high school, Richard's placement has broken down, and the school has effectively, washed their hands of him and is waiting until May 2003 when he will be leaving school. A sixth form place for him has long since been ruled out. Also, the school's indifference to his non-attendance was inconceivable. No consideration was given for him to repeat another year. We feel the school has failed him in his education. Your lack of commitment in identifying and meeting his special educational needs has ensured that, despite his educational potential, he has effectively been consigned to the educational dustbin."*

I did not receive a reply.

He was formally diagnosed with Asperger syndrome in Nov 2013, at the age of 26, after years of struggling with stress and anxiety. I recently wrote to the ombudsman, but was told too much history had passed for him to investigate. I have a letter dated Nov 2014 in which Mrs ***** for Wigan council explains that "a medical diagnoses – including that of autistic spectrum condition - does not necessarily imply that a statutory assessment, or a statement of SEN is required." I find this quite staggering.

I have another son, who is a teacher, and I know that he would not let his pupils down in the way that my son with Asperger syndrome has been let down.

I once read that, "There is no greater injustice, than to give a child a poor education. By giving every child a good education, we will liberate them from a culture of low expectations, low self-esteem and lack of confidence that has sapped the energy and damaged the lives of so many in previous generations. This is the foundation for success. "

We feel a great injustice has been done and that, like many other parents in a similar situation, we have been let down by the education system."

Mrs E Halliday

Three Cheers for Schools Minister, Nick Gibb

Able primary school pupils are not fulfilling their potential as they pass through secondary school. Two thirds of children who achieved Level 5 in national assessments (SATs) at age 11 do not go on to our leading universities. Level 5 represents the expected performance level of 13-year-olds.

The education ‘expert’ who has found this out is none other than Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw. His discovery is based on Ofsted in-depth inspection of 50 schools plus visits to another 100. A formal report is about to be published.

Ofsted was set up by the *Education (Schools) Act of 1992*. It has, therefore, taken it well over 20 years to make this discovery. And it seems to have come a quite a shock to the aforesaid Chief Inspector. According to *The Sunday Times* he “is expected to describe the situation as deeply disappointing”, rather than entirely predictable and what most of us already know.

Perhaps, in 20 years’ time, another Chief Inspector will discover that not only are able children under-achieving but so are both average-ability children and below-average ability children. By that time, of course, our economy will be even more dependent on immigrant workers, who have been well educated in their country of origin.

For children in the most successful education systems around the world, the current Level 4 ‘national expectation’ of 11-year-olds in this country is laughably low. Even children who arrive in the UK from the moderately successful education system of Poland are finding our schools to be undemanding. A research project in Scotland by the *Centre for Educational Sociology* concluded that: “*Many Polish children and their parents viewed school in Scotland as ‘easy’: schools’ expectations of some pupils may be too low...*”.

Recently, at our Government’s invitation, a group of Chinese maths teachers arrived on these shores. Their task is to show our primary school teachers how to teach. In essence, this involves whole class teaching, plenty of practice to secure the basics and plenty of challenge. This really is alien territory for most of our state primary schools and it is small wonder that by the age of 15 our youngsters lag three years behind those in Shanghai.

At least the schools minister, Nick Gibb, seems to be aware of the problem. He knows that we have been getting things wrong for too long and that we can learn something from the most successful education systems around the world, such as those in Asia Pacific. He wishes to see their successful methods being given a chance to raise standards here.

Denis Thatcher once recalled that Margaret always knew that she must be on the right lines if the educational establishment opposed her. Nick Gibb is finding the same reassurance. A few weeks ago, writing in *The Guardian*, a professor of primary education described her response on listening to his proposals for maths teaching being presented by the DfE:

“As I listened, my blood pressure rose ...you’d be forgiven for thinking that we were in China given the level of prescription in the new proposals for primary mathematics. It was based almost entirely on the Shanghai education policies which Nick Gibb, the schools minister, so much admires. The new, highly prescriptive curriculum for England presents – in a year-by-year schedule – the exact maths that teachers have to “deliver” and even suggests the particular methods and layout children must use...

The theory is that, because the Chinese and Singaporean children all work through a textbook together, no one falls behind. And they think this system should work in the UK.”

Given the state of our education system the CRE is not accustomed to praising schools ministers, but in the case of Nick Gibb we have to make an exception. Unlike the Chief Inspector, he has not needed 23 years to work out that we have a problem of under-achievement. More importantly he has a strategy for doing something about it. Three cheers!

NUT zeal for promoting gay rights tramples over the rights of others

The National Union of Teachers wants all schools actively to promote gay marriage and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) rights to permeate the school curriculum beyond lessons on sex education. At its Easter conference, it overwhelmingly passed a motion that calls on the incoming government to make “it compulsory for all schools’ sex education policies to include a positive portrayal of same sex relationships, promoting LGBT History Month in all schools, and encouraging schools to develop a curriculum that is inclusive of LGBT issues.”

“We need education policy that develops curriculum for children and young people that supports the democratic values of a diverse Britain, including LGBT equality,” demanded Christine Blower, the NUT’s general secretary.

Currently, sex and relationships education is a required teaching for pupils at local authority maintained secondary schools in England, but is not mandatory for primary schools, academies, free schools or independent schools.

Protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is already firmly enshrined within the Equality Act (2010). For the largest teachers’ union this does not go far enough. It regards the promotion of LGBT rights as so important that it is prepared to ditch the rights of those, such as many faith groups, who do not support gay marriage. In order to forcibly promote the rights of one group, other groups of people, far greater in number, have to be discriminated against.

Pity the poor teacher who will lose his livelihood because his conscience prevents him from actively promoting gay marriage. Pity the faith school that has to choose between closing its doors or betraying its religion. Pity the helpless parent whose child will be subjected to politically correct and Orwellian thought control. Pity the innocent child who will be at the receiving end of all of this social engineering.

The stage is being set for quite a drama to unfold. Already, in the name of ‘British values’, Ofsted has to evaluate how well schools are preparing children for life in modern Britain. The step from the legitimate exercise of informing children about LGBT rights to promoting those rights at the expense of the rights of others may not be so far around the educational corner.

Not all LGBTs support gay marriage, of course, let alone the NUT's stance of promoting it in all schools. Even a cursory search on Google will reveal plenty of sceptics amongst the gay community. The vast majority of people in Britain, including LGBTs, wish to treat others fairly, as equals. The consequence of favouring one community over all others is likely to bring resentment and resistance.

The folly at the heart of the NUT motion is that it is divisive and discriminatory. If ever it attains legal backing it is likely to provoke a backlash against LGBTs as it is to help them. Do the misguided and politically correct zealots of the NUT really believe that ‘tolerance’ and understanding can be promoted by ‘intolerance’? What fools they are and along what dangerous paths they lead their members!

Radicalisation and value relativism in our schools

Why did three bright teenage girls from Bethnal Green Academy in London flee to Islamic State? Why are they not the first? Why will other pupils wish to follow in their footsteps? These are questions that are much vexing our political and educational leaders.

Reassuringly, we are told that children are not being radicalised at school. At the behest of the Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, Ofsted is enforcing “British values” as a means of combatting radicalisation. And who could possibly find fault with such requirements as these?

- 1 *“Pupils must be encouraged to regard people of all faiths, races and cultures with respect and tolerance.”*
- 2 *“an acceptance that other people having different faiths to oneself (or having none) should be accepted and tolerated...”*
- 3 *“...nor is it acceptable for schools to promote discrimination against people or groups on the basis of their belief, opinion or background.”*

In a statement regarding the pupils from his school who are now in Islamic State, the principal of Bethnal Green Academy confirmed his school’s adherence to these values:

“A core aspect of our ethos is to promote the British values of democracy, tolerance and respect for other cultures, taught through a wide variety of curriculum topics and learning programmes...With such measures in place, police have advised us that there is no evidence that radicalisation of the missing students took place at the academy.”

The message is unequivocal. The police have given the ‘all clear’ to schools. It is a message that seems to have been swallowed hook, line and sinker by commentators.

On the surface, indeed, all seems well and the police verdict is plausible. Schools, for sure, are not urging pupils to ‘bunk off’ to join Islamic State. Look below the surface, however, and a very different picture begins to emerge. It is a picture that should be causing us all the very greatest concern. It is truly alarming because, under the radar, it underpins the radicalisation of young people both within school and beyond the school gates.

In the name of tolerance, respect and understanding, the teaching of so-called ‘British values’ is reinforcing the notion that different views and beliefs must be respected because they are equally valid. This is the ‘value relativism’ described by Allan Bloom in his seminal work, “The Closing of the American Mind”. A belief in the relativity of all truth has now spread from the USA to the UK and to other liberal democracies. It has become ‘holy writ’ for our educational establishment and it saturates and defines the teaching of “British values” in our schools. It is entirely optional whether or not schools teach foundation stones of British values as Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution or the two World Wars. However, there is no choice over teaching the relativity of truth - that all views are, more or less, equally valid. The message to children is, “Do not be judgemental”.

On the one hand, pupils are told, we have western liberal democracies and on the other hand we have societies built around different values, for example, religious law. These are very different societies but each has an equally valid point of view. In line with so-called ‘British values’ our schools are promoting the ‘middle ground’ between different beliefs and different ideologies. All of this is exceptionally well intentioned. The ‘middle ground’ is not supposed to provide a launching pad for radicalism but, unfortunately, that can be the consequence.

Unwittingly, the endemic ‘value relativism’ within our education system is encouraging youngsters to see fundamentalism as one equally valid choice amongst several. It is time our political and educational leaders woke up to this awful truth. The path to hell ever was paved with good intentions.

No Comment

“Three-quarters of trainee, student and newly qualified teachers have already considered leaving the profession, a survey reveals.” *Times Educational Supplement*, 27th January 2015

“A Labour government would overhaul school inspections, replacing Ofsted’s ‘avalanche of bureaucracy’ with a new light-touch, peer-review system led by heads and teachers, the shadow education secretary has said.” *The Guardian*, 30th March 2015

“Department for Education figures showed 3 million days were missed for holidays in 2013-14, down from 4.4million in 2012-13...Government statisticians said the drop has been fuelled by a fall in the number of authorised breaks – trips approved by the school.” *Daily Mail*, 27th March 2015

“Leading state schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are falling further behind independent schools....Professor Alan Smithers, director of Buckingham University’s education and employment research centre, said recent reforms to make GCSEs tougher, including a ban on re-sits and extra emphasis on grammar, punctuation and spelling may have given fee-paying schools an advantage.” *Sunday Times*, 5th April 2015

“We must find a way to level the playing field and work together as a sector to address the widening gap between our requirements as employers and the skills UK graduates emerge with.”

UK-based Israeli choreographer Hofesh Shechter speaking at the start of the UK Dance Conference in London

London Evening Standard, 9th April 2015