

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

Chancellor George Osborne assures us that, on the economic front, Britain can look forward with some optimism to 2014. This is good news. However, if we look further ahead, things appear somewhat less rosy. We have recently been given a glimpse of the future. It came in the publication of the latest school test results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Commonly known as the PISA tests (Programme for International Assessment), they cover the attainment of 15 year-old schoolchildren in maths, science and reading across sixty-five ‘developed’ countries. Andreas Schleicher, who has responsibility for the tests, warns that, “Your education today, is your economy tomorrow.” Education Secretary, Michael Gove, has described Mr. Schleicher as the “most important man in English Education.”

Alarmingly, and for all the years of ‘improvement’ in exam results, the UK fails to make the top twenty nations, for any of the three subject areas tested – maths, science and reading. Worse, our pupils are up to three years behind pupils in parts of eastern Asia. In other words, long term, the likelihood of our remaining competitive in the global market place is very much in doubt. We are in trouble. The best we can hope for is that our economy will continue to be bailed out by well-educated immigrants.

Countries at the top of these latest education league tables are also some of the most successful economies – China/Hong Kong/Macau, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan.

Amongst European countries there are a few that have not totally lost touch with the ‘big boys’ from Asia, but we are not amongst them. Poland is a

particular success story. It has improved sufficiently, since the previous tests in 2009, to scrape into the top ten for both maths and for science. Estonia is another European success story, reaching 6th place in science and attaining 11th and 12th position, respectively, for maths and reading. Finland, Germany, Ireland, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands and Switzerland also make the top twenty for all three subjects. Australia, likewise, makes it into this group. However, the UK and, notably, the USA, fall into the ‘also ran’ category of mid-table mediocrity and stagnation. We are unable, even, to come near matching the emerging economy of Vietnam, a nation that can afford to spend only a tiny fraction of what we, or the Americans, spend on schooling.

Amongst all this gloom, however, some encouragement might be drawn from another OECD report; one that preceded the latest PISA results by a few weeks. It was the first ever OECD international “Survey of Adult Skills”. Whilst, unsurprisingly, it placed our 16 – 24 year-olds towards the bottom of the league, our 55 – 65 year-olds came near the top of the international table for its age group. This is the generation educated in the 1950s and 1960s, where traditional and rigorous whole-class teaching was the norm, whether at grammar school, technical school or secondary modern school. In those days, for example, children were given textbooks to assist their learning. Shockingly, a recent study showed that these days only 10% of our 10 year-olds are issued with textbooks, as against 99% in high-flying South Korea. At secondary level, only 8% of our pupils are provided with science textbooks. In Taiwan it is 88%!

For the UK, at least, the time has come to fight back. In 1914 the country had to be put on a war footing to fight the Kaiser. It is ironic that 100 years later we need to prepare for war once again. This time, however, the opponent is closer to home. It is our educational establishment – those well-intentioned idealists who have ensured our relative educational decline.

2014 is not too late but delay is not an option. Education Secretary, Michael Gove is, already, a bloodied and battered figure. Nevertheless, there are major battles yet to be fought and some, such as over curriculum reform, examination reform and teacher training, are a long way from being won. This was vividly illustrated last summer by what the editor of “Labour Teachers” wrote about the new National Curriculum for History, a subject especially close to Gove’s heart. He compared the Education Secretary to a defeated First World War general and stated, “...make no mistake, the new History National Curriculum... is as near identical to the one most English schools have been operating off for a decade, and entirely unlike the Department of Education’s initial offering...It would seem history teachers have won and Gove has lost. Some might say he has more than lost: he has been humiliated, just punishment for wasting our time.” Gove’s promise to his party conference in 2010 that he would stop the “trashing of our

past” in school history lessons now rings hollow. He has suffered a significant reversal, for all he would have his political party believe otherwise. As a consequence, the Coalition Government will mark the 100th anniversary of the Great War in 2014 by removing any requirement in the new History National Curriculum to teach either about the First World War or about the Second World War. An opinion poll that Ipsos Mori has just carried out for the Campaign for Real Education (December 2013) indicates that over 80% of people in Britain disagree with the Government on this matter and that only 7% are in agreement. Details can be found on our website. Quite a victory for the educational establishment over the rest of us, but not the first and not the last! You may register a protest in favour of teaching children about those who ‘fell’ in both world wars, by signing a petition at: <http://tinyurl.com/ungove>

Where do we go from here? Is there a way back to the top end of the international league table for our schools? The same question might have been asked after our poor performance at the 1996 summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. We gained just one gold medal and only fifteen medals in total, finishing in 36th position, overall. However, at the recent London Olympics, we won 29 gold medals and 65 medals in total, finishing third in the medals’ table. The lesson to be learnt is that it is never too late. So, in 2014, let’s declare war on low standards in our classrooms and let’s make sure that our children, like our Olympians and, indeed, our Paralympians, are fit to compete with the best in the world.

Chris McGovern (Chairman)

Private tutoring

It is hard to assess the importance of, or need for, tutoring. I am frequently told that it is not needed at all; the motion for a debate I participated in at a London private school earlier this year is typical: "This house believes that tutoring preys on parents' neuroses." Most of the parents I've met are not neurotic, though. They are concerned, reasonably so in most cases, that their children will not perform at their best in an increasingly competitive examination environment; or that their child has not understood a subject properly in class. The growth of tutoring, especially in the last decade, is proof enough of the value parents see in it. It is heartening that this growth has been seen not just at the elite end of the market. Families of all backgrounds have responded to an ever-wider range of tutoring providers: a company like *Explore Learning* is a stand-out example of a plethora of lower-cost tutoring companies that have taken tutoring to a markedly broader demographic. Charities such as *The Access Project*, *Into University*, *Access Tutoring* and many more have helped provide tutoring to families that could not, otherwise, afford it. The prevalence of

tutoring – the fact that this 'shadow education' is no longer in the shadows – has meant that more families than ever before are seeing its benefits.

The future of tutoring will be characterised by plurality and professionalism. The market will continue to diversify, with new entrants and new models competing to satisfy the increased appetite. The flexibility of price and delivery will all be to the good of parents; what an exciting prospect to think that, before long, at not much cost, parents will be able to source a master Mathematician for half an hour an evening, online and "in the comfort of one's own home." The increased appetite has already led to increased scrutiny. Tutoring companies have had to hold themselves to higher professional standards in the face of competition; *Keystone's* own development in a matter of a few years from a band of self-employed tutors working for extra cash to an ever more committed body of professional full-time tutors shows this "professionalisation" in action. A new trade body, *The Tutors' Association*, has been set up to promote higher standards across the industry.

When done properly, private tutoring stands in the best tradition of teaching that this country has done so much to promote: it is liberal, purposeful and didactic. Its dissemination across the sector is a rare good news story in these educationally stricken times.

Will Orr-Ewing (Keystone Tutors)

Why being a 'qualified teacher' does not mean being qualified to teach

A debate has been raging over whether, as in independent schools, free schools and academies should continue to be allowed to employ 'unqualified teachers'. 'Unqualified' has come to mean lacking a teaching qualification rather than lacking a subject qualification. Indeed, many so-called 'qualified teachers' are teaching subjects for which they do not have a degree. According to fairly recent government data, this includes over a quarter of secondary school maths teachers and almost as many for secondary school English. The percentage of teachers teaching secondary school physics without a degree in the subject is approaching a third. Primary school teachers have, until recently, needed only a Grade C in GCSE maths to teach the subject. This has now been raised to a Grade B which, given grade inflation, amounts to little in terms of a maths teaching 'qualification'. Rather than addressing the key issue of subject knowledge and how to pass it on to pupils in an ordered classroom, teacher training focuses on 'politically correct' ideologies too centred on 'personalised learning' and equality of outcome. On a recent BBC Radio 5 Live 'phone-in' programme a trainee maths teacher claimed that his year-long course allocated only two-and-a-half hours to providing instruction on how to actually teach

maths. Teacher training is right at the heart of the under-performance of our schools in comparison with our economic competitors. A recently trained teacher has agreed to write an account (below) of what it is really like to go through ‘teacher training’.

Confessions of a trainee teacher

“I embarked on my PGCE course in Primary Education full of hope, eager to step into a classroom to teach. I had chosen my institution carefully and I was delighted to be accepted onto a course at one of London's most prestigious institutions.

Once the course was underway I was surprised by how little emphasis was placed on actual subject content: short of a few exercises in science, arithmetic and basic English, there was little else to ensure that prospective teachers could actually transmit a body of knowledge. The main emphasis of the course was to assimilate the tenets of progressive theory that have been the intellectual backbone of the teaching profession since the 1960s. Whilst this is an important aspect of becoming a teacher – heaven forbid that teachers should be ignorant of pedagogic theory – it seemed more important to master a new pseudo-scientific lexicon than to get to grips with what I must actually teach to children. It is commendable that teacher training has undergone changes to increase professionalism and accountability. Unfortunately, this seems to be at the expense of a multiplicity of voices within the profession: those who do not agree with the prevailing discourse find themselves marginalised, often seeking employment in the independent sector or abandoning teaching altogether.

Having benefited from the pedagogic approaches of independent education, I was interested to see how such approaches could be used in the state sector to improve pupil progress. Sadly, my own traditional, academic background was seen as both 'elitist' and 'reactionary' – the assumption being that traditional methods were far too boring for children and that we should 'enlighten' ourselves with the newer approaches to teaching. I was meant to be a facilitator for children, providing them with a rich learning environment in which they could, as if by osmosis, absorb the contents of the syllabus. I must move away from the out-dated notion of a teacher standing at the front of a class to tell children things. Instead, I should ask them for the answers. I am not criticising the Socratic method of teaching. I am, however, questioning the validity of allowing a class of 9-year-olds, with far less knowledge than me, to set the agenda of the class.

On a positive note, I learned a few techniques for classroom management – but this was during my teaching placement, observing a very experienced teacher. Indeed, the most rewarding parts of my teacher training were the periods of on-the-job training during my school placements. However, my time at my placement school was an eye-opening and dispiriting one. I was shocked by several observations in the classroom.

Trainee teachers are told that they should divide classes into groups rather than use whole class teaching. This can result in classroom chaos as children sit in clusters facing each other rather than facing the teacher. My school mentor, having had years of experience, laid out her desks in rows for certain subjects such as English, but I was told that I had to have my desks arranged in groups so that I could demonstrate my group-teaching skills to my college tutor when being observed. There was a tacit understanding that, although more traditional approaches may be more effective, ideological dogma prevents such approaches from being used. This is clearly damaging for pupils.

I spent an inordinate amount of time preparing 'differentiated lessons' – essentially, different work for different groups of children of high, average and low ability for every single lesson. However, this tended to lead to fractured sessions in which attention became most focussed on the average to least able.

The idea that work should be challenging and intellectually demanding was alien. Tragically, the brightest students suffered most of all. They were not stretched and were, instead, meant to act as 'assistants', imparting their knowledge to weaker pupils and in turn 'benefiting' from the perspectives of others. What actually happened was that these bright and enthusiastic children did all the work, but not for their own intellectual development.

I was also shocked by how little emphasis there was on diagnostic marking and on writing relevant comments on children's work. The use of red ink, in particular, was frowned upon, even though it made it far easier for children to see and read comments and marks. In particular, we were dissuaded from pointing out errors in a child's work since it was seen as discouraging.

A culture of mediocrity was pervasive – and it started in the staffroom! In my experience of four primary schools before becoming a teacher myself, I was the only Oxbridge graduate, either as a trainee teacher or as a teacher. I was treated with disdain and suspicion. The hostility and inverse snobbery towards me was one of my most enduring memories of teacher training. If teachers are unable to applaud the accomplishments of their colleagues, what hope is there for their pupils? Why should top graduates be discouraged from teaching the younger age group?

Another abiding impression of my teacher training was that of being encouraged, even required, to be too permissive of pupils' transgressions. I was left asking myself why we wring our hands at the production of so many 'feral' teenagers who lack the basic skills to progress in life when schools are, so often, causing the problem rather than solving it.

I seemed 'off message' amongst fellow trainee teachers in holding with the traditional idea that rigour and discipline must be introduced at a young age, else the skills required to succeed, such as tenacity and concentration, are too difficult to attain later on.

Too often, teacher trainers appeared to see trainees, like myself, as conduits for an ideology that mistakenly supposes the classroom is a vehicle for remedying all the ills of society.”

(The author of this piece, now a highly successful full-time teacher, wishes to remain anonymous)

Grammar schools and the class war

Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector for Schools, is proving to be more effective than most of his predecessors in the post. However, his recent denunciation of grammar schools, on the grounds that they are “stuffed with middle-class kids”, harks back to the class warfare language of ‘yesteryear’. There is a reason why grammar schools are so popular, and not just amongst the middle classes. By now, Sir Michael should have worked this one out. An ICM poll in 2010 showed huge support (76%), amongst all classes, for an expansion of grammar schools. Only 17% opposed the idea. Support was particularly strong amongst 18-24 year-olds. We need to expand grammar schools in accordance with the wishes of local communities. It was remarkable, indeed, to witness, recently, a Conservative education secretary turning down the plans by Kent County Council for a grammar school annex to be set up in Sevenoaks. We need lots and lots more grammar schools, especially in deprived areas of the country, in order to meet the needs of academically able children of all classes. Equally important, perhaps more so, we need a grammar school examination at 16+; easily achieved by lifting the current ‘ban’ on GCE O-Level. We, also, need great and properly resourced ‘vocational’ schools for youngsters whose talents are more ‘practical’ than academic. Lessons can be learnt, here, from the diversity of approach to schooling on offer in Germany, South Korea and elsewhere. Comprehensive schools should survive where there is a demand for them. Probably, they would best meet the needs of their pupil intake by reviving a bi-lateral system that recognised both academic and vocational pathways. Certainly, they could learn some lessons from the much-praised educational

system of Singapore where different educational pathways are provided within individual schools.

One thing is for sure, more grammar schools would reduce the demand for independent schools. Thus, grammar schools and new vocational schools would reduce, rather than enhance, class divisions within our education system and within our society. Wake up Mr Wilshaw!

No comment

“In the UK, only about one in five adults believed that students showed their teachers respect in school. And while teachers in China were compared with doctors, in the UK they were more likely to be bracketed with nurses and social workers.”

BBC report, 14th Oct 2013, on international study published by Varkey GEMS Foundation.

“This report [OECD Pisa] exposes the failings of this government's schools policy – a policy that has sent unqualified teachers into the classroom and prevented effective collaboration between schools.”

Tristram Hunt, Shadow Education Secretary, quoted in The Guardian, 3rd Dec 2013.

“It is fundamentally a teacher’s subject knowledge and their “passion” that researchers identify as the key characteristics of excellent teachers...If you think when you stand up in front of a classroom full of children put in front of you to learn maths, geography, or music that your job is to give them a better life, be in no doubt: the children don’t. They just want you to teach them maths, geography or music. They’ll find that better life for themselves if you do.”

Joe Nutt, educational consultant, researcher and author, quoted from Times Educational Supplement, 18th Dec 2013.

Jeremy Paxman has accused schools of a “scandalous” failure to teach pupils about the First World War. The Newsnight presenter said that he believed the war was the “event which made modern Britain” and should be given greater prominence.

Daily Telegraph, 21st Dec 2013.