

Campaign for Real Education

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

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Newsletter

No 89, Winter 2017

Editorial

According to Ofsted schools in England are getting better and better. 86% are now judged to be either “good” or “outstanding” and we can expect further progress in 2017. This educational success story is surpassed only by the spectacular improvement in public examination results in recent decades.

The triennial OECD PISA ranking of educational attainment published at the end of 2016 for 15 year-olds, however, told a different story. It revealed how our ‘success’ story translates into educational performance in an international context. Looked at from this global perspective, it turns out that, in reality, our “good” or “outstanding” means nothing of the sort.

If the OECD were to use Ofsted terminology, the UK would, at best, fall into the category of “requires improvement”. In science we may have risen to 15th position from 21st in 2012 but our attainment score in the subject actually fell by two points. More or less, in terms of our international ranking in the subject, we are back to where we were in 2009 when we came 16th. In other words, we have been treading water.

Our performance in literacy and mathematics causes rather more concern. Attainment in literacy is stagnating in a lowly 22nd place whilst in maths our 27th position takes us to a new low. We trail the likes of Estonia and Poland by some distance. Indeed, Estonia sits comfortably in the top 10 for all three of the subject areas tested.

Before retiring, Ofsted’s boss, Sir Michael Wilshaw, tried to put a gloss on his organisation’s performance by claiming that the rest of the UK has dragged down his ‘patch’, England. He is correct to point out that Scotland’s trendy new “Curriculum for Excellence” is leading to a free fall in standards and that Welsh education is in an even more parlous state. In terms of the UK’s position on the PISA tests, however, given the population differences, it has made little difference.

Wilshaw is correct, however, to see England’s new National Curriculum as of higher quality than the cross-curricular, theme-based and knowledge-lite versions masquerading as curriculum reform in Scotland, in Wales and, even, in Northern Ireland. Indeed, we can expect to see the

current gap in attainment between England and Scotland/Wales, widening. Northern Ireland, with its grammar schools, has, for years, out-performed the rest of the UK at GCSE and A-Level but could do no more than match England on the PISA tests for maths and it fell behind in literacy and science. With its new dumbed-down curriculum and with its grammar schools under sustained pressure within the province, its educational prospects, too, are heading south.

The OECD's education director, Andreas Schleicher, describes the UK's PISA results as "flat in a changing world". Our economy may be the world's 5th largest but it is over-dependent on skilled immigrants and on an older generation of British workers, mostly educated before the 'educational rot' set in. A previous OECD report pointed out that Britain is the only country in the developed world in which grandparents outperform their grandchildren in terms of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy.

In contrast, Singapore, a state that has largely retained traditional whole-class teaching methods and knowledge-based learning, is shooting ahead. It has, even, kept the GCE O-Level exam that is 'made in England' and exported to our economic competitors but is, effectively, banned here on the basis that it is not an 'approved' qualification. 70 years ago most Singaporeans were illiterate. Singapore now tops the global league tables for educational attainment. Its pupils are up to three years ahead of those in the UK by the age of 15 and, for the foreseeable future, out of reach. Pupils in several other Asia-Pacific countries come close to matching Singapore.

The educational establishment is in denial of its failure and regularly 'rubbishes' the PISA tests and similar reality checks. Many of today's school children in Britain will pay a very high price for this blindness and for the educational delinquency of some of these so-called experts.

Chris McGovern

Witchcraft for A-Level - trick or treat?

The latest edition of Cambridge University's "Research Matters" has revealed the most popular option in the new toughened-up A-Level History syllabus:

*"Research by Cambridge Assessment today reveals that one in three UK schools is going beyond 'Hitler and the Henrys' and is teaching at least one new topic offered in the new OCR A Level History – with **Popular Culture and the Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries** at the top of the list."*

Great news, then, for Harry Potter fans and time for them, perhaps, to light some celebratory pumpkins in the classroom! Expect, too, a revival of interest in Hammer Horror's "Witchfinder General", starring that master of horror, Vincent Price. Its fictional depiction of a real 17th century witch finder, Matthew Hopkins, has acquired cult status for its presentation of violence, torture and general sadism. Hopkins is specified for study on the OCR version of the witch craze syllabus.

Given the enormous popularity of Jack the Ripper as a teaching topic for 11-14 year olds under the new 'free-for-all' History National Curriculum, the growing popularity of witchcraft at A-Level might be seen as a logical development. Teaching about witches in history lessons, however, is not new. It has been creeping into school history teaching for a while and was even

available within an earlier A-Level syllabus. What is new, is its current ascendancy and the likely reasons for it.

The witchcraft topic does, after all, fit well with current notions of what constitutes ‘best practice’ and what is most likely to impress Ofsted inspectors. The exam board makes this clear in its latest report:

“It’s perhaps not surprising that this topic is so popular – it’s exciting, real bums-on-seats stuff, with some fascinating and at times gruesome stories... It allows students to explore so many different approaches: gender, cultural, political and intellectual...including considering the interaction between elites and ordinary people.”

The report notes that Professor Alison Rowlands from Essex University, an expert on the history of witchcraft and witch-persecution, is “thrilled, but not surprised” that the witch craze is so popular at A-Level. She adds that it “enables students to look at the wider historical themes of gender, legal change, and religious tension... More broadly I would hope it also encourages students to think more critically about issues which still have relevance today, such as why and with what consequences some people are scapegoated by others, and what constitutes a ‘fair’ trial.”

Study of the 16th and 17th century witch craze may tick the boxes of today’s PC agenda in education as the exam board and Professor Rowlands suggest, but it does so by sacrificing the integrity of history as an A-Level subject. The witch craze topic has historical importance but an understanding of it requires a great deal of underlying knowledge, especially of the political and religious background of the period that the new A-Level syllabus does not require.

As an academic subject, history should not be a vehicle for promoting notions of political correctness or of any other agendas. A model question in a textbook to go with the new witch craze course is indicative of the direction of travel:

‘Witchcraft, a crime supposedly committed by women, was essentially a crime against women.’ How far do you agree with this view in the period from 1560 to 1660? (“The Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries” – Alan Farmer. Access to history - Hodder Education pub 2016)

This latest ‘trick’ from the Blob should certainly spook the former education secretary, Michael Gove. Back in 2010 he told the Conservative Party conference that the “current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story. This trashing of our past has to stop”.

It is doubtful that he envisaged a surge of interest in teaching about witchcraft or, indeed, of Jack the Ripper, as the way forward.

A good news story

Imagine a comprehensive school full of enthusiastic, well-mannered and considerate children from a range of ethnic, linguistic and social backgrounds. Imagine a school that is hugely successful in realising the academic potential of its pupils even though over half come from families that are deprived enough to qualify for “pupil premium” funding. Imagine a school in

which traditional ‘whole-class’ teaching is the norm and where it is common for pupils to thank their teachers at the end of a lesson. Imagine such as school in the UK, today, now. Am I dreaming? No.

This is a real comprehensive – the Michaela Community Free School - in Brent. Amidst the low expectations, underachievement, poor behaviour and lorry-load of excuses that characterise too many state schools, a beacon is shining in north London.

Its founder and head, Katharine Birbalsingh, lit up the Conservative Party Conference back in 2010 when, as deputy head teacher in a comprehensive, she told a few home truths about the awful state of many inner-city schools. She is not, to the best of my knowledge, a card-carrying Tory but she had the courage to speak out in support of Michael Gove’s crusade against the embedded defects in our education system.

Needless to say, she did not survive long in her deputy head role. She compounded her crimes against the ‘Blob’ by publishing a book - “To Miss with Love” - in which she lifted the lid still further on what is really going on behind the school gates and, indeed, beyond them. Made of stern stuff, Katharine was not to be squashed by an outraged educational establishment. She set up a free school, the Michaela, to put her principles into practice.

A group of teachers at the school have recently published a book that sets out their philosophy of education – “The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers”. It includes input from pupils as well as from parents and visitors to the school. The message is simple – ‘tough love’ works both for behaviour and for learning. The school expects the best, the very best, from its pupils in all areas of school life. This philosophy is not open to negotiation and the teachers are in charge.

Such a philosophy is ubiquitous in the educational super-star states of the Asia-Pacific and, before the rot set in, was the norm here in the UK, too. One reason for success of the Michaela school might be its willingness to employ teachers who are very well-qualified in their subject but who have not been brain-washed by formal ‘teacher training’. Fortunately, those who have been through this ‘training’ seem to have been de-toxified of its worse excesses.

It would be utterly naïve, of course, to believe that a ‘Brent Spring’ has broken out amongst the schools of north London or, for that matter, anywhere else in the UK. Indeed, the stunning success of the Michaela Community Free School is not going down at all well with the educational establishment. Its vile and ugly intolerance is becoming increasingly evident. Katharine Birbalsingh told “The Guardian” that the “emails are the worst”:

*“They wish us cancer and things like that, because they don’t like what we are doing,” ...
“People ask me, what’s your biggest challenge running the school? It’s the detractors on the outside. On the inside there are daily challenges. But the detractors on the outside are very time-consuming, emotionally draining. And they are obsessive.”*

In the CRE’s battle to improve our schools it is helpful for us to understand what we are up against.

Teachers' leaders are urging parents to ignore this year's school league tables for 11 year-olds. They claim that the SATs tests in English and Maths for 11 year-olds, on which the tables are based, were too hard. "This data is not worth the paper it is written on," according to Russell Hobby, the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers. "The pass mark for the test [65%] was set at a ridiculously high level."

It is true that a few of the questions on English grammar were over-complicated but, in terms of the overall performance of children, these few questions did not determine a 'pass' or a 'failure'.

The SATs tests have always been an imperfect measure of performance, largely because they have been easy and far too leniently marked. The adjustment, therefore, in terms of making the tests more challenging and raising the 'pass' mark from 60% to 65%, should be welcomed. It was part of Michael Gove's attempt to lift aspirations and to raise standards.

Russell Hobby's complaint about the SATs, however, reminds us that the profession has a rather different view of what we should be expecting from our children

"Pupils were doing [in the SATs tests] what they should have been doing in the early years of secondary school. Some of the grammatical stuff was the same level as GCSE English."

Unwittingly, he is giving the game away. Expectations in the early years of secondary school and, even, at GCSE, are so low that they are more suited to primary school pupils. It is for this reason that our secondary school children are, according to the OECD, up to 3 years behind the best performing education systems around the world.

By dismissing the latest set of SATs results teachers' leaders are looking after the interests of the teaching profession rather than the best interests of children. It is akin to ignoring the results of a medical check-up. There may have been a few flaws in that check-up but the overall results are in line with other evidence.

The snowflake generation and the glass delusion

Do young people, especially university students, need to toughen up a bit? Recent media reports from the battlefield of political correctness indicate that University College London is warning archaeology students that studying the past "may be disturbing, even traumatising". Any student who finds old bones a bit scary is invited to "step outside" of the class "without penalty".

A similar 'trigger warning' was attached to a lecture on the Roman poet, Ovid, given at Royal Holloway, University of London. The lecturer felt the need to alert students that some of Ovid's work described "domestic violence and other nasty things."

Meanwhile, law students at Oxford have been warned that they can leave lectures if they feel distressed by the content. This did, at least, produce one expression of opposition. Law professor, Laura Hoyano, told the *Daily Mail*: " We can't remove sexual offences from the criminal law syllabus – obviously. If you are going to study law, you have to deal with things that are difficult."

Trigger warnings are, also, becoming increasingly common in Scotland. Theology students at Glasgow University have been given advance warning that Bible study may include tackling the ‘potentially distressing’ nature of crucifixion. They will be given time to leave the room if Calvary and the cross is too much. Students of forensic science are receiving a “verbal warning... at the beginning of some lectures where sensitive images, involving blood patterns, crime scenes and bodies are in the presentation”.

The desire of universities to wrap students in cotton wool has been criticised by Joanna Williams in, *Why Academic Freedom matters* (Civitas 2016). She argues that we need to move away from “the idea that children and young people are fragile ... We need to stop treating children like they are made of glass and in need of constant supervision.”

She is right, of course, and, what is more, this new narcissism comes with royal approval for, surely, what we are witnessing is a renaissance of the ‘glass delusion’ made famous by King Charles VI of France (1380-1422) – “the mad”.

At times the monarch was so convinced that he was made of glass that he used to wrap himself in blankets to prevent his bottom from shattering. He had iron rods sewn into his clothing to prevent his body from breaking. When asked as to why he was frequently motionless he replied that even one wrong move could shatter him. In truth, he was not much of an opponent for England’s Henry V of Agincourt fame.

The psychiatric condition of ‘glass delusion’ was well recognised across Europe during the era historians call the late medieval/early modern period. By the time Cervantes wrote about it in his short story, *The Glass Graduate* (1613), it had, rather like today, become something of a cultural phenomenon. Richard Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) notes many cases.

In a BBC radio programme on the condition (“The Glass Delusion”) psychoanalyst Adam Philips argued that “the glass delusion has powerful contemporary resonance in a society in which anxieties about fragility, transparency and personal space are pertinent to many people's experience of, and anxieties about, living in the modern world. The feeling of being made of glass could be a useful way of understanding how we negotiate society, a society that is increasingly crowded, in which modern technological advances isolate us and offer apparently boundary-less communication.”

Universities will, doubtless, draw comfort and confidence from such insights. They will be encouraged to redouble their efforts to provide ‘trigger warnings’ that treat students as infants and place real constraints on subject knowledge and on academic freedom. Germaine Greer and Peter Tatchell have already been subjected to bans after being labelled ‘transphobic’.

The USA has gone even further down the ‘trigger warning’ pathway than the UK but Chicago University has stood out against this tide of liberal fascism. The university’s Dean of Students has written to students to inform them that, *“Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called 'trigger warnings,' we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”* He

added that the exchange of ideas "*may challenge you and even cause discomfort*", but that this is preferable to censorship.

Three cheers!

Teacher Recruitment

An investigation by *The Times* has confirmed that schools are finding it increasingly difficult to retain and to recruit head teachers. 11% of heads left their posts in 2014-15. Whilst many simply moved school or retired, a growing number are resigning. The shortfall is becoming significant.

According to the union of which I was formerly a member, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), we face a current deficit of around 2000 to 3000 schools leaders – around 5% of what our school system requires. In addition, there is the inevitable but unreported consequence that too many ‘second-rate’ applicants have been, and are being, appointed to ‘plug’ the vacancy gaps.

School governors see having someone in place as better than the alternative. This may be understandable but it delivers a potentially fatal blow to the quality of education on offer in many schools. It, also, undermines any real prospect of our education system ever matching the best around the world. The quality of school leadership really does matter that much.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, the outgoing chief inspector, was right to suggest as much when he addressed a Sutton Trust conference in 2016:

"We need head teachers in our secondary schools that are going to be really transformative leaders, and we have not got enough of them. We need battlers, we need bruisers, we need battle-axes who are going to fight the good fight and are absolutely determined to get high standards. We have got too many appeasers in our secondary schools who are prepared to put up with mediocrity."

Governments over the years have been reluctant to face up to the issue of teacher quality, let alone the quality of head teachers. It is, however, the key to everything, as the best education systems around the world make clear.

Where do we go from here? First of all, we must attract more of the brightest and the best graduates into teaching. We need to create a pool of talent from which to recruit future leaders.

Secondly, we need to redress the gender imbalance within the profession. Three out four teachers are female and in primary schools it is close to nine out of ten. Male role models are important for children and, since men are twice as likely as women to seek headships, we need more men in schools if we are ever to find sufficient teachers with the desire and ability to become outstanding school leaders.

Thirdly, we need to make teaching a more attractive career choice by eradicating the infestation of political correctness and attendant bureaucracy that plagues our classrooms. Schools should not be knowledge-lite agencies for indoctrinating children in fashionable, and often highly

politicised, social ideologies. They should, principally, be about learning, alongside the development of potential in sport and the arts. Increasingly, these days, however, the profession has become more focused on social work than on teaching. This is a huge ‘turn-off’ for many prospective recruits, especially male recruits, it seems.

Fourthly, we need to restore the whole-class teaching methods that underpin the success of schools in the Asia-Pacific and that we ditched long ago. They are not only more successful than ‘child-centred’ methods in allowing pupils to learn, they are, also, much less stressful for teachers. An added bonus is that they allow classes to be a bit larger. Having slightly larger classes would reduce our teacher shortage and allow teachers and head teachers to be paid more. Because it necessitates a teaching method that works it would, also, raise standards. A win, win, situation!

If we wish to attract the most talented into teaching in general, and into headship, in particular, we need to make the job more attractive. In particular, it needs to be attractive to more men since they constitute half of the potential recruits and, at least, half the talent. The ‘solution’ is not so hard to work out and it is to be hoped that, one day, a UK government may find it.

No comment

“...a seven-foot-long boa constrictor and a number of tarantulas are kept in the principal’s office...” Recent Ofsted report on a school in Luton.

“...the internet was not designed with children in mind...”

Anne Longfield, Children’s Commissioner for England, 5th Jan 2017.

“Less immigration might mean actually lower standards because immigrant families want their children to do very well.”

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector, speaking on BBC Radio 5 Live Dec 22nd 2016

“If [apprenticeships are] going to be taken seriously, they can’t just be seen as the option for kids who aren’t that academically bright, who were never going to go to university anyway.” Euan Blair (son of former Prime Minister). TES magazine Jan 6th 2017.

“We are therefore writing to inform you that the transcript of your evidence as provided in the Peter Clarke investigation will be disclosed to the Respondent teachers and their representatives on 3 January as per the Panel’s direction.”

Letter from the NAHT of 22nd Dec 2016 warning teachers who gave evidence in Trojan Horse investigation that their names would not be kept confidential as originally promised.