

# Could do better?

## Education policies in an election year


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## Welcome to Questa, the thoughtful education magazine

It's a platitude to say that these are educationally complex times. As an election approaches, the issues facing us and our children come into ever sharper relief. The aim of *Questa* is to bring these issues into the public domain in a thoughtful and constructive way. Our approach to these complexities is unashamedly evaluative. Not for us the popular disclaimer 'But that's just a value judgement.' Values lie at the heart of education and we believe that the debate about values needs to be conducted vigorously and well.

*Questa* contains 13 newly commissioned essays by philosophers, journalists and practitioners. Some of the essays – Mary Warnock's and Stephanie Northen's, for example – are controversial. Some – see Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift on the Tories' voucher scheme – contain detailed analyses of current policy proposals. John White writes about Michael Gove's determination to return to a subject-based curriculum, and others (Warwick Mansell, Andrew Davis) explore and criticise the conceptual grounding of our examination regime. Headteacher Huw Thomas calls for strong leadership in education, while Anthony Seldon of Wellington College seeks to remove the 'dead hand' of the state.

**'We have an enfeebled  
concept of value that appears  
on TV chat shows when  
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marks out of 10.'**

Some of our writers are hopeful and even visionary; see Mary Warnock's proposals for a response to austerity, and Fiona Millar's call for good local schools as the basis of our education system. Peter Wilby, by contrast, sees 'a system based on promises of advancement in a competitive society', prompting an outpouring of initiatives that are likely to fail. There is a place for both hope and concern in this debate.

*Questa* is published by Wiley-Blackwell on behalf of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. Philosophers of education are of course interested in the ideas underpinning educational practice and policy. For over a decade we have published monographs in the *Impact* series dealing with issues like school choice, special needs, the curriculum, the aims of education.

With *Questa*, we have taken a new step. We have focused on a significant event at a significant time: the general election of 2010. Not only does this election come after 13 years of New Labour, when the opposition is primed for power and the electorate could be ready for this. It also coincides with a recession following the most serious financial downturn for 70 years. As some of our contributors remind us, there will be profound change whether we like it or not.

As a response to this situation, we have created what Richard Smith in this issue describes as a 'market' (drawing on his namesake Adam Smith's original concept): 'The market is the extensive middle ground where arguments can take place, reasons be offered, traditions defended, new visions explored.'

Such a market is a kind of forum: one that we urgently need (as Richard Smith argues) as a foil to these crudely marketeering times. *Questa* is a meeting place for people who care about the future of education and would like to spend time thinking and talking about it. We hope you, the reader, will join us there.

What, fundamentally, are schools for? In one way or another, this is the recurrent theme of this issue. Richard Pring, Lead Director of the Nuffield Review 14-19 Education and Training for England and Wales, writes about the review's project of articulating what it means

to be an educated young person today. The review explored a concept that was developed by Richard Peters (founder of philosophy of education in this country) in the 1960s: the concept of worthwhile learning. 'Talk about education,' Peters wrote, 'is inseparable from talk of what is worthwhile.'

This thoroughly ethical conception of education stands in rich contrast to the de-moralised, cynical and wholly instrumental conception that has emerged in recent years. The recession can't take all the blame. We live in a time when the concepts 'good' and 'bad' have been all but drained of ethical meaning. Instead of reflecting on what is and is not worthwhile, we have an enfeebled concept of value that appears on TV chat shows when so-called judges give contestants marks out of 10. It appears in happiness questionnaires when these are used as infallible sources of knowledge about the human condition. It appears in the voter choice that, whimsical or wise, has politicians running in ever-decreasing circles. It appears, of course, in educational assessment.

Such determinants of value are treated as authoritative and unassailable. When we are unable to trust values like courage or kindness, we are encouraged to trust values like these. Except that they are, in truth, what might be called 'rinsed'; they purchase comfort and the illusion of certainty at the expense of engagement and enquiry. We hope that *Questa's* market place of thinking, arguing and above all questioning will restore some grit to the educational debate.

Ruth Cigman, editor

**'We hope that *Questa's* market place of thinking, arguing and above all questioning will restore some grit to the educational debate.'**

## School choice for those who have no choice

**Harry Brighouse** and **Adam Swift** have some advice for the Conservatives if they really want a Swedish-style voucher system to help at least some of the most deprived children

No enormous difference is to be found between the education policy approaches and central goals of the Labour and Conservative leaderships. Both seek to improve outcomes for the lowest third of achievers, and both conceive of those outcomes primarily in terms of basic skills which, they assume, will be valuable in the marketplace. Both are aware that these low-achieving children come from backgrounds that present considerable barriers to their learning. Both take a technocratic, incrementalist, approach, and assume that tweaking the incentive structure will improve the schools attended by such children.

Both are committed to a model whereby schools make day-to-day decisions within a national framework of quite specific national standards, and schools face a moderately competitive market as a result of

parental choice. While neither claims to have a magic bullet to deal with the problems, both, we suspect, oversell their policies, fostering unreasonably high expectations.

The Conservatives' headline innovation is the voucher system. Modelled on one adopted in Sweden, private providers will be allowed to enter a controlled market and access public funds in the form of a voucher, thus competing with schools currently run by local authorities. Both Tory advocates and Labour opponents overemphasise the extent to which this would be a departure from current practice. We see it rather as continuous with the choice reforms that began in the early 1980s, and as a logical extension of specialist schools and academies, and gradual diminution in the influence of local authorities, developed by Labour. Nonetheless, it would be a significant further deregulation on the supply side.

Two standard rationales are offered for school choice policies. Some appeal to claims about parents' rights over their children's education. We have little sympathy with this rationale, and doubt the sincer-

**‘It may be possible for schools in a voucher scheme to exert competitive pressure that improves other schools.’**

**Harry Brighouse, Professor of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Adam Swift, Fellow in Politics and Sociology, Balliol College, Oxford**

## **‘In California, charter schools have been free to cater only to the upper middle classes, thus effectively providing exclusive private schooling funded by the taxpayer.’**

ity of those who advance it within a framework that is constrained by prescriptive national standards. We believe that parents have very limited rights to control the content of their children’s education, or to seek to advantage them relative to others, and the status quo already provides them with greater scope to do both than they are entitled to.

A second and far more plausible rationale is that choice can play a powerful role in spurring school improvement. A naïve version of this idea claims that parents generally have more information than school administrators about what their children need, and are more motivated to satisfy those needs, so markets will result in better outcomes all round. In fact, markets in schooling are necessarily highly imperfect, and information about what is going on in schools is hard to access.

But the more plausible version of the idea is that parents can generally identify, and are highly motivated to exit, very bad educational situations; whereas administrators, even when they can identify bad situations, are neither highly motivated nor very knowledgeable about how to improve them. Something like this theory is what animated the designers of the Swedish voucher programme, and similar programmes in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington DC in the USA.

Nobody should expect school reforms to have huge effects on student achievement. Children spend most of their waking hours outside school, and the educational experiences and opportunities they enjoy in their families and communities vary greatly, in ways that

track their social-class background reasonably closely. School policy is just one policy lever. But there is some reason to believe that the right kinds of reforms could raise achievement, especially that of working-class and poor children, who are much more likely than middle-class children to be attending low-performing schools.

Whether vouchers can improve outcomes for poor and working-class children depends on the design of the system. We take certain aspects of the Conservative proposals to be fixed. So, we assume that entry to the market will, in the foreseeable future, be restricted to non-profit providers, and that the scheme will operate at the margins of the system. (The Swedish scheme, after 17 years, still enrolls only 10 per cent of children, and we suspect that barriers to entry will be higher in the UK than they were in Sweden.)

Opponents of the proposal will argue that the new schools will select the easiest-to-teach children. In the US some charter schools engage in ‘cream skimming’. In California, in particular, charter schools have been free to cater only to the upper middle classes, thus effectively providing exclusive private schooling funded by the taxpayer. Such an arrangement does nothing to improve the quality of schooling, and a good deal to increase the level of inequality.

But by far the bigger problem with both charter schools and voucher schemes is what, purged of its moralised connotations, might be called ‘dregs sifting’. Even a charter school that only educates disadvantaged children does not educate all such children because the most disadvantaged, those whose parents lack the social connectedness and wherewithal to apply to such schools, do not attend.

This is almost certainly part (but only part) of what explains the success of the largest chain of charter schools in the USA – those belonging to the Knowledge Is Power Program – and the remarkable gains in schools in Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, both of which have influenced President Obama’s approach to school policy. If ‘dregs sifting’ happens, there’s some reason to expect the state schools to suffer, and the new schools to coast. They will show apparent improvement

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but some of this will be artifactual, a function of the kind of children they are, and are not, taking in.

There are ways to guard against this. We think it is politically unrealistic to demand that voucher schools be more socio-economically mixed than regular state schools; it may also be undesirable if these schools are located where educational needs are greatest. But the scheme should ensure that voucher schools are given substantial incentives to find and take a good number of hardest-to-teach children.

If the scheme operates at the margins of the system, the Conservatives also have to face the fact that it will not cater for the majority of disadvantaged children. Still, this does not mean that the policy is bad or doomed. Any policy that resulted in, say, 20 per cent of disadvantaged children attending better schools without damaging the schools that others attend, would constitute an improvement over the status quo. But, and this seems to us the core justification of the policy, it may be possible for schools in a voucher scheme to exert competitive pressure that improves other schools.

A well-known study of the Milwaukee voucher system is instructive here. Because the voucher schools are no longer required to supply data about their own performance we do not know a great deal about the quality of the education they provide, But, in an econometric study comparing Milwaukee schools with other districts in the same state over time, Caroline Minter Hoxby makes a strong case that the voucher system has

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improved the performance of the regular state schools.

However, she does not distinguish two different mechanisms by which this might have occurred. One possibility is that each of the schools (state and voucher) competed within a quasi-market, and this drove up performance. If this is what happened then the natural policy lesson is that we should introduce more competition and let the chips fall where they may. The other possibility is that the state-school system as a whole was pressured by the voucher system, and the threat of its expansion, to start getting its act together.

Our reading of the politics of education in Milwaukee supports the second mechanism, in which case the lessons are rather different. In particular, it is important that voucher schools are resourced for success, and that the lessons (positive and negative) are learned and applied across the system. The regular state schools will need help to develop the capacity to learn the relevant lessons and make the necessary changes. Smoothing the process by which state schools can learn from the new schools depends on what will inevitably be a very long and difficult process of establishing trust. (Think about how much suspicion there is of academies, even within feeder schools, despite the fact that they are an integral part of the state system.)

Working on our reading of the Milwaukee case, here are some suggestions for designing the scheme so as to give it the best chance of producing the desired effects.


- As with the City Challenge urban regeneration scheme and Sure Start, it makes sense to pilot the scheme in specific areas where it can be supported and monitored effectively.
- The money values attaching to the vouchers must be progressive enough to ensure schools really are willing to take, and able to teach, the most disadvantaged and hardest-to-teach children.
- Admissions to oversubscribed schools must be determined by lottery.
- Much is known about what kinds of spending improve the quality of instruction. Heads and governing bodies (if the schools have governing bodies) need a good deal of freedom to spend as they judge

best, but they need proper training and support to help them judge well.

- We recommend the establishment of a ‘New Schools Support Unit’, which offers high quality continuing training to senior and, perhaps more importantly, middle managers, on what constitutes best practice (especially around instruction and professional development).
- We recommend the establishment of a ‘New Schools Research Unit’ ideally not funded directly by the government (instead by research councils or charitable foundations), whose mandate is to stay close to the schools, establishing what works well and, crucially, what doesn’t work well. These units need to increase understanding on the ground of what changes might yield improvements.

Between us we have written a good deal that is hostile to school choice and sceptical about the likely success of voucher systems in the UK. Does our willingness to offer constructive advice on the design of a scheme that extends school choice represent some sort of volte face? We think not. We remain doubtful that this, or any school reform, will yield large improvements for the most disadvantaged children in the absence of more systematic measures designed to combat poverty. We continue to stress the limitations of an approach that seeks to improve educational standards at the bottom with little apparent concern for equality of opportunity per se, or recognition of the positional aspect of education.

Still, if the Conservatives do find the money to go ahead with their reforms, we want them to achieve their stated goals. We think that the leadership is sincerely committed to improving the achievement of disadvantaged children (consider their willingness to stand up to Tory grassroots opinion on grammar schools). But we’re not yet sure. Enough is known about how to design school-choice policies so that they are more likely to contribute to that goal for us to regard their willingness to do it properly as the real test of that sincerity.



**‘Nor do we know whether SEAL’s unrelenting attention to feelings is creating a nation of narcissists.’**

**Ruth Cigman, Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy of Education, Institute of Education, London**

## Let's not get too social and emotional about learning

Politicians are strangely silent on the subject of SEAL, the government programme to promote pupils' well-being. Is this because they share **Ruth Cigman's** fears that it could undermine rather than spread happiness?

There's a philosophical joke about two behaviourists who meet on the street. 'You're fine,' says one to the other. 'How am I?'

Philosophical humour, said Wittgenstein, has a character of depth. I like this joke because it reminds us of things we may need to be reminded of from time to time. First, there's the absurdity of the idea – which psychologists like BF Skinner promoted – that the mind is reducible to the body. All that messy consciousness-stuff that you take so seriously is nothing but folklore. If things were so simple, we might indeed approach people in the street to find out how we were.

Crazy as this idea is, it reminds us of something we're liable to forget. It reminds us that we aren't always the best judges of 'how we are' or what we are

thinking or feeling. We can sometimes learn about ourselves – important things – from people who know us, watch us, listen to what we say.

Education policy in England and Wales has taken a turn in the past few years that neglects these important insights. It is based on a story that goes like this. Children are more miserable today than they have been for years. Because they are miserable, they are disruptive at school, cannot motivate themselves to learn, and are prey to destructive (including self-destructive) behaviour. Their futures look bleak unless we take steps to improve their emotional well-being now. We need to teach them how to overcome negative feelings, how to keep calm, how to value themselves and others. Instead of the piecemeal approach to children's feelings that teachers have always had, we need to roll-out national programmes scientifically designed to enhance their emotional well-being.

Though not compulsory (yet), the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme is intended to address these concerns. But how do we know that SEAL's premise (that today's children are

more miserable than ever) is correct? This belief is based, at least in part, on the error that the behaviourist joke seeks to expose: the assumption that self-report is necessarily authoritative. Of course, children can lie; anyone can deliberately misrepresent her thoughts or feelings. But this methodological consideration aside, happiness questionnaires, as they are often known, are widely trusted.

I do not trust them and I don't think it's obvious that the ice cap of children's well-being is melting by the month or year. But it's certainly useful to treat people as sources of unassailable authority about a substance like 'well-being' that seems to be in short supply. If we do this, we can turn our 'impressions' into 'facts': over a certain period, well-being levels rose/fell by x per cent.

Of course it's tempting to scientise children in this way at a time when news about their depressions and addictions greets us daily with our muesli. And we mustn't forget the electoral potential. Instead of doing nothing (effective) about depression and anti-social behaviour, you are in a position to take scientifically validated action to eliminate this.

What interests me about the forthcoming election is that, despite the alleged validity of SEAL, and despite an avalanche of polls showing that people value happiness more than anything (including wealth), happiness and well-being are not on the agenda. We haven't seen David Cameron on Andrew Marr's couch saying earnestly, 'Children's happiness levels fell by 15 per cent under New Labour. We aim to drive them up by at least 18 per cent.' We aren't even learning what the major parties intend to do about SEAL.

This is curious and worrying. Carol Craig, Director of Glasgow's Centre for Confidence and Well-Being, has described SEAL as a 'large-scale psychological experiment on young people, which will not just waste time and resources but could actually back-fire and unwittingly undermine people's well-being in the longer-term.' We don't know, says Craig, whether our efforts to calm children down make them calmer or more agitated. Nor do we know whether SEAL's unrelenting attention to feelings is creating a nation of narciss-

**'We haven't seen David Cameron on Andrew Marr's couch saying earnestly, "Children's happiness levels fell by 15 per cent under New Labour. We aim to drive them up by at least 18 per cent.'"**

sists who will find it harder, rather than easier, to form strong relationships. The American self-esteem movement's attempt to influence the nation's psychology in a comparable programme is widely believed to have fallen flat on its face. If anything (say many), it undermined well-being and achievement.

Craig's concerns are shared with many experts, who see SEAL as a controversial programme the validity of which has not been demonstrated. Its intellectual basis is Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, which sees a person's EQ (emotional quotient) as a more effective predictor of life success than IQ. However much of Goleman's work has been discredited and superseded, as he himself accepts. Evidence for the effectiveness of SEAL is widely challenged, and even the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which supported SEAL, accepts that there are 'gaps in the evidence'.

The empirical picture, in short, is contested, which is no doubt part of the reason why politicians aren't falling over each other to get electoral mileage out of well-being enhancement. But the reasons are deeper than this, and I believe they are deeper in the way that our philosophical joke has depth. An interesting film on Teachers TV – a SEAL resource for teachers – may help us to understand this.

Entitled *Emotions in Motion*, the film features KS2 children. Taking the lead are some children playing an ambiguous role between chat-show host and teacher. In sing-song voices, they say things like: 'With the help of my assistants here, I'll be helping more of you understand and work with some of those tricky feeling situa-

tions that we all find ourselves in.’ Other children come to them with their problems and we are struck by the ways in which ‘teacher/host children’ and ‘pupil/guest children’ are vulnerable to, and articulate about, painful emotions. They share problems and suggest solutions. They acknowledge guilt, frustration, jealousy and anger, and praise each other for being brave and honest.

Zac confesses that he can’t deal with numbers. ‘When I look at a page,’ he says, ‘it’s as if there are just numbers everywhere, swimming up and down.’

The others help out.

‘Just try taking some deep breaths,’ says one.

‘Clear your head and forget about everything else,’ says another.

‘You know, Zac, you’re not stupid and you can do numeracy.’

This last remark struck me as odd. Zac can do numeracy: how do we know? There’s no time to think about this because Zac has gone and the next anxious child has arrived.

Let’s go back to the behaviourists, except that, in my version of the story, they aren’t behaviourists but friends.

‘Hi, how are you?’ says A.

‘I’m fine,’ says B.

‘Why don’t we stop for a coffee?’ says A.

What is happening in this story (you’ll have to take my word for this) is that B thinks she’s fine, but she isn’t. What she’s trying to do is persuade herself that she’s fine so that she can keep herself going. Her estimate of her ‘well-being level’ is flawed, and A, a sensitive friend, understands this and is able to respond helpfully. We needn’t intrude further into their conversation. The point is that, at the heart of this encounter, is a short and, I would say, crucial word.

It is the word ‘you’. Between friends, this word has a use and a meaning that it doesn’t have in the film *Emotions in Motion*. There, the word is corrupted in two ways. First, there is the media ‘you’, as in: I’ll be helping more of you understand and work with some of those tricky feeling situations... The child who says this is talking into a camera; like Myleene Klass, she has no

idea who, if anyone, she is talking to.

Second, and implicit in much SEAL thinking, there is the social science ‘they’. Be assured that the suggestions ‘take deep breaths’ and ‘clear your head’ are based on scientific evidence about ‘what works’ for children (for ‘them’) in classrooms. There are two problems with this. One is that the empirical evidence relating to such interventions is contested, as we’ve seen. The second is that, even if the evidence about ‘what works’ is sound, it is at best evidence of ‘what works’ for the majority, ie over 50 per cent, of children. What works for Shilpa may not work for Mira. We can’t therefore extrapolate from ‘what works’ to ‘what will work for you personally’.

From this we get a glimpse of why emotional education may be disastrous for some children. In most cases, it may be true that children who say ‘I can’t benefit from the rejoinder ‘you can’. If a child hesitates before a vault and says ‘I can’t jump over it’, it may be a wise teacher who says, ‘Of course you can’. But this cannot be a general rule. First, the child may have a phobia that needs to be taken seriously. Second, there may be a ‘special need’ of some sort; going back to the film, Zac might be dyslexic. The swimming numbers that he reports might swim even more vigorously when the anxiety of being misunderstood compounds his dyslexia.

This issue of the word ‘you’ – the personal ‘you’ that appears in sensitive conversations between friends, and between teachers and their pupils – is neglected at our peril. As a concrete example of what can go wrong when third person perspectives are misdirected to the second person, consider how irritated we are by receptionists in GP surgeries whose clawing manner and frozen smiles betray the training courses they have taken (how to treat *them*, the patients...). Now consider teachers who talk to parents this way at parents’ evenings (how to talk to *them*, parents). Finally, consider teachers talking to children like this (how to talk to *them*, the children...).

The last scenario is scary, and my concern is that this is where we are heading. The well-being agenda should be a greeting to children, personalised in the classroom. *How are you? We really want to know.*

## An apple for the inspector

It is impossible to rid assessment of inconsistency and personal preference, says **Andrew Davis**, so politicians really must put an end to using test results as a means of judging schools

For years teachers have begged government to reduce the burden of testing, and to stop using exam results to judge the quality of schools and teaching. While some tests have gone in the last year or so there are plenty left. So, with a general election looming, perhaps it is worth making the effort once again to persuade those in power to mend their ways.

Markers grading national tests are supplied with assessment criteria. 'For 12 marks, the story has a beginning, a middle and an end.' 'For 15 marks the writing is lively.' All this ensures we can meaningfully compare schools, teachers and pupils on the basis of test performance. Without it, school league tables would make little sense. Anyway, that's the official story...

There are some cans of worms lurking around here. To discover them consider the following activity. Over the years I've tried it with many students and teachers. You are to supply criteria for grading apples on the following scale: Excellent Apple, Good Apple, Sound Apple with some Weaknesses, Failing Apple. My student victims usually wade in with initial enthusiasm. However, after a few minutes they begin to protest. 'Some people like them crisp! But not everyone! My mother prefers them mushy.' 'It depends on the variety!' 'What are you going to do with them? Cooking apples are different.' I nod soothingly, and suggest something similar for pears. Finally I request new criteria to apply to both fruits. 'But this is impossible – our descriptions are so bland now that they are almost meaningless! We're leaving out what makes an apple an apple!'

The students sometimes smell a rat. 'Oh no! You're not implying that our fruit criteria resemble criteria for school tests! That's ridiculous. Obviously fruit preferences are just opinions. Grading exam answers isn't like that! Or if it is, someone should put a stop to it!'



**‘How certain are we that everything of any educational importance can be captured by consistent grading?’**

**Andrew Davis, Research Fellow, School of Education, University of Durham**



## **‘We create a special food regulator, Ofgrub. Ofgrub lays down what counts as excellence whether in terms of juiciness, pip colour, sheen or whatever... Fruit graders learn to set their personal preferences to one side.’**

Yes – criteria for assessing school learning differ from the infamous fruit grade descriptions. All the same, let’s stay with fruit just a little longer. It would be possible to train several people to judge fruit in the same way. But what criteria would work here? Just how is consistency going to be achieved? You might think that the solution would be to exclude any descriptions linked to personal reactions. So ‘delicious’, ‘refreshing’ and so on would be banned because different people find different things delicious.

However, we couldn’t stop there. For even colour, size and shape, seemingly objective features, can be linked to personal sentiments – some people like green fruit and others do not. So if we went down this road we would eventually run out of descriptions for our fruit criteria. Prohibiting descriptions tied to people’s opinions isn’t going to work.

The alternative is an exercise in power over fruit thinking. We create a special food regulator, Ofgrub. Ofgrub lays down what is to count as excellence, whether in terms of juiciness, pip colour, sheen or whatever. Fruit graders are trained accordingly. So the cost of this exercise is that graders learn to set their personal preferences to one side. Ofgrub imposes its views on everyone.

Some readers will react enthusiastically to this result when transferred to school tests. ‘That’s great! We certainly don’t want mere personal opinions influencing how markers assess. Whatever next!’

This response is too quick. Opinions in educational assessment arguably have a different status from reactions to fruit. Consider the criteria for writing tasks included in national curriculum English tests for 11-year-olds. They include things like ‘Length and focus of sentences varied to express subtleties in meaning and to focus on key ideas’ and ‘All aspects of the story are consistent and contribute to overall impact’.

A striking number of phrases here relate to opinion – and could theoretically lead to disagreement between markers – what one person might deem an effective variety of sentences expressing subtleties in meaning, another could find irritatingly artificial. Yet the opinions are not mere opinions in quite the sense that reactions to fruit are just personal in the end. Can’t equally well-informed professionals legitimately disagree here on occasion and isn’t it possible that each of them could support their judgements with reasons?

At the same time, we cannot live with significant discrepancies in judgements between different markers when the test results are so important for schools, teachers and pupils. Such differences would drive a coach and horses through the fairness of the process. Hence anything liable to provoke disagreement will have to be ironed out of the criteria themselves or excluded during the training of the markers. And certain opinions will have to be endorsed officially. Markers will have to follow suit, or find another occupation.

Now it would be foolish to encourage inconsistency. Yet at the same time we should be very concerned about what might be sidelined in a single-minded pursuit of consistency. We are told time and time again that what is not assessed will not be taught. So what cannot be assessed consistently will not be assessed at all. How certain are we that everything of any educational importance can be captured by consistent grading? Whose values are being imposed in the drive to ensure consistency, and with what justification? What is being excluded from education because of the way assessment is still being used? Can education survive assessment criteria in our high-stakes system?



‘One sixth-former recently told me he had opted not to take French A-level because he wanted to learn French, not learn how to take an exam in French.’

Warwick Mansell, education journalist and author of *Education by numbers, the tyranny of testing*

## The unquestioned rise of the exam empire

Twenty years ago children in most of the UK rarely encountered an external test. Now they shoulder the heaviest burden in the world. Is this what people want? And what is the impact on pupils’ experience of learning?

**Warwick Mansell** searches for answers

This September, hundreds of thousands of Year 10 pupils will embark upon education’s equivalent of the Grand National.

The steeplechase\* that lies between the more academic of them and university will feature many barriers, in the form of what may come to feel like an endless succession of exams. Those studying the new modular GCSEs, followed by A-levels, could be, at a very conservative estimate, sitting down in the exam hall 40 times between the age of 14 and 18. Even those not taking A-levels could experience 20 exams as part of their GCSEs alone, with these assessments spread

## **‘Those parts of the UK operating the GCSE and A-level system are, as far as I know, unique in the world in putting pupils through this much formal testing in the latter years of secondary school.’**

throughout their two-year course.

Those parts of the UK operating the GCSE and A-level system – England, Wales and Northern Ireland – are, as far as I know, unique in the world in putting pupils through this much formal testing in the latter years of secondary school. But is it something that we, as a country, that teachers as a profession and that parents and our young people, as the ones experiencing it, actually want? Has it even been properly debated?

What astonishes me most, as an outsider to our education system – I am not a teacher or a parent – is that it seems to have developed in ways which can have a huge influence on the learning experience for pupils, but almost without meaningful discussion of what we want for them, or what the aims of the education system as a whole should be. A politicised process, in which proper discussion of these matters struggles to happen in the face of other considerations – what will improve exam results, what might produce the right headlines in advance of a general election or how policies fit with a particular ideology for how the public sector should be managed, for example – seems to dominate. I find this disturbing. Why does it happen this way? A more detailed look at recent reforms to the exams mechanism may provide some clues.

The GCSE and A-level system has changed dramatically since 2000, from a structure in which young people took exams in two batches, in the summer of Year 11 and Year 13, to the modern arrangements in which

examining can now be almost continuous, throughout the final four years. Going further back, we have moved, in 20 years, from a structure in which children encountered few external exams to one in which their school horizons are dominated by national testing, followed by exams in Years 10 to 13.

The Curriculum 2000 changes, introduced from 2001, saw all A-levels moving from a ‘linear’ set of exams, in which assessment took place at the end of the two-year course, to a modular structure, with six papers. Three tended to be taken at the end of Year 12, and three at the end of Year 13, although it was also possible to be tested in the January of either year, with resits allowed.

Less discussed has been the change at GCSE. The picture is less uniform than at A-level, as some ‘linear’ versions do still exist, but essentially GCSE became a mainly modular qualification with the introduction of a new version of it in most subjects in September last year. This transition will be complete this September, with changes to English, maths and ICT GCSEs.

Most courses will now be modular, with pupils able to take papers throughout Years 10 and 11, or even earlier for some schools wanting to begin their GCSE work in Year 9. There are now exam sittings in November, January, March and May/June. On top of this, a new system of ‘controlled assessment’, which is replacing coursework at GCSE, will see pupils write up planned assignments under supervised, timed conditions at least once for most subjects, on top of their exams.

Some of these trends may be positive or negative, depending on your point of view. My surprise, though, is that the overall learning experience which follows has been so little discussed. In fact, the change from GCSE being a mainly linear to a mainly modular qualification was not even the subject of any meaningful consultation. I remember what happened vividly, having covered this subject as a reporter.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which oversaw the design of the new exams, never stated explicitly in consultation that it was preparing to usher in modular GCSEs. Instead, its consultation in 2007

included a question stating only that modular qualifications could ‘enhance flexibility and choice’, before asking whether any problems could arise from this. A further question asked whether it was a good idea that at least half of all GCSE courses should be linear. That was it. Yet this change is the biggest to have happened to this exam, taken by almost all pupils, in at least 15 years.

And it would appear to be the final act in creating an education system, at least for those in their latter years of secondary school, which is now completely dominated by exams. Pupils’ time is spent preparing for them and taking them. Their textbooks and other learning resources are devoted to them (to the extent that one sixth-former recently told me at a conference that he had opted not to take French A-level because he wanted to learn French, not learn how to take an exam in French). And, crucially, teachers’ and schools’ achievements have become a function of them.

Many teachers and pupils may be in favour of, for example, a modular exam in particular subjects. But I think it is, at the very least, debatable whether, if asked, they would say that the best education system is one in which exams dominate pupils’ educational experiences, in almost all subjects, for four years.

So why has it happened? Part of the answer might be revealed through a consideration of the arguments in favour and against modular exams.

On the positive side, it is argued that spreading modules throughout a course tends to help pupils, reducing pressure because they do not face one all-or-nothing assessment at the end. It gives them, potentially, several

**‘Maximisation of exam results has become the *raison d’être* of England’s schools system largely without any meaningful debate.’**

‘goes’ at each paper. It also gives them and their schools a better idea, earlier in the course, whether they are at risk of missing a grade. Less positively, there is the risk, in some subjects, that modular exams may break up the learning experience; make it more difficult to assess a pupil’s synoptic understanding of a subject; and, crucially, that revising for and taking exams takes curriculum time away from teaching.

Both of these sets of arguments are coherent. Simplifying hugely, the first set could be summed up as advocating modular exams because they give pupils, and schools, more control over the process of achieving better results. The second set relate to reservations about the educational implications.

However, in the current educational climate, at least in England, I believe that improving the results is seen as what matters when decisions of this type are taken. Schools, the customers of exam boards which design courses to the regulator’s outlines, are judged by results. The regulator itself is overseen by politicians whose policies are judged by the results they generate. In this scenario, purely educational considerations – and I am aware that modular exams can be defended on purely educational terms – struggle for a hearing.

There are other ways in which our education system has been manoeuvred, subtly, into becoming an examinations system, geared overwhelmingly to the production of rising grade statistics.

The effects of league tables and targets which centre on national test and exam results are well-known. Perhaps less so, to outsiders to education, is the role that Ofsted inspections can play. These are now very data-orientated. Guidance to inspectors, published last year, said: ‘No school can be judged to be good unless learners are judged to make good progress.’ This means, of course, that no school can fare well unless its test and exam results, on the Government’s published indicators, show the children making good progress.

Maximisation of exam results has become the *raison d’être* of England’s schools system largely without any meaningful debate. To be clear, the notion that education has become too exams-orientated is often discussed.

But rarely does anyone with power to change matters stand back, when important decisions are taken affecting the schooling of millions of pupils, and ask fundamental questions such as: is this helping create the right kind of educational experience for young people? That question, of course, can only be answered if one has arrived at an idea of what education is for.

Other questions need to be considered, too. Is education's sole aim the generation of good grades? Is it only about the qualities and attributes young people emerge with at the end of the process, or do their experiences along the way matter, too? Does education matter mainly in helping young people of all backgrounds go on and earn well in the future, thus, perhaps, helping to create an economically fairer society? Or is the understanding fostered by education of value in itself?

I suspect that many teachers would have quite enlightened answers to these questions, along the lines that education matters in ways not always captured by the grades at the end of the process. Yet the system does not work to give these ideals expression.

There are, of course, reasons why the more reductive approach to schools policy has won out. The first is that politicians, and to an extent many parents, do see education in terms of the material gains it can create later in life. Grades are seen as important, for people from poorer homes for reasons of social justice, and for everyone, potentially, in terms of obtaining a good job. Against this background, the ideal of education as having value as an end in itself can struggle for attention.

Second is the dogmatic view that measurable 'outcomes', of which, in education, exam results are the most obvious, are what matter when assessing the suc-

**'Politics and thorough, open-minded deliberations as to the aims of education might go together, in an ideal world. But not in this world, it seems.'**

cess or failure of public services of all kinds. There is not space to discuss this here, but it has undoubtedly been influential in shaping schools policy. Yet it is highly questionable, clearly, if one believes that the purpose of schooling is not simply what emerges at the end, but the process and the experiences along the way.

Third is the fact that education policy is now run by national politicians, and hence steered according to their needs. Politics and thorough, open-minded deliberations as to the aims of education might go together, in an ideal world. But not in this world, it seems.

Recently, two impressive inquiries have considered at great depth the purposes of education. Both the Cambridge Primary Review and the Nuffield 14-19 inquiry took place outside the political process and both have, to put it mildly, struggled for a hearing with ministers.

Arguably one has to go back more than five years, to the Tomlinson review of secondary qualifications, for the last time a government-sanctioned inquiry took place which sought to take a holistic look at the educative process from the pupil's point of view. But Sir Mike Tomlinson's central recommendation was rejected by a government concerned about the electoral impact of being seen to be abandoning GCSEs and A-levels.

One could argue that decision-makers have taken seriously, in recent years, the criticism that schools have become too exams-focused. The demise of the key stage 3 tests; the investigation of replacing exam-only league tables with a ranking system reflecting wider school achievements; and the reduction in the number of A-level modules from six to four might be evidence.

However, this is piecemeal change. What is so desperately lacking is a proper inquiry, from first principles, into what the goals of our education system should be, and how to achieve them. The Cambridge and Nuffield reviews offered a persuasive glimpse of just such an approach. The great pity is that, with politicians rather than philosophers or educators in charge, it is unlikely to happen.

*\*or 'low hurdles race' for those who are not convinced by the difficulty of individual exams.*



**‘There is a compelling vision about the role schools can play in a fairer, more cohesive society.’**

**Fiona Millar, writer and education campaigner**

## Wanted: a politician prepared to back good local schools

**Fiona Millar** proposes her alternative manifesto for parents that goes beyond issues of choice, diversity and competition to create environments in which all children can thrive

Parents will be centre stage in the coming election, just as they have been for the past 20 years. Much will be said and done in our name and the debate will undoubtedly be coloured by the views of a small group of media commentators whose personal experiences are not necessarily representative of the nation at large. Many of the arguments will be what my children would describe as ‘rinsed’, in other words we will have heard them all before. Choice, diversity, competition and the power of parents, as consumers, to act as agents for change in the school system are hardly new ideas, although the Conservative promise to create surplus places, the so-called ‘supply side revolution’, at a time of public-sector cuts, will certainly give them an edge.

I should start by saying that I have nothing against

parent choice or parental involvement in schools. The primary school my children attended has, for me, been a microcosm of parent power in action. When the school was heavily criticised by Ofsted in the mid 1990s, a core group of aspirant parents withdrew their children, confidence in the local community plummeted and it sank to the bottom of the local league tables.

However an equally powerful group stayed and put literally hours into everything from the governing body and PTA to cake sales and discos. With the headteacher and staff, we crafted a strong inclusive vision that has helped create the successful and popular school it is today. I now chair the governing body of that school and of another local secondary and indeed have spent 20 years as a parent and governor in one of the most active schools markets in Western Europe – the square mile in which I live is home to 29 state and private schools. I would argue that we need a wholly different approach, and a more coherent political argument, to underpin policies concerning parents and schools.

The starting point must be that there is a compelling

vision about the role schools can play in a fairer, more cohesive society. It is bigger than the simple fulfilment of choice, and it doesn't conflict fundamentally with what many parents want for their own children. While no one can speak categorically for 13 million parents, successive opinion polls, and research into the campaigns for new schools in areas where there aren't enough places, suggest that the majority of parents want a good local school for their children. They also tend to be clear about the characteristics of that good local school; it should be one which is well resourced, which commands the confidence of a wide cross section of the local community, where the intake is balanced, the leadership, teaching and behaviour are good and the physical environment well maintained.

This kind of school almost certainly provides the best environment for all children to thrive. Schools need a critical mass of students who are positive about learning and education; many parents want to see that in the schools they choose for their children. It is no coincidence that all the countries that achieve the highest standards and lowest social differentiation in achievement have non-selective systems with relatively little diversity.

The politician who is prepared to stand up and say 'We believe in the principle of good local schools where children of all backgrounds and abilities can be educated together' may need to be brave, given the political context. Allegations of Stalinism and social engineering would undoubtedly follow. But the supporting arguments could be powerful and popular. Resources and

**'Worries about selective entry tests, private tuition and long journeys might start to evaporate, as would the trauma of separating children from their childhood friends.'**

expertise could be focussed on the quality of teaching, leadership, class sizes and the relationships between adults and young people within those schools. Other policies would then be calibrated in relation to the aim of creating good mixed local schools and some decisions on admissions, curriculum and qualifications would be inevitable – the good local school will never work if its curriculum is as skewed as its intake.

Parents would still have choice, not of institutions which the politicians have tried to make as different as possible, but of institutions which are broadly similar and uniformly good; worries about selective entry tests, private tuition and long journeys might start to evaporate, as would the trauma of separating children from their childhood friends and the now familiar annual tale of too many parents chasing too few places at seemingly 'better' schools.

But there is another, and perhaps more important way of thinking about parents and schools; less about parents as consumers and more about parental engagement in their children's learning, and in their development into well rounded, social citizens. A child's life chances may be affected by which school they attend but a range of other issues are possibly more important to their ability to succeed; personal resilience, family income, the educational qualifications of their parents, their peer group, the neighbourhood in which they live and critically, the home learning environment and parenting. Some of these lie too far outside the school gate for them to be the business of heads and teachers, although governments that want to see more equitable outcomes for children should undoubtedly be putting more resources into reducing income and housing equality. But schools can and should be helping parents support their children.

Too often the idea of parental engagement in their children's learning is muddled up with the idea of parental involvement in schools. But the research reviews of Professor Charles Desforges for the Government in 2003, which flagged up the importance of 'at home' parenting, especially for children in the primary age group, suggested that a 'good' parent never needed to walk

## **‘The idea of a good local school, rooted in its community and providing wider services for that community, may well be anathema to politicians with fetishes about diversity and freedom.’**

through the door of a school to make a difference to his or her child’s prospects. According to Desforges, what really mattered was a parenting style typified by love, warmth, good communication, aspiration, confidence and suitable boundaries.

However acting on these findings has not been straightforward. If we accept that ‘at home’ parenting can impact on a child’s achievement and behaviour, what should schools do about it? Is it their job or indeed the state’s role to ‘interfere’ with what is essentially a very private and personal relationship? Some heads and political figures have complained about teachers being asked to do social work and schools being expected to offer therapeutic services. The ‘respect’ agenda, which prevailed in the latter part of the Blair years, further confused the issue, rightly linking the root causes of antisocial behaviour to poor early parenting, but putting an emphasis on ASBOs, fixed penalty notices and contracts which appeared to be more about blaming than supporting parents.

And confusion still exists about what services for families and parents mean in practice. When the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education studied family and parenting programmes, it discovered no less than 16 different terms in use under the vague umbrella of family and parenting support. Many of these confused family learning, aimed at helping parents improve their own skills, with parenting support. The latter can mean anything from parenting support advisers, non-teaching

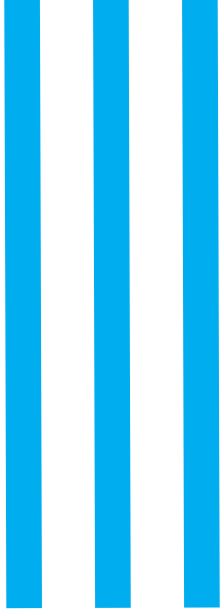
staff who specialise in home-school links, to parenting courses which are now widely recognised as helping change children’s behaviour. Many parents who have been coerced onto such courses say they wish they had been given the chance to do them much earlier in their children’s lives.

But the narrative could be simplified. Schools are places of learning but they are also places where children and young people develop social skills, learn to tolerate and co-operate. Working with their families complements those aims and that work needs to start early with high quality pre-school provision. We know that able children from poorer homes fall behind their less able, more advantaged peers before they even start school, and the EPPE (Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project) study has demonstrated the value of high quality early years settings for long-term attainment and social behaviour. This is especially marked for children from poor homes.

The offer of family learning and parenting courses should be a key element of any extended services as children move through primary and secondary schools and this must be a universal service, not just a response to problem or disadvantaged families. Families, parents and children from all backgrounds move in and out of risky situations in their lives, often due to relationship breakdown, mental health problems, alcohol or substance abuse at home. If services for parents are seen as only relevant to some poorly skilled adults and children, or peripheral to the work of schools, families who most need help will inevitably feel stigmatised and become harder to reach.

The idea of a good local school, rooted in its community and providing wider services for that community, may well be anathema to politicians with fetishes about diversity and freedom. It will almost certainly not be as eye catching or headline grabbing as the niche school set up by the idiosyncratic group of media friendly parents. But if we listen to what parents say they want – good local schools in which all children can flourish and become good citizens – it will almost certainly be the answer to their needs.





# **‘Why do we truss up our children in suits more appropriate for an investment bank than a river bank?’**

**Stephanie Northen, education journalist and contributing author, Cambridge Primary Review**



## Just what the blazers is going on?

Are politicians right to view school uniforms with such approval? **Stephanie Northen** unpicks this sartorial trend and finds it has more to do with social inequality than standards and behaviour

There is a depressing uniformity about Labour and Tory policies with regard to school uniform. Both seem intent on burrowing ever deeper into children's wardrobes while primly endorsing the increasingly obsessive policing of what young people wear to school.

Education Secretary Ed Balls wrote to local authorities late last year calling for more 'smart' uniforms and (rather sinisterly) for schools to build up links with 'uniformed' organisations like the scouts and guides. For the Tories, Michael Gove has made speeches championing blazers and ties. Both parties' attitudes can be summed up by the Conservative policy paper which said: 'We have observed that the best-performing schools tend to have strict school uniform policies, with blazer, shirt and tie, and with zero tolerance of incorrect or untidy

dress.' That was back in 2007 – and it is interesting to note what was going on across the Atlantic at the same time.

In New Jersey, two boys, aged 11 and 13, were in trouble with their teachers. Their crime was to wear a badge protesting the school district's attempt to impose uniform on pupils up to age of 15. The badges depicted serried ranks of Hitler Youth – all slicked-back hair, neckerchiefs and button-down shirts. Printed over the top in red were the words 'No School Uniforms'.

The boys' schools threatened to suspend them, insisting the badges were offensive. The parents retorted that suspension would be an infringement of their right to free speech – as was the district's decision to introduce mandatory uniforms. One mother wrote: 'I've gotten overwhelming support from many people that tell me that they absolutely agree with what the image depicted, an ominously homogenous group of blindly cooperative children. The picture makes a profound statement about what can happen when we turn children into "uniform" followers.'

The boys won their case over the badges, and, though

## **‘What about all the children who would rather, on purely secular grounds, be dressed by H&M than HM government? Is their right to determine their identity to be disregarded simply because it is not a religious identity?’**

they failed to stop the spread of uniform in America, they made their point. Sadly, it is not one often made in the UK. Here legal wrangles over uniform are usually about whether a school should accommodate a garment worn for religious reasons. Shabina Begum’s belief that she had the right to wear a full-length jilbab to a Luton high school took the Muslim pupil all the way to the House of Lords – where in 2006 she lost. Lydia Playfoot was equally convinced that not being allowed to wear her ‘purity ring’ to school constituted an ‘unlawful interference’ with her fundamental right to express her Christian faith – in this case her belief in the importance of chastity before marriage. In 2007, the High Court ruled against her and against a 12-year-old Muslim girl who wanted to wear the niqab, or full-face veil, to her Buckinghamshire school.

Even though these girls lost their cases, the fact that they were brought resulted in schools making tremendous efforts to fine-tune their uniforms to accommodate religious sensitivities. But what about all the children who would rather, on purely secular grounds, be dressed by H&M than HM government? Is their right to determine their identity to be disregarded simply because it is not a religious identity?

There are very occasional protests. For example, pupils at Abertillery comprehensive school burnt their ‘horrible, itchy’ black blazers after the head insisted that they be worn. But such demonstrations are largely only reported in local papers and then as a bit of a laugh.

Of course none of this would matter if we had the confidence just to say no. No to school uniforms which have to conform to rules stretching sometimes over three A4 pages, as is the case with more than one of the new academies. These schools appear to relish dressing their pupils like junior yacht-club members or, even more unfortunately, like miniature City traders.

Why are we doing this? In an age which supposedly values ‘personalised’ education and the ‘children’s voice’, why do we insist that all young people look the same? In an age that bemoans the loss of tree-climbing, field-scampering, risk-taking childhood, why do we truss up our children in suits more appropriate for an investment bank than a river bank? In an age that trumpets entrepreneurship, why are we bundling up our most enterprising spirits in polyester and Teflon? Our children look mass produced. They have been branded to sell their schools.

Yet when anyone mutters about freedom of expression, politicians gleefully quote statistics showing that 89 per cent of parents are in favour of uniform – and what’s more, so are many pupils. We’re told that they encourage team spirit, a community ethos within schools, that they help hide differences between rich and not-so rich kids and hence reduce bullying. And, of course, children are consulted about the design of their uniforms. Hmm. I remember being asked at age 14 to write an essay about why youth clubs were a good thing. ‘Youth clubs keep us off the streets,’ I dutifully wrote, despite the fact that neither I nor any of my classmates were regularly, if ever, to be found ‘on the streets’. It is unsettling to think that people are pleased that so many children at so many secondary schools apparently lust after blazers, ties and v-neck jumpers. Are we breeding a nation of conformists – is that really what is wanted in an age of global challenges?

Perhaps children opt for blazer and tie because they and their parents think that’s what the posh kids have (though no private school yet lists Tesco as its uniform supplier). And then when the gloss has worn off they start to customise it – everyone knows there are 101 ways not to wear a tie and teachers rarely check that

## **‘Certainly David Cameron should not stress the power of clothing to regulate behaviour. The infamous Bullingdon Club photo showed members dressed in the regulation blue tie, tails and biscuit-coloured waistcoats.’**

socks match. It’s not long before the old divides open up again – those between rich and poor, between the innately stylish and the clothes horses – and no one is more acute at detecting these than children.

But does that matter if uniform really does improve behaviour and discipline? In fact, there are mixed messages out there regarding such claims – frequently repeated by politicians and those with money to make. (A well-publicised piece of research which ‘revealed’ that pupils ‘enjoyed the sense of pride they get from wearing a smart uniform and the smarter the better’ was in fact commissioned by the Schoolwear Association.)

A decade of research in America by David Brunson found that uniform actually had a slightly negative effect on behaviour and performance. Sir Alan Steer’s respected report on behaviour in schools in England does not mention uniform once in its 47 recommendations. Uniforms do not, of themselves, make schools more orderly places – they do result in staff endlessly having to niggle at pupils to get them to conform.

Certainly David Cameron should not stress the power of clothing to regulate behaviour. The infamous Bullingdon Club photo showed members dressed in the regulation blue tie, tails and biscuit-coloured waistcoats. Far from imposing discipline on the group, the £1,000 uniform was presumably in tatters several hours later as a result of, in the words of London mayor Boris Johnson, ‘a number of us crawling on all fours through the hedges of the botanical

gardens and trying to escape police dogs’.

Parents are also told that a blazer and tie go hand in hand with rising standards. No one remarks that struggling academies have as strict a uniform policy as those that are flourishing. In fact it takes a headteacher equipped with vision and verve – not polyester and Teflon – to improve a school. Often there is an outward manifestation of their vision – perhaps a particular goal, or a particular commitment, maybe to sustainability, to singing, to drama or to reaching out to the community. It doesn’t really matter what ‘it’ is – and ‘it’ can include a uniform – just so long as it is implemented with passion and confidence. A charismatic headteacher could get his or her school to the top of the league tables by teaching the whole curriculum through the study of Icelandic fishing techniques.

So what is really going on? Interestingly, the rise of school uniform mirrors the rise in social inequality. The 1960s and 70s were the golden age for those who preferred their pupils dressed casually. Coincidentally – or not – the proportion of national wealth cornered by the wealthiest 1 per cent was at its lowest since the 1920s and the income gap between rich and poor was relatively stable and narrow. That most important gap – between how long rich people and poor people live – was also the narrowest it had been since the 1920s.

But then came Margaret Thatcher and the seemingly inexorable rise in social inequality – and, on its shirt tails, school uniform. Do those with power think that dressing the have-nots in smart clothes will persuade them that we are all one nation? Are all these blazers and ties a ‘horrible’ and ‘itchy’ means of control that will linger beyond school? Are we, as a society, so frightened of young people that we have to undermine their individuality by making them dress the same? Or are they themselves reaching out for the trappings of status and money that too few of them stand a chance of realising, especially during a recession?

Whatever the answer is, this unchallenged spread of sartorial uniformity is worrying. Remember it was a child who blew the whistle on the emperor’s new clothes. That’s the sort of child we need.



**‘What so many young people shine at is given the thumbs down in the estimation of a “good education”’**

**Richard Pring, lead director, Nuffield Review 14-19 Education and Training  
Former director, the department of education, Oxford University**



## Beware education for not very many at all

**Richard Pring** warns that too many of the skills and talents of 14 to 19-year-olds are neglected – if not scorned – by narrow policies and practices based on aims and values that no one has discussed or agreed

So-called 'lifelong learning' is carved up into phases. Sometimes these phases receive rather questionable theoretical justifications. For example, the normal split between primary and secondary at age 11 (though not between preparatory and public school in the independent sector) had its defence in the 1926 Hadow Report, which spoke of the 'tide which begins to rise in the veins of youth at the age of 11 or 12. It is called by the name of adolescence'. Again, the age of 16 is the age at which compulsory schooling ends. Hence, the division of 'secondary' into two further phases: 11-16 and 16-18.

However, the tide is in full flow by the age of 14. The national curriculum in England has been partly dismantled for students of this age, who are allowed to dispense with the arts and humanities and opt for

'vocational subjects' instead. The run-up to GCSE has begun in earnest, and careers advice has assumed an importance as the learners start to consider their progression into the adult world. At the same time, education and training are being extended in one form or another to 18. Therefore, continuity of progression from 14-18 would suggest a new phase in the organisation of education, though without the quaint justification of the Hadow Report. It all seems very pragmatic.

However, questions of a philosophical nature do arise in the policy and organisational development of this new phase of education and training.

First, as so many seek to leave education as soon as they can, the 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (Neet) group has for a decade remained stubbornly at just under 10 per cent, despite many government initiatives. Many more young people are in employment but without education or training. To require all these to remain in education does require educational justification. In pursuing that, the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education and training asked the question: What counts as an educated 18 or 19-year-old in

this day and age? What are the kinds of knowledge, the practical capabilities and the qualities which we should be nurturing through our educational system for all young people, not just, as in the past, for those who are judged to be academically able?

Second, in answering this question about the aim of education, the Review looked critically at the narrow vision of learning which passes for 'education' – narrow but exclusive. The 'half our future' of the 1963 Newsom Report (the so-called 'average' and 'below average' subset of the population) is still with us, fit to be trained, perhaps, but hardly recognised as educable.

The response to the second issue does of course depend on the answer to the first question. What should be learnt and how that learning should be pursued depends on the underlying view of what is educationally valuable. And yet, despite the constant interference and intervention by government, that question is rarely asked. Of course, it is not an easy question to answer. To decide upon the kind of learning which is worthwhile and which we require all young people to pursue in some form or another is to take us into the realm of ethics, and in that realm there is little consensus.

However, the question, though always resulting in contentious responses, is already answered implicitly in the many policies and practices being pursued under the banner of 14-19. Unexamined values shape the education of 14 to 19-year-olds – in the division between the more prestigious academic pathways for some and vocational studies for others, in the dismissal of the arts and humanities from the core curriculum at 14, in the focus on economically relevant skills, in the introduction of such virtues as entrepreneurship and enterprise, in the concentration on exam grades as a mark of successful learning, in the absence of practical and experiential engagement, in the proposed designation of mathematics and science as 'hard subjects' for purposes of league tables (and the arts and drama as 'soft'), in the mode through which merit is recognised in formal assessments. All these reflect dominant values and thereby the prevailing

## **'Where in all this is there room for the exploration of ideas, the struggle to understand, the risk taking through trial and error that are part of a broader vision of learning?'**

aims of education. But practices and policies, too often unquestioned, become problematic against a deeper ethical critique.

Furthermore, values and thereby educational aims are embedded in the very language of 'performance management' which pervades education – the engagement in those activities which are the effective means to some further end (for example, qualifications), the setting of precise performance targets, teachers as deliverers of the means of reaching those targets, the auditing of the performance in ways which depend on standardised measures). Where in all this is there room for the exploration of ideas, the struggle to understand, the risk taking through trial and error that are part of a broader vision of learning?

How, then, might one argue for educational aims which do not exclude many as ineducable and which do not leave so many with a sense of educational failure, disengaged from what the system has to offer?

The Nuffield Review argued for a closer look at what it means to be and to develop as a person. Education (in a descriptive sense) is about the learning which is promoted in communities and in places set apart (such as schools) for that purpose – for example, to attain economic independence or to play their part in the community which sustains them. And education in an evaluative sense (as in the 'educated person') puts value on that learning which is so promoted. It is what is judged to be worthwhile – an enhancement of the distinctively human life of those who are learning. Educational policy

## ‘Divorced from relevance to social mobility or to aspiration to middle-class lifestyle, young people might still be enabled to have a sense of achievement and fulfilment... satisfaction in making and creating...’

and practice necessarily make judgements (usually implicit and unacknowledged) about the kinds of learning (content and processes) which lead to people being educated in this evaluative sense. And, of course, those judgements need to take into account the social and economic worlds which these young people have inherited.

The Review therefore argued that what is distinctively human and what might be developed through formal learning are:

- The ability to make sense of the physical, social, economic and moral worlds we inhabit. That ‘making sense’ draws upon the concepts, modes of enquiry, explanations which we have inherited through the different traditions and disciplines of thinking. Inevitably, different young people acquire such modes of thinking at different levels of sophistication – or, as Jerome Bruner articulated, in different modes of representation. But no one should be excluded from entry into these different modes of experiencing and understanding the world in which they live.
- The practical capabilities that enable one to act in the world – we are doers and creators as well as thinkers. Richard Sennett, in his recent book *Craftsmen*, criticises the dualism between mind and body which has shaped our thinking about education, denigrating the intelligent ‘knowing how’ or the practical intelligence which characterises the craftsman. Indeed, with due reference to John Dewey in the same philosophical tradition of pragmatism, he

sees practical activity and experiential learning as crucial for a theoretical understanding of the world we inhabit. And yet, that ‘intelligent doer’ is too often neglected – unrecognised in the ‘standards’ by which learner and school or college are judged.

- Moral seriousness or the capacity to take responsibility for the direction of one’s life, for the relationships entered into and for the contribution to the wider community. It is not hard to imagine the academically successful being bereft of desirable human sensibility or appropriate dispositions or virtues, and thereby that much ‘less of a person’. And such sensibilities can be learnt through an educational process and ethos which helps shape the personality and goals thought worth pursuing.
- Community orientation – that is, the recognition that these young people’s very identity is tied up with being a member of wider communities upon which they are essentially dependent and which they have the capacity to shape.

By contrast with these broader aims, ‘educated’ is currently identified with a narrow vision of academic success, reflected in a limited kind of assessment.

First, for example, Michael Gove, the Conservative education spokesman, is proposing that vocational qualifications should no longer earn a place in the league tables, and soft subjects (art, drama, performing arts) should not receive the same recognition as ‘hard’ subjects (maths, English and economics). What so many young people shine at and find a sense of achievement in is given the thumbs down in the estimation of a ‘good education’.

Second, educational success is identified with doing well in particular forms of assessment, leading to more prestigious qualifications but resulting in teaching to the test. However, the educational quality of such learning is rarely questioned. One needs to examine carefully the role of subjects in the development of the ability to make sense of the world – the extent to which, for example, the arts and the humanities are taught for the sake, not of obtaining qualifications, but for illuminating what it means to be human and for understanding those



**‘There are more than seven million jobs which require no skill or very low skills. Are those who occupy low status posts to be regarded as educational failures?’**

issues of profound human importance which confront young people (issues of authority, social justice, racism, relationships).

Third, the political urge for greater participation in education often relies on the need to prepare for work, indeed to raise aspirations (a much used word recently) and to be socially mobile (upwards, of course). But we must think of ‘this day and age’. There are more than seven million jobs which require no skill or very low skills. Are those who occupy such low status posts to be regarded as educational failures – that is, without aspirations and engaged in the many, and necessary, low or no skilled jobs? In the pursuit of education for all, can we think of an army of educated (though academically low level) street cleaners or dish washers?

Divorced from relevance to social mobility or to aspiration to middle-class lifestyle, young people might still be enabled to have a sense of achievement and fulfilment, to have sufficient grasp of those areas of knowledge which, in Dewey’s terms, gives them an ‘intelligent management of life’, to find satisfaction in making and creating, to develop moral sensitivity and to contribute to the wider community. We can talk about educated 19-year-olds even where, because of academic failings within a particular formal context, they were regarded as ineducable.

However, these broader aims of education (basic grasp of the relevant kinds of understanding, practical capabilities, moral seriousness and being an active member of a community) need to be learnt through the initiation into the different forms of knowledge, into moral traditions which can so easily come to be neglected, into practices of doing and making, and into civic and public traditions of service. For that reason, early initiation into various kinds of understanding, into practical activities, into a set of values and into community cooperation, which takes place in the family, needs to be supplemented and built upon by the school. The world that young people are being prepared for, and in which they are hopefully to find personal fulfilment, extends in time and space far beyond their own family and community.

## Throw off dead hand of the state and live!

Fear and mistrust thrive in our exam factory system, sucking the individuality out of pupils and teachers. **Anthony Seldon** sees salvation in schools liberated from government, free to develop their children's aptitudes

Education should be designed to open out all the potentiality that is latent within each human being. Schools, the principal facilitator of this process, should be places of delight; instead they are shunned and marginalised by many children. The teaching profession should attract those with the best degrees and highest moral qualities; instead, it finds it hard to attract and then retain top graduates. Parents should feel boundlessly grateful to schools for all that they do for their children, and should be eager to be involved: instead, many take schools for granted, and are uncooperative and evasive. Leading schools should be the apex of all professions, with the opportunity to shape thousands of minds, including teachers and parents as well as children: but instead many headteacher posts

are left open. What is going wrong? Why is education so often a disillusioning experience for teachers and, sadly, for students at school, as well as university?

The chief culprit is government, with its reduction of education to the passing of exams, with schools evaluated wholly on the basis of their exam and league-table success. In this diminished world, teaching all too often becomes instruction, with creativity and individuality sucked out of the system. Students feel that education is something done to them, not for them. Parents see schools principally interested in the exam successes they can extract out of their children, rather than the development of them as human beings. Heads live like football managers, fearful of the next visit by inspectors, and August's crop of exam results. It is a regime driven not by delight but by fear, motivated not by trust but by mistrust.

Schools need to be freed up from the dead hand of government, and should be left (unless they show themselves to be unworthy of it) to be run substantially as the head, the students, the parents wish. The dull and restricting hand of central government, en-

**‘Why is education so often  
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teachers and, sadly, for students?’**

**Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College**

## **‘The five creative arts – music, dance, drama, visual art and creative writing – should lie at the heart of the curriculum and not be some bolt-on for those who show talent.’**

forced by the bloodless Ofsted, is choking our schools, much as Charles Dickens foresaw in *Hard Times*. The most exciting minds in education are not to be found in the corridors of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, exam boards or Ofsted, but in schools. If the grey bureaucrats were any good, they would be in the classroom or running schools, rather than telling other people how to do their job, and instructing them how and what they are to teach. Schools need to be reclaimed by teachers themselves.

We can do this much better. Why is it that children in the developing world, in Africa, Sri Lanka and South America, often love the experience of being in school, and feel enormous pride in belonging to one, even if their schools have little or nothing in the way of material provisions? Why are parents so full of gratitude that their children are in these institutions, and why do they treat teachers with respect and even reverence? Why has this human spirit and reverence for education been lost when we have so much material wealth? Has a hundred years of research into schools by university departments taught us anything of enduring value about how to develop young minds?

Children are naturally creative. Schools do not have to teach them to be creative; they must merely stop squeezing it out of them. A creative spark is a child’s individuality; it is what makes that child unique. That is why the five creative arts – music, dance, drama, visual art and creative writing – should lie at the very heart of the curriculum, and should not be some bolt-on for those who show talent (which is of-

ten synonymous with those who have been encouraged by their parents). Creativity is sucked out of children by lessons that teach the young that there is one right answer, which must be expressed in a certain way to gain marks in public exams. Such learning has nothing to do with education or the academic subject purporting to be taught. It is utterly degrading that government continues to exert an ever tighter stranglehold in its desire to dominate schools and to dictate what is to be taught.

Howard Gardner, the Harvard professor, was an early developer of the thesis that human beings do not possess merely one form of intelligence, which is intellectual, but rather possess multiple intelligences. His writing directly challenged the work of those like Hans Eysenck and others who elevated ‘IQ’ to all-governing proportions, culminating in the belief that the only valid form of measuring human beings was by ‘intelligence tests’, based on the notion that one is born with an intelligence level which is fixed for life. Sadly, many academics at universities have chosen to belittle the work of Gardner. Some highlight issues of semantics or question his methodology, such as John White, while traditionalists such as the University of Berkeley’s Arthur Jensen continue to see intelligence as genetic. Those interested in this debate should read ‘Howard Gardner Under Fire’ edited by Jeffrey Schaler.

As someone who runs a school, I am interested in the debate, but am not deflected one iota from my belief that Gardner is essentially right. My job is not to dabble in academic debates about educational psychology; it is rather to teach the young and develop them in all their fullness. Whereas some of Gardner’s assertions can certainly be criticised, such as his choice of the different form of intelligences, his basic argument is absolutely correct: there are many different forms of intelligence possessed by each human being, and education should be giving more weight to them.

At Wellington College, we have developed our own model of ‘eight aptitudes’, based on a mixture of Gardner and our own experience of bringing up the young.

We believe that while students are with us, it is our job to develop all eight of these aptitudes, in the belief that what we do not help flower by the age of 18 is unlikely to be developed in later life. The aptitudes fall into four pairs: the logical and linguistic; the creative and physical; the moral and the spiritual; and the personal and the social. We hold that all are equally valid. Our students, at the start of each year, fill in a form which lists all eight of these aptitudes, and they write down how they will be developing themselves in each of these areas, which they then discuss with their tutor. At the end of each year they assess their own progress, again in discussion with their tutor, so they, and the school, can form a clear impression of how much progress they have made. Reports home are based on progress in all eight areas. When they leave, they are presented with a certificate at their graduation service which lists all they have achieved in all these eight domains.

This holistic approach is as popular with parents as it is with teachers. It visibly shows that we are not letting ourselves become an exam factory, and are taking our responsibilities for education very seriously. One might, perhaps, have expected examination passes to decline in the five years since we adopted this approach, because of less focus on academic results. In fact, our A and B passes at A-level have risen from 64 per cent in 2004 to 92 per cent in 2009, making us one of the most improved schools for A-level passes in Britain.

Allied to the eight-aptitude approach is our focus

**‘Education has to be reclaimed from government which can no longer be trusted to drive it. State-run education has achieved much, but the engine has run out of steam.’**

on well-being and the teaching of happiness, another strongly contested area by university academics such as Carol Craig, as well as by writers such as Frank Furedi and Barbara Ehrenreich in her recent *Smile or Die*. The critics, as with multiple intelligences, have valid points to make, but make no impression on my determination that every child should be taught about well-being and happiness. The chief but by no means only influence here is the American academic Martin Seligman from Pennsylvania University, above all in his works like *Learned Optimism* (1991), and *Authentic Happiness* (2002).

At Wellington we have developed our own model which we are again keen should become widespread across the education system. At its heart is the learning by each child to take responsibility for decisions affecting their bodies, minds and emotions. They learn how to find harmony within themselves and between themselves and others. The basis of our own course is about relationships, not only with oneself and with others, but also with technology and with one’s environment. Its essence is reflective, where the students learn to make their own decisions about their lives, rather than being told what to do and think. We have found the whole approach to be enormously popular again with students and with parents, and it has contributed to an enormously positive atmosphere in the school, in which pride in achievement is palpable.

Education has to be reclaimed from government, which can no longer be trusted to drive it. State-run education has achieved much, but the engine has run out of steam, just as steam-powered locomotives did in the 20th century.

We are in a new era, and one that needs to engage the hearts and minds of teaching professionals, parents and children. This is not an impossible dream. Many state and independent schools are already cutting loose from the dead hand of the exam factory: they are the harbingers of the future. Schools should be there to educate young people not to live half lives, but to live full lives. No change in society is more important than this.

## Start trucking for the universities


Higher education must stop coyly trading on its image of ivy and quadrangles and get on with explaining why a degree matters for reasons more important than status and money, says **Richard Smith**

Cuts to the public funding of higher education, and the prospect of more to come, naturally focus the minds of university leaders on other sources of income. Most of these, from raising top-up fees to recruiting overseas postgraduate students to the more lucrative forms of research and consultancy, involve selling the university's services in one way or another. They mean the increasing exposure of higher education to market forces.

This now seems inevitable if a substantial proportion of UK universities are to continue to exist in anything like their present form. So there are two things that those of us who think this form is, on the whole, a good thing, must do (apart, naturally, from recruiting the overseas students and so on). We need to be vigilant about the distortions that 'the market' brings to educa-

tion, as to everything that it touches. We also need to think carefully and creatively about what a market in higher education might be taken to entail, beyond the crude matter of manufacturing as cheaply as possible what the customers seem to want and selling it to them at as high a price as they are prepared to pay.

Vigilance, then, to start with: a continual alertness to what should by now be the entirely familiar problems with marketising education, and higher education in particular. First, increases in fees bring the risk that students think of their education essentially as opening the way to the careers that will earn them the money with which to repay the fees. Of course in the minds of some people this is not so much a risk as a major reason for the changes in funding now under way: the most capable people will choose to go into industry, or what is left of it, commerce, and of course banking. Any professor or lecturer who thought their job was to offer a critique of such crude instrumental reasoning and to suggest alternatives to it will be brought into line when the connection between graduate salaries and particular degree courses becomes clear in league tables. If stu-



**‘If students of Plato and Hegel are not becoming accountants and management consultants then so much the worse for philosophy.’**

**Richard Smith, Professor of Education, Durham University**



dents of Plato and Hegel are not becoming accountants and management consultants then so much the worse for philosophy, and certainly for Philosophy.

The student, and no doubt her parents, armed with league tables and other information, is now in the driving seat, in theory, and each university has to improve in order to attract customers. This means better teaching and facilities as well as sign-posted exit routes to good money. The market thus raises standards and this at least looks like progress. But here lies a second problem. If education is primarily an investment for the individual then it is no longer a public good, justified by producing civilised people who put their enhanced capacities at the services of other people and the planet. Trickle-down theory will be dragged in once more to explain that everyone benefits when 'we pay the top people well so that they don't take their skills elsewhere', but this argument is wearing very thin. And anyone who cannot grasp the idea of a public good has presumably never met a doctor, nurse or teacher who does whatever it takes for you, because that, for them, is just what being a doctor, nurse or teacher means.

A third problem here is that if a popular university charges higher fees and improves what it offers, even more students will apply than do now. But then the university is in the driving seat, not the student customer who was supposedly being empowered, because the university can pick and choose who it takes. This changes if it can take many more students than it does now: another merit of the market, surely, if good and popular universities expand and the weaker ones wither on the vine. However Lord Mandelson and his Department for Business, Innovation and Skills do not seem disposed to follow the logic of the market to this conclusion. If they did, it would not only be the withering universities that would suffer. Many well-regarded institutions would lose much of what their students seem to value (think Portakabins on the Balliol lawns): the 'knowing her children one by one' that Cardinal Newman said distinguished the university from the foundry or mint.

Fourth, the market brings with it commodification, the creation of a brand and image which quickly come to

**'If education is primarily an investment for the individual then it is no longer a public good, justified by producing civilised people who put their enhanced capacities at the services of other people and the planet.'**

matter more than what might be called the real thing. Just as people buy clothing for the label, the crucial thing becomes not what happened to you at Shrewsbury University – what you learned, how you changed – but the simple fact that you went there. A friend tells me of a discussion at a meeting of his own Senate. Some members thought it was a problem that departments were cutting down on teaching in their focus on research. Did this not diminish the student experience, which could rebound on the university? The vice-chancellor replied comfortably that what mattered to students was that they would still be able to say 'I was at the top-rated department of psychology at Shrewsbury'. And so universities polish their image and invest in their websites and prospectuses and advertising, to make their brand or label better known.

A fifth objection to 'the market', and one which takes me to my suggestion that we might think about it more creatively, is this: education, it is often said, exists not simply to satisfy preferences, but to shape them. That is, while most providers of goods try to find out what their customers want (or can be got to want) and provide it, education does something rather different. It tells its 'customers', in so many words, 'you may want to study this, but we think you'd benefit from something else. You may want to go on studying Nazi Germany, which you enjoyed at A-level, and the idea of a module on mediaeval France may not seem so attractive. But we think you would be a better historian for doing it.



And we should know as we are the experts on history’.

This objection naturally appeals to university lecturers because it confirms the traditional view of their status; on the other hand there is a lot of truth in it. What position is the budding philosophy student in to say that she can’t be doing with that scary-looking stuff on epistemology, but practical ethics might float her boat? Or the first year specialist in English literature to choose never to study poetry or Jacobean drama? We might, though, be mindful of particular dangers in this line of thinking in the current climate. Difficulty can be marketed like anything else: as well as being reassuringly expensive a university might badge itself as Traditionally Difficult, with a Latin module compulsory for all in the first year and gowns to be worn to lectures. Hogwarts fans would love it.

The more serious problem is that this objection and its apparent repudiation of the market absolves the university from explaining why it does what it does, and why it teaches what it teaches. It is a take-it-or-leave-it approach that fails to notice its own basis in market philosophy. It assumes that students will appear as they always have done, not reflecting that they are lured precisely by the brand of tradition, advertised in prospectuses featuring ivy and quadrangles.

Now a market does not have to be thought of in this stark way: if you don’t like what you see on my stall, move on to another (there are lots more customers arriving, after all). Adam Smith famously wrote in *Wealth of Nations* of the human propensity to ‘truck, barter and exchange one thing for another’. We might take trucking more seriously. To truck is to have dealings with, negotiate, haggle, barter, be on familiar terms with. The *OED* includes ‘to walk about on petty business; to potter’ (adding ‘esp. dealings of an underhand or improper character’).

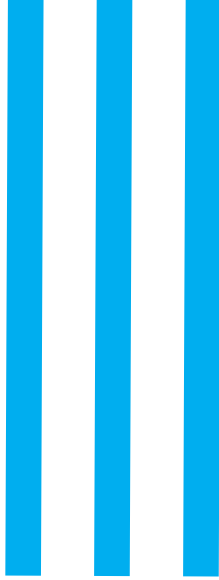
In other words the market is a forum where, sometimes rather unhurriedly, we explain the point and the benefits of what we have to offer, as well as where all manner of satisfying gossip or ‘crack’ takes place. We are not faced with the simple alternative of satisfying preferences by pandering to what the customers

currently and perhaps immaturely want, on the one hand, and forming preferences once they have yielded to our claim that we know best, on the other. The market is the extensive middle ground where arguments can take place, reasons be offered, traditions defended, new visions explored. Academics ought to be rather good at doing all this and, further, at explaining why they talk about education in the way they do rather than in the pseudo-language of brands, images, slogans and rhetoric (those underhand dealings that the *OED* records).

My not entirely creative point, then, is that academics should be prepared to spend more time explaining the traditional and other purposes of a university education in the market of the press and other media and in talking to parents and potential students. It is not easy to set out the reasons for employing a professor of palaeography, but no one else is likely to try. It is not easy to articulate the vision of university education as something which broadens your mind, expands your horizons and generally turns you into a more civilised person, without prompting people to ask ‘yes, but what’s the point of it, though?’ It is distinctly difficult to explain that part of why we have higher education is to preserve, explore and develop forms of rationality different from the prevailing instrumental kind. This, however, is what we have to go on doing, with ever-increasing persuasiveness, as the easy philistine case is pressed for dismissing the palaeographer and introducing modules in learning for entrepreneurship.

If we did this it would help the wider world understand what universities are for and why they matter, and win them more friends and allies against underfunding. It might also help our students to understand just why they are studying with us, a matter about which they are often naive. We need a ‘market’ in university education that involves fewer league tables, less image management, and a great deal more trucking.

*This is an extended version of an article which appeared in the Durham University student paper, Palatinat, in January 2010.*



**‘There is a myth that politicians seem to feel a need to tell, namely that of brokenness and repair.’**

Huw Thomas, headteacher, Emmaus primary school, Sheffield, and education writer



## Teachers deserve a leader with a story to tell

Too many past education secretaries have failed to inspire. Whoever next seizes the reins will find a profession ripe for dialogue, says **Huw Thomas**, so long as they are prepared to listen and to lead

‘Would I like to be chancellor at some point in the future? Of course I would. I’d love it.’ So declared Ed Balls in his *New Statesman* interview last year. Had Gordon Brown not been so weakened by the local and European elections Balls would have had his wish last June. If Labour win in May, it’s certain. On the other hand, a Tory victory could see Michael Gove in the job. Either way, there’ll be a new education secretary the summer. To quote Dylan Thomas: ‘It all means nothing at all.’ Unless, that is, a far more important person steps into Sanctuary Buildings on May 7, namely, a leader.

Ask a group of teachers to name past education secretaries and the chances are they will manage to recall the present one. Past ones don’t stand a hope because successive secretaries have failed to lead the profes-

sion. Anyone doubting this should reflect on two words: Charles Clarke. See – you’d forgotten him already. And who remembers Ruth Kelly?

Certain names faithfully crop up – topped by Blunkett and Baker. They do so for a simple reason. Whatever your views on their leadership, it was leadership. Baker fought off Mrs Thatcher to carve out a space in which he could promote standards and choice. Blunkett turned hype into substance with a swift deployment of strategies that, whatever else they did, can be credited with raising standards in core learning. Crucially, both were interested. Both brought enthusiasm to the job, whereas Ed Balls would rather be doing something else.

It all raises the question: what is an education secretary there for? He or she should be there for children and parents, but to make this happen there’s one other rein of leadership a new incumbent should grasp, namely, leadership of the profession. Without this, a wandering profession becomes lost.

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks of leadership in relation

## **‘Good education leadership involves an intelligent grasp of direction and that is what the profession needs. We’re currently lost between the pathways of Excellence and Enjoyment, finding one up against the other.’**

to a workforce hacking its way through a jungle. A good manager ensures the teams are well rotated and machetes are sharpened. A good leader is ‘the one who climbs the tallest tree, surveys the entire situation and yells “Wrong jungle!”’

Good education leadership involves just such an intelligent grasp of direction and that is what the profession needs. We’re currently lost between the pathways of Excellence and Enjoyment, finding one up against the other. The truism barked back when you suggest this is that the two need not be in conflict. True, but thanks to the way they are currently defined, they are. There’s no point giving me a Rose review, and the fluffy encouragement to develop the curriculum, if, like me, you are in a school where the attainment agenda hangs like the sword of Damocles. I’m not at my most creative with that dangling over me.

A leader needs to review the attainment agenda, not letting up on the drive for standards, but rather asking whether their narrow definition has damaged the learning experiences of children. At key stage 2, the drive to attain level 4 in Sat tests has skewed education. The creativity of writing is sapped by the need to deliver scripts that markers can mince into a turgid mark scheme, with the result that children don’t use adjectives for literary reasons – they use them for an extra mark.

In such confused wanderings, we have the undignified spectacle of the Education Secretary panicking in

the face of a union boycott of Sats tests and sending out the recent publication, ‘Getting the balance right’, attempting to resolve the Government of responsibility for the imbalance it has created through an over-reliance on data-driven evaluation.

To provide such direction a leader needs to shape the narrative of the journey. Howard Gardner, in his book *Leading Minds*, highlights this facet: ‘Leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate.’ However, the vital ingredient of such stories, if they are to lead, is authenticity.

There is a myth that politicians seem to feel a need to tell, namely that of brokenness and repair. It isn’t just a Cameron thing. The recycling of old policies has to be presented in terms of ‘fixing’ – whether that be hospitals or schools. There’s something almost mythological about it – the need for a beauty to rescue, a dragon to slay.

We can do without another big fix. Michael Gove may tout the notion that we become more Swedish and Ed Balls is keen to boost trust status, but what we most need now is a shaping of the current story. This involves looking back on changes to date and undertaking the sort of fine tuning and nuanced reform that improves on 20 years of big story changes. We need to ask some really interesting questions, such as: if a child has a chance of gaining a level 4 in writing, provided time they would spend doing art is sacrificed to this end, what should we do? Interesting – because we’ll be turning round and looking at children.

We have yet to see an education secretary shape the narrative in a way that maximises the buy-in from the profession. Blunkett did it briefly with strategies that were actually well received on the ground, and the mixed feelings about the agreeing of the curriculum gave Baker a small, similar moment. Done properly and intelligently, it could prove powerful.

Shaping a narrative involves reflective understanding, otherwise a leader can easily be easily drawn into the sorts of myths that lead astray. The day after the ’97 election Blunkett caught the train from Sheffield to St Pancras, became secretary of state and, that night, dined with Michael Barber and others, and pulled

together the standards and effectiveness unit, gathering the thinking that had fuelled their previous three years into a way forward for schools. The next secretary needs a similar attention span and a good meal. He or she needs to take the time Gardner labels 'Going to the Mountaintop,' noting the tension in leadership between being attuned to the community and knowing your own mind.

Taking the time to learn and reflect is so at odds with a politics dominated by the news cycle and need for spin, but it would be truly refreshing to hear some authentic thinking. This will be vital if another Labour government runs the public services. A new secretary needs to define ideas. Old governments risk running out of thinking – remember John Major's 'cones hotline'. Equally they can overcompensate for this, as Baker possibly did after the 1987 victory. Somewhere between these extremes a leader needs to find out precisely what needs to be done, and know their own mind in response.

To this end, a new secretary needs to listen to the profession. There is also that tie to the community. Baker tells cheery stories about how Mrs Thatcher would appear at meetings reporting that her hairdresser 'was worried that her children were going to be educated by a lot of Trots.' I do feel like I've spent my career on a bandwagon set rolling by the old dear's hairdresser. I've implemented every reform sent my way: I've sold them to staff, I've enthused where I might feel less than keen. I talk to other teachers and

**'The creativity of writing is sapped by the need to deliver scripts that markers can mince into a turgid mark scheme, with the result that children don't use adjectives for literary reasons – they use them for an extra mark.'**

reckon that we now have the most interesting and diverse profession I've seen. Two decades of changes received in varying ways creates an incredible resource of practitioners ripe for dialogue. It isn't the case that every change is resisted and resented. It is the case that, having experienced them, those of us actually in school can see how they could better reach the aims they profess.

Many of us would not scrap Ofsted, but have ideas about how it can achieve more genuine evaluation and improvement. We wouldn't scrap the national curriculum, indeed we welcome improvements in core subject teaching. We do have ideas for making learning more inspiring and exciting. At a push we may not want rid of Sats, but will have views on how they can become less farcical and more a time of genuine assessment. Instead of letting us set up our own schools we may have good ideas that would work in the ones we currently occupy.

If listened to, the next secretary of state will find the profession a lot more nuanced, engaged and creative than any of think tanks that throw out some of the absurdities around which politicians are currently sniffing. We may even know a thing or two more than Mrs Thatcher's hairdresser.

Unions can't shape the narrative; their pretence of interest in the stuff of education is sweet, but we know what they are there for. There was a chance the General Teaching Council could become a channel for such discourse, but the version we were given is now more intent on catching teachers with their trousers down – more 'Carry On' than consultation. The result is a profession so confused that we are about to launch the most mistimed and bungled boycott of Sats imaginable, a token of the disappointment and frustration felt by a profession that feels led by those who do not hear us.

In the end it doesn't seem such a revolutionary proposition. Whoever is next charged with leading education should give the profession direction and should shape a thoughtful and honest narrative that can inspire us. It doesn't seem revolutionary to suggest that whoever leads education should lead teachers.

## Three reasons for hope in a new Age of Austerity

**Mary Warnock** wants no more platitudes about Education as Investment. Instead she welcomes the recession as a chance to shake off the chains of centralisation and introduce a tripartite split between academic, technical and practical in Year 8

At the end of World War II, we lived in an Age of Austerity, and most people did not much enjoy it, especially those who, unlike me, had been adults before the war started and who therefore knew about the luxuries of which they were now, and had long been, deprived. We are about to enter a second Age of Austerity, and we will not enjoy it either. The difference between us and them is that, exhausted though they were, they had hope. Everything was new; social security, education and, soon, the NHS. It was a fresh world.

As educationalists, instead of trying to secure for education some exemption from the cuts, by uttering platitudes about children being Our Future or Educa-

tion as Investment, we should take on the task of reintroducing hope in what may seem a hopeless situation. The cuts will come anyway. We must face the facts that there will be no new money for education; that local authorities will have huge new burdens; and that there is nothing to be gained by proposing expensive new policies. We must work with what we have got. And make the best of it.

It is wrong to think that efficiency economies will be enough. We need radical change to avoid waste, and not only of money, but of the talents of children who all too often find nothing to engage their interest once they have left their primary schools.

In one way we can count ourselves better off than they were in 1945: we have more mistakes to learn from; and centralisation has been one of the biggest mistakes of all. We must, forthwith, abolish targets, league tables, and compulsory curricula. We must, if necessary by primary legislation, untangle education law from anti-discrimination law, so that local authorities, governors and headteachers can regain control of the variety



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Baroness Warnock, philosopher



of schools that they want to be responsible for.

We cannot hope to go back to the heady days of the 1960s and 70s, when money seemed endless and parents and local authorities tended to trust one another. But if local authorities had more power to allow flexibility in schools, then I believe a new sort of trust might gradually be built up, a trust based on the understanding that we are all in the same boat, and must collaborate with one another or perish.

We could save huge sums now spent on tribunals, for example, if local authorities could devise their own policies with regard to children with special needs and could discuss honestly with parents the manner in which they could try to meet these needs, acknowledging that the proposed solutions might not be perfect, and showing themselves willing to make use of the considerable expertise of parents themselves in a joint enterprise. Confrontation costs money.

We need more teachers properly trained to identify and help children who are floundering in Year 7, when they change schools, monitoring their progress carefully for the whole of this year, and ensuring that they have access to specialist teachers in small groups, or even one-to-one, if they need it. After Year 7, some children might be recommended for special or specialist schools or units. Parents would have been prepared for this by fortnightly progress reports throughout the year, and consultation. This intense concentration on Year 7 might cost money; but it would be saved elsewhere.

In Year 8, education would become tripartite, divided into the academic, (in both humanities, sciences and mathematics) the technical (virtually mathematics and sciences only, perhaps at a less theoretical level) and the practical (including if necessary remedial reading and writing). Each type of course would offer a very different sort of teaching. In maths, for example, it would range from the very practical, geared for use in practical engineering, to the theoretical leading up to pure maths.

This tripartite education might or might not involve children changing schools, depending on local policy and facilities. From Year 8, it would be possible, with careful


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monitoring and parental discussion, to allow children to change courses. It ought to be possible, too, for children to take some practical and some technical subjects, but everything possible should be done to avoid ‘academic drift’, the undoing of the old polytechnics. Parents in particular should be encouraged to think of the technical course as the elite (and in hard economic times this should not be too difficult). The official school-leaving age would remain 18, but there would be some flexibility, in either direction. For example, those fortunate enough to get a proper apprenticeship could leave school altogether at any time from 14 onwards, to take it up. (But in our new austerity era, it is idle to pretend that many apprenticeships will be forthcoming.)

The whole exam system must be changed, if we are to see value for money. There should be one set of exams only, to replace GCSE, taken at the end of Year 9, whose purpose would be to ensure that good standards of reading, writing and comprehension had been achieved over a wide range of subjects, including mathematics, science, history and a foreign language, ancient or modern. This could be examined within the school, by the appropriate subject teachers, and monitored by teachers from other schools (appropriately paid), and sporadically by Ofsted. Thereafter there would be no common exams.

Huge sums of money would be saved by the abandonment of externally-examined GCSE and A-levels, graded tests being substituted, over all the courses, to be taken when the student was thought, by himself or his teachers to be ready. These tests would be externally administered, modelled on those already existing for music, ballet, drama and languages. Admission to higher education would be the business of individual institutions





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which would rely on graded test results and interview.

After Year 9 extra-curricular activities, sports, drama, and music should be largely organised by students themselves though with well-paid professional guidance and instruction, and should be shared between all the three kinds of school courses, and not compulsory. This would not be the time to try to get rid of private education, which would compel local authorities to provide for more children and which might in any case be found to be impossible under the 1988 Human Rights Act. But we might hope both that austerity will cause some parents to switch to the maintained sector, and that private schools will have to share their facilities more widely to retain their charitable status, or else become maintained schools (eg academies) themselves, as some already have.

All these changes would streamline education, and save the money now wasted on the academic bias that still bedevils our educational system. It would motivate children by allowing them to do whatever they do best and enjoy most, and by treating them as grown-up, when they feel that they are so, largely taking charge of their own lives but within a formal structure. These changes, if they could come about, would be grounds for hope.

The greatest reason for hope, however, seems to me to exist already, though readers of the *Daily Mail* and others may be reluctant to admit it. It lies in the increasing numbers and quality of the teaching profession. I know that one still hears horror stories about English teachers who never read and cannot spell, maths teachers who never passed even GCSE maths themselves, biologists teaching physics and Italian specialists teaching German. But they are probably out-numbered by teachers who are truly imaginative and enthusiastic, who deeply care for their pupils, and do everything in their power to further their interests and progress. Nobody who watched the BBC programme, *The Choir*, can doubt what such teachers can do. The hope is that disillusion with the City and rising graduate unemployment will uncover an army of teachers with talents they never knew they had. Then we can be genuinely grateful for austerity.

‘Narrowing the focus on to traditional knowledge for its own sake helps the already privileged.’

John White, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Education, Institute of Education, London

## Equality does not come from letting subjects rule

**John White** argues that the Tories’ desire to wind back the clock will mean the end of hopes for a curriculum based on aims relevant to all children

‘We will reform the national curriculum so that it is more challenging and based on evidence about what knowledge can be mastered by children at different ages. We will ensure that the primary curriculum is organised around subjects like maths, science and history.’

So reads the Conservatives’ draft manifesto for education in the section headed ‘A rigorous curriculum and exam system’.

Does it hold water? Its brevity is a problem when assessing it. But since it reflects the things that Michael Gove, the party’s education spokesman, has been saying and writing recently, it is best taken along with these.

The sentence about the primary curriculum is a clear rebuff to the two recent reports, those of Jim Rose

and Robin Alexander, both of which want to replace the present structure of discrete subjects with wider learning 'areas' (Rose) or 'domains' (Alexander).

This attachment to a subject structure is wholly in line with Michael Gove's ideas. For him, education is an induction into an intellectual heritage based on academic disciplines. Gove says that he, an adopted child from an ordinary Aberdeen family, owes everything to his rigorous grammar-school education. He seems genuinely in favour of equalising opportunities in the interests of increasing social mobility. Why does he think a traditional curriculum of separate subjects especially valuable?

A talk he gave to the RSA in June 2009 revealed his belief 'that education is a good in itself – one of the central hallmarks of a civilised society'. His inspiration is philosopher Michael Oakeshott's argument that everybody is born heir to an inheritance of human achievements. But education also has extrinsic as well as intrinsic aims. First, says Gove, it is 'the means by which individuals can gain access to all the other goods we value – cultural, social and economic': it 'allows individuals to become authors of their own life story'. Second, the shared intellectual capital that education provides 'helps bind society together' and this strengthens our democracy.

What impedes a straightforward judgement on this is that, whenever Gove uses the word 'education', he equates it with a regime of learning within discrete, traditional subjects. Without that equation, much of what he says here strikes a chord with those of us who share a different politics from his. We can agree with him that school education should help individuals to acquire control over their lives, to become personally autonomous. We can also go along with the aim of promoting social cohesion and democratic citizenship. So, too, with education as a good in itself, if interpreted to mean that pupils are equipped for a fulfilling life by becoming fully and intrinsically absorbed in worthwhile activities.

Gove's aims are admirable. But what are we to say about the vehicles by which they are attained? As already stated, for him there is no question what these

should be – the discrete subjects of the grammar-school tradition. His stance here is odd. If there is only one sound way of forwarding these purposes, and this way is the academic route he favours, he has a watertight case. But why should anyone accept these premises?

Most human goals can be reached in different ways. We want to travel into town, and can go on foot, by bus, taxi, or in our own car. It is a mark of our peculiar intelligence as rational animals that we are flexible about what means best promote our ends. We upbraid ourselves for sticking to habitual patterns when a bit of imagination would have suggested other routes. We see as pathological the behaviour of people who become dispositionally rigid in this way, victims of what we call 'tunnel vision'.

Gove does believe that there is only one way of realising his educational aims. He calls his curriculum 'rigorous', but 'rigid' is nearer the mark. This is evident from his uncompromising opposition to any alternative. He sets his face against interdisciplinary collaboration, against themes and projects, against areas like media studies that he sees as purveying 'soft' rather than 'hard' knowledge.

Gove has a propensity to let his wishes get between him and reality. This comes out in his characterisation of those who do not see the traditional curriculum as the one and only way forward. He believes that for four decades educational policy has been dominated by, in his words, 'a small, self-replicating group of academics and bureaucrats who have been in thrall to one particular ideology' – progressivism. This ideology holds that 'children should be left free to discover at their own pace, to follow their own hearts', and 'should be protected from any attempt to regiment, educate or otherwise guide their development'. What has united the ideologists 'has been hostility towards traditional, academic, fact-rich, knowledge-centred, subject-based, teacher-led education'.

This is bizarre stuff. Where, outside possibly Summerhill School, do any academics or bureaucrats think that children should not be guided, but left to their own devices? What evidence could this aficionado

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of knowledge and fact-richness provide for his claim? Gove is a black-and-white thinker. If you are not a traditionalist, you must be a progressive (as he understands this). But this ignores the huge swathe of the educational world that is neither. There are plenty of people who do not think everything should be taught in discrete subjects, seeing these as appropriate on some occasions, and cross-curricular work on others. The belief that education is not only about knowledge does not reject, but affirms, its importance. An enthusiast for themes and projects can readily agree that these should be teacher-led... These points should not need labouring. What is alarming is that the man who may be about to run our schools gives them no credence.

Let’s go back to Gove’s aims. As I have said, taken by themselves they are unexceptionable. They are also in the territory where sensible thinking about the curriculum should begin: first, decide what our wider purposes of education are; and then work out the most suitable means of attaining them. If Gove agrees with this, he needs reasons why his traditional curriculum is a suitable vehicle, and one more suitable than others.

Don’t get me wrong. Like Gove, I’m in favour of extensive knowledge and understanding when talking about the equipment people need to lead their own lives and be good democratic citizens. But I’m not assuming from the outset that this knowledge must fall neatly and exclusively under the headings history, geography,

science, a modern foreign language, and so on. Perhaps a course in social studies that acquaints children with the main features of the society in which they probably going to live out their lives is likely to be helpful to them. So is knowledge about sex, about relationships, money management and community involvement.

Again, if you are really serious about aims, you do not assume that the transmission of knowledge is the only way of furthering them. A non-tunnel-vision thinker considers other possibilities. Personal qualities are the most obvious. If we are to become authors of our own lives, we need persistence, imagination, a willingness to take sensible risks. As democratic citizens, we need to be cooperative, wary of attempts to pull the wool over our eyes, concerned that people are treated fairly. Schools do much to develop these and a host of other such dispositions. Gove seems insensitive to these wider aspects of education.

All this makes me wonder how attached he is to his aims, after all. The truth is that, from his perspective on schooling, he has no need of them. This is because he already knows, or thinks he knows, what the curriculum must be.

One of the bright spots in the often dismal story of the national curriculum since 1988 has been moves to base it on a set of aims. In 1988, strange to say, the complex apparatus of 10 foundation subjects, programmes of study and attainment targets came about with next to no indication of what these were for. An attempt in 2000 to lay down basic aims foundered because nothing was done to see that curriculum subjects were in line with them.

The then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority had a second go in 2007. This did more to bring the subjects into line. Its three overarching – and now statutory – aims are that pupils are helped to become ‘successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens’.

Since these three objectives seem close to Gove’s intrinsic aim and his two extrinsic ones, you might think he would welcome them. But no. He upbraids the QCA (now the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency) because it ‘does not make its principal aim a

guarantee – entitlement if you prefer – that each pupil will have access to a body of knowledge’.

Gove says: ‘I am sure all these goals are admirable, in their own way, but they reflect my underlying concern – that in making schools institutions which seek to cure every social ill and inculcate every possible worthwhile virtue – we are losing sight of the core purpose, and unique value, of education.’ And he adds: ‘The shift away from seeing education as a process of acquiring knowledge and towards more broadly-sketched “outcomes” is actually a regressive move.’

All this strongly suggests that, if in power, Gove will reverse recent moves towards an aims-based curriculum by removing the new statutory aims. If so, this will take us back towards 1988 and the original, literally aims-less, national curriculum. Once again, it will be taken as read that knowledge, as traditionally carved up, is the focus. Why it is important teachers and parents will not need to ask. Its worth should be self-evident.

Why is Gove, as was Ken Baker before him, so chary of aims – at least, any that go beyond the intrinsic value of knowledge? A plausible answer takes us back 50 years, to the days of the 11-plus and a sharply divided secondary system.

Before the 1960s, the only kind of schooling that could lead to higher education and a professional job was the highly academic regime of the grammar school. Although the scholarship system enabled some children from lower social classes to benefit from this, the

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grammar-school population tended to be drawn from more affluent families.

With the ending of the 11-plus, such families naturally continued to want their own children to be well-placed for higher education and an interesting career. The preservation of the grammar-school kind of curriculum, first in the ‘better’ comprehensives, and after 1988, as the standard for all pupils, has been to their advantage. Children whose upbringing has prepared them for academic pursuits, those who read and write early, for whom geometry and French verbs hold no terrors, and who have been unfazed by unseen exam questions on *Macbeth* in key stage 3 Sats, are likely to fare better under this curriculum than many of those from different backgrounds.

It is not surprising that Gove’s party wants to wind back the clock. Spelling out wider aims draws attention, as we have seen, to the multiplicity of possible ways of realising them. More individually-sensitive ways of learning can help those pupils who fare worst if an academic education is all that is on offer. Narrowing the focus on to traditional knowledge for its own sake helps the already privileged. The more these pupils get absorbed in the intrinsic delights of simultaneous equations, late medieval history, Milton’s poetry, and the handling of the preterite, the more they up their chances of getting into a good university.

All of which raises the question: what is the real aim behind the pursuit of knowledge of this sort? Is it indeed intrinsic? Or extrinsic?

The last thing we need is to go back to a system where official aims are sidelined and covert ones allowed to flourish. What we require instead is a fuller and more considered set of aims than we have at present, one backed by a public rationale, and enabling us all to see how the most specific of curricular prescriptions are legitimated by reference to wider goals. All the indications are that Gove is not the man for this job.

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## Social class still counts for more than top of the class

If more children do well in their exams, more children will prosper – at least that is what the politicians tell the voters. But it is just not true, says **Peter Wilby**, because it was scarcity that made those three As at A-level valuable

It was once possible for politicians to enter election campaigns with no significant policies on education beyond a few vague promises of newer buildings and smaller classes, and a commitment to either selective or non-selective secondary schools. The state then controlled large sectors of the economy – power, water, telecommunications, for example – and carried decisive influence over others, through a variety of bodies with titles such as the National Economic Development Council. Chancellors set interest rates and determined the sterling exchange rate. Trade ministers set tariffs, labour ministers helped to settle industrial disputes, and, at various times and in various ways, governments tried to set wage and price levels.

Now the state has withdrawn from many such areas of economic management, or ceded authority to bodies such as the Bank of England or the European Union. Though governments know they will still be judged on the economy's performance, their scope for influencing it is greatly diminished and they can do little to prevent, for example, the takeover of Cadbury by Kraft or the mothballing of the Corus steelworks on Teesside with consequent losses of British jobs. What they can do, as they see it, is to improve British economic 'competitiveness' by maximising the skills of the population. The main vehicle for achieving this is inevitably the education system.

Two other factors bring education into the electoral arena. First, public services – once presented to the public on a take-it-or-leave-it basis – have been forced to become more consumer-oriented. Increasingly, people expect the same standards of customer service and product quality and the same choices as they find when they buy privately traded goods. Politicians, therefore, intervene more in the detail of public



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former editor of the *New Statesman* and the *Independent on Sunday*



services such as education and health and strive, at elections, to convince voters they can achieve better outcomes than the other parties. This may entail promises that include new structures and institutions, new performance requirements and new consumer rights, including rights to more information, as well as more resources. They also wish to convince tax-payers that their money is well-spent and so usually promise greater 'value for money'.

Politicians thus put themselves firmly on the side of the consumer and tax-payer and take great pains to distance themselves from professionals and practitioners. They want voters to believe, not that MPs and ministers are part of some amorphous state machine, but that they are protectors of consumer and tax-payer interests against an elite that lacks common sense, despises ordinary people and acts according to narrow self-interest.

This accords with wider populist trends in contemporary culture. People who have devoted study and thought to a particular area or acquired direct experience in it are distrusted on subjects as diverse as crime and punishment, justice, poverty, the Middle East, even health (think of the controversy over the MMR vaccine) and the views of 'the man or woman in the street' are respectfully highlighted on innumerable TV and radio news programmes and phone-ins.

Nowhere is this more true than in education, a subject on which everybody thinks that experience as a pupil or a parent entitles them to an authoritative opinion and an area in which claims to professional status and expertise were never as widely accepted as they are in, say, medicine or law. Politicians therefore spatter their election addresses with, for example, promises to root out 'sloppy' or 'trendy' teaching.

Second, and most important of all, the role of education, and particularly secondary education, as a distributor of life chances has been greatly expanded and more widely recognised. Until the late 1960s, the majority of young people left school at the minimum age without any qualifications whatever. A wide variety of manual and clerical jobs required little more than

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basic literacy and numeracy, if that, and an ability and willingness to arrive at work on time and obey orders. Skills, where necessary, were learnt on the job, sometimes through apprenticeships and/or day release. Credentials based on general educational performance – O-levels, A-levels and, more rarely, university degrees – were, for the most part, required for entry only to professional and other white-collar jobs. But for management – and for some occupations such as journalism that are now called (not entirely accurately) 'professions' it was possible well into the post-Second World War era for people to rise from manual or routine jobs (messengers, for example) without possessing a single paper credential.

Now education sifts the population ever more finely into a hierarchy of general competencies, from the lower grades of GCSE to masters' degrees and doctorates. Each qualification level carries access to different segments of the labour market, though the precise value of a particular credential is, to many parents, as obscure as the traditional rules of high society precedence. Not all families understand, for example, that even a first-class degree from one of the newer universities may be worth less, for entry to some careers, than a mediocre degree from Oxford or Cambridge while, despite numerous attempts at reform and standardisation, vocational qualifications remain a thicket of confusing acronyms.

Most parents wish their children to rise as high as possible up the educational hierarchy. Anxieties, and awareness of the value of credentials, are greatest



among middle-class parents and those anxieties grew as economic inequality increased from the 1980s. The penalties of failing to access the more sought-after jobs are immeasurably greater than they were 30 years ago, as are the rewards for accessing the more elite careers. Middle-class parents will fight fiercely to prevent their children slipping down the social and economic ladder and scarcely less fiercely to help them ascend a few steps higher. Many of their anxieties are already evident before and during their children's primary schooling. But the pressure of parental concern – and therefore political concern – falls most heavily on the secondary sector in which pupil performance and acquisition of credentials rations access both to the job market and to further and higher education. Tests and examinations, teaching methods, curriculum, disciplinary ethos and pupil intake all fall under the spotlight.

Politicians, however, face a dilemma. Their usual promises for public services, and their claims for success, concern better results and higher standards – better cancer survival rates, shorter waiting lists for operations, rising numbers passing examinations, smaller classes. These can be said potentially to benefit all individuals, from all social classes and all neighbourhoods, as well as benefiting the nation in, for example, a more skilled workforce or reduced working time lost to ill-health. But education is crucially different. The benefit to a cancer patient of an extra two

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years of life is not reduced if every such patient also enjoys two more years. That is not so when parents consider the benefit to their child of improved exam results.

Suppose my child gets, say, three A-level A grades when, under the inferior education regime of the previous government, she would have got three Bs. The benefit to her is quite significantly reduced if many more children in the same cohort also get As rather than Bs. It is reduced still further if those who would once have got As and Bs now get A\*s or if some who previously got Cs also now get As.

In the short term, competition for university places and jobs requiring A-levels will be intensified. In the longer term, universities, employers and professions may well raise their entry requirements, so that, to succeeding generations, three A grades are worth no more than three Bs once were. And in somewhat less dramatic form, this is roughly what has happened to A-levels over the past 20 years. Many critics argue that A-levels are less demanding than they once were but, whether that is true or not, it is beside the point. The value of the three A grades lay in their scarcity. If, now my child has obtained them, they are more plentiful, the benefit to her is reduced.

It may be argued that the country and its people will benefit from a more highly achieving workforce. The results may include higher economic growth, more desirable and rewarding jobs and greater resources to finance more university places. But even if this relationship were proven (and it isn't), it is unclear that my daughter will ever reap the benefits from her three A grades that she might have expected. It may also be argued that my family should be satisfied with the more intangible benefits of high educational achievement – self-respect, confidence and so on – but modern politicians are uneasy with such abstractions.

Uniquely among public services, education, as recent governments have designed and marketed it, is a zero-sum game. This point is well illustrated by the continued angst over lack of social mobility. The post-war expansion of educational opportunity allowed

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millions of working-class young people to achieve levels that were unattainable to their peers in previous generations. Yet even more millions of middle-class young people also achieved higher levels than their predecessors. The result is that the gap between middle-class and working-class educational performance has, if anything, widened, and social mobility is at best no greater than it was 40 years ago.

The central fact of post-war social history is that social and economic opportunity now depend on merit as identified by the education system, just as generations of well-meaning reformers hoped it would. Unfortunately, the reformers did not foresee that educational merit would be so closely related to social class, making access to the best careers more, not less, dependent, on birth and breeding.

Politicians are therefore compelled to promise the impossible: ‘better’ results across the board and ‘good’ schools and ‘good’ teachers for everybody. Because some parents will always be disappointed or apprehensive and because some schools will always be less successful than others – mainly, but not entirely, because of differences in their class and ability intakes – opposition parties invariably insist that schools are ‘in crisis’, that a ‘shake-up’ is necessary and that ‘innovative’ schools and ‘new’ practices (the latter usually, in fact, practices that were abandoned a decade or two ago) are required.

Parties seeking re-election may use less dramatic

rhetoric, but nevertheless promise continuing ‘reform’, more action on ‘failing schools’ and ‘tougher’ measures against teachers or local authorities on whom shortcomings can be blamed.

The rhetoric of crisis and failure strikes a chord with a large proportion of the electorate, and particularly with young, aspiring parents, who tend to be among the more biddable voters. Paradoxically, most parents are perfectly satisfied with the school their children attend. But prior concern about what is available at secondary level, subsequent disappointment with children’s results and career prospects, employers’ complaints when school-leavers turn out to be less impressive than previous cohorts with similar credentials (because those cohorts contained pupils who would now continue their education) and everybody’s discovery that what the parties promised last time didn’t quite deliver the expected benefits – all these combine to create an undercurrent of disgruntlement that politicians exploit.

Since the distinction between an election campaign and normal political exchanges is now only a matter of degree – New Labour came to office convinced that no government dare lose control of the political agenda for even a day – schools are subject to a constant battery of political ‘initiatives’ which are supposed to raise standards, eradicate failure, enhance consumer choice, and so on. In an education system that is now largely sold, not on the inherent merits or personal satisfactions of learning, but on promises of advancement in a highly competitive society, all are likely to fail.

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