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Deborah Orr: No excuses – only better schooling

Another of Labour's supposed successes has been stripped of its baubles, with yesterday's damning investigation into the state of Britain's primary schools, describing them as being in "severely utilitarian and philistine times". I suppose one should be glad that the charade has finally been completely exposed. But I just feel so angry that what has been clear to me for years – through a simple "investigation" that involved nothing more or less than watching my own children, and many of their friends, flounder in a system that taught them only that learning was unutterably tedious – has remained unacknowledged by the Government for so long.

The Government has been told a million times that "teaching to the test" was destructive, because it blighted the schooldays of children in order that they could jump through hoops to make their schools look good on paper. But minister after minister kept on retorting that the schools did look good on paper and so the cycle of denial continued. It was not until last year that the Government's delusions about primary education began to crack, and it admitted what many parents knew already: that many of our children are not being properly taught to read and write. Until then, Labour's honest, stupid, belief was that primary schools were fine.

Educational problems, they genuinely believed, suddenly and inexplicably appeared at secondary school. Their current prescription? Keep all children, even the least enthusiastic, at school until they are 18. And what? Hope they die of boredom before they blossom into Neets? The report suggests that children enjoy school more if teachers "blend literacy and numeracy into the wider teaching of other subjects". Leaving aside the sheer utilitarian philistinism of those words – "literacy" and "numeracy" – that statement gets to the heart of the problem.

I can't speak for every school or every child as this report, the most comprehensive for 40 years, does. But the level at which such blending does not happen is, in my observation, utterly basic and totally staggering.

You'd think, for example, that children might be taught about handwriting through drawing. Or at least that drawing might be seen as a fun way of getting young children to hold a pencil and form a letter properly. But my sons gained the very strong impression early on that it didn't really matter how they held a pencil, or how they formed a letter. Trying to teach them the right way of drawing or writing at home became a nightmare, because it contradicted the stuff they were being told at school.

You'd think, as well, that the introduction of writing into the things that the children did enjoy would be seized on. Yet no opportunity to hand the children a photocopied sheet of computer-generated and non-cursive lettering is ever missed. The idea of asking children to take down the lyrics of a song themselves, or make their own list of spelling words, seems lost in the mists of time. Children seem never to be asked to pick up a pencil as a means to another end, and as a way of getting them to practise their writing skills. They appear to pick up a pencil only for "literacy".

The report goes much more deeply into all of this, explaining how so many of the other subjects are sacrificed in favour of literacy and numeracy that don't even work that well. But the biggest blight in our primary schools is lack of ambition for children.

They seem to be taught that learning is hard and that the smallest effort is to be applauded. I want my children to understand that writing is a mechanical process that with practice can be done with barely any thought at all, except for thought about the ideas you are trying to express. What they seem to understand from school is that writing is jolly difficult and should be resorted to only when there is no alternative.

I'm foolish and reckless enough to believe that, as a person with the privilege of a public space in which to make my observations known, it is important that I educate my children in the public sector, like 93 per cent of the population do. Anyway, as a product of a "bog-standard" state education myself, though in Scotland, I know it does not fail all children. But I've learned a lot more from this commitment than my children have.

So, fearful at his ruined confidence, and non-existent skills, and lucky enough to have the option, financially, I moved one of my boys into the private sector last Easter to spend his last year of primary education at a school that didn't patronise him, and wave away his difficulties. It expected him instead to roll up his sleeves and get down to the business of catching up. He, and his chances, have been transformed, more thoroughly than I could have imagined.

Yes, the classes are smaller. Yes, the teaching is exceptional. But the crucial difference is that one school offered him excuses, while the other wouldn't dream of accepting any that he offered. Likewise, no one should dream of accepting the Government's excuses, or those of its apologists, for one moment longer.