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John Rentoul: The golden age of education is a myth

We love to think that life was better in the 19th century, so that we can express horror at the state we are in

We don't half like moaning about how awful life is. Take schools, for instance. Dreadful. Children shouldn't go to them. Not until they are at least six, and possibly 16. Most of them leave school unable to read and write, anyway. And testing. That's a load of rubbish. Scrap the SATs. Then all those children who are not at school but presumably roaming the streets will pick up the three Rs by osmosis. Learning by doing.

What we really like is comparisons that tell us that life is worse than in the 19th century. A minor news story a few years ago reported a claim that the health gap between rich and poor in Britain was greater than in Victorian times. Patent nonsense if given a moment's thought, but we haven't time for that before we're on to the next story about our better yesterdays. Last month Lesley Ward, the new president of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers union, had her 15 minutes of name recognition for the claim that a "small, significant and growing minority" of children endure a level of poverty "mirroring the times of Dickens". No, they don't.

But back to schools: our sister newspaper achieved the ideal last week. The Independent asked on its front page: Do our pupils get a better education than the Victorians? It managed to answer in the negative, despite the obvious objections. Closer examination reveals that this rested on a single sentence in a report that said the primary school curriculum is "even narrower than that of the Victorian elementary schools".

This is a rather extreme and contradictory example of golden ageism, given that the same report repeats another common complaint, which is that schools are forced by the Government to cram too many things into the primary curriculum. But then Professor Robin Alexander, the author of the Cambridge study, has long been a critic of New Labour. His main complaint has been tests and the need to abolish them. The other things in his report seem designed to attract media attention and the support of teachers in order to further this objective.

The idea that formal lessons should not start until the age of six, for instance, has a lot of support. So much so that it is common practice in many primary schools. The question of when compulsory education should start is slightly different, and not helped by simple comparisons with Scandinavia, where the legal age is six or seven, but where most younger children are in some kind of nursery schools.

So what, apart from saying that our primary schools are worse than they have been for 100 years, does Professor Alexander's report say? Abolish testing and league tables. Well, it is a thought. Then we will at least have no idea how good or bad our schools are, and anybody can assert what they like. Of course, SATs are the worst way of finding out how the education system is performing - apart from any other way. Some countries test random samples of children without giving them a chance to prepare. Those tests give a good statistical overview of the whole picture, like an opinion poll, but if they identify weaknesses, they fail to identify schools or pupils and therefore to provide any useful information to help to rectify them.

SATs are imperfect too because of confusion about what the results mean. David Blunkett, Labour's first Education Secretary, whose literacy and numeracy hours produced the single greatest rise in primary school standards, made one mistake of over-ambition that has haunted the New Labour record ever since. He decided

that the standard expected of the average pupil should be the minimum expected - hence all the nonsense ever since about children leaving primary school unable to read or write "properly" ("properly" being a big weasel, warning word). By international standards, literacy in the British adult population is 99 per cent, as opposed to 90 per cent at the end of the Victorian era.

Professor Alexander's prescription for schools is like Conservative policy for the NHS: abolish targets and information about performance and trust to the judgement of the professionals. Fortunately, Michael Gove, the Tory education spokesman, has not fallen for that trap, even if he did spend too much time in his speech in Manchester earlier this month reading out silly questions from GCSE exam papers.

There must be lessons from the different perceptions of the health service and our schools. Golden ageism is almost completely absent from reporting of the NHS. It is widely accepted that it has improved over the past 12 years. Academics who study health care accept that this is so, even though information about waiting times simply did not exist before 1997 - just as information about schools performance was limited before SATs were introduced (by a Conservative government) in 1991.

Chris Ham, professor of health care at Birmingham University, recently told me, for example: "Evidence on waiting times for different stages of the journey and particularly for the diagnostic waits stage has not been strong in the past. [But] the big picture point is that massive progress has been made in cutting waiting times in the last decade. Access to care in England is now much speedier than at any time since the inception of the NHS."

Perhaps the changes in the NHS are so tangible that no one could claim that health care was better in the Victorian era - or that good health was more equally enjoyed. Perhaps that is what allows Andrew Lansley, the Tory health spokesman, to persist in his foolish pretend policy, which will not be implemented in government, of abolishing targets. But the truth is that the improvements in our schools are just as real, if not so measurable, and it is just as well that Gove is not tempted to follow Professor Alexander on his pied piper journey to a mythical yesterday.

John Rentoul's blog is at independent.co.uk/jrentoul

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