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Ten years of bold education boasts now look sadly hollow

It will be hard politically but Labour must accept its vaunted policies on schools haven't worked - and change them now



Jenni Russell

The Guardian, Tuesday 13 November 2007

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When Tony Blair advertises his services as a speaker through the Washington Speakers' Bureau, education is named as one of two key domestic achievements. Education is one of the few solid fields of success Labour ministers feel they can rely on when the government record is under attack. Which means the growing evidence that educational progress has been considerably overstated, and that some educational reforms may have been positively damaging, has been very difficult for ministers to admit or take on board.

Yesterday the Guardian reported that Lancaster University's research into the government's specialist schools programme and the Excellence in Cities initiative had concluded that, while the policies had cost billions, the benefits were "meagre". Educational resources appeared to have been allocated "inefficiently and inequitably" in the programme, since most resources had gone to schools with higher proportions of better-off children. While there had been an improvement in exam results, only a third of the improvement could be attributed to government policy. The authors' conclusion was that these results "suggest a substantial misallocation of public funds".

The response of the Department for Children, Schools and Families was predictably defensive, accusing the report of "cherry-picking policies selectively, rather than looking at the whole picture". There was no sense that the DCSF was going to study the research for what could be learned

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The same defensive reaction was evident this month when Cambridge University published its interim reports from a wide-ranging, independent, two-year review of primary education in England. Seventy academics are undertaking 30 different surveys of published evidence, with 87 meetings being held with schools and parents around the country to get a snapshot of primary education now.

The conclusions of the first three reports should make those running education policy stop and think. They demonstrate that the initial sharp rise in primary school test results between 1995 and 2000 is now understood to be largely a result of teaching to the tests, and not to a dramatic improvement in learning. They point out that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the government's own Statistics Commission accepted the rises were overstated, only for the DCSF to reject the findings. The review also finds that the primary curriculum has narrowed in response to the testing; that statutory tests make it harder, not easier, to judge pupils' progress; that there have been rises in test-induced stress among pupils; that the results of the tests are unreliable in up to a third of cases; and that the gap between the highest and lowest achievers in Britain is wider than in many other countries.

The reports conclude there has been a genuine, although modest, improvement in children's numeracy. It cannot say the same about literacy. Some £500m has been spent so far on running the national literacy hour. Yet the review concludes that standards of reading have been "more or less static since the 1950s". The National Literacy Strategy has had "a barely noticeable effect" on reading ability, yet since it has been introduced there has been a substantial fall in children's enjoyment of reading. Meanwhile the literacy levels of the poorest children are further behind their peers than anywhere in Europe.

The review is also highly critical of the narrow basis on which children's ability is measured. It points out that the pressure on schools and children to deliver the right answers to tests means teachers don't develop children's abilities to think and talk. Teachers ask closed questions and children are expected to give short, prescribed answers.

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What the report calls "higher-order learning", ie the ability to connect different ideas and draw conclusions from evidence, is neither encouraged nor measured. Here the report echoes a child I heard on the radio last week, who said: "I know the right thing to do to pass the tests, but I don't know what I'm doing."

But perhaps the most important parts of the report are to be found in its recommendations for the future. It points out, drily, that "massive efforts to bring about change have had a relatively small impact". Education policies have cost hundreds of millions, but they have generally had neither a sound basis in research nor a systematic evaluation thereafter. As the review says, what is clear is our ignorance. It wants to see policies tied much more closely to evidence, and trials of any new initiatives before they become national practice.

In its response the DCSF appears to be imprisoned by its political inability to admit that the thrust of this policy could have been a mistake. Indeed, ministers are planning to press ahead with new tests for primary school children which can be taken at any point during the school year - something critics believe will only add to pupils' stress, while adding nothing to their learning.

Perhaps the only hope lies in the possibility that the new secretary of state will have the courage to look at the evidence anew. Meanwhile, it is ironic to reflect that, 10 years after coming into office and promising to govern on the basis of "what works", the government should still have so little idea of what really does.

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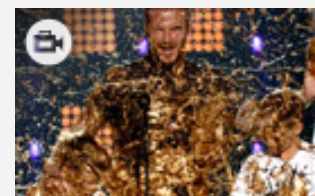
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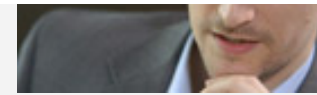
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timetomoveon

14 November 2007 1:32am

Changing their policies would be good if changed for the better.

In the meantime what are the Government going to do to rectify the damage that has been sustained by both pupils and teachers over the last ten years and how quickly is the whole debacle to be resolved. Best the Labour Party puts its hand in its pocket and affords appropriate courses for the children who have lost out through their error or should we say negligence.

Ministers are very happy to tell us 'they have learned lessons and are now better equipped to go forward' salaries, perks and benefits- trotters even in the trough . They should be sacked and made to pay compensation to those they have damaged- then they'll have learned.



newsed1

14 November 2007 1:44am

We might also ask why our children are still failing to respond to the various educational treatments of the last four decades?

Is it, as special needs teacher friend of mine said, that we are now trying to educate the third generation of Communist-style pupils, and find the parents and grandparents

the third generation of Comprehensive pupils and find the parents and grandparents can't provide the back-up at home?

Is this 'compounding' of the comprehensive experience also causing an alarming split to open up between the middle class 30 percent and the rest?

(and, yes, I did go to a bog standard one..)



marksa

14 November 2007 5:08am

"Rarely is the question asked, is our children learning?" --Pres. George W. Bush, Jan. 11, 2000

Perhaps we might ask the Americans for help. President Bush has been obviously pondering this issue, and he might have some bright ideas by now.



janfrank

14 November 2007 7:21am

"I know the right thing to do to pass the tests, but I don't know what I'm doing."

This is what a child says, but it would apply much more strongly to NuLabour as a whole. They want to pass the tests, i.e. newspaper approval and electoral approval, but don't know what they're doing.

From an evolutionary point of view, parents are there to nurture their children and to educate them to survive to adults who can look after themselves.

We have lost sight of this need. Children are now educated so that the government can pass its test - and to hell whether this is good for the children.

The gap between what the government wants and what the child needs has been widening steadily over the last century. What the government wants are children who pass tests; they can then tell the papers and the electorate how many tests the children pass. As if this is proof that children are being educated.

What children and young adults need is to learn how to learn, how to ask questions, how to appraise what they're being taught. This is not done for two reasons:

1) you cannot test the ability to ask questions or to appraise the answers - the government insists that the "no test, no proof" argument is the only one 2) if people

grew up with a training of being able to ask questions and appraise answers, no in-group doing the governing would be safe. Keep them ignorant is the safest method.

Perhaps I'm very cynical, but I can't say I have been very enthusiastic about my own school experience or what I see young people being subject to these days.



Salfordian

14 November 2007 7:23am

Those areas where schools (and children) are failing are, in the main, areas of poverty and deprivation. There is a clear connection between poverty and low attainment. Instead of fiddling around with this or that initiative the government needs to make our society more equal through taxation. Look at the evidence - the more unequal the society - such as ours and the US - the greater the disparity between the educational attainment of those at the top and those at the bottom. Look to the Scandinavians and 'old' Europe.



iamnotwhattheywant

14 November 2007 7:25am

"Rarely is the question asked, is our children learning?" --Pres. George W. Bush, Jan. 11, 2000

The construction of that sentence suggests the President has problems of his own.



MorrisOx

14 November 2007 7:32am

What kind of world is it where the people who threaten my children most are academics and politicians?



radished

14 November 2007 7:44am

"When Tony Blair advertises his services as a speaker through the Washington Speakers' Bureau, education is named as one of two key domestic achievements."

Don't say the other one is the economy

"Which means the growing evidence that educational progress has been considerably overstated, and that some educational reforms may have been positively damaging, has been very difficult for ministers to admit or take on board."

Very limited people, hidebound by conventionally, of very sparse experience. Barely fit to venture forth without a carer, and yet they formed the government of the country in 97. They just weren't good enough.

"Yesterday the Guardian reported that Lancaster University's research into the government's specialist schools programme and the Excellence in Cities initiative had concluded that, while the policies had cost billions, the benefits were "meagre"."

Trouble is that having borrowed billions and pissed it up the wall, you can't spend wasted money twice. Between 2001/6 they borrowed 100 billions more than they said they would. They extended the scope of PFI far beyond what the Tories had done, they tended to use PFI as a limited expedient, and so mortgaged the future to a wholly irresponsible degree.

"newsed1 November 14, 2007 1:44 AM We might also ask why our children are still failing to respond to the various educational treatments of the last four decades?"

Is it, as special needs teacher friend of mine said, that we are now trying to educate the third generation of Comprehensive pupils and find the parents and grandparents can't provide the back-up at home?"

That's a desperate but perhaps all too plausible comment.



magnolia

14 November 2007 8:01am

The problem with education in the UK is not what has been done over the past 30 years, or what might be done in the coming years, but rather what the political elite have not and will not allow to be done at all, ever. Namely the acknowledgement that some kids are academic and some kids aren't. Some kids are bright and some kids aren't.

As a nation we need to concentrate on developing, encouraging and inspiring our best young talent, whilst managing and guiding our lesser able children. There should be no difference in approach between general education and the academies at our leading football clubs. At football clubs the 'educators' find the best talent and develop it towards excellence, whilst being realistic and straight up about the

potential of the those who don't make the cut.

Recently I worked for two years on a programme that said it was concerned with taking the highest quality and cutting edge academics into UK high schools in a bid to stretch the sixth form students. At every turn I was blocked from taking these academics into any school that had achieved high educational standards and instead I was consistently directed to take this programme into 'disadvantaged schools'. The kids in these 'disadvantaged schools' had little or no interest in what the academics could provide and even when they did show interest in the seminars, the academic abilities of these teenagers was simply not sufficient to take advantage of this high level opportunity.

Does Wenger spend all day training the kid who is never going to make the Arsenal first team no matter what opportunities are put his way, or does he focus on those with the greatest natural abilities and help turn them into footballing giants?

We had a system in the UK that worked and worked well. It was the Grammar / Secondary system, but the political elite, devoted as they are to theory rather than empirical evidence, destroyed this system and now refuse to accept what a gigantic mistake this 'comprehensive experiment' has been.



JESTERZ

14 November 2007 8:06am

Labours instincts always were to spray money at a problem rather than try to understand it. Part of the reason for this has been political, enabling labour to castigate the Tories for spending cuts. My wife works in a school & the reasons for poor performance can be named in five. Some very bad disinterested teachers, poor or no backup from parents, family breakdown, poor discipline & silly dicktats from Whitehall. The very things spraying money about won't cure!



jarrah

14 November 2007 8:56am

Yes, all sadly true. I was in education for 20 years, and I know that teachers, unions, academics etc have been saying so loud and clear. But government ignores them all and sticks to its usual script. The problems are:

1. They think government knows best (they don't)
2. They think appearing to do something is the same as doing something (it isn't)
3. They think quoting statistics proves they've succeeded at something (it doesn't)

All governments do these things, but this Labour government is worse than most - because they put ideology before pragmatics and are obsessed with control and obsessed with manipulating and distorting to persuade that things are otherwisethan they are. Deceit, no less. Add to that a reckless disregard for how public money is spent and you have disaster. No wonder they've done so little good in education, as in everything else.



greatoperation

14 November 2007 9:00am

I read these comments as a parent with a young child, whose education now and the future is a priority. I cannot see that his solely learning test answers, in order for the Government of the day to have an occasional good headline, to be in his best interest. Having some experience of being "taught to the test" in order to pass exams, showed me how demoralising this is. Also how much of an inevitability it is that schools/teachers will behave thus, when presented with a target. I was lucky enough to be taught generally, around the subject, as well. I cannot see this happening in the majority of comprehensives. More money, maybe, but the culture of reaching a target as a priority eschews all-round teaching, as does it distort behaviour in other fields (e.g in the field of NHS surgery). Drop the targets! Let professionals get on with their work, which they know a damn sight better than Whitehall.



undercoveraca

14 November 2007 9:20am

This piece expresses well the difference between 'teaching to the test' and learning. I see this also in HE where I teach; and senior school teachers in my family assure me that this is essentially the state of play (and the reason for better grades).

Let's not forget that there is a whole ideological underpinning to this testing madness: public choice theory. It states without evidence, on the basis of 'human nature', that those running public services cannot be trusted to perform well out of their inherent interest in what they do, and basic status-motives related to working well, like promotion and gaining the respect of others.

Instead they must have lots of performance management targets and incentives to prod them. through testing, the architects of the system think they are measuring 'quality'and fostering its pursuit, but they are just distorting the system, encouraging game-playing, strategic behaviour and unintended consequences. Simultaneously it suppresses qualified professional autonomy to act with discretion, and fidelity in

suppresses qualified professionals' autonomy to act with discretion, and kids' joy in open-ended learning. It is the latter collective intelligence that gets things working at the chalkface, and they just stamp it out.

The double whammy is that the constant change sought by the improvement 'initiatives' technocrats think will lead to quality 'as measured', are also a waste of time, energy and money that could have been deployed on core activities like reducing class sizes. There's no surprise none of this has worked, despite billions wasted. It makes me feel like a Tory... but let's not forget Thatcher started the whole approach to the public sector at stake (it's just she didn't waste the extra cash on it...)

This is about poor British management compared to progressive European models where managers' jobs are to support professionals, not confuse them. British management (I would guess across the whole economy) is still a reflection of our class system, with those at top barking orders (or today 'strategies' we have figured out for ourselves) off the top off their heads, expecting the rest of us to go fetch. (At least in the uni where I work, the uni sector also being subject to this creeping death.) They don't really scrutinise work processes. They don't really manage. Because of all our 'initiatives' we have a class of confused/confusing managers, who cost a lot (lots are needed to work through the miasma they create) and disrupt the efforts those responsible for core delivery.

JUST SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS AND MAKE THEM ACCOUNTABLE IN SENSIBLE WAYS. For me, this culture is what needs unpicking, before we waste more billions.

Let's not forget our private schools are the best in the world because they run themselves, not just because of the extra cash.



robbinghood

14 November 2007 9:24am

Last week a senior government spokesman asserted there were 17000 failing teachers.

I assert there are not 17000 failing teachers but 17000 principled people suckered into a political experiment known as comprehensive education and that experiment has systemically failed.

These 17000 people and their failed pupils, and the many thousands failed before them, should get together and start an action against expense-magnet Balls in his capacity as "Education" minister for neglect of duty of care to both pupils AND teachers. That's a class action worth supporting.

(And I'm NOT a teacher and my children had a good education years ago, thanks be to God.)



incorruptible

14 November 2007 9:26am

A lot of these comments are rather empty since they criticize past policy without giving much hint about what better policy would be. The truth is that it is an extremely complex question which we do not yet understand more than very partially (see for example the OECD studies on cross-country comparisons of education achievement and education systems). So there are no simple 'right' answers, and the things we think work a bit are only ever tendencies. What this government has done has been generally sensible, given the limitations on the levers they can pull and our only moderate understanding. They have generally given more power to schools to decide things for themselves: good. They have provided lots more money: good. More money doesn't necessarily make things better but too little money can definitely make things worse. They have gone for a reasonable middle way on testing: good. We need to have information in order to find out what works. If the statistics do not show that much progress has been made, then this is clear evidence that we are getting the truth from our tests - a valuable tool. The government has also set itself the target of abolishing child poverty: good. There are no magic wands. You can argue about details, but generally speaking this government has behaved sensibly and non-ideologically: we can ask no more. A parent and ex-teacher



liberalcynic

14 November 2007 9:44am

But Jenni, surely you don't expect New Labour to actually LISTEN, do you?



Cholo

14 November 2007 10:05am

Labour is reacting to this failure by looking to ending the tax breaks for independent schools. After all, if poncey blazer-wearing, team sports playing, latin-reciting schools didn't exist then the Labour party would find it easier to claim state schools were "world-class".

Intriguingly, 48 of the 50 best state schools are blazer-wearing too.
http://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/features/behindtheheadlines/display.var.1746012.0.jackets_often_costly.php



DisillusionedLiberal

14 November 2007 10:13am

The thought of sending my soon to be born child into a system dominated by tests and targets, academic theory and blind political dogma is deeply discomforting. What angers me is ministers' constant criticism of teachers when, as reports like this show, it is they who are responsible for the failure to have much real impact on standards. I can't help thinking that things would be so much better if they would spend more time plotting against each other in their subsidised bars and leave teachers alone for a while to get on with the job. Btw I'm not a teacher myself.



undercoveraca

14 November 2007 10:15am

INCORRUPTIBLE

But this thread has been kicked off by evidence that the tests are not a good tool, because the costs are too high. They stress out kids and distract from deep learning. You cite the OECD: what about the one where they place the UK BOTTOM for children's quality of life in the developed world? You can also look at the countries at the top of the OECD education rankings. Take Finland: big investment, yes, but combined with policies (low testing/high professional autonomy) that are more or less the opposite of New Labour. Coincidence?

Your other point is that the tests actually measure something. They do. But they measure ability to take a test, not internet ability or deep knowledge. Students are coached for them at the expense of broader intellectual and emotional development. This is the main source of better grades (not as some say, easier questions). If you want evidence, York University has for decades given science undergrad entrants the same diagnostic maths test (same questions, unchanging) every year for nearly three decades under the same conditions. This is not a test they are coached for. There has been a steady decline in the students scores on the test, despite there improving A-level results.



ByGeorge

14 November 2007 10:27am

We live in a quite affluent town in north Merseyside. We have a situation here where my 7 year old is currently learning about the Ancient Egyptians. He will learn about the Ancient Greeks in Spring. They will look at the work of Miro and some other modern artist whose name I can't remember later in the year. However, he, and many of his friends are lagging behind in basic reading and writing skills. The volume of homework he brings home makes us wonder just why he attends school, since I have taken over teaching him most of the bread-and-butter stuff. We have teachers who, when not on maternity leave, are on job share (with no loss of teaching quality we are assured). The same teachers also get 10% of the working week as P&P, when the children are supervised by the 'Teaching Assistant From Hell'. Oh, and if they're well behaved they get some time watching telly on Friday afternoons. Class sizes, unlike my own when I was a boy, are a comfortable 29/30 - I had 39 'classmates' in my inner-Liverpool school in the 1960s.

School results are good (SATS2), but the teaching staff, while patting themselves on the back, have absolutely no idea of the huge number of children being taken to Kumon each and every night to have their children educated. Luckily for them their parents can afford it - what about the poor souls in inner-city Liverpool.

As in everything else in Britain, I'm afraid nobody in authority gives a damn as long as the best education and jobs are reserved for the deserving rich!

Our politicians have now have no direct experience of life as an ordinary person lives it.



midlandsmike

14 November 2007 10:30am

I agree with Incorruptible: we know what makes a good school, we know how to ruin an education system, but what we do not know is what goes on inside people's heads - the Black Box, so that although we know what works, we do not know why it works, which is why we find it difficult to replicate it. The situation is not helped by people like Jenni Russell who actually know no more about it than anybody else, but who continues to write article after article for Comment & Debate saying the same thing over and over again. But then again, everybody has been to school, so we are all experts on education, and we continue to deal in the same stereotypes over and over again, confirming our own prejudices, kidding ourselves that if only we did this, or that, all the problems would be solved and we would live in Paradise for ever and ever, amen. How the Hell does raising income tax improve the lifechances of a disaffected 14 year old?



zendon

14 November 2007 10:31am

It is extremely difficult to reach the senior ranks of the media/political/progressive/liberal industrial complex if you have to devote time to raising a family. Those that do, whilst supporting bankrupt pseudo-socialist ideas for the education of the masses, seem perfectly happy to choose a selective/private school for their own offspring (Messrs Blair, Boateng, T. Phillips, Harman, Abbott et al).

If a muscular right-wing education is good enough for their children, why do they pull the ladder up behind them leaving the Rest to wallow in a system paralysed by initiatives, diktats/ training days/ SATS / worthless Alevels etc?



alvanoto

14 November 2007 10:46am

'despite there improving A-level results'

Looks like you could do with making some improvements of your own. Did you say you were an academic?



Yummance

14 November 2007 11:34am

I can hear the sound of the beating wings of chickens coming home to roost.

As ever, Tony Blair's timing was (superficially at least) perfect; his successors are left to reap the whirlwind.

However, on this as on many other issues, history will not judge him kindly.

I was a victim of the Comprehensive experiment in Hull in the mid to late 60's. It was only the escape for crucial O level years to a Technical Grammar School in Birmingham which gave me a fingerhold on the academic ladder.

My own son is now 15 months old and we have another baby due at the end of February 2008. We desperately want them both to be educated in the State Sector

(as we both were) but what will the State Sector be like when they get there?

Tony Blair proclaimed "Education, Education, Education" as his priority in government. We have been deceived, we have been let down and we have been abandoned.

The most perceptive comment I have read on this blog is the truism that Labour have compounded existing education problems by focussing on the short term political expediency of passing their own "tests" with a complete disregard for what is actually good for the children themselves. All the while key Labour politicians (listed by another poster) are busily making use of private education opportunities for their own children.

How cold and gloomy does the evening of this regime feel after the gloriously sunny dawn of the new era in 1997.



north

14 November 2007 11:39am

Newsed1. The answer to your question is yes. Salfordian. Chicken and egg. What comes first? Does poverty lead to educational failure or does educational failure lead to poverty? I was brought up in a poor working class household in Scotland yet won a scholarship to a private, fee-paying school. Numerous friends also gained scholarships to private schools or got int senior secondaries (grammar schools) despite coming from one of the worst slum areas in Edinburgh. It is certainly harder to succeed if you are poor but nowhere near impossible. Undercoveraca. My friends and I went through, what would now be seen as, the testing regime from hell. Right from early primary years we were tested, on a weekly basis, in arithmetic, english, history, geography and other subjects. We also had term tests, the 'Qualifying' test (11 Plus) plus various practise 'dry runs'. This continued throughout secondary with the added bonus of all the external exams and their 'mocks'. Strangely enough, I cannot remember many stressed friends or acquaintances. If modern kids are stressed and unhappy it may have to do with things happening and wider society not the school.



zedy

14 November 2007 11:51am

Time for politicians to leave the schools alone to pick up the pieces. I wouldn't put my kid in a state school here. But what do you want when everything is a commodity and the market knows best. Pay a bit more for better performers, publicly flay those

'underperformers', don't allow any group receiving public money to have a minute's peace, make sure that accountability and targets are always at the fore. An absolute recipe for disaster, and that is what we have.

Pity the teachers & hospitals. We made a mess by the privatising of our industries.

Now we are determined to bring the market to everything and ruin what's left of working people's goodwill in the process.

Time to return to socialist principles?



radished

14 November 2007 11:53am

"They have provided lots more money: good. "

But as I said, incorruptible, you can only spend the monney once, if you waste it, then it is down the drain and gone.

When Nulab came in their clarion call was "standards not structures". What this meant of course was that they didn't have the courage or the wit to look at the clearly defective structures. The comprehensive experiment, however tarted up, is considered by many to have been a failure, some element of selection is absolutely essential. We now are also told that big schools are bad news from the discipline point of view particularly, hardly a great revelation but there it is.

In order to act however money is required, Nulab over the past 6/7 years launched into what is more than likely a once for all spending splurge, to very doubtrful effect. Once the money is gone, that's it - so is the wasted time.



HJHJ

14 November 2007 11:58am

They have wasted billions, as any sensible person predicted.

Hayek pointed out that centrally run government monopolies are bad because the government cannot effectively be both a critic of the results and defend their own running of the system. They inevitably do the latter and this is why we get government spin and an attempt to deceive us.

The solution is to make schools independent of the government - no top down initiatives or 'system'. They might be owned and run by companies, charities, as co-

initiatives or system. They might be owned and run by companies, charities, or co-ops - whatever - answerable to their users. The government should restrict itself to considering how all can afford to pay for schools, not to actually running them itself.



jarrah

14 November 2007 11:59am

to answer Incorruptible.

Yes, it's easy to point the finger, but it needs to be done. You need to identify failure before you can address it. The future is relatively simple. Two stages: you roll back government and local authority interference in schools. At every level.

It is not really true that Labour have done this. There are an immense amount of government imposed initiatives still going on. For example, by December 3rd all schools MUST publish a 'Disability Equality Scheme' - a very large document detailing all that a school is planning to do to cater for pupils and staff with disabilities. Fine you might think. But it is all dictated by the DfES. The format, the content, etc - and whether there are or not disabled pupils/staff there.

And it was Labour who, in 2003, changed the inspection framework, altering the criteria to ensure that more schools were identified as failing when previously they would not have been so identified. Thereby allowing much more control from the local authority, many many more targets and so on.

And so on. Lots of diktats, lots of control. Endless circulars telling teachers what they must teach. Including the bizarre circular telling us we must teach children 'happiness' - what sort of half insane bureaucrat or politician thinks you can teach children how to be happy? And of course all these curriculum diktats are added to the Ofsted criteria - meaning you'll be inspected as to wheehr or not you're doing it, and 'failed' if you're not.

Quite how anyone thinks all this is giving more autonomy to schools frankly escapes me.

Stage 2 - allow all schools eventually to become self governing, as it used to be a long long time ago. End the finger pointing and assumptions that teachers are all useless and must be told what to do (by people who've never taught). Leave teachers and schools alone to get on with what they know how to do. Abolish Ofsted - they do no good at all and waste gargantuan sums of public money. Abolish the testing regime and the target culture. Slim down the DfES, slim down local authority administration and put the money directly into schools instead. If all this was done, you would see a flowering of education, a renaissance, and children would do better and be happier.



AngelaPhillips

14 November 2007 12:20pm

One major difference between the British education system and the rest is that we insist on starting to teach children to read at four. Some four year olds are ready. Others are not. The children who are not ready, developmentally, to achieve this difficult task learn very early on that they are failures and they behave accordingly. tell a child they cannot do something and pretty soon they stop trying. In Sweden no child starts reading until they are nearly seven. By that time the slower group will have caught up developmentally and all of them will be raring to go. They learn fast and they learn together and very few children are left behind feeling like miserable failures. While our system continues to focus on the top thirty percent it will never provide education suitable for the rest. It will just teach them how wit feels to fail.



WillDuff

14 November 2007 12:32pm

AngelaPhillips is absolutely right: we have this absurd fuss being made about the failure of 5-year-olds to achieve the government's target on reading, yet that target is fundamentally silly. Sweden isn't the only country which doesn't even begin to teach reading and writing by 5 - I know that Italy doesn't either and doubtless other countries do the same. Exactly why is the government persisting with this foolish target?

The comment that previous generations had as tough (or even tougher) a testing regime is interesting. Maybe the current problem is the purpose of the testing, which is not aimed at checking the knowledge of individual pupils with a view to determining how best to continue teaching them but is solely to check whether a school is meeting government targets (and so that schools can be placed in silly league tables).



emilbus

14 November 2007 12:45pm

League tables/tests etc, like detention without trial, are the prescriptions of a failed political system.

Politics is a mere dog-fight today.

Success in politics depends entirely on its democratic credentials and on social justice - principles that are entirely absent under new Labour



thetrashheap

14 November 2007 12:48pm

Education reform won't work as long as we keep focusing on the schools and the teachers. The main problem lies with the pupils but nobody in power is willing to allocate blame to the little kiddies so they aren't dealing with the problem.

The main complaints I get from anyone who went to an inner city school is about the quality of their class mates not their teachers.

We either force kids to learn or we remove the ones who don't want to learn, that would solve 90% of the problem.

Problem is nobody in power seems to believe in doing this they just move to nice areas or send their kids to private schools and condemn everybody else.

Private schools and schools in nice areas don't have much better teachers they have much better pupils.



DaveBerry

14 November 2007 12:59pm

To all those blaming the comprehensive system, please could you explain how good the old secondary moderns were at teaching the less academically able children?

At first glance, I fail to see how the problem of a significant minority of children failing to learn will be solved by shunting them back into secondary moderns. But perhaps you can explain how this will help?



easterman

14 November 2007 1:20pm

Smoke and mirrors and spin . Election election election .

Ask the poor bloody infantry who have been bombarded by PR stunt after PR stunt -

each one diminishing the key hidden resource of 'goodwill'.

One instance . Opening 'specialist' schools whilst closing down 'special' schools catering for academically able autistic children . Whither 'inclusion' when these vulnerable children go under with depression from the chronic stress they experience = a lose-lose-lose exercise in bean counting .

Stupid new labour .



parttimer

14 November 2007 1:50pm

Sorry: "drily"? This should presumably be "dryly". Oh, the irony.



WillDuff

14 November 2007 2:05pm

easterman reminds me of two more pieces of current educationr stupidity: specialist schools and so-called 'choice'. Now pretty much every secondary school is a specialist in something, but to what purpose? What can't all schools provide a good all-round education? The result if, for example, otherwise fairly weak schools which have become specialist technology colleges solely because it's a way to get more money.

It's part of that fatuous chimera of 'choice' which politicians (and not just Labour ones, unfortunately) are obsessed with, and which we, the people, actually do not want. We want good-quality public services, so that choice becomes irrelevant.

In any case, do parents really have a genuine choice of where to send their children? Of course not. The top-rated schools are oversubscribed, and those at the bottom are full of the kids of the poor and the academically disinclined. There's an immensely stressful fight to get into 4th or 5th choice schools, and the environmental and social nonsense of children travelling miles across towns to attend distant schools.

While I'm about it, there's that other New Labour nonsense, the Academy School. I'll leave it to others to point out the inadequacies of that policy.



shamlin



14 November 2007 2:20pm

I can think of one good policy: scrap the national tests at 7, 11 and 14 (especially 7 & 11). A good testing regime is of course essential throughout the school system but it should be there to serve the child, the teacher and the parent NOT Whitehall. Good teachers give their charges little tests regularly and they are very useful to measure how well the children have absorbed the subject matter. They help the child by allowing them to see how well they are learning, and they help the teacher help the parents to help the children.

The SATS tests do not do this. They are useless to the children: they gain no qualification nor does it help them learn. They are worse than useless for the teachers: they swallow up vast resources and, worse, vast amounts of time better spent educating the children. And they tell the parents nothing worth knowing about their children's progress.

They are wonderful for the ministry of course. Ministers can point to meaningless percentage point changes and proclaim themselves the saviours of education. And it allows them to think that their league tables are in anyway meaningful or worthwhile.

It is high time they scrapped this pointless activity.



ArseneKnows

14 November 2007 2:38pm

Just a few rambling thoughts:

As one of the large % of people who left the teaching professions stressed out (25% of potential teachers dropped out within the first 2 week in-school training and 25% of qualified teachers leave within 5 years)and disillusioned little of this comes as a surprise to be honest.

1./ Curricula and syllabuses look great on paper but are increasingly dry and boring as huge swathes are skimped to concentrate on teaching to the tests. The National Curriculum, imposed by diktat under the Tory Government was the start of a process whereby less and less time is available for creative and interesting teaching and more time is taken up by centrally imposed requirements and seemingly every time some short term headline grabs the attention politicians and others call for it to be 'taught' in school - just yesterday was a call for teachers to teach students in sex education that 'No means No' - maybe there will be a centrally prepared lesson plan in the post in the near future.

2./ Schools and class sizes are far too big thus not allowing for the forming of bonds

3./ The celebration of stupidity promulgated by large sections of the media is not helpful and it's hard to put forward a coherent argument in favour of learning when students are influenced by the 'Big Brother' contestants and vacuous non-entities plastered all over the web, TV and print media.

4./ There is a conflict of interest built into the system. Teachers are judged almost exclusively on test results as shown in league tables almost without any consideration of the pupils. This leads to many teachers debating within themselves as to whether they should allow pupils to reach their 'full potential' (stupid phrase given that to many administrators this means every student is a potential Einstein which is as ridiculous as saying every student is a potential Theo Walcott or Linford Christie) thereby risking failing the examination targets or whether they should give them help (ie coaching and extra input into coursework) in order to ensure that targets are met.

5./ Much of the money has gone into school buildings which were crumbling away through previous years of neglect, this was badly needed, though signing up to 30 year PFI contracts was maybe not the most efficient way to do it. Much more money has been wasted on ill thought schemes and contracts with companies such as Capita, RM and Microsoft to provide IT solutions that are expensive, inflexible and based on little empirical evidence of the benefits.

6./ Many things which have been shown to work are ditched or ignored on ideological grounds, from both right and left. Grammar schools gave more children from lower backgrounds the opportunity to access higher education and become upwardly mobile than any system before or since but were abolished because the middle classes couldn't find a way to buy a pass for their children at 11 at the expense of those poorer children who did pass.

7./ When plumbers, electricians, computer network technicians and other trades are in short supply and highly valued it seems ridiculous that these skills are not evident in any great degree in our education system. This largely comes down to 2 factors:

- the snobbish tradition of looking down on vocational courses
- the difficulty the suits have in assigning 'points' to these course eg an A at English. Maths, Biology, Geography etc is worth x points. How many points do I assign a student for being able to plaster a wall or wire up a house? and will Universities recognise these abilities as having merit?

8./ The inability of politicians to accept ideas that conflict with their prejudices and accept that in many cases those within the profession can be trusted to do the job they thought they were being paid for. I don't hear many politicians telling doctors how to treat a broken leg or a heart attack or an architect how to build a safe building but when it comes to teaching professional standards have to be imposed from the

but when it comes to teaching professional standards have to be imposed from the centre. Having said that, we are increasingly seeing the unintended outcomes of centrally imposed targets in the health and police services as well.

Basically if New Labour had wanted to make a real difference it would have been better to do an in-depth national study before spending the money but how many weeks would they have been allowed to carry this out before the Daily Mail et al were screaming that they were doing nothing.

Would it really be too much to expect that in something as vital as education we could ask our politicians to grow up and work together to build a system based on evidence?



SarahGreen

14 November 2007 2:52pm

"To all those blaming the comprehensive system, please could you explain how good the old secondary moderns were at teaching the less academically able children?"

Can you show that they were worse? The report quoted above states that reading standards haven't improved since the 1950s. I have seen some evidence that the maths & english exams taken by secondary modern pupils were harder than current GCSE's.

"At first glance, I fail to see how the problem of a significant minority of children failing to learn will be solved by shunting them back into secondary moderns. But perhaps you can explain how this will help?"

A bit of a straw man argument. Few of the above posters are arguing for a return to the Grammar / Secondary Modern system. That certainly had enough drawbacks of its own. The point is that the Comprehensive system in general, and the current governments policies in particular, have been a complete failure. There are many examples from around the world of education systems that actually work - versions of a school voucher system that have been very successful in Sweden and New York.



spiky

14 November 2007 3:04pm

@SarahGreen - it's 'GRAMMAR'(I think Little Britain's got a lot to answer for)



KatieL

14 November 2007 3:11pm

"we insist on starting to teach children to read at four. Some four year olds are ready. Others are not."

This is because our children are different; they are all the same.

This is why one size-fits-all education has succeeded so gloriously, except where it has failed. And since the ideology of identical education creating equal people is so sound, it must have failed only where people have just not been trying hard enough or where enough public money has yet not been spent.

The most surprising thing about this government is not so much their willingness to try inventive edgy approaches to things like refuse collection or education so much as, when the approaches obviously don't work, their complete inability to STOP trying them and think of something else.



Asterix

14 November 2007 3:15pm

Is improvement in education really desired or is political dogma to be followed instead? Political ideology as basis for the educational structure in the UK has shown itself to be a failure for decades. If education exists purely to meet political demands for social engineering this should be expected and the lack of improvements be no surprise. Recent research has shown no improvement in reading ability over decades following decades of political intervention.

Real improvements require the application of the scientific method which has zero appeal to politicians and their educational theorists as it is extremely unlikely to support dogma in any form. For a decade or so research in the USA has shown the value of small schools (less than 500 students). New York has benefited from this research see http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/30/nyregion/30grads.html?_r=1&oref=slogin as an example. Rolling out small schools has led to improvements in results by several tens of percentage points over just a few years without no dumbing down of exam syllabuses required. There has been a noticeable attendant improvement in student behaviour illustrated by lower crime figures.

Meanwhile the UK's latest plans are to roll out huge academies and early results shown little or no improvement as expected as there is no scientific basis behind these. Perhaps ideology is far more important as always than results, or perhaps there is nobody in government and their bureaucrats interested in or who has even

there is nobody in government and their bureaucrats interested in or who has even heard of the scientific method, never mind having any ability to apply it in practice?



andy49

14 November 2007 3:41pm

if we are so bad compared ro other western european countries, has it occurred to anybody in government to go and visit them and find out what they are doing that makes their systems work? the same could apply to the health system.



SarahGreen

14 November 2007 4:48pm

Why just health and education? While they are at it they can find out how to run cheap & reliable public transport, how to have an effective environmental policy, how to have a modern electoral system, how to have a manufacturing industry, how to look after children, win at football, eat proper food... In return we can teach them how to make pop songs and tv programs that aren't rubbish. God I am so proud to be british. It seems to me that the labour party don't actually want our children to be well educated. I think it goes against their basic beliefs. Also, wealthy people tend to vote conservative, and educated people tend to be wealthier. It is in their electoral interests to keep the population poor, thick and dependent on the state.



JMHP

14 November 2007 5:19pm

My son's education has finally begun now that he has left school. It took him about a year to recover, and now through an apprenticeship he is discovering the pleasure of working hard and learning new things. Secondary school seems to have been an entirely negative experience for him. He learnt about cannabis, bullying, racism and little else, and this is a school where there is a core of very committed teachers. Under the current system, it seems to me that school is very bad for your education. We need a radical new way of educating our young people, and I don't mean piling on the pressure. What young people and their teachers are being asked to do is inhuman. We need to foster creativity, caring relationships, and the enjoyment of discovery. Schools that manage this would look very different from how they look now.



paticus

14 November 2007 7:32pm

The articles pile up, the voices continue to clamour but still HMG refuses to take notice or think again. Why? Is it only obduracy, an unwillingness to make any signal it's been getting things wrong?

No. I think not. There's enough support from teachers resigned or even content to 'teach to the test', avoid real planning and thinking creatively - and with reason and some justification - and from, mostly, middle-class articulate parents using the state system from choice or need and other influential persons erroneously seeing testing as providing 'standards' both for teacher and taught; whilst meanwhile those really calling the shots in educational policy - the politicians - make sure their own children have as little contact with the state system as possible. The greatest, cruellest irony of our days was Blair's Education Education Education clarion call in view not only of his own personal educational history but those he was nicely nursing along for his nearest and dearest.

There's a relevant bit of research (with all due publicity) still to be done - that of exploring those of our fine Parliamentary representatives.

But - keep up the clamour, Jenny. Constant dripping weareth away something or other...



BobDobolina

14 November 2007 9:37pm

This article misses the point. Schools do not create the social achievement gap, it exists independently, although they may make it slightly worse or slightly better. High scores on standardized tests are strongly correlated with the number of books in the homes of the families of schoolchildren - the books being a proxy for wealth/education. The wide achievement gap that exists in the UK mirrors the large economic gap (which is also wider in the UK than elsewhere in Europe). If you take into account that kids spend approx 10% of their waking lives at school from birth to 18, it's not difficult to figure out what the biggest influence on a child's intellectual is. Any attempts to solve this problem must take into account the fact that schools have a minimal influence on schools, in comparison with the child's background, and the habits, beliefs, behaviours, values, vocabulary, background knowledge, and critical thinking skills they learn often before they even reach school age. It's time to get off the PC high horse and start demanding more of parents and politicians, and stop blaming schools, teachers, the curriculum, the buildings - because, while the latter can have some impact, the central problem lies with the former.



johrichpea

15 November 2007 1:42pm

10 years of agonising, criticism and debate. President Clinton might say, "It's the system stupid".

Analogy: Debating how to improve stagecoach performance: - add more horses; smooth road surfaces; make the coach bigger/smaller/wider/lower.. and so on. Problem being that the system is dependent upon horse drawn power, the limits are inbuilt.

Current education system essentially the same as the Greeks and Romans had: knowledge packaged by those in authority; delivered in bite sized chunks by teachers to reluctant children who see little relevance to their everyday lives and imaginings, coupled with an organisational apparatus to retain control - best achieved by a closed system with exotic rules and regulations. Children are not daft, they get what it is all about rather more quickly than they used to. Horses and water spring to mind.

There is a much better way -- practical and economic. See, www.optimum-education.freeseve.co.uk/

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