

Comment: Turning our children into machines



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Labour has turned education into a processing factory for the economic units we used to call children.

By [Ian Dunt](#)

I was always struck by something Ian Hislop said years ago: Education aims to raise children above the level of animals, without turning them into machines.

It's quite clear which side of that divide Labour's education policy has fallen. Today's epic report (28 research surveys, 1,052 written submissions, 250 focus groups, 14 authors, 66 research consultants) by Cambridge University on the UK's primary education policy described the approach as "Stalinist". Sats and league tables should be scrapped and children not put in formal lessons until six. The sense of failure at any earlier age can damage them for life, the authors found.

Thinking back on my education, the parts I remember most vividly were never on the syllabus. Mr Kinlock, a maths teacher in middle school, had a wonderful habit of answering any question put to him. 'How does a TV work?'... 'Why do planes fly?' we used to shout at him. I still remember his answer to 'what's the point of school?' He said: "That depends on which school. At this age, we just teach you how to learn." Other than that, I can't remember a single one of the answers he gave. But I do remember the feeling of being given reliable access to the world, of being imbued with a sense of wonder and intrigue about the things around me, of being taught, primarily, that it's honourable to want to understand how things work.

Years later, in senior school, a teacher called Mr Herbert walked into class and wrote the words "state apparatus" on the black board, and then started listing it: courts, education system, the media etc. Instantly I saw it for the mad left-wing shenanigans it was. But I also felt like a door was opening on an adult world, where we could start questioning authority. At another class, someone asked about a character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – as tepid and dull a play as any of Shakespeare's comedies - and he put the book down, took off his glasses and said: "Right, I guess it's time we talked about love." He then proceeded to tell us about heartbreak, the danger of sleeping with friends and the benefits and dangers of age, among other things, for the next half hour. I never forgot it.

None of it would have meant anything if we hadn't already been raised from the level of animals.

But with reading and writing and maths skills intact, these occasional diversions, these moments spent giving pupils knowledge as opposed to information, are simply invaluable in a human life. The two men above won't remember the classes I'm talking about, they probably wouldn't even remember me. But I remember it. They taught us how to learn, and then why to learn. It's a great gift, to offer a child a glimpse into the complexity of the world, to allow it to develop a love for mystery and oddity, from which the thirst for knowledge originates.

This can only happen through teacher freedom. Labour has reduced education to the processing of input-output devices, which must pass tests and learn certain facts and then be sent into the outside world to produce and consume and eventually die. Children are just units in a Robert Nash book, to be manipulated properly. Teachers are automatons designed to spread the message of their political masters. As the Cambridge review said, ministerial interference in the classroom had risen to unprecedented levels.

It's customary at this point to cite Sweden as the example of what we should do. We should look further afield, to Finland. Constantly number one in the international tables, Finnish 15-year-olds came first in science and second in mathematics and reading literacy in 2006. The World Economics Forum ranks Finland number one in the world in enrolment and quality and second in maths and science.

Here are some facts about Finnish education. All teachers must have at least a master's degree, regardless of the level they teach at. They are paid well, although not absurdly well. The education system is decentralised to municipalities and even to individual teachers, who function with a degree of autonomy that would make British teachers weep with envy.

Private schools exist but they are neutered by a ban on tuition fees and the requirement of a council of state authorisation for their foundation. Free school meals are offered to all pupils and university fees don't exist. Students are not divided by skill or intelligence at an early stage.

What can we learn from this? Firstly, that the best thing we can do for our children's education is to make teaching a profession which passes the 'dinner party test'. When someone says that they teach at a dinner party, the response should be one of warmth and interest. In short, it should be the kind of profession which attracts beautiful women, rather than make them look at your overworked, under-inspired, badly paid life with a mixture of sympathy and derision. Well-respected, with a good quality of life, and well-remunerated. Until the profession reflects this, the best people won't join, and anyone that does will invariably have the inspiration beaten out of them by drudgery and overwork. Of course, there should be a basic curriculum, but there must be opportunity to improvise and follow the course of a child's imagination and curiosity.

We must end the process by which children are divided according to ability early on. Education is not something which should define the worth of child. So many kids in Britain today treat intelligence as if were innately contemptible because it was just another one of those powers – like money – which lords it over them. Growing up without the riches advertising waves in front of their face everyday, and consigned to lower groups, at a crucial early stage of their life, because they couldn't keep up, curiosity and smarts just become another object of oppression.

Many conservatives – small and big 'C' – will like what I said at the start but hate this part. That's fine. Labour and Conservatives are barking up separate hollow trees. Michael Gove's approach to schooling has so little going for it he may as well act it out to audiences as a one man show in the style of Benny Hill. Foolish, authoritarian and full of ideas which have been shown not work, the Tory education policy is jumping back in time to the 19th century.

Labour is possibly worse. It's genuinely hard to tell. They have reduced children to the units in a complex computation. They understand nothing of what it is to create a vibrant human being with a thirst for knowledge. They view education as entirely utilitarian. It is designed to – and I believe their motivation is entirely honourable here – increase social mobility. But it has no conception of human knowledge for its own sake, or the curious nature of the human condition that separates us from numbers.

We have an education system treating children like machines due to the Stalinist over-management

of our political class. It fills children with education, and stress, and the fear of failure, from a disastrously early age. For those that fail, it makes intelligence another dark enemy in a conspiracy against them. And a hatred of intelligence and knowledge will turn us into animals.

We're getting it wrong on every front, and the worst part is there's no sign of decent change on the horizon.

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