The standards of today

And how to raise them to the standards of tomorrow

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Bibliographical information

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Executive briefing

This paper by Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of Schools, argues that it is time to ***end the phoney war on exam performance and begin a serious national debate*** to find out what is actually happening to school standards.

Do the constant improvements in exam results mean that teaching has become better and that schools are now better organised? Or is it just that changes in the ***syllabus***, the greater reliance on ***coursework***, and ***modular structures*** it easier to get good results? Could it even be that the ***grade boundaries are being lowered***?

We must ask: ***are school inspectors independent enough*** of politicians and teachers to stand back and criticise failing schools. Can the system be working properly when the inspectors can praise, as an example of good practice, an authority that has some of the worst results in its region?

The evidence that something is deeply wrong is clear enough.

- Education remains a ***lottery***, with some schools achieving results four or five times better than others. Why? And how? Can we not learn from the best and spread the principles behind their success to others?
- Despite large commitments of money, many teachers are still confused about how to raise standards of ***literacy***. Children leave primary schools unable to read adequately, leading them into failure in secondary education and when they leave school.
- Our very brightest pupils too are underachieving, and not being stretched as they should be stretched. And it is pupils from the neediest homes who are most failed by this ***institutional underachievement***.

Woodhead's prescriptions are clear and radical:

- We must actively ***defend the traditional understanding of education*** against erosion by vague and non-measurable concepts.
- ***Abolish the national curriculum***. Being designed by bureaucrats and interest groups, it will never embody those parts of our culture that are worth preserving.
- Instead, ***trust parents to make rational choices*** between different schools and to demand a broad-based and high-quality education for their children.
- Make school inspection properly independent. ***Shift responsibility for the exam system*** in order to restore public confidence.
- Embark on a real debate and be prepared to ask: ***has the state's bureaucratic monopoly in education been a mistake***?

Getting to the core questions

Every summer it is the same. In the left hand corner, the teacher unions, the Times Educational Supplement and the Government applaud the wondrous achievements of ‘hardworking’ teachers and their pupils; in the right, the Institute of Directors and a motley gang of sceptics bangs the grade inflation drum. Insults are traded. Nothing, ever, is achieved. The debate on standards is a sham.

It would help, if, as David Hargreaves suggested when he was ILEA Chief Inspector, the protagonists were to keep two issues separate:

- First, what is happening to standards? Are pupils achieving more? Are schools getting better?
- Second, are our expectations high enough? Are standards, however high they may be, high enough?

And there is a third issue which Hargreaves did his best to avoid when he was Chief Inspector at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority: Can we trust the evidence? This, logically, is the place to begin.

First, though, a preliminary observation to which I shall return. Are our schools good enough? It depends on what you mean by ‘good’. Education is a deeply contested concept. For me, it is the initiation of the young into the best that has been thought and written. I am interested above all else in academic standards. If you send your child to A.S. Neill’s famous progressive school, Summerhill, you are starting from a completely different point.

What follows needs to be read in the context of my own view.

Can we trust the evidence?

The answer to this question is no, we can't.

There are two sorts of evidence: test and examination statistics and inspection data. The latter is more reliable than the former, but each has to be treated with a degree of scepticism. This is a major issue to which I return.

Testing questions

The introduction of National Curriculum tests, which assess the progress children have made at 7, 11 and 14, was a major step forward. The argument that children are now over-assessed and that you do not fatten a pig by weighing it is ridiculous. Three tests in English and Mathematics and two in Science over a period of nine years is not over-assessment. And while it is true that assessment does not in itself lead to learning, the teacher must understand what it is the child does or does not know if they are ever to teach that child anything. These truths are obvious, and the government must resist moves from sentimentalists and defensive educationalists to abolish the tests.

However, it must also address concerns about the implementation of these tests. There are schools where the papers are opened early and the children prepared for the questions. Some teachers, invigilating the tests, offer discreet advice to their pupils. It is no doubt a minority of schools, but you do not need many for the whole system to be corrupted. Occasionally, as last year in Islington, there is a public scandal. In private, many headteachers are more than willing to talk about their anxieties. The tests are too important to be left to provoke this sort of questioning. We need more rigorous and systematic monitoring of how the tests are administered.

Turning to public examinations at 16 and 18, each year's results are, as everyone knows, better than those of the previous year. There are only four reasons for this inexorable progress:

- each new cohort of students might be more intelligent than the last;
- each might work harder;
- their teachers might be teaching better; or (as many suspect)
- the examinations might have become easier.

The first two possibilities are fanciful. There is some truth in the third. But it is the fourth, which raises the terrifying prospect that we are living in an educational cloud cuckoo land, which is the most likely.

There are four points to make on this issue.

1. Changing syllabus. First, over the years, syllabuses have changed. This does not, of course, mean that the examinations have necessarily become any less intellectually demanding. As a point of fact, however, there is less algebra in GCSE Mathematics than there was in O-Level Mathematics. Less inorganic Chemistry has to be studied at A-Level than was once the case. A-Level literature students can now avoid studying major authors such as Chaucer and Milton.

David Hargreaves used to say that there was no point in looking back. The world, he argued, has moved on. The examinations have changed. Comparisons are irrelevant. End of story.

Not in my view, it is not. These changes need to be brought out into the open. They need debating. If the syllabuses have become easier, as some believe, then action is needed. What is the point of more and more young people staying on at school for longer and longer if they end up knowing less and less?

2. Procedural changes. Then there are the procedural changes. Once upon an admittedly long time ago, an examination was an examination. When I did my O-and A-Levels, and indeed my degree, I sat in a room for two or three hours and did my best to answer the question paper in front of me. Today, by contrast, most examinations have twenty or thirty per cent of the marks allocated to work done during the course.

In some respects, this is an attractive development. The emphasis now, the argument goes, is on understanding rather the ability to memorise. Fine: but how do we know that the coursework has been done by the candidate? How heavily has the teacher been involved? Have parents helped? Has the student simply copied the essay from the Net? The truth is that we cannot answer these questions, and therefore we cannot trust the results.

3. Modular structures. The move to modularity is a third, highly significant development. Nowadays most GCSE and A-Level syllabuses are divided up into modules or units of work. The candidate is tested on each module once it has been completed. If they are not happy with the grade achieved, they can repeat the test.

Question: how does this approach compare with the traditional terminal examination that assesses the candidate's grasp of the whole syllabus studied?
Answer: it is easier.

4. Lowered boundaries. Finally there is the fact that each year the grade boundaries (the marks required to achieve a particular grade) are lowered. Last year, Jeffrey Robinson, who had been Principal Examiner in Mathematics for the OCR examination board for sixteen years, blew the whistle. More candidates now achieve better grades than in the past because 'the marks required to pass at each of the seven grades (A to G) have been steadily lowered during the nineties'. In 1989 the mark needed to obtain a grade C in the Intermediate level paper was 65 per cent. In 2000 it was 45 per cent. At Higher Level the drop has been even more dramatic: from 48 to 18 per cent.

You would have thought that the latter statistic at least would have brought a blush to the most brazen ministerial cheek. Eighteen per cent! We have reached a point where it is possible to get over four-fifths of the questions wrong and still pass. The official response was that the questions are harder now than they once were and that the pass mark had therefore to be adjusted. This, however, is to ignore the QCA Chief Executive's view that year-on-year comparisons of intellectual difficulty are an irrelevance. The creak of vested interests is audible across the land.

Inspecting inspectors

The other main source of evidence on standards is inspection.

However, the unions allege that the evidence from inspection is flawed because the inspectorate (in my day anyway) simply looks for things to criticise and ignores real achievement.

But this criticism will not survive the most cursory glance at the reports, on individual schools and the system as a whole, published by Ofsted. Read any of the Annual Reports and you will find heaps of praise. Of course, there is criticism too. That is inevitable. Even Doug MacAvoy cannot believe that everything is fine in every school in the country. Neither, I imagine, does he believe that the inspectorate should lie to the general public and to Parliament. In fact, the unions have turned the truth on its head. If Ofsted has a fault it is not that it has been too critical: it is that too often it has bent over backwards to be kind.

For example: a new headteacher has been appointed to a school six months before the inspection. She has clearly had an impact and the school is improving. But, at the time of the inspection, it is still a failing school. What does the inspector do? Does he fail the school and, perhaps, demoralise the head and her staff? Or does he give her the benefit of the doubt in the hope of further progress? It happens.

Or again: How can it be that the LEA which, at the time of its inspection, had the worst Key Stage 2 results in inner London could be praised as a model of good practice? And yet it was.

Sources of error

The problem is obvious to anyone who reflects on the business of inspection with a modicum of impartiality. Inspectors are not, as the hostile mythology would have you believe, driven by uncontrollable sadistic urges. They are human beings who do not find it easy to tell a headeacher who has invested fifteen years of his life in a school that he has made a complete mess of it. It is easier to fudge the issue and avoid the tears.

Some inspectors, moreover, drag the baggage of their beliefs about education — how teachers should teach, how schools should be managed, what it is reasonable to expect inner city kids to achieve, and so on — into the classrooms that they inspect. When (in particular) this baggage is the flotsam and jetsam of progressive education, we have a problem: because then we have lost the hard-headed objectivity that is necessary if the inspection evidence is to stand up to public and professional scrutiny.

I am not saying that the whole process is fundamentally flawed. My point is that the evidence needs to be pondered, thought about, questioned. It needs to be read in just that spirit of open-minded scepticism in which, ideally, it was gathered.

What is happening to standards?

It would be nice if the evidence on standards could be taken at face value. We could then (to use the word beloved of educationalists) ‘celebrate’ the fact that x per cent of pupils now achieve their five A* to C grades, or that y per cent of teaching is judged to be good, with confident good cheer. But, for the reasons given above, we cannot.

And even if we could believe the evidence, there are, I am afraid some chilling observations to be made. I make them reluctantly; realising that what I am about to write will confirm my reputation as the spectre at the feast and provoke the usual accusation that I am demoralising the troops. On the latter, I can only reply that morale will rise when teachers teach better and pupils as a consequence learn more: problems have to be brought out into the open, weaknesses acknowledged, the assessment of strengths and weaknesses has to be honest.

The strengths

As for the strengths, there have been improvements in pupil attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Some schools, sometimes in the most difficult of social circumstance, are doing brilliantly well. Their teachers deserve our praise and gratitude, and, I think, a hefty pay rise. However, there are a number of buts.

The weaknesses

The standards lottery. Picking up on this last point, the first of the buts is that the gap between successful and unsuccessful schools remains unacceptably wide. Education remains a lottery. Generalisations about the education service as a whole are difficult and dangerous. Eliminate external variables such as different levels of resources and geographical circumstance and we still have the ludicrous situation of school A achieving results four or five times better than school B. The obvious question has to be asked. Why, if the one school can do it, can’t the other? No question with regard to standards in our schools is more significant.

Literacy and numeracy. Second, although we have indeed seen improvements in literacy and numeracy, there is an awfully long way to go. A quarter of eleven-year-olds still leave primary school unable to read well enough to deal with the demands of the secondary school curriculum. These are the children who turn into the truants and the disruptives, who at sixteen end up with little or nothing to show for their eleven years of formal schooling. Does anyone believe that the government has cracked the problems of primary education? We will never see higher standards in secondary schools until the

vast majority of primary school pupils can read and write and have mastered the basic rules of numeracy.

Underachievement. Third, there is the long tail of underachievement at sixteen, which I have just mentioned.

Gender differences. Fourth, the fact that boys continue to fall further behind girls.

Academic failure. Fifth, we need to recognise that we have been kidding ourselves for too long. The conventional wisdom is that the English education system might have failed pupils of average or below average ability, but that we have always been rather successful when it comes to the more able. This simply is not true. Talk to any university admissions tutor about the knowledge and understanding of students seeking a university place — students, incidentally, who more often than not have good A Level grades. The most able are not being stretched as they should be stretched, and, in particular, there is a problem with able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is a national scandal that the children who are most in need of support from our education system are the ones worst served by it.

Education, Mr Blair told us in 1997, was his top priority. He now, it seems, has other priorities, and he has not yet delivered the improvements in schools he promised. There is much still to do.

Are standards high enough?

No, as is obvious from the above, they are not. In primary schools the problem is that not enough children are yet achieving the standard we expect of them in literacy and numeracy. In secondary schools, the problem is that the standard we expect is so low that too many achieve it.

The remedy to the primary problem is straightforward: better teaching. The remedy to the secondary is a matter of debate. The educational establishment and politicians want to lie back and enjoy success; I do not, for two reasons.

- First, examinations define expectations. A healthy, genuinely successful education system will want to raise expectations so that pupils achieve more. An insecure, defensive system will want to rest on its laurels and rubbish the wreckers who cannot give credit where credit is due.
- Second, the examinations are intended to discriminate between candidates. If too many candidates achieve top grades, as is currently the case when it comes to admission to the elite universities, they are failing to fulfil this basic function. The government has recognised this and tacked on the A* grade to A-Level. This is a typically pusillanimous fudge. The sensible solution is to raise expectations at every grade, but this, of course, would result in future students achieving lower grades. That wouldn’t do at all, would it?

So what needs to be done?

A lot, but in the light of my last observation, I cannot see much actually happening.

Travelling hopefully, and assuming that the government of the day is genuinely interested in education, the programme of action to raise standards would be as follows.

Firm foundations

First and most fundamentally, a traditional concept of education ('the best that has been thought and written') has to be defended against those who believe, for example, that in the information technology age there is no point in teaching knowledge about anything to anybody. And there are many such believers. What we need, the argument goes, is a 'skills based' curriculum, and the more 'transferable' these skills the better.

Arguments of this pernicious kind are now all pervasive. We will never see standards rise while teachers are being encouraged to undermine the foundations of a proper education. The battle must be won. But how?

Abolish the Curriculum

I used to think that the answer was the National Curriculum. I have changed my mind. If the National Curriculum did embody those aspects of our culture which are worth preserving, then it would itself be worth keeping. But it does not, and, in the present climate at least, it never will. It is best to face up to this and abolish it.

Trust parents

There is a further point. If we genuinely believe in diversity and choice (and I do), then the National Curriculum is a problem. Why, to put the argument very starkly, should parents not be able to send their children to a state school as progressive as Summerhill? The fact that I personally could not applaud their judgement is neither here nor there. Either we believe in choice, or we do not.

I am, moreover, confident that the vast majority of parents would select schools that offer a broad and balanced curriculum, traditional teaching methods, strong discipline, and so on. The way forward ought to be to empower such parents, to offer, for example, vouchers that could be used to pay for an independent education if that is what parents want for their child.

New Labour has done everything possible to lever up standards through centralised control. The time has now come to try a different, bottom-up approach that relies more on the good sense of parents and less on the wacky ideas of educationalists and the pulling of bureaucratic levers.

Accurate information

But if parents are to exercise an intelligent choice, they need good and clear information. It is vital, therefore, that test and examination results continue to be published and that the examination system is reformed so that public and professional confidence is restored.

This imperative demands centralised regulation. We cannot, for very obvious reasons, rely on market forces. Whether the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority can be relied upon to do in future what it has failed to do in the past is, however, a very moot point. It may be that the QCA should be abolished and the responsibility given to Ofsted.

Independent inspection

It is certainly right in principle that Ofsted continues to inspect schools. In practice, however, everything depends on whether the inspectorate is independent of both the government and the teaching profession. The inspectorate exists to give parents information, not to reassure ministers that their latest policy initiative is working, or to bolster up teacher morale.

Conclusion: deep thoughts

These thoughts lead us into deep questions about how education should be provided and paid for in the future. Do we really need the state with its apparatus of control? Or do we strip back the bureaucracy and, recognising that there is no reason why market forces cannot work in education as they do in any other area of human life, rely on minimal, but trustworthy regulation?