

FALSE STARTS

This edition is chiefly concerned with things that are going wrong, especially in Early Years and Primary School. We draw attention to the growing problem of unregistered schools and Madeleine Holt explains why she set up "More Than a Score". We also have the first of a series of articles which look at what is happening in the other nations of the UK.

PROBLEMS FOR EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

Recent changes in England to the education of children in the Early Years stage have been depressing. In April 2017 the Government introduced the Early Years Funding Formula for all Early Years provision, failing to take account of the very different costs incurred by the wide range of different providers.

Broadly, primary schools have gained financially, while nursery schools and others have lost so much funding that they are barely sustainable.

Local authorities are no longer able to offer subsidies. Even though 96% of all nursery schools are rated by OFSTED as "good" or "outstanding" and have been shown to give the best start for disadvantaged children, many are now being forced to close. The Pupil Premium for children in nursery school is grossly inadequate - £300 per child, compared with £1300 for those in primary school. Moreover, the Government has raised the bar so that many children who were previously eligible for Pupil Premium no longer qualify. Funding for young children with SEN has also been reduced, in spite of its being well-established that early intervention is more effective and less expensive than intervention at a later stage.

The Early Years Foundation Stage – the rich curriculum introduced in 2003, has been revised several times by this Government and is about to be revised again. Now the direction is towards a curriculum based mainly on literacy and numeracy, as used for older children.

This is totally unsuitable for young children. OFSTED has recently published 'Bold Beginnings', an unhelpful document which encourages schools to adopt more formal learning styles for very young children. This document has been strongly criticised by professionals working

in Early Years education. No other country introduces formal teaching until children are 6 or 7 years of age.

It has become increasingly difficult to recruit teachers who are appropriately qualified to work in Early Years education. The Government has responded by proposing the category of the Early Years Teacher but such people will be less well qualified than current specialists in the field, who combine Qualified Teacher Status with a degree in Early Years Education.

Headteachers do not help by too often placing teachers with no Early Years qualification or experience in the Foundation Stage nursery and reception classes. This is not good practice; working with young children is completely different from teaching older children and appropriate qualification and experience are essential.

Much progress was made in the years up to 2010 but much now is being undone. The Early Years are the most important years in a child's life and will affect everything the child does in later years. Serious damage can be done when provision is not of high quality. Such provision needs to include a stimulating environment where children learn best through play and can follow their interests, observed and guided by highly skilled staff.

Although schools and nursery schools continue to do their best to meet children's needs, their ability to do so is slowly being eroded.

It is now urgent that we campaign for the formal recognition of an Early Years sector for all children up to the age of seven, staffed and run by appropriately qualified and experienced professionals.

For more information see www.earlychildhoodforum.org www.earlyeducation.org.uk or www.tactyc.org.uk

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

UNREGISTERED SCHOOLS

In March 2018, the Department for Education issued advice for collaborative working between the DfE, Ofsted and local authorities on the subject of unregistered independent schools and out- of-school settings.

Its reason was that *“over recent times, we have seen a rise in the number of institutions operating outside the regulatory regime as unregistered independent schools; this involves a criminal offence and conduct that may be putting children at risk of harm, denying them a suitable education, and limiting their life chances.”*

The law is clear on what independent schools and “home schools” must provide for their pupils. The list is extensive and includes that lessons be taught in written and spoken English and that personal social health and economic education be taught in a way which encourages respect for other people, provides access for secondary age pupils to accurate, impartial and up to date careers guidance and effectively prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life in British society.

Two years ago, Ofsted set up a special taskforce to investigate unregistered schools. To date, it has unearthed more than 350 suspected sites. Ofsted inspectors say they don't have proper powers to inspect or close them. The people running these sites say they are not schools at all. There is no watertight definition of what constitutes a school. In law, parents are responsible for ensuring that their children receive a suitable full-time education. In these cases, the parents choose to have their children educated at an institution which is not a school and the unregistered schools refuse to divulge the details of their roll to Ofsted so the “education” of these children cannot be monitored.

Most of these unregistered schools are run by fundamentalist religious sects associated with the three main religions found in the UK: Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

In terms of children's rights, the education is abusive.

One sect does not allow its boys to be taught in English until they are seven years old.

Many adults who have been educated in this way, struggle to understand basic English.

Last year a group of 34 schoolchildren from an unregistered school in a north London Borough became trapped on a beach in Kent as the tide rushed in. The group, led by two adults, appear to have ignored several signs warning people to go no further because of the danger of rock falls and the possibility of being cut off by the rising tide. The boys were rescued by lifeboats but had come within two hours of getting drowned.

In another case, the use of physical punishment to discipline children came to light. Recently broadcast BBC

footage showed it being used on a very small boy above the caption “Any parent watching would be very worried.”

Curriculum abuse can take other forms. Leaders of a fundamentalist group wrote a letter to its teachers urging them to boycott Government funding that would oblige them to teach “the lie that the world is ancient”, rather than 6,000 years old, as it says in the Bible.

At the heart of this is the clash of notionally absolute human rights which happen to contradict each other. Do children have the right to an education which prepares them for living, working and enjoying life in the modern world? Do parents have the right to choose to bring up their children according to their beliefs? Can any belief be legally justified if it is claimed as religious? Does the state have the right to expect all its children to be educated to some agreed legal standard?

Answers on a post card to Damian Hinds and his predecessors.

WARWICK MANSELL'S NEW VENTURE

Freelance journalist Warwick Mansell has initiated a new online venture: www.educationuncovered.co.uk For years Warwick enlivened the Tuesday “Education” section of The Guardian with well-researched stories of financial and other misconduct in the world of academies and “free” schools but, in common with other newspapers, The Guardian has reduced its employment of specialist education journalists. CASE is happy to support “Education Uncovered” and we are pleased to reprint Warwick's own introduction.

“Education Uncovered” is a new website offering exclusive news stories, irreverent and analytical blogging, first-person reportage, long read features and opinion and more.

We aim to put under the microscope the endless waves of reforms which have hit England's schools in recent years. We will seek to hold policymakers and those with power to account for goings-on at ground level, as we dig around in the undergrowth of schools reform.

The site offers one article a month for free, with further articles offered on a subscription basis. Please register for free to start reading. And if you value independent, probing public interest journalism and want to see it continuing, please do subscribe.

We very much hope that readers will support this very important and valuable initiative.

EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

In Scotland there is fierce debate about what are perceived by many to be falling standards in schools.

This debate revolves around the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) introduced by the SNP government in 2010. Critics point out that, since the introduction of CfE, Scotland has fallen back in PISA tests and that the kind of improvements in examination results claimed for English schools have not been achieved in Scotland.

Defenders of CfE argue that much of the debate is tainted by nostalgia for a non-existent “golden age” of Scottish education and by the inability of a deeply conservative education establishment to cope with change.

A third view, supported by some education academics, is that reform was much needed but that its introduction has been mishandled.

Professor Walter Humes in his blog “Sceptical Scot” has identified seven reasons why CfE has not, so far, brought about improvements.

1. Failure to learn from the past: previous experience of introducing education reforms had highlighted the importance of certain key principles if the reforms were to succeed. These included the need for a strong theoretical rationale; a realistic time-scale; the need to win the support of teachers; a convincing assessment system. These principles were ignored and the architects of CfE “blundered on...confusing activity with progress”.
2. Poor political leadership: too many Education Ministers since devolution, some of them in post for a very short time.
3. A complacent policy community: too many of those appointed to important policy committees are drawn from the ranks of the education establishment. This has led to the growth of an “insider” culture, encouraging conformity and discouraging criticism.
4. Lack of up-to-date independent data: the OECD has complained that it cannot properly evaluate CfE because insufficient information is available. One leading academic has described Scottish education as a “data desert”.
5. Defensive professional attitudes: the Educational Institute of Scotland (to which the great majority of Scottish teachers belong) has become “deeply conservative and defensive”. Inappropriate language: “the language (of policy initiatives) has become embarrassingly boastful (and confuses) aspiration and achievement”.

6. Anti-intellectualism: CfE was introduced without proper consideration of the aims and values of education. “The academic community should have taken a lead...but has ...colluded in the shallow discourse and intellectual evasions of government”.

Scots will take little comfort from the fact that many of these failings are not unknown south of the border!

COMMENT

The Education Secretary has recently suggested that teachers who remain in the profession for at least ten years could be offered a “sabbatical” year on full salary. As a means of tackling the appalling retention problem from which teaching currently suffers, this seems irrelevant and smacks of desperation.

The reasons why teachers are leaving the profession in droves are well-known, poor pay and a ridiculous workload being the leading culprits.

Naturally, the idea has produced the usual outbursts of “whataboutery” and expressions of ignorance and resentment about school holidays. In a recent edition of Radio 4’s “Any Questions?” and its follow-up phone-in, “Any Answers?” not even the more sympathetic members of the panel actually saw fit to address the question of whether a measure of this kind will halt the steady drain of teachers from schools.

Instead we had lists of other deserving groups and silly comments about teachers already getting plenty of time off. Only one panel member suggested that attention to pay and working conditions might be better than offering a sabbatical.

In any case, it is difficult to see the rationale of offering a sabbatical year to a teaching profession which displays such a wide range of education and expertise. In Higher Education, whence Damien Hind’s proposal is drawn, practitioners have achieved a high standard of first degree and have then undertaken serious and intensive post-graduate study. They have usually done considerable research and have had work published. A sabbatical is intended to allow the recipient to develop further expertise within his or her specialism.

Although there are school teachers who could be considered in this way, the majority could not and it would require a sea change in the way our teachers are educated and professionally trained for Hind’s idea to make any sense.

MORE THAN A SCORE

By Madeleine Holt

“More than a Score” is a rare thing – an alliance of parents and professionals, operating beyond the echo to challenge the many injustices of English education policy. It began in the summer of 2016, just after the ill-fated education White Paper. I had just helped set up “Rescue Our Schools”, the parent-led group for more forward-thinking schools. We were sick and tired of seeing children put through an increasingly joyless education system, and their love of learning gradually squeezed out of them.

We started to speak at rallies and within weeks the NUT had invited us to meet with other organisations to discuss how to change the status quo. Kevin Courtney – now Joint General Secretary of the NEU - saw that to push through a more enlightened agenda for education you had to get parents on board. After all, there are nearly 14 million households in England with dependent children. That’s a lot of voters. That’s a lot of angry voters, many of whom feel helpless in the face of an increasingly inhumane schools system.

“More than a Score” aims to challenge and change the test-driven agenda in primary education. Our numbers include experts in mental health, academics, Headteachers and parents. Many of us have children in the primary system, and see them having to contend with such inanities as Michael Gove’s Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar test. We see the curriculum narrowing to a diet of maths and English in many schools, as Heads bow to the pressure to get results or risk their careers.

Our mission is to inform as many parents as possible about alternatives to SATS, phonics and now a SATS test for four- year-olds, which will be used as a progress measure between Reception and year 6, a practice unknown in the rest of the OECD. Indeed, this ‘base-line’ test will make us the only country in the world to put such young children through a “high stakes” test, which will be used as a progress measure between Reception and year 6. Those who dream up ideas like this can have no serious understanding of how young children think and learn.

It doesn’t have to be this way. You only have to travel to Scotland, Wales or Northern Island to see a greater focus on formative, teacher-led assessment. New Zealand has just abandoned its equivalent of SATS

because it saw how its previously rich curriculum was being narrowed by “teaching to the test”.

Parents know that something is going wrong. They know that ability in maths and English is not the only thing to celebrate in their children and that children have many other capabilities and evolve at different rates. Writing off children at 11, as SATs does, is no way to run an education system and it is children from less advantaged backgrounds who are more likely to be judged “not ready” for secondary school. Schools in deprived areas face enormous pressure to sideline the arts and drill children in maths and English.

The whole thing is a very cruel mess, forcing Heads and teachers to act against their consciences and demotivating children, some of whom no longer want to go to school.

“More than a Score” is intensifying its campaign over the coming months, and moving into secondary assessment. If you want to join our growing alliance, please get in touch at morethanscorecampaign@gmail.com

Who We Are

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Printed in Great Britain

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CASEnotes Issue 67 © CASE 2018

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