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The Crisis in School Attendance

In an article in *The Guardian* of June 28th last year, Sally Weale, the paper's excellent education correspondent, gave a list of possible reasons why school attendance, especially at secondary level, has shown a marked decline since the COVID pandemic, with the attendance of as many as 25% of pupils regularly falling below 90%:

An increase in anxiety and other forms of mental ill-health among children aged 7-16
An increase in poverty and housing problems
An increase in illness among younger children
A change in parental attitudes
A decline in the ability of schools to cope with SEND pupils.

In a letter printed in *The Guardian* of July 2nd, CASE responded by suggesting that, while all of Sally Weale's reasons are completely valid, "*there is also an underlying and chronic reason for this* (decline in school attendance)*: throughout this century, but especially since 2010, school has become an increasingly uncongenial experience for children"* and that the pandemic has simply accelerated an existing trend. We pointed out that around half of all children now say that they dislike school.

The government has so far shown no inclination to question whether the model of schooling that has been developed since 2010 may itself be part of the problem. It has suggested that the way to restore healthy levels of attendance is to punish the parents of persistent absentees by increasing the fines to which they may be liable and to modify the outlook of the children themselves through such means as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). In other words, there is nothing wrong with the model of schooling and children must be taught or compelled to adapt to it.

The Guardian returned to the subject last month with an article identifying anxiety as a major cause of school absenteeism. This produced letters from three distinguished education academics: Diane Reay, Professor of Education at Cambridge; Priscilla Anderson, Professor of Childhood Studies at the Institute of Education, University College, London, and Dr Lorna Chessum, formerly Principal Lecturer in Education Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester.

Diane Reay wrote that the government's response *is still focused on children and young people changing their attitudes and behaviour in order to fit in better into the educational system.* She went on to emphasise the part played by poverty in increased school absenteeism, something noted by the Education Select Committee. Professor Reay quoted the Children's Commissioner,

Rachel de Souza: *"Every day thousands of children find themselves without the support that they need to engage in education and attend school"* and went on to criticise the *harsh discipline, excessive rules, regimented daily timetable and teaching to the test* which are particularly to be found in schools with large working-class intakes. *It is the educational system that needs to change,* and *schools should be more welcoming and supportive.*

Priscilla Anderson wrote that the government's approach was likely to result in symptoms, rather than causes, being addressed: *therapists* (often) *position problems within young individuals, instead of within adult-run systems, and so increase the problems.* Professor Anderson went on to criticise the way in which many schools can actually damage children's mental health – *by punishing failure to learn, and enforcing petty rules* (by using) *detentions, isolation rooms and exclusions.*

Lorna Chessum echoed this in criticising *today's unprecedented levels of authoritarianism in UK schools. Strict enforcement of uniform, punishments for infringements of draconian rules and the liberal use of isolation and exclusion have created a harsh culture in many schools. If the rigid and narrow curriculum – with reduced opportunities for creativity – plus endless testing is added to students' experiences, it is hardly surprising that they are anxious. Such a culture is anti-educational and anti-learning.*

The description of much of today's schooling presented with remarkable unanimity by three such distinguished experts contrast sadly with **The Children's Manifesto**, *The Guardian's* own distillation of the ideas in **The School that I'd Like**, in which children were asked to imagine their ideal school. Among the features of this imagined school were:

A safe school with swipe cards for the school gate, anti-bully alarms, first aid classes, and someone to talk to about our problems.
A listening school with children on the governing body, class representatives and the chance to vote for the teachers.
A flexible school without rigid timetables or exams, without compulsory homework, without a one-size-fits-all curriculum, so we can follow our own interests and spend more time on what we enjoy.
A relevant school where we learn through experience, experiments, and exploration, with trips to historic sites and teachers who have practical experience of what they teach.
A respectful school where we are not treated as empty vessels to be filled with information, where teachers treat us as individuals, where children and adults can talk freely to each other, and our opinion matters.
A school without walls so we can go outside to learn, with animals to look after and wild gardens to explore.
A school for everybody with children from all backgrounds and abilities, with no grading, so we don't compete against each other, but just do our best.

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The education system is broken and doing 28 A-levels won't fix it

A student's choice to take 28 A-levels reveals a darker side to the British educational system, says **Jack Deasley**.

Last week, several British news outlets reported on a 17-year-old who is studying 28 (yes, twenty-eight) A-Levels. In an interview given to *The Times*, Mahnoor Cheema argued that there is not enough support for "gifted students" to take on academic challenges, saying that "we are wasting so much talent in the UK." She's right: "gifted students" do need additional support. just not in the way that she suggests. So-called "gifted students" (I remain unconvinced by the term) should not be encouraged to attach their identity and self-worth to their grades. Rather, they should be given the space to find out who they are, how to look after themselves, and what they love and care about. The education system desperately needs to re-evaluate its definition of success, for the sake of our children's feelings of purpose and identity. This isn't to attack this particular student or to tell her to change. Instead, it is to say that this case is representative of a widespread culture of toxic productivity, a problem which is concentrated among Cambridge – and other Russell Group – students.

The current ethos tells students that in order to be successful, they need to achieve flawless grades, attend a prestigious university, and be generally good at everything they do. This aspiration to academic perfection is often a product of government policy, exemplified by the establishment of league tables and Ofsted in 1992, which rewarded schools simply for producing good examination results. These features of bureaucracy scarcely include contextual considerations, meaning that many "high achieving" schools are highly selective with their students and focus entirely on their academic output.

But symptoms of this problem date back even further than 1992, as this culture was arguably formalised and entrenched by the structure of our school system. Take the existence of grammar schools, where children must correctly answer absurd questions about shape patterns and verb conjugations to even get in. This means that while some 11-year-olds are told they make up the top 25% of the country, with their grammar school attendance equated to success, the remainder are deemed failures. Private schools, too, operate in a similar model, rewarding students for their grades rather than personal development following an even more exclusive selection process. Living in a grammar school area has given me a very personal connection to the contradictions inherent within this culture. I failed the 11-plus and went to a supposedly "worse" non-selective school (in many ways it wasn't) before moving to a grammar school sixth form. The schools were barely a five-minute drive from each other, but their approaches to learning were on different planets. For young people, whose parents could not justify the extortionate costs of the tutoring

necessary to somehow make sense of the ‘verbal and non-verbal reasoning’ component of the 11-plus exam, the benefits of a ‘meritocratic society’ feel far, far away.

This difference in approach was epitomised by the “assessments” which took the place of A-Levels during the COVID pandemic. For a start, we were faced with roughly 30 hours of exams over two months. This was wildly unnecessary, particularly when 18-year-olds were processing coming out of lockdown. In one of these exams, I “slipped up” – by scoring a mere 19/25 instead of my normal 22 – and was met with a disapproving “What happened?” from my teacher. By contrast, I did similarly before my GCSEs at my non-selective high school, and my teacher casually asked if I was all right and didn’t make a big deal of it. At the grammar school, it was a results business, with one subject continuing to be taught throughout the May half-term to “get ahead” during lockdown (priorities, eh?).

It was better to get little sleep and feel burned out, but still bag that A*, than to strike a healthy balance and get a B. It was, of course, possible to score highly and strike a balance – I think I managed this – but it wasn’t encouraged. So many (understandably) developed unhealthy sleep schedules and felt competition within their relationships. But no one batted an eyelid at these teenagers’ habits or potential learning difficulties, so long as they kept producing results. Sound familiar?

The legacy of this culture is apparent, and consistently perpetuated, at Cambridge. So many of us stay up in the early hours to finish our work. Ah, you’ve finished an essay? Onto the next. You’re never done. Feelings of guilt, often more than competition, are common. Many of us could probably benefit from remembering why we chose to rack up thousands in debt to spend three years studying what we love.

Let’s redefine success from day one of the schooling process. I’m not suggesting this sixth-form student needs to stop doing 28 A-Levels. I am suggesting that children and young adults deserve an education system which rewards learning to love themselves, developing fun hobbies, and being driven by curiosity and purpose, rather than fear and pressure.

Jack Deasley is a student at Cambridge and a member of the steering committee of TUFFT (Time's Up for the (11+) Test)

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What are Schools For?

Tom Mann

This question seems to have been debated since the first schools were set up. To provide religious instruction? To enable the development of a fit fighting force? To raise some out of poverty? To providing a future workforce? To support the functioning of a mature democracy? To provide education as a right in itself? These are just some of the answers given at different times in our history to this central question, which seems of particular pertinence just now.

Education cannot be separated from wide societal changes. Politicians know this and have used education over the years to forward their priorities. A major issue for us now is the impact of austerity and the current administration's desire to shrink the state and provide less funding to its institutions. This has led to a relative reduction in state school funding, a relative increase in available funding for private education and the development of an even more lop-sided and unfair system.

More worrying, I believe, is the increased call on schools to support the crumbling infrastructures around them. Teachers and other 'chalkface' staff in education are being asked to train as mental health supporters, social workers, family support workers, food-bank workers. They are being asked to take the place of specialist SEN teachers, to manage complex budgets and to make very difficult funding decisions around difficult and competing priorities. Some of these ideas, taken out of the context of the current funding crisis in schools, would be good ones and would and support students and staff better, but inside the context of these funding restrictions and a lack of school resources they have over-burdened schools, in-particular those in challenging circumstances. Schools are struggling to recruit, retain and even worse, afford staff to teach let alone fill the roles that the reductions in funding for our public institutions and political expediency have created The narrative that schools can raise students out of poverty and deliver social mobility and equality on their own is false. The international evidence is very strong; more equal societies provide more equal educational and wider societal outcomes. Education, with very few exceptions, will not do this alone. The debate about what education is for and how it can be fit for the 21st century needs to include how we are managing to provide measures of social justice in support of and along with other vital institutions such as housing, health-care, social-care, the benefit system and the legal system.

If the debate remains around schooling being a main driver for social justice and mobility in isolation, which I fear it will regardless of who is in government next, then at least there needs to be a recognition of the urgent need to provide significantly increased resources and funding to state education to allow it to attempt to play a more significant role in this.

Tom Mann is a member of CASE NEC and writes from personal experience of school teaching.

COMMENT

After 14 years of "austerity", the entire education system, from Early Years to Adult Education is in a mess: underfunded at all levels (except for the private schools attended by the children of the rich) and (except for the private schools attended by the children of the rich) driven by the narrow, life- denying philosophy of utilitarianism attacked by Charles Dickens in his novel of 1854, *Hard Times.*

Dickens puts it better than we can so here is an extract from the beginning of the novel, in which Thomas Gradgrind, a wealthy patron of the local school, is speaking to a class of children. A new girl, Sissy (Cecilia) Jupe has attracted Mr Gradgrind's attention. Learning that Sissy's father trains horses for the circus, Gradgrind demands that she "define a horse." She is unable to do so.

> *"Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!" said Mr. Gradgrind, for the general behoof of all the little pitchers. "Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours."*
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> *The square finger, moving here and there, lighted suddenly on Bitzer, perhaps because he chanced to sit in the same ray of sunlight which, darting in at one of the bare windows of the intensely white-washed room, irradiated Sissy. For, the boys and girls sat on the face of the inclined plane in two compact bodies, divided up the centre by a narrow interval; and Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the comer of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end. But, whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun, when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed. His cold eyes would hardly have been eyes, but for the short ends of lashes which, by bringing them into immediate contrast with something paler than themselves, expressed their form. His short-cropped hair might have been a mere continuation of the sandy freckles on his forehead and face. His skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white.*
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> *"Bitzer," said Thomas Gradgrind. "Your definition of a horse."*
>
> *"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Thus (and much more) Bitzer.*
>
> *"Now girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind. "You know what a horse is."*

This is an example of what, 170 years later, the government likes to refer to as “the knowledge-rich curriculum”. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*...

If Labour wins the next election, we can be confident that the material problems blighting our system will be tackled, just as they were after 1997. School buildings will be repaired, schools will be better equipped, and some progress will be made in encouraging teachers to stay in the job. Early Years will be better financed, some version of the much missed Sure Start may return and so on. Labour's record in improving the material conditions for education has been a good one.

However, Labour so far shows no sign of wishing to bring about the reforms to the governance, structure and content of education at all levels that would bring our hopelessly misconceived and outdated system up to modern standards and it has to be said that Labour's historical record in this regard is far from encouraging. We can but hope...