



The Breaking of the Education Contract

Why we need to keep politics out of schools

Joanna Williams

CIVITAS

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About the author

Joanna Williams is an academic, author and commentator. Her books include *How Woke Won* (2022); *Women vs Feminism* (2017); *Academic Freedom in an Age of Conformity* (2016), and *Consuming Higher Education, Why Learning Can't Be Bought* (2012). She is a columnist for the online magazine *Spiked* and writes regularly for *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Spectator*. Joanna began her career teaching English in secondary schools. She joined the University of Kent as a lecturer in Higher Education and Academic Practice in 2007, later becoming director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Since leaving academia, Joanna has worked for think tanks, including Civitas and Policy Exchange, and has served as a Visiting Fellow at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium in Hungary.

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Introduction

Forget toddlers. Every busy mum I know has had at least one tantrum. Often, it is when the pressures of being a good parent at home and a hard-working colleague in the office combine with some seemingly random but urgent request from their child's school. The journalist Allison Pearson nailed the experience in her 2003 novel *I Don't Know How She Does It*. Protagonist Kate Reddy finds herself in the kitchen late one night, 'distressing' shop-bought mince pies so they can be passed off as home-made in the school cake sale.

My own meltdown began with me scrabbling around for leftover sachets of sugar in my university department's staff canteen. Later, exhausted at the end of a long day, I sat at home cutting up the sachets, pouring the sugar into the bin and handing over the 'Fairtrade' symbols for my 6-year-old son to glue onto a cardboard headband. To celebrate Fairtrade Week, his class were expected to come to school with a 'Fairtrade hat' they could wear in a playground parade.

All at once, the ridiculousness of the situation hit me. My son had next to no idea what Fairtrade meant. Poor farmers would be much better served by fertiliser and tractors, I thought, rather than having to doff their caps to Western middle-class consumers. And yet there I was, helping my son make a hat for a political cause I disagreed with, when I had dinner to cook and he had television to watch. Why?

This book is my attempt to explain how and why education has become so entwined with politics.

I draw upon my experiences as a secondary school teacher, university lecturer, educational researcher and mother to argue that, over the course of many decades, education has stopped being primarily concerned with the transmission of knowledge and culture and, instead, has become focused on shaping children's political outlook and moral values.

As a former teacher, I know this is a bold claim. So, let me be clear from the outset: I do not think my one-time colleagues spend their free time researching how to brainwash children and conspiring world domination. Rather, as I argue in this book, the cumulative

impact of a century's worth of educational reform has fundamentally altered the purpose of schools and universities, moving them in a more political direction, regardless of the intentions of individual teachers or lecturers. Often, this involves encouraging children to reject the attitudes and values of their family members and instilling in them school-approved views on everything from sex and relationships to Britain's allegedly racist past and which brand of bananas to buy in the supermarket (answer: Fairtrade).

In this way, without anyone specifically intending it, education stops being a 'conversation between the generations' and becomes a form of moral and social re-engineering, shaping children in line with new political values and assumptions. As a result, education and indoctrination become blurred.

This process of reshaping children's attitudes and values begins long before they start formal schooling. Parenting campaigns focus upon 'the first 1,000 days', a period extending from pregnancy to a child's second birthday. Although well-intentioned, the sheer volume of advice given to new mothers and fathers today sends the message that they cannot trust their own instincts and should neither rely on them nor on older family members.

Children are first introduced to new 'expert-approved' attitudes and values at nursery. Scotland has 'Gender Friendly Nurseries' where staff use 'gender neutral language' and initiate gender neutral activities.¹ Toddlers might be greeted with the phrase 'hello everyone' instead of 'hello girls and boys', and referred to using 'inclusive' pronouns such as 'they' or 'them'. They won't find princess or superhero costumes in the dressing-up box, but unisex alternatives.

This might seem harmless enough. But for the youngest children, learning that they are a boy who will grow up to be a man, or a girl who will grow up to be a woman, is an important part of their development. Yet progressive educators encourage children to question these initial assumptions about their own identity. In 2016, Brighton Council's school application form asked the parents of 4-year-olds to discuss with their offspring whether they wished to be a boy or a girl when they started school, or, if they were undecided about their gender, the question could be left unanswered.²

Once they start school, children will be engaged in projects that, intentionally or not, promote only one perspective on an issue, like

my son's Fairtrade hat-making. Over 40 schools in Northern Ireland signed up to become 'Schools of Sanctuary', a scheme that offers support to refugees and migrants. One activity suggested by the organisation involved children writing anonymous Valentine's Day messages to welcome 'people seeking safety'.³ One school in Wales asked pupils to produce videos welcoming migrants and promoting the services of the Welsh Refugee Council.⁴

These initiatives are not 'education' as commonly understood. Educating children would involve teaching the history of migration, examining geographical trends and global conflicts, or discussing the push-and-pull factors for both migrants and host communities. Encouraging pupils to 'welcome' migrants requires them to take one side in a contentious debate. This is activism, not education.

Over the course of just a few weeks in 2025 came news that a 12-year-old girl was sent home from her secondary school in Rugby, and prevented from making a speech about 'being British', for wearing a Union Jack dress on 'Culture Celebration Day'. Pupils had been asked to wear 'traditional cultural dress' reflecting their 'nationality or family heritage'.⁵ This, it seems, did not include a celebration of British nationality or culture, although the school later apologised and invited her back. Meanwhile, Britain's former education secretary Bridget Phillipson decreed that transgender teachers have a right to ask pupils to refer to them by the gender neutral title 'Mx', before clarifying that they can 'request' this title but not insist upon its use.⁶ New relationships and sex education (RSE) guidance was issued, directing schools to teach secondary-age children about strangulation in a bid to tackle the harms of online pornography.⁷ And former Prime Minister Keir Starmer backed a campaign to have *Adolescence*, a Netflix drama about knife crime and the dangers of social media, shown in all schools.⁸

Children learn to be welcoming of migrants, respectful of a person's gender identity, ashamed to be British and wary of toxic masculinity. It is not important whether these are good causes or issues with which we, personally, agree or disagree. What matters is that schools are concerned with political issues and aim to cultivate particular attitudes and viewpoints in pupils. This may be due to government policies, the particular enthusiasms of activist teachers and school leaders or the demands of external organisations. The collective impact of all these expectations and initiatives is to transform education into a political project.

Through explicit instruction in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), workshops grounded in critical race theory (CRT), the content of both the formal and 'hidden' curriculum and the work of individual activists in the classroom, education has morphed into indoctrination. This book explores how and why this has happened. We look at the impact of activist teachers, campaigning schools, 'decolonised' subjects and reading lists, and successive governments that have seen 'put it on the curriculum' as the solution to every conceivable social and economic problem. We examine how schools have come to replace education with a political project of morally re-engineering children to create citizens for an imagined future. This book makes the case for a return to education as an end in itself.

Part One

The politicisation of education

Chapter 1

Activist teachers, campaigning schools

Britain seems to be constantly teetering on the brink of a teacher recruitment crisis. It's not just that vacancies go unfilled; schools also struggle to retain teachers. In 2025, the National Foundation for Education Research found that the number of unfilled posts was at a record high, with pupil behaviour, low wages and inflexible working practices all blamed for teachers quitting the profession.⁹ But what motivates people to become teachers in the first place?

Changing the world, one pupil at a time

The government website promoting teaching tells potential recruits:

*There's no career quite like teaching. From sharing your passion for a subject, to having a job where every day is different, there's lots of reasons why people choose to become teachers in England.*¹⁰

Using 'every day is different' as a selling point nods to the perception of shrinking attention spans and the notion that work is about personal fulfilment rather than service to others. But in my experience, many people are attracted to teaching because they want to share their passion for a subject.

Yet, despite this initial reference to subjects, the rest of the webpage focuses on a very different kind of passion: a desire to change the world. Recruits learn that 'Every lesson you teach or conversation you have in a school corridor has the opportunity to inspire your pupils, shape their futures, and the world around them.'

This message is reinforced by a quotation from a practicing primary school teacher, who explores her reasons for entering the profession: 'Education is the most powerful tool you can use to change the world, and we get to provide that to the next generation and others to come.'

At first glance, being driven to 'change the world' is an odd reason to become a teacher. It assumes that educators think the world is

wrong as it currently exists and either have a plan for creating a better world, or, as the practicing teacher seems to suggest, feel more comfortable throwing their lot in with generations yet to come than already existing adults.

This leaves teachers, even those passionate about a particular subject, uncertain how to proceed. If the world is flawed, and children are the ones to bring about change, how can knowledge of the past, or from the past, be of any use to them?

For another primary teacher quoted on the recruitment site, the change she is seeking will come about because of who she is. She says:

I chose teaching because I was inspired by some amazing teachers as a child, but I didn't always see myself represented. I wanted to help inspire, teach children new things, be that representation and help my community.

Her authority in the classroom is premised less upon what she knows and can transmit, and more because of her identity – who she is and the identity group she belongs to.

As we will explore in subsequent chapters, rejecting the intellectual authority gained from knowledge of the past and adopting a future orientation paves the way for education to become confused with moral instruction, and the transmission of knowledge and culture to be replaced by engagement in political activity. If new recruits are told that teaching is a route to changing the world, then it is hardly surprising that some come to confuse their role in the classroom with that of a political campaigner.

The power of the progressive activists

The National Education Union (NEU) is Britain's biggest teaching union. In December 2025, members were polled about their voting intentions. It found that 60 per cent had voted Labour in the previous year's general election, but this had since fallen to just 18 per cent. At the same time, support for Zack Polanski's Green Party had risen from 10 per cent to 23 per cent, making it the most popular choice among those polled. A further six per cent expressed support for Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana's Your Party. This means that,

in total, 54 per cent of NEU members back a left-wing or far-left party (including 7 per cent for the Liberal Democrats), making them considerably more progressive than the population as a whole.¹¹

Of course, none of this should really matter. Teachers' personal political views should, for the most part, be irrelevant. Good teachers know to leave their own opinions at the classroom door and, as professionals, convey knowledge and information, encourage critical thinking and allow for open-ended discussion, without showing bias towards their own views. For older pupils, it may even be appropriate for teachers to acknowledge their own views, provided they do so without discriminating against those who hold contrary opinions.

The problem we face in schools today is not just that we have a significant proportion of teachers who hold views that are out-of-kilter with the population as a whole, but that some see their role in the classroom as not a neutral arbiter of debate but as a social engineer who has a responsibility to win children over to 'correct' ways of thinking.

The NEU makes this explicit. In January 2026, general secretary Daniel Kebede declared his intention to expand the union's membership to include up to 500,000 support staff. Crucially, Kebede argued that this growth was necessary to protect schools from the impact of a potential Nigel Farage government. He told members that the NEU and other unions had joined a movement 'aimed at preventing Reform from gaining power and addressing the growing influence of far-right street movements'.¹²

We did not have to wait long to discover how this would play out in practice. Barely a fortnight later, it came to light that a planned visit by the Jewish MP and vice-chair of Labour Friends of Israel, Damien Egan, to a Bristol secondary school had been cancelled following a campaign led by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and reportedly, the NEU. Although Egan was the city's democratically elected representative and was not expected to speak to children about the situation in the Middle East, activist teachers raised concerns about his visit. On private WhatsApp groups, staff discussed 'things like people wearing keffiyehs to work that day... and the work that members could do with students in preparation for that visit.' Fear of protests and parents keeping children away from school ultimately led to Egan's cancellation.¹³

The phrase ‘the work members could do with students in preparation for [Egan’s] visit’ takes on a new significance when set against the NEU’s plans, announced the previous spring, to train members in how to ‘advocate for Palestine’ and to bring the ‘Palestinian struggle’ into schools. Workshops ‘aimed at strengthening the movement for Palestinian liberation’ were to instruct teachers in ‘educational approaches that capture the history of the Palestinian struggle’.¹⁴ In this context, a visit to a school by the local MP was not to be used to teach children about Parliament and democratic processes, or even to allow them to ask their own questions. Instead, it was perceived as an opportunity to bring ‘the Palestinian struggle’ into the classroom and teach children about the need for ‘Palestinian liberation’. We see that trade unions, like the NEU, co-ordinate teachers who see themselves as progressive activists on a mission to change the world through education.

Outside of unions, individual teachers routinely hit the headlines after being exposed for imposing their own views on children. In Scotland, a boy was suspended from school after he filmed his teacher telling him off for saying there were only two genders. ‘This is an inclusive school,’ the teacher told him, later adding, ‘Could you please keep that opinion to your own house? Not in this school.’¹⁵ A similar incident occurred in England some months later. In a recorded interaction, a pupil describes the idea of a child identifying as an animal ‘crazy’, before going on to argue that sex is immutable and gender is binary. In response, a teacher describes her views as ‘despicable’ and threatens to report her to a senior colleague before concluding: ‘If you don’t like it, you need to go to a different school.’¹⁶ These teachers are seeking to impose on children highly contested ideas about sex and gender.

Teachers breaking the spirit of the law?

Activist teachers challenge children’s language, preconceptions and existing biological knowledge and replace these frames of reference with their own beliefs. Indeed, their authority in the classroom comes not from subject expertise but from their sense of moral superiority. They consolidate the transformation of education into indoctrination, and because their views are contested, drive a wedge between school and home. Yet in Britain, under the Education Act 1996 and subsequent government guidance, it is illegal for schools to show political bias.¹⁷ This means that while

contentious issues can be discussed, teachers are expected to present a balanced view of opposing arguments. So, what is going on?

One problem, as we will explore in more detail later in this chapter, is that there is little agreement about what constitutes a ‘political’ issue. To many teachers, lessons on gender identity, celebrating Pride or raising money for children in a conflict zone fall under the heading ‘good citizenship’ rather than politics. It is only when confronted by parents who take an opposing view that schools stand accused of engaging in politics.

Another problem is that the government itself has contradictory aims for schools. While the law against promoting ‘partisan political views’ in the classroom is clear, sometimes government ministers themselves call on schools to challenge particular political views or to inculcate new beliefs in children. The idea that gender is an innate feeling, rather than a binary biological reality, is explicitly political and highly contested. Yet, as we will explore in the next chapter, this was taught to children as part of the sex and relationships curriculum for many years.

Keir Starmer’s Labour government had called on schools to counter the impact of ‘mis’ and ‘dis’information (both inherently political categories) and to identify children vulnerable to extremism, including ‘far-right’ views. In December 2025, the government announced that teachers would receive training to spot and address misogyny in the classroom. Pupils who are identified as being at ‘high risk’ of developing misogynistic attitudes will receive ‘extra care’ to alter their behaviour.¹⁸

Of course, no pupil should be allowed to make derogatory remarks in the classroom, and teachers must act if they fear children are becoming embroiled in criminal activity. But the classroom campaign against misogyny goes beyond this. It risks problematising boys and traditionally masculine attributes and, through a focus on social media influencers, acting as a political intervention to squash opinions that government ministers dislike.

That government ministers appear untroubled about asking teachers to monitor pupils and carry out a political intervention on those with the ‘wrong’ views speaks to the fact that education is rarely considered an end in itself. All too often, education is viewed simply as a tool for achieving a wide range of social, economic, political

and health-related goals. Ultimately, individual teachers determine for themselves how far down this line they wish to go. Most teachers focus on transmitting basic skills and subject knowledge. But a small cohort finds that nurturing particular attitudes and viewpoints, whether for equity, social justice, sustainability or gender neutrality, is what gives their role a sense of purpose.

Campaigning schools

Over many decades, these progressive activists have moved beyond the classroom and gained leadership positions in schools. One primary school in Birmingham sparked controversy after the headteacher banned phrases like ‘good morning, boys and girls’, ‘let’s go, guys’ and ‘man up’. Students as young as three were apparently taught to hold up posters flagging ‘sexist’ terms if they came across them in classroom resources or heard them uttered by the adults around them. Pupils who found the ‘best’ examples were rewarded with certificates.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in London, a school asked pupils to join a sponsored fast to raise money for people in Gaza,²⁰ while elsewhere around the country, one school reportedly asked children to dress up in rainbow colours or even in drag to celebrate Pride month.²¹

Later, some activists move beyond schools altogether and take up positions in other organisations. When Labour launched a review of the school curriculum in 2024, many of the responses came from teaching unions, think tanks, university teacher-education departments and learned societies – groups we might label, collectively, Britain’s educational establishment. For the most part, they called on the government to go further in using schools to cultivate particular attitudes in pupils, particularly towards issues such as climate change, diversity, equity and inclusion, and the identification and rejection of misinformation. They clearly perceived their primary goal as social justice rather than academic excellence.

Meanwhile, all manner of organisations are ready to identify sympathetic headteachers and target schools as a potential source of revenue and as a means of access to a captive audience. Charities from Amnesty International to Parallel Histories, a group that works with children to promote ‘new ways to study and understand conflict’ and provide ‘an antidote to populism and extremism’,²² send speakers or run workshops in schools.

Captured institutions

The Fairtrade Foundation claims that around 5,000 schools across the UK ‘are helping to champion Fairtrade’.²³ This might involve pupils learning that ‘whatever their age, they have the power to make a difference in the world.’²⁴ In order to be granted a FairAchiever Award, Fairtrade learning must be embedded in lesson plans and pupils’ work.²⁵ Zero Carbon Schools put ‘climate education and action at the heart of school life.’ This ‘cross-curricular programme for primary and secondary with links to science, geography, maths, English, PSHE [personal, social, health and economic education] and art’ involves children in activities like calculating ‘an estimate of their school’s carbon emissions’ and leading ‘meaningful projects to reduce the school’s carbon footprint’.²⁶ Despite extensive searching, I have yet to find a pro-nuclear power or free trade school.

Fairtrade and Zero Carbon Schools are not simply providing extra-curricular activities that children can choose to engage with outside of timetabled classes. Instead, they suggest that lesson content focused on a particular worldview be taught to a captive audience of children. Yet rather than reacting in alarm as they hand over the curriculum to highly motivated campaigning organisations, schools pay money for instruction in how to comply in the face of a ‘climate emergency’ or in the interests of promoting ‘social justice’.

Similar schemes make explicit the goal of converting children into young activists. Over 6,000 UK schools have signed up to ‘Let’s Go Zero’²⁷ (not to be confused with Zero Carbon Schools), with pupils conscripted into a campaign urging the government to support the ‘vital mission’ of reaching net zero by 2030. The organisation aims to ‘show the overwhelming support for zero carbon classrooms up and down the UK’.²⁸ The assumption that this is a ‘vital mission’ suggests that all involved agree with the same environmentalist outlook.

Against democracy

When schools have a mission, pupils are transformed into a stage army for adults who, in the past, would have joined protest marches and picket lines to make their views known. Today’s blurring of the boundaries between education and politics speaks to the degradation of both spheres. Unable to make the case for education as an end in itself, adults likewise struggle to engage

in public debate and win other adults to their cause. As a result, it can seem as if today's militants prefer to create little Gretas in the classroom rather than engage in formal democratic processes. When adults lose faith in free speech, debate and democracy, they turn their attention to children. Formal democratic processes are being undermined by the politicisation of education. And this is not just happening in the UK.

Amnesty International has certified 'Human Rights Friendly Schools' in 22 countries. Each must show that human rights are placed 'at the heart of the learning experience' and are 'an integral part of everyday school life'.²⁹ In other words, despite all the concern about decolonising the curriculum, a wealthy Western non-governmental organisation exerts influence over the education of children worldwide. Whether we agree or disagree with Amnesty International's definition of human rights or the project of cutting carbon emissions is irrelevant: it should be for teachers – not charities – to decide what children are taught, perhaps in consultation with parents, academics or state officials, and schools should not be in the business of recruiting pupils to political causes.

When schools are 'captured' by third-sector organisations, the opinions of individual teachers no longer matter. They may find themselves working in institutions where managers endorse certain views, where the curriculum itself promotes a particular worldview and where the very purpose of education is perceived to be the promotion of social justice, not the transmission of knowledge.

Activist teachers are, in many respects, a symptom, not the cause, of a politicised education system. It is important to understand that their success in using schools to promote their own beliefs and opinions does not stem from the strength of their arguments but from the collapse of any alternative sense of what education is for. It is in this context that teachers who are not particularly politically motivated get swept up in projects they may not explicitly endorse.

A long-standing problem

When we think about the politicisation of education today, we focus on contemporary issues – such as climate change, misogyny, fake news and gender ideology. But concern about the politicisation of education is not new. As early as 1848, Horace Mann, the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, expressed

concern that as school attendance increased, teachers might exploit their positions and use the classroom to promote their own beliefs. He explained, 'political proselytism is no function of the school ... all indoctrination into matters of controversy between hostile political parties is to be elsewhere sought for, and elsewhere imparted.'³⁰ Almost 2 centuries later, such reminders are still pertinent.

In his 1971 critique of formal education, *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich describes a 'hidden curriculum' within 'the ceremonial or ritual of schooling itself'.³¹ Illich was troubled by the role schools played in reproducing capitalism, a process he saw as beginning with laying claim to pupils' time and energy solely to turn them into consumers of yet more formal education. Schools, he argued, colonised the minds of children. In a particularly prescient comment, Illich notes that, 'The teacher-as-moralist substitutes for parents, God, or the state. He indoctrinates the pupil about what is right or wrong, not only in school but in society at large.'³² Today, the educational establishment has different concerns and a new understanding of what counts as 'right' and 'wrong'. Yet, even more than when Illich was writing in the 1970s, schools are concerned with advancing a progressive ideology and its associated values.

One way to spot this ideology is to look at the vocabulary children pick up at school. Of course, there are the slang expressions that comprise an essential part of youth culture. And children will, hopefully, learn new subject-specific words like 'equation', 'sonnet', and 'oxbow lake'. But many parents will be aware that school is where children become versed in the language of 'systemic racism', 'white privilege', 'gender' and 'identity'. The German sociologist Norbert Elias argues that, 'The more or less sudden emergence of words within languages nearly always points to changes in the lives of people themselves'.³³

In the case of phrases like 'white privilege' and 'gender identity', social change is not being driven from the bottom up, but from the top down. In other words, a cultural elite seeks to impose change on society, at least in part, through the education system. As the historian and educationalist Nick Tate notes:

One of the most striking parts of the state's social engineering agenda has been how it has come to assume that education can be used to shape children's feelings, attitudes and behaviour in ways which will not only be beneficial to them as

*individuals but which will help to bring into being a particular kind of society.*³⁴

While the idea of schools changing not just pupils' attitudes, but their very lives, may seem far-fetched to some, it will not shock the parents of children who have grown convinced that they were born in the wrong body and are really the opposite gender. It may come as no surprise to those parents who discovered schools supported their child's 'social transition' with a new name and pronouns. Less dramatically, and to return to the beginning of this chapter, we know that recruitment campaigns tap into a wannabe-teacher's desire to 'change the world' and that this change is presumed to start with the children in the classroom. None of this suggests the existence of a global conspiracy linking teachers to a shadowy ruling elite.

However, as we will explore over the next few chapters, sometimes there really is a specific project to change children's behaviour. This is particularly evident in the plethora of new subjects, such as relationships and sex education (RSE); personal, social and health education; and citizenship, which have no basis in academic disciplines and are explicitly concerned with changing pupils' attitudes and values.

More generally, a loss of faith in the importance of transmitting cultural knowledge and the loss of the intellectual authority of the teacher mean that education is far more open to political, progressive motivations than in the past. Changing attitudes and promoting values are enshrined in the very purpose of schools and carried out by well-meaning, even apolitical, teachers within a curriculum that also seeks to develop children's skills and increase their factual knowledge.

Chapter 2

Reframing sex and gender³⁵

Teachers' attempts to change children's attitudes and behaviour are most evident in lessons on sex and gender. Some form of sex education has been taught in schools in Britain for many decades now, and, for much of this time, lessons have gone beyond straightforward biological facts about human reproduction to encompass topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections and, more recently, gender identity. As such, sex education has increasingly encroached upon intimate aspects of human behaviour once considered to be beyond the scope of the state. Teachers have been tasked with a responsibility that was once left to parents, extended family members, religious communities or just individuals themselves to negotiate.

As we will explore in this chapter, it was at the turn of the century, when sex education was transformed into 'sexuality' education, that the curriculum really began to get into contested terrain. For example, the idea that gender is an identity distinct from our anatomical reality is not widely accepted. Indeed, it has no scientific basis. Ironically, it is precisely because the notion of gender is not 'common sense' that activists have needed to argue so vociferously for its inclusion in the school curriculum. When schools re-engineer children's most fundamental assumptions about whether they are boys or girls, we know that education has been captured by activists with a political mission. Here, we consider the history and current state of what is often called relationships and sex education (RSE).

A brief history of sex education

Children have long been taught facts about puberty and human reproduction, often in school science lessons. However, from the late 1960s, teachers were encouraged to go beyond a strict focus on biology. The 1968 *Handbook of Health Education*, published by the government to offer guidance to teachers, used a far more explicit vocabulary to describe reproduction and sexual relations. It mentioned contraception for the first time and suggested that teachers should acknowledge sex as an emotional experience.³⁶

In the following decade, this guidance – along with far broader cultural and political changes in society – began to have an impact on what was being taught in the classroom. As Michael Reiss writes for the Open University, from the beginning of the 1970s onwards, ‘Biology textbooks started to provide fuller accounts of the human reproductive systems’, and more pupils were taught about contraception. The general push was for teachers not just to reduce levels of ignorance about sexual reproduction but also to reduce children’s embarrassment and anxiety about discussing such issues. However, a strict divide between lessons covering biology and relationships was often maintained, with the latter, Reiss notes, ‘more often discussed in programmes of personal and social education, or their equivalents’.³⁷

By the mid-1980s, some parents were growing concerned that sex education lessons were promoting homosexuality and threatening ‘family values’. In response, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government enshrined in the 1986 Education Act rights for schools to opt out of sex education provision and for parents to withdraw their children from classes. Furthermore, the Act prescribed that sex education must be done ‘with due regard to ... the value of family life’.³⁸ The Department of Education and Science advised schools to teach children about the importance of monogamy and family life, to focus on health and the avoidance of risk and to avoid any promotion of homosexuality.³⁹ Even though this appears to be a conservative move, it continues to extend the scope of sex education into the area of intimate relationships and personal behaviour. This set the agenda for the coming period.

From reproduction to risk

Just two years later, the 1988 national curriculum compelled schools to go beyond teaching academic skills and knowledge and gave them a broad remit to promote ‘the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils’.⁴⁰ Some schools fulfilled this remit by including a new subject on the school timetable: personal and social education (PSE). A 1989 Curriculum Matters report on PSE described the subject as ‘concerned with qualities and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and abilities and skills in relation to oneself and others, social responsibilities and morality’.⁴¹ This was formalised the following year when DES guidance designated

that non-mandatory PSE lessons should run alongside the formal curriculum.

The introduction of PSE led to the emergence of two distinctive forms of sex education. Schools needed to include sex education within the science curriculum while, at the same time, it was included in PSE classes, where it was set within the context of emotional wellbeing, relationships and personal development. This means that from 1990 onwards, most schools went far beyond teaching scientific facts about human reproduction. Through PSE, sex education became a vessel for a range of political and public health concerns.

In 1991, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists specified that sex education was a means of tackling teenage pregnancy – a major political concern in the UK at that time.⁴² The following year, the Department of Health identified ‘HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health’ as one of five key areas of focus.⁴³ Over subsequent years, sex education came to be seen as the solution to both teenage pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted infections. These topics became part of the mandatory science curriculum, which was primarily intended to cover the biology of puberty and reproduction.

The 1993 Education Act attempted to reinstate clear boundaries between instruction in human reproduction, which was to occur in science classes, and broader health education, which was to take place in PSE lessons. This clarification was made after commentators raised the alarm about references to anal sex in lessons about HIV/AIDS. However, in the long run, one consequence of this move was to strengthen sex education as an important, discrete strand of the PSE curriculum. It was here that children learnt how to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and diseases. As a result, the 1996 Education Act listed sex education and PSE as part of the ‘basic curriculum’.

A model sex education lesson from this time suggests that casual sex is a problem because people not well known to one another will feel less moral obligation to guard against sexually transmitted infections and be honest about their health problems. A distinctive moral agenda can be seen here – against casual sex – but it is expressed through health concerns rather than a discussion about religious or moral rights and wrongs, love, commitment or relationships. Students may well have concluded that casual sex is wrong because it presents greater health risks.

Sex as a public health issue

This emphasis on risk continued under Tony Blair's New Labour government, which took office in 1997. PSE remained a non-statutory part of the curriculum but was seen as an important means of teaching a range of public health issues. Towards the end of the 1990s, there was a growing clamour for 'Clause 28', or 'Section 28', which outlawed the promotion of homosexuality in schools, to be repealed. Campaigners wanted sex to be discussed in the context of relationships, although without any emphasis on marriage or heterosexuality, and frequent reminders that relationships were themselves emotionally risky.

They were successful. New guidance for schools, issued in 2000, saw relationships formally coupled to sex education for the first time. Government policy documents began using the label 'Sex and Relationships Education' rather than simply 'Sex Education', and PSE itself expanded to personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE). Clause 28 was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in England and Wales in 2003. Consent and emotionally safe relationships were key features of the new curriculum; dropping Clause 28 left teachers free to cover not just sex but sexuality and a far wider range of sexual practices than previously.

As I can vouch from personal experience in the classroom, the expansion of sex education into the area of relationships further complicated what many teachers already perceived to be an awkward subject to teach. Despite being a hopelessly naive English teacher at the turn of the millennium, I was expected to take my Year 10 tutor group for weekly PSHEE lessons. The point in the lesson plan I dreaded most was when pupils got to submit anonymous, written questions. While I was supposed to suggest that no topics were off limits, my mischievous 15-year-olds saw it only as an exercise in making me blush. So, perhaps it is unsurprising that in many schools, sex education was readily given over to the enthusiasts and activists who sought to carve out a new niche for themselves. At the same time, professional 'sex educators' began to emerge, selling their services to schools confused about how to meet the new guidance.

From health to wellbeing

In a 2008 speech to the Sex Education Forum, a charity and advocacy group campaigning for ‘better’ (read: ‘more expansive’) sex education, the then Schools Minister, Jim Knight, announced that PSHEE was to become a mandatory part of the national curriculum in primary and secondary schools.⁴⁴ As *The Guardian* noted at the time, this was part of ‘government plans to cut teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases’. Sex education was to become part of a new personal, social and health education curriculum, which would also include advice warning children against drugs and alcohol. As the grouping together of these issues shows, risk is still a dominant theme. However, the focus is beginning to shift from physical risks (infections) to emotional risks, and from the danger of casual sex to the danger of sex within relationships.⁴⁵

In 2010, the Department for Education’s paper *The Importance of Teaching* highlighted that ‘Children need high-quality sex and relationships education so they can make wise and informed choices’.⁴⁶ It was around this time that my eldest son, then aged 10, had sex education lessons at school. As a liberal mother, I assumed I had already taught him everything he needed to know. So it was with a wry smile that I asked him if he had learnt anything new. ‘Oh yes,’ he replied. ‘Oral sex and masturbation.’ Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised. This is surely the logical endpoint of presenting both sex and relationships as inherently risky.

Yet by 2012, now under a new Conservative government, the remit of sex education was expanded once more. An Ofsted report from this time, *Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools*, criticised primary schools for placing too much emphasis on friendships and relationships, leaving pupils ill-prepared for the physical and emotional changes of puberty. And it criticised secondary schools for placing too much emphasis on ‘the mechanics’ of reproduction and too little on relationships, sexuality, the influence of pornography, emotions and staying safe. Ofsted argued that a lack of high-quality, age-appropriate sex and relationships education could itself be a risk as it would leave children vulnerable to inappropriate sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation.⁴⁷

From sex to socialisation

The emphasis on relationships was formalised in the decision to refer to relationships and sex education (RSE) rather than sex and relationships education, first recorded in the government's 2017 Children and Social Work Act. This reflected the continued expansion of sex education into all areas of people's intimate relationships. The definition of risk, at this time, was broadened from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections to emotional risks from abusive relationships in both the online and offline world. Sex education was shaped less by scientific knowledge and more by whole school policies on safeguarding, child protection and equalities legislation. These changes made schools more explicitly concerned with inducting children into a particular set of values, determined by the state rather than by parents, family, community or faith group.

With the door open for a far more expansive focus on all aspects of a child's emotional realm, intimate life and personal relationships, civil servants set about devising a new curriculum. As we explore below, their work was heavily influenced by groups like Stonewall and Mermaids in the UK, as well as by international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The new statutory guidance they developed was published in 2019 and came into effect in 2021. Teachers were to help children discover and celebrate their gender identity and sexuality, and, as such, they were not to assume that cisgender people, heterosexual relationships or the traditional family were, in any way, 'normal'. What resulted was a highly sexualised and politicised curriculum that did not just 'go beyond' scientific facts but ignored basic biology entirely when it came to promoting the idea that people can change gender.

Teaching gender

For millennia, it has been accepted that people are either male or female. For much of recent history, it has been considered tolerant and progressive to accept that some people do not conform to strict gender stereotypes, just as some people may be gay or straight, and yet they are no less male or female, men or women. This began to change with the rise of transgender ideology.

A new theory of human development posited the notion that sex is simply something which is ‘assigned at birth’, seemingly on the whim of a doctor or midwife. Meanwhile, each person must discover their gender identity according to their preferences and personality traits. So, for example, a girl ‘assigned female at birth’ but who discovers she hates wearing dresses and the colour pink, and much prefers climbing trees and playing football, may actually be a boy in a female body. The logical next step is that their body must be changed, through medication and surgery, to match this internal sense of themselves. Rather than this being heralded as an abusive message to send to children and one that rehabilitates outdated sexist stereotypes, it has been promoted by transgender activists.

Charities and organisations, such as Gendered Intelligence, Mermaids and Stonewall, sought to bring the transgender message into schools. One such group, Trans Student Educational Resources, promotes a ‘Gender Unicorn’ diagram which illustrates the idea that while biological sex is ‘assigned at birth’ based on the outward appearance of the body, ‘gender identity’ floats free from biology as an internal sense of whether you are male, female, neither or somewhere in between. Children are taught that this identity or ‘gender expression’ is further defined by who they are physically or emotionally attracted to. Another popular organisation delivering RSE in schools, Pop’n’Oly, showcases a video, ‘Gender Explained for Kids’, that presents gender identity as ‘a sliding scale that most people sit on somewhere’, and which ranges from ‘Female’ to ‘Mostly Female’, ‘Partly Female’, ‘Both or Neither’, through to ‘Partly Male’, ‘Mostly Male’ or ‘Male’.⁴⁸

To understand how such groups were allowed to promote this politicised agenda through the school curriculum, we must move beyond the UK and look at the influence of international organisations.

From sex to sexuality

For several decades now, organisations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), UNESCO and the WHO have sought to influence the way children in countries around the world are taught about sex. Their collective approach is best encapsulated by the push to move from ‘sex’ to ‘sexuality education’. While ‘sex’ indicates both anatomy and an intimate physical act,

‘sexuality’ denotes psychological, embodied characteristics of a person’s identity that exist in the context of society and personal relationships.

UNESCO, for example, defines sexuality as:

... a core dimension of being human which includes: the understanding of, and relationship to, the human body; emotional attachment and love; sex; gender; gender identity; sexual orientation; sexual intimacy; pleasure and reproduction.

It involves ‘biological, social, psychological, spiritual, religious, political, legal, historic, ethical and cultural dimensions that evolve over a lifespan.’⁴⁹ This encompasses almost all aspects of a person’s life, including their mental and physical health, interactions with friends and family members and public engagement.

IPPF claims that ‘sexuality, and pleasure deriving from it, is a central aspect of being human, whether or not a person chooses to reproduce’,⁵⁰ before clarifying that ‘all people are sexual beings, no matter what age, ethnicity, gender, culture or religion’.⁵¹ The emphasis on ‘pleasure’ moves comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) away from objectivity and locates it within a highly personal, subjective, intimate – and, indeed, adult and contested – realm. IPPF makes this explicit: ‘IPPF has supported young people’s right to access education which goes beyond a mere biology lesson to incorporate sexual pleasure and wellbeing as a crucial part of life.’⁵²

As we can see, the move from sex to sexuality means nothing is off limits when it comes to teaching. This expansive remit is echoed in the title adopted by these international organisations: comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)

UNESCO defines CSE as:

... a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop

*respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.*⁵³

This is worth unpacking. Listing the ‘cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality’ differentiates CSE from traditional academic subjects. Pupils are expected to be fully engaged as ‘active learners’, not passive recipients of facts. And while it may be uncontroversial to list knowledge and skills as learning outcomes in relation to other school subjects, ‘skills’ are not normally associated with sexuality. Likewise, the explicit aim of equipping children with ‘attitudes and values’ raises questions about what are ‘correct’ values and who gets to decide. Slippage between ‘children’ and ‘young people’ often passes without comment, but when it comes to sex, many nations have strict age of consent laws that delineate between adults and minors. In this context, the ambiguity around the phrase ‘young person’ is unhelpful.

Learning goals related to ‘well-being’ and ‘dignity’ are highly subjective; teachers can reasonably assess the extent to which pupils have mastered algebra, but notions of wellbeing and dignity are far more personal. The emphasis on ‘respectful social and sexual relations’ and the ‘well-being ... of others’ hints that what is being promoted is less an individual sense of wellbeing and more conformity with predetermined behavioural norms. The final reference to ‘rights’ moves us from education to politics.

As this makes clear, CSE covers all aspects of a child’s intimate life and sense of self, from their gender identity to their sexuality, and from casual sex to family bonds. And whereas sex education implies a one-off or short series of lessons, CSE is a permanent feature of the school curriculum, which involves continually revisiting key topics.

A global project

CSE is a global project that has been more than three decades in development. Many hundreds of policy documents on CSE have been compiled by supranational organisations, national and regional non-governmental organisations, national governments, local education authorities, schools, community groups and youth

clubs. However, just a small number of key documents, especially work produced by WHO and UNESCO, have had a global influence on the delivery of CSE. They are repeatedly cross-referenced in the work of other organisations.

UNESCO's *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* has been particularly influential.⁵⁴ First published in 2009, before being revised and reissued in 2018, the definition of CSE and practical teaching instruction provided in this document has been endorsed by a range of international organisations, including, most notably: UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UN Women, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) and WHO.

National governments, such as the UK, are committed to UNESCO's Global Education 2030 Agenda, which incorporates the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4: to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.⁵⁵ These international organisations present CSE as integral to inclusive and equitable education. Within the EU, primary responsibility for education policies lies with member states. Nonetheless, the EU and its institutions offer guidance on the delivery of CSE. In doing so, they draw heavily upon work by UNESCO and WHO. This means we see similar definitions and guides to best practice replicated by the European Parliament, the European Commission, and beyond the EU in the Council of Europe. Although nations have limited scope to determine *how* to implement the specified standards, they are under considerable pressure to meet international targets in *what* should be taught.

UNESCO, along with WHO and other UN agencies, sets out standards for the delivery of CSE that member nations are expected to meet. WHO's 2010 standards have been particularly widely promoted, including by the European Parliament. They include the expectation that children will:

- ... *contribute to a social climate that is tolerant, open and respectful towards sexuality, various lifestyles, attitudes and values;*
- ... *respect sexual diversity and gender differences and to be aware of sexual identity and gender roles;*
- ... *be aware of and have knowledge about the human body, its development and functions, in particular regarding sexuality;*

- ... *be able to develop as a sexual being, meaning to learn to express feelings and needs, to experience sexuality in a pleasurable manner and to develop one's own gender roles and sexual identity;*
- ... *reflect on sexuality and diverse norms and values with regard to human rights in order to develop one's own critical attitudes;*
- ... *build (sexual) relationships in which there is mutual understanding and respect for one another's needs and boundaries and to have equal relationships.*⁵⁶

Many parents will consider these standards to be highly controversial. References to 'gender identity,' 'sexual identity,' and 'gender roles' locate the text within the realm of queer theory and gender theory. The priority given to children becoming 'open and respectful towards sexuality, various lifestyles, attitudes and values', meanwhile, suggests a permissiveness that is tolerant of everything other than limits on expressions of sexuality as imposed by traditional religious or moral codes. In other words, what is being asked of CSE teachers is little short of the wholesale transformation of social norms.

Driven by powerful and well-funded international organisations, CSE is now taught in schools around the world. Indeed, there is remarkable homogeneity in lesson content across national and cultural divides. Neither a child's own parents nor their local community or national government are expected to stand in the way of sexuality education.

As CSE has spread across the globe, previously assumed norms around privacy, age appropriateness, and even compliance with national laws, have been called into question. Increasingly, an elite group of sexuality 'experts' assume responsibility for inculcating children's attitudes towards sex and relationships and claim the moral authority to dictate how people should think, feel and act in the most intimate areas of their lives. In this way, proponents of CSE become moral imperialists who bypass national sovereignty to change social attitudes and, in the process, impress novel, progressive teachings upon the minds of the next generation.

In sum, a definition of CSE that has been taken up by a powerful network of global organisations and imposed upon nations, schools and families exploits education to promote a highly politicised and contested approach to altering children's attitudes and values in the

most intimate sphere of their lives. It is easy to spot the influence of CSE in the English national curriculum. Research conducted for Policy Exchange in 2023 found that 72 per cent of schools polled taught pupils that people have a gender identity that may be different to their biological sex, while 25 per cent taught that some people ‘may be born in the wrong body’.⁵⁷

Teaching methods

The European Parliament is clear that CSE is not to be taught in the same way as traditional academic subjects. It suggests that classroom activities can comprise: ‘group discussions, quizzes, games, peer-to-peer teaching’ as well as ‘the use of multimedia and social media platforms.’⁵⁸ The emphasis on discussion and activity is a bid to ensure the child’s complete mental and emotional engagement with the topic under consideration. UNESCO reinforces this point: ‘CSE, like other forms of transformative education, requires the use of participatory pedagogies, which may be counter to the style of teaching that many teachers are familiar with.’⁵⁹

Organisations that work to support schools in providing relationships, sex and health education, such as the School of Sexuality Education, suggest that participation can include activities such as handling contraceptives, drawing or ‘modelling’ body parts, examining illustrations of sex acts, and sharing feelings and personal experiences⁶⁰.

Again, the influence of this on the English school curriculum in the early 2020s is clearly apparent. The New Social Covenant Unit compiled a dossier of evidence setting out the content of so-called ‘sex positive’ relationships and sex education classes. Activities involved children ‘stepping away from heteronormative and monogamy-based assumptions’ to appreciate that ‘there are a variety of sexual preferences and practices – we’re all a little different’.⁶¹

Masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, fisting, rough sex, gender queer and polyamory were all taught in some schools. Children were being asked to draw pictures of penises, model vulvas from Play-Doh, and engage in discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of different sex toys. Research carried out for Civitas found that 41 per cent of pupils surveyed claimed to have encountered ‘sex positivity’ at school, while 23 per cent reported having been taught about

Bondage, Dominance and Sado Masochism (BDSM), and 59 per cent said they had been taught about masturbation.⁶² In addition, pupils were introduced to dozens of gender identities: from non-binary and agender, to demigirl and boi in lessons that reiterated the importance of respecting someone's gender identity, including their preferred pronouns.⁶³

CSE sexualises childhood

The principles upon which CSE is based assume children are sexual beings with sexual rights, including, first and foremost, the right to sexual pleasure. Although the teaching of CSE does not correlate with an increase in sexual activity among children, it frequently sexualises childhood in a way many consider not just morally inappropriate but a potential threat to children's safety.

According to WHO, 'All people are born as sexual beings'.⁶⁴ Its 2010 document, *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe*, explains:

*The development of sexual behaviour, feelings and cognitions begins in the womb and continues throughout a person's lifetime. Precursors of later sexual perception, such as the ability to enjoy physical contact, are present from birth.*⁶⁵

When it is accepted that sexuality begins at (or even before) birth, the case can be made for CSE to begin in early childhood. WHO argues that:

*From birth, babies learn the value and pleasure of bodily contact, warmth and intimacy. Soon after that, they learn what is "clean" and what is "dirty". Later, they learn the difference between male and female, and between intimates and strangers. The point is that, from birth, parents in particular send messages to their children that relate to the human body and intimacy. In other words, they are engaging in sexuality education.*⁶⁶

This reinterprets child development and family interactions through a sexual lens. Parents have not traditionally seen themselves as 'engaging in sexuality education' when they care for their babies

and young children. To suggest that this is, in fact, what they are doing is to impose a distinct and highly sexualised values framework on family life. It is not babies that are sexual beings, but WHO that sexualises childhood and intimate relationships.

UNESCO adopts a similar line. It claims:

Young people are sexual beings. They have sexual needs, desires, fantasies and dreams. It is important for all young people around the world to be able to explore, experience and express their sexualities in healthy, positive, pleasurable and safe ways. This can only happen when young people's sexual rights are guaranteed.⁶⁷

As previously noted, the rhetorical usage of the phrase 'young people' is slippery. UNESCO is clearly referring to children, but 'young people' blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood in a way that suggests both groups are equally sexually mature and able to exercise 'sexual rights'. Astonishingly, WHO appears to claim that children are somehow *more* sexual than adults:

The sexuality of children is much broader than that of the average adult. It can be regarded as one aspect of the development of sensuality, which is part of psychological, social and biological development.⁶⁸

Children are presented as being both inherently sexual beings and in the process of development. These two seemingly contradictory claims justify the perceived need for CSE.

Once it is established that children are inherently sexual beings, it is argued that they have sexual rights. This is often interpreted quite specifically as a right to sexual pleasure. When children's rights are understood in this way, then denying children opportunities for sexual pleasure becomes a denial of their fundamental human rights. By the same token, instruction in sexual pleasure is perceived not as a means of inappropriately sexualising childhood but of allowing children to fulfil their human rights.

UNESCO demonstrates the logic of this argument. It claims 'Young people's rights are often neglected, ignored or misunderstood'; and 'young people are especially vulnerable to sexual rights violations.'

It then highlights ‘a framework for understanding how human rights apply to young people’s sexuality’ and offers ‘Elaborate ideas about how to translate sexual rights into actions for and by young people.’⁶⁹ We rapidly move from children’s rights to sexual rights and the need for children to be helped to ‘translate sexual rights into actions’. Those in favour of highly sexualised CSE pose as the defenders of children, while those who question the appropriateness of, say, teaching children under the age of 10 about oral sex, are cast as a threat.

Age (in)appropriate?

As a defence against the charge of sexualising childhood, CSE policy documents frequently claim that lessons must be age and developmentally appropriate. This sounds sensible. However, ‘age’ and ‘development’ are not at all the same thing. Within a random group of 12-year-olds, some may be well into puberty, while others may have yet to begin the transition to adulthood. Some may be curious about sex and relationships, while others are not. Ultimately, the suggestion that lessons can be both age and developmentally appropriate is a myth. Teachers must be guided by one or the other.

The WHO’s Standards for Sexuality Education claim to be able to:

*... indicate what children and young people at different ages should know and understand, what situations or challenges they should be able to handle at those ages, and which values and attitudes they need to develop; all of this so that they can develop in a satisfactory, positive and healthy manner as regards their sexuality.*⁷⁰

Here, the focus is on age rather than development. But this soon leads to moral judgements about ‘what situations or challenges’ children and young people ‘*should* be able to handle’ (my emphasis) at any given age and what values and attitudes they should hold. It should be for parents and family members, not the WHO, to determine what challenges children should be expected to confront and what values they should hold in all matters, especially matters of sexuality.

The focus on age appropriateness readily moves from children’s current development to their future development. WHO goes on

to claim that topics should, ideally, be ‘introduced before the child reaches the corresponding stage of development, to prepare him/her for the changes which are about to take place.’⁷¹ In this way, CSE is not responding to the child’s concerns but pre-empting them.

The need for CSE to instruct children in advance of their development leads to calls for lessons to start at ever-younger ages. WHO argues CSE should start before children reach the age of 4 to achieve the ‘normalization of the topic of sexuality’; specifically, to show children ‘that issues related to sexuality are positive and enjoyable.’⁷² It sets out a ‘matrix’ suggesting children aged 0–4 should learn about ‘enjoyment and pleasure when touching one’s own body’, including ‘early childhood masturbation’. Between the ages of 4 and 6, they should learn ‘respect for gender equality’ and ‘gain an awareness of gender identity’. Between the ages of 6–9, children should have ‘an understanding of “acceptable sex”’ defined as ‘mutually consensual, voluntary, equal, age-appropriate, context appropriate and self-respecting’.⁷³ The language of sexual rights and ‘age appropriateness’ becomes a justification for introducing children to sexual practices long before it may occur to them to think about these things if left to their own devices.

A key part of CSE instruction is the requirement that children are not simply taught facts but are encouraged to develop a positive attitude towards sex and relationships. The Council of Europe is clear that CSE is ‘about protecting one’s health, and about adopting a positive attitude towards sexuality and relationships.’⁷⁴ The WHO argues CSE must not focus ‘primarily on individual issues or threats’ and must instead adopt a sex positive approach, young people are ‘supported, strengthened and enabled to handle sexuality in responsible, safe and satisfactory ways’.⁷⁵ IPPF goes further, explaining that ‘sex positivity is an attitude that celebrates sexuality as a part of life that can enhance happiness, bringing energy and celebration.’⁷⁶

A sex-positive approach focuses on the pleasure and enjoyment to be gained from sex. It looks to build children’s ‘sexual confidence’ through ‘information, knowledge and skills.’ IPPF explains that ‘Sexual confidence has to do with understanding your intrinsic value and that you can bring something positive to a sexual encounter.’⁷⁷ In taking a ‘sex-positive’ approach to CSE, schools and teachers end up promoting sexual activity to children and young people. They build confidence to consent to ‘sexual encounters’ without

providing children with reasons to consider saying no to sex. This prematurely sexualises childhood.

IPPF suggests young people should be enabled to negotiate consensual experiences against prescriptive cultural norms. It explains:

*Empowering adolescents and young people in their sexuality means ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to negotiate enjoyable, consensual experiences and to express their sexuality without the pressure to conform to prescriptive norms.*⁷⁸

Those young people are empowered not to reject but to consent to sexual experiences. This focus on 'positivity', on saying 'yes', suggests that the 'prescriptive norms' adolescents are taught they do not need to conform to may include not just heterosexuality but also norms about the appropriate age of consent. The UK's Sex Education Forum adopts a similar approach. It suggests that:

At both Primary and Secondary level, CSE aims to:

- *Increase children and young people's ability to make informed decisions about their physical health, and contribute to positive sexual health outcomes including consensual and pleasurable relationships.*⁷⁹

Consent operates in just one direction. Children are taught to consent to sex within a 'pleasurable relationship' but not to reject participation.

CSE instruction commonly assumes that children are sexual beings with sexual rights. The role of the teacher is to lead children to the fulfilment of these rights by shaping their attitudes in a way that makes them approach sex 'positively' and with the confidence to consent to sexual experiences. In this way, CSE is not responding to children's needs but pre-empting children's sexual development and sexualising childhood.

Political justifications

Although rarely acknowledged explicitly, CSE is grounded in highly contested ideologies associated with queer theory and gender theory. Queer theorists often draw upon the work of Michel Foucault, who proposed that institutions, fearful of youthful sexuality, sought to assert power over children through monitoring, controlling and regulating their intimate behaviour.⁸⁰ Gender theorists, meanwhile, draw upon the work of Judith Butler, who argues that sex is not to be read from the body but grasped as a performance. Neither Butler nor Foucault is uncontroversial.

Policy documents are clear that the ultimate goal of CSE is social change. In 2020, the Council of Europe stated that CSE should:

*... contribute to conveying, from the early stages of education, strong messages in favour of equality between women and men, promoting non-stereotyped gender roles, educating about mutual respect, consent to sexual relations, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships and respect for personal integrity, as requested by the Istanbul Convention.*⁸¹

The same year, the European Commission found that:

*... delivering sexuality education programmes to children and young people at school can have a positive effect on larger societal issues, such as gender equality, human rights, and the well-being and safety of children and young people.*⁸²

In 2022, a report published by the European Parliament notes ‘increasing evidence on the positive effect of sexuality education on gender equitable attitudes, respect for sexual diversity and gender-equitable relationships.’⁸³

These statements would be less controversial were it not for the idea of equality between the sexes having morphed into the far more contested notion of gender equality, which is something very different indeed. It is less concerned with equality between men and women and more concerned with equality between people who identify as men and people who identify as women. This threatens single-sex spaces, sport, toilets and accommodation.

UNESCO notes that, through CSE, children learn ‘to understand injustice based on gender. They learn to uphold the universal values of equality, love and kindness.’⁸⁴ Kindness is often interpreted as a demand not to pass judgment. The Council of Europe Commissioner’s Human Rights comment is clear: that ‘sexuality education should not include value judgments or perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes.’⁸⁵ The demand not to judge is, ironically, in itself a value judgement. It condemns those who live according to a religious or moral code as bigoted. Yet the Commissioner counters apparent relativism with the stark warning that ‘non-stigmatising information on sexual orientation and gender identity’ is necessary because it ‘can help save lives. It can contribute to combating homophobia and transphobia, at school and beyond, and to creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment for all.’⁸⁶

The implication is that those who do not accept same sex relationships, or who question whether a man can turn into a woman simply based on feelings, hold the wrong view. When the consequences of illiberalism are posed so starkly, CSE must respond by promoting social change, including ‘supporting individuals to become active bystanders’ to challenge ‘social injustices such as sexual violence, transphobia and racism.’⁸⁷

Social change

The European Commission notes: ‘Beyond health outcomes and knowledge, there is also emerging evidence that sexuality education programmes can contribute to broader societal changes.’⁸⁸

CSE policy documents make clear the aim of changing society by changing sexual and gender norms. They normalise and promote acceptance of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. According to queer theory and gender theory, patriarchal institutions are premised upon binary, heteronormative assumptions. Challenging such ideas strikes at the heart of all existing social and hierarchical structures, from the nuclear family to capitalism. While the idea that the European Commission wants to overthrow capitalism may seem far-fetched, questioning traditional sources of authority and loyalties, to the family, community, nation and religion, bolsters the influence of supranational institutions. UNESCO claims ‘Raising awareness about CSE and involving all stakeholders is essential to educate young populations on issues that foster

inclusive societies.’⁸⁹ The language of ‘stakeholders’, ‘populations’ and ‘societies’ undermines the notion of citizenship.

For IPPF, challenging existing hierarchies goes beyond social and economic inequalities to consider equality of sexual pleasure. It argues that ‘social inequalities contribute to a sexual system that is geared towards the pleasure of people who enjoy power based on their gender, race, socio-economic status, nationality or other factors’.⁹⁰

According to this perspective, CSE contributes towards achieving both social and sexual justice:

*CSE can also provide an important forum for building solidarity between young people with varying degrees of access to privilege and sexual rights. It can also strengthen active citizenship skills for working towards a sexual culture that is more just and equal.*⁹¹

The language of political activism is being appropriated to redefine solidarity away from class-based concerns and onto ‘sexual culture’. Rather than taking to the picket lines, young people who have been instructed in CSE argue for equality in the bedroom. Critics of CSE, meanwhile, are unfairly besmirched as opponents of:

*... the full realisation of the human rights of specific groups, in particular women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons and, to some extent, children themselves, on grounds that it would threaten traditional and religious values.*⁹²

Undermines education

Global organisations promoting CSE argue it must be delivered in schools as part of the regular curriculum, which risks politicising schools and undermining education. UNESCO claims ‘Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.’⁹³ This suggests that CSE is an academically rigorous subject that delivers measurable knowledge and skills-based outcomes.

The message that 'Comprehensive sexuality education is an essential part of a good quality education that helps prepare young people for a fulfilling life in a changing world'⁹⁴ is repeated across many policy documents. Yet CSE is a fundamentally political project with no associated body of knowledge. By involving schools in the delivery of CSE, teachers are recruited into a political project designed to change future social norms by reshaping children's values and attitudes in the present.

The assumption that CSE requires 'an active teaching and learning approach centred on students'⁹⁵ implies that teachers need specialised training to communicate with children about topics which are grounded in subjective human experiences. The European Parliament makes this point clear:

*... training the teachers to deliver sexuality education is vital, especially because a highly sensitive topic such as sexuality might cause discomfort and embarrassment to teachers having insufficient expertise, knowledge and awareness.*⁹⁶

Yet the very idea that sexuality and relationships require expertise and knowledge would be alien to previous generations.

Because the CSE knowledge base is so thin, special teaching methods are called for. This is again made clear by the European Parliament:

*The focus of good sexuality education lies not only in the top-down transfer of knowledge, but also in discussing social and gender norms as well as developing critical thinking, positive values and behavioural skills. This requires participatory and interactive teaching methods to ensure that sexuality education is effective.*⁹⁷

Participation and interaction are required to engage the child's full attention. It is not just their mindset, but their emotions and their bodies that teachers are required to interrogate to expose outdated values and replace them with new, approved attitudes. This is not education but a form of indoctrination.

Children's feelings about their bodies, their gender, their relationships with others, sex and sexuality are shaped through

teacher direction and peer pressure, in line with an official checklist of approved values. Privacy, abstinence until reaching the age of consent, heterosexual marriage, traditional gender roles and the nuclear family are condemned as regressive and bigoted. When it comes to relationships and even their own bodies, the message to children is that there are no boundaries; as long as there is consent, anything goes.

CSE represents a misuse of the school curriculum for political ends. It does not just take time away from teaching children academic subjects; it fundamentally alters the teacher's role and the purpose of schools. When separated from a body of knowledge and an intellectual purpose, teaching becomes an ideological project. This misuse of education breaks the social contract between the child and the teacher, the school and the parents. CSE transforms schooling into an anti-democratic political exercise designed to meet the demands of international organisations.

The current situation

In March 2023, following an intervention by more than 50 Conservative MPs, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced an urgent review into 'age-inappropriate' sex education.⁹⁸ There was mounting concern that RSE exposed children to sexually explicit content and scientifically inaccurate gender ideology. By May of the following year, the Department for Education had issued new guidance to schools. It stopped teachers from presenting contested gender ideology as fact and ruled out teaching children about sex before the age of nine.⁹⁹ This was a sensible corrective.

However, just two months later, Britain had a change of government. Further Department for Education guidance, commissioned as part of Sunak's review, was issued under the subsequent Labour administration. It proposed that pupils should be taught that strangulation is illegal and made aware of the harms of pornography. It advised that children learn how online content, including AI-manipulated images and deepfakes, can distort perceptions of women, sex and consent, in order to 'portray misogynistic behaviours and attitudes'. And it recommended that boys should be encouraged to identify positive male role models and to challenge online misogyny in response to concern about the growing influence of the 'manosphere' and incel (involuntary celibate) culture.¹⁰⁰

Although it may, at first glance, seem sensible to use sex education lessons to protect children from all manner of potential harms, each topic introduced into the curriculum raises new problems. For example, while it is correct that strangulation is illegal, some children may be unaware that this act is in any way associated with sex. To teach that it is wrong, children must first be made aware of what it is. This means a significant proportion of children will learn that strangulation is a means to sexual arousal from their teacher. Similarly, lessons addressing toxic masculinity speak directly to contemporary concerns of the UK's political elite rather than necessarily those of children or their parents. We see that, just as in the 1970s and 1980s, what purport to be 'conservative' moves, in this case rowing back on gender ideology and an overly sexualised curriculum, end up confirming the expansive and politicised nature of sex education.

As Labour's then newly installed education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, announced a review of the entire school curriculum, including RSE, the Labour Party was under pressure to drop the most recent guidance, even though it had barely been implemented, and bring back the previous, much-criticised, RSE curriculum. More than 100 groups wrote a letter warning Phillipson that the previous (Sunak) guidance fell 'short of what is required to help keep children safe, healthy and prepared for modern life'. They argued that age restrictions on teaching children about sex and on covering the topic of gender identity threatened the 'preventative role' sex education plays.¹⁰¹

The latest Department for Education guidance, published in July 2025 and implemented in schools in September 2026, suggests that at least some of the activists' demands have been met. For example, unlike the Sunak guidance, there are no age restrictions on what children can be taught. Rather than an outright prohibition on teaching children about sex before the age of nine, is simply a note that lessons must 'meet pupils' needs' and be 'age appropriate'. Indeed, engaging with pupils is listed first in a set of principles for schools to use when developing lessons. This suggests that rather than authoritative adults directing what children should know and when, this crucial responsibility will be handed to children themselves.¹⁰²

Similarly, rather than there being a straightforward prohibition on teaching contested ideas about gender 'as fact', the 2025 guidance leaves more room for interpretation. The guidance states:

... schools should be mindful that beyond the facts and the law about biological sex and gender reassignment there is significant debate, and they should be careful not to endorse any particular view or teach it as fact. For example, they should not teach as fact that all people have a gender identity.¹⁰³

By grouping together ‘biological sex’ and ‘gender reassignment’, it can seem as if both have equivalent status, or that there is ‘significant debate’ about biological sex. This is clearly not true. Likewise, not ‘teaching gender identity as fact’, and not ‘teaching that all people have a gender identity’, are not the same. The latter leaves open the possibility that *some* people have a gender identity.

Finally, what’s notable about the 2025 guidance, issued almost 60 years after the first such national sex education policy was published, is the vast, all-encompassing nature of a subject that now includes every possible permutation of relationship and emotion. The inclusion of ‘health’ and ‘wellbeing’ alongside relationships and sex means that everything from friendship to family life, online interactions, masturbation, personal attitudes, values, opinions, thoughts and beliefs, to diet, dental hygiene, sexual consent and domestic abuse, is open to classroom scrutiny.

Conclusions

Over the course of six decades, the remit of sex education has expanded relentlessly. The subject has become a repository for every social problem of concern to adults and a means of directly influencing children’s thoughts and behaviour. Activist teachers and politically motivated campaigning organisations have been able to exploit this lack of boundaries to advance their own agendas in the classroom. At each turn, progressive posturing about identity and a liberal approach to validating every conceivable sexual practice have won out.

While some of the expansion of sex education appears to be random, soaking up whatever the current preoccupations of the day happen to be, the curriculum in England’s schools sits alongside a carefully co-ordinated, well-funded, highly political project that extends across the globe. Driven by a small number of powerful international non-governmental organisations, CSE sexualises children and undermines the family, national sovereignty and

education. The global reach of CSE into societies with very different cultures and traditions indicates the risk that this becomes a social engineering project designed to impose hyper-liberal values on societies that have not yet adopted them.

Chapter 3

Creating citizens¹⁰⁴

Alongside relationships and sex education (RSE) sits another subject that is similarly expansive and just as bold in its goal of shaping pupils' behaviour and attitudes. In England, 'citizenship education' is a statutory requirement for all secondary schools and, from September 2028, will also be mandatory in the primary sector. In some schools, citizenship is taught as a standalone subject, while in others it is covered as part of the history or English curriculum, or included within personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE).¹⁰⁵ This fluidity betrays the fact that citizenship comes with no academic tradition or body of subject knowledge. Instead, the subject is another opportunity to shape children's attitudes and opinions in what has become a timetabled repository for all manner of social and political concerns.

The Department for Education's current Citizenship Programme of Study, for children in Key Stages 3 and 4 (aged 11–16) suggests the subject should prepare pupils 'to play a full and active part in society' by fostering a 'keen awareness and understanding of democracy, government and how laws are made and upheld', as well as equipping them 'with the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments.' Finally, it should help them 'manage their money well and make sound financial decisions.'¹⁰⁶

The broad edict 'to explore political and social issues critically' means not just that few topics are off-limits but that the teacher's view of what counts as 'critical' can shape the way such topics are approached. For example, if teachers consider the prevailing consensus to be hostile to women, migrants, the EU, and net zero, then critically exploring such issues requires promoting an opposing, positive narrative. Rather than remaining objective, citizenship education gives schools a licence to present one side in political debates. As with RSE, we see that campaigning organisations have been quick to recognise schools as providing an audience.

Groups such as the British Red Cross provide schools with teaching resources on topics such as 'refugees and migration' so that teachers can 'help young people challenge assumptions about migrants,

asylum seekers and refugees, and to develop mutual respect, empathy and understanding.’¹⁰⁷ Oxfam, meanwhile, provides free resources for schools on topics such as ‘The Human Impact of Climate Change’ and ‘Sustainable Fashion’.¹⁰⁸ The climate change resources aim to help children as young as nine ‘start to develop an understanding of intersectionality and its relevance to the climate emergency’.¹⁰⁹ In order to meet this aim, Oxfam recommends teachers show pupils a TED talk by Labour MP and former foreign secretary David Lammy, in which he ‘uses a justice framework to strongly connect two apparently unconnected issues, the climate emergency and structural racism’.¹¹⁰ At no point is it suggested that teachers should also present the views of ‘climate realists’ such as Bjorn Lomborg.

In this chapter, we trace the development and future trajectory of citizenship lessons and consider how this subject politicises education.

The development of citizenship education

Citizenship education has, in the UK at least, emerged far more recently than sex education. One reason for this is that ‘being a citizen’ was, throughout most of British history, assumed to be a birthright rather than a set of skills or knowledge that could be taught. Education certainly helped to nurture a sense of national identity and cultivate knowledge of national culture. But this took place organically, through the study of music, literature and history, as well as through other aspects of school life such as assemblies, rules and sporting competitions. The curriculum and classroom environment helped children see how they fit into a community, a nation and a world that preceded their arrival and would continue after their death. As the American educationalist E. D. Hirsch writes, ‘Schooling in a democracy is not just schooling. It’s also citizen making.’¹¹¹

The impetus for schools to transform the educational project of ‘citizen making’ into a discrete ‘citizenship’ lesson emerges from the failure of the curriculum to transmit a positive story about national history and culture. As we will explore more fully in the next chapter, rather than the content of education and the rituals of schooling imbuing pupils with a sense of themselves as citizens, today’s pupils are taught to condemn their national culture and traditions,

and denigrate historical figures, such as Samuel Pepys or Francis Drake, that connected their schools to the past. This helps create a generation of young adults who feel alienated and rootless.

In response, rather than rehabilitating fallen heroes or teaching a less cynical view of national history and culture, politicians and policymakers, already accustomed to seeing the curriculum as the solution to every social, economic and political problem, set their sights on the classroom once more. Citizenship lessons became part of the curriculum in England, as well as in many other countries throughout the Western world, in the mid-1990s as a solution to the growing perception that populations were growing atomised and disengaged from the labour market and democratic processes.

Changing children, changing society

For many decades, successive governments have looked to schools to produce future adults with the skills and attributes necessary for social cohesion and economic success. In 1963, Britain's then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, warned that if the country was to prosper, a 'new Britain' would need to be forged in the 'white heat' of a 'scientific revolution'. He stressed the importance of education in creating a workforce with 'technical expertise', in order to, as he later put it, 'replace the cloth cap [with] the white laboratory coat'.¹² Schools and universities were tasked with creating tomorrow's workforce.

Since then, the idea that education is vital to national prosperity has grown. However, focus has shifted from producing scientifically literate workers for the benefit of the public purse to cultivating individuals with the generic 'employability skills' necessary to aid their own social mobility. As we will explore in Chapter Seven, the idea of education for its own sake has long been viewed with suspicion.

Today, schools are tasked not only with improving national and individual prosperity but also with solving all manner of real and imagined social problems. For example, in 2025, the Labour government announced that children who live in 'deprived areas' would receive instruction in how to brush their teeth, following claims that tooth decay is the 'leading reason' children are admitted to hospital.¹³ This places an additional burden on teachers and removes an important responsibility from parents. Yet a closer

look at the evidence suggests that rates of tooth decay in Britain's children have not only fallen dramatically since the 1970s, but are continuing to fall.¹¹⁴ The focus on 'deprived areas' suggests the problem government ministers are seeking to resolve is not so much dental decay as poor parenting. Ministers assume the state, via schools, must teach children how to brush their teeth because parents are not up to the job.

Schools are now frequently called upon to 'correct' what campaigners and government ministers consider to be 'wrong' opinions or 'harmful' attitudes. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the disorder that swept through English towns in the summer of 2024, following the murder of three young girls at a holiday dance class in Southport, the then education secretary Bridget Phillipson announced that schools would teach children how to spot extremist content and fake news online. Her aim was that teachers would 'arm' pupils against 'putrid conspiracy theories'¹¹⁵ by correcting their erroneous understandings and substituting beliefs picked up online, or at home, for state-approved values.

Clearly, it is easier and cheaper to teach children how to brush their teeth than to provide more trained dentists. And it is easier to order teachers to 'correct' children's thinking than it is to deal with terrorism, knife crime, or social tensions arising from high levels of immigration. But such demands on schools are motivated by more than just a desire for penny-pinching, quick-fix solutions. They speak to a view of children as morally, physically, socially and emotionally 'deficient' and in need of classroom 'correction'. This view extends across all political parties and a professional class of academics and policymakers. Together, they justify an increasingly interventionist state that seeks to save people from their own instincts and foibles.

It now seems to be taken for granted that without smoking bans, food labelling regulations, 'sin' taxes, diversity officers, and police constables recording non-crime hate incidents, people would fall prey to their own weaknesses. Schools assume an epidemic of racism, bullying, physical and mental health problems and that it is the task of teachers to administer the cure. Such interventions occur most explicitly in PSHEE classes, and it is in the 'citizenship' element of this timetabled 'subject' that children's political thinking is most directly challenged and shaped. In this way, citizenship education is distinct from 'civics', that is, instruction in national systems of government and legislation. It is essentially a political project that has been transformed into a school subject.

Challenging national pride

Education has grown detached from ‘citizen making’ as an intergenerational, national project. As we will explore in the next chapter, subjects such as history have, over recent decades, moved away from a narrative of ‘national pride’, and the task of promoting a national story has instead portrayed a more negative and fractured perception of Britain’s past. Hirsch notes that when children grow up without the shared cultural reference points that transcend divisions of race, gender and sexuality, ‘we’re left with divided citizens who cannot communicate with one another, because they don’t have enough knowledge in common.’¹¹⁶ When history serves only to divide and chastise, pupils lack a sense of themselves as members of a nation and are left, as the sociologist Frank Furedi explains, ‘confused about the values with which they should identify.’¹¹⁷

Elite antipathy to the nation-state is longstanding. In the aftermath of World War Two, many European intellectuals blamed global conflict on nationalist sentiment. Britain’s colonial territories were granted independence while, at home, an emerging ‘post-war consensus’ was characterised by ‘welfare-capitalism’ and what has been described as ‘an unprecedentedly ambitious project of state legitimisation.’¹¹⁸ But this legitimacy was built on the political class’s administration of sustained economic growth and did not translate into elite patriotism. Indeed, it was during this period that George Orwell’s ‘intellectuals’, who, he said, ‘would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during God save the King than of stealing from a poor box,’ went from counter-cultural to establishment figures.¹¹⁹ Their disdain for national pride was premised on the assumption that ‘nationalism thinly disguised by democracy can be a destructive force.’¹²⁰

As the post-war consensus began to unravel, economic globalisation called into question the connection between the state and the nation. As sociologist Gerard Delanty notes:

*The state is no longer entirely in command of all the forces that shape it, and sovereignty has been eroded both downwards to subnational units, such as cities and regions, and upwards to transnational agencies, such as the European Union.*¹²¹

As such, the meaning and significance of citizenship became more fluid, with some radical activists even questioning the right of

countries to maintain national borders. Citizens who defended the notion of borders, or expressed pride in their country, found they were castigated as ignorant and old-fashioned at best, or racist and xenophobic at worst.

At the turn of the millennium, the apparent economic success of globalisation seemed to confirm that national citizenship was outdated and that children needed to be taught to look beyond borders to understand issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and multiculturalism. Academics and commentators welcomed the fact that the nation-state no longer played the significant role it once did in shaping both world events and people's sense of identity. 'We are living in a global age,' declared Delanty in 2000, where 'citizens are exposed to a far greater range of influences, resources and dangers than was formerly the case.'¹²²

In opposition to national citizenship, Delanty called for 'cosmopolitan citizenship', which he described as 'multi-levelled, cutting across the subnational, the national and the transnational.'¹²³ This stands in stark contrast to more traditional, less flexible notions of citizenship, which were based on birth or explicit affiliation to a nation. As Furedi notes, 'the distinction between citizen and non-citizen is frequently condemned as unjust and exclusionary.'¹²⁴

With the connection between citizen and nation politically and economically strained, what remained was primarily an emotional attachment to customs and traditions. This troubled a cultural elite that had struggled to make sense of populist movements and events such as Brexit, and for whom patriotism was associated with bigotry. Education was recruited to convey a new, apparently more progressive set of values to children. In this way, the demand for citizenship classes speaks to the lack of consensus about the significance of national identity. At the same time, it is also a response to problems, such as a lack of democratic engagement, that have been created by problematising national identity in the first place. The introduction of formal citizenship lessons represented a conscious effort to steer children away from more organic associations with national identity and to engineer new loyalties through the promotion of global citizenship.

Citizenship education

Historically, British children have not had formal citizenship lessons. In part, this can be explained by the ‘taken for granted’ status of the nation, in contrast to countries such as America, where there was a perceived need to cultivate national identity with the political creation of the nation-state and high levels of migration. ‘Civics’ has long been part of the school curriculum in many states.

The need for formal citizenship classes in England was raised when New Labour took office in 1997. Under Tony Blair, government ministers were concerned about social exclusion, particularly among young people who were classed as not in education, employment or training (NEET). Attention was focused on the ‘democratic deficit’ or, in other words, young people who did not vote or otherwise engage with public institutions. Citizenship classes were viewed as a means of promoting civic responsibility and an antidote to the individualism of the previous Conservative government. Britain was not alone. The Australian government’s civics and citizenship programme, *Discovering Democracy*, was also introduced in 1997 and ran for 10 years, with civics and citizenship classes having continued – and indeed having been formalised and reinvigorated – since this time.

In the UK, an Advisory Group on Citizenship and Democracy in Schools was established, chaired by Professor Bernard Crick. The group’s final report, known as the ‘Crick Report’, was published in 1998. It ambitiously declared that the aim of citizenship education was ‘no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally’. The report argued that all children needed citizenship lessons to tackle ‘political disconnection’.¹²⁵ This reveals the perceived role of schools in redirecting children away from loyalty to family, community and nation, and towards more expressly political projects of social justice, sustainability, and loyalty to transnational institutions. The suggestion is that voting in elections is a civic duty rather than a potentially radical democratic act.

In August 2002, the Labour government made citizenship a compulsory subject for every student in maintained schools in England, but schools were allowed to teach it through the existing curriculum; that is, by incorporating new topics into existing subjects. This meant there were large variations in practice across schools and teachers, depending on their enthusiasm and priorities. Some schools promoted community activism as a form of democratic

engagement or the values of global, rather than national, citizenship. However, in the decade between 1997 and 2007, citizenship classes rapidly became a catch-all solution to a wide range of social and political problems that had little to do with education.

The need for more comprehensive provision was addressed in a 2007 Curriculum Review led by Sir Keith Ajegbo. The renewed emphasis on citizenship at this time was driven, in part, by terrorist attacks that took place in London in July 2005 and the realisation that they were carried out by British citizens. There was also political concern about the integration of migrant workers from Europe into the UK. Ajegbo's final report found that, 'Despite much good practice in trailblazing schools, the quality and quantity of education for diversity are uneven across England.'¹²⁶ The report's 'vision' was 'for all schools to be actively engaged in nurturing in pupils the skills to participate in an active and inclusive democracy, appreciating and understanding difference.'¹²⁷ With seemingly little awareness of the inherent contradictions between 'difference' and 'inclusion', Ajegbo spoke of a need to 'provide young people with a common sense of identity and belonging'.¹²⁸ The connection between citizenship education, civil renewal, and community cohesion was formalised in the new national curriculum, introduced in schools in 2008. The emphasis on diversity, inclusion and 'activity' has driven citizenship education, and lent a broader purpose to many schools, ever since.

The revised curriculum aimed to ensure that all young people would become 'responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society'.¹²⁹ It introduced a new theme, 'Identities and Diversity: living together in the UK', which involved 'appreciating that identities are complex', 'considering the connections between the UK, Europe and the rest of the world', and 'exploring the diverse national, regional, ethnic and religious cultures, groups and communities in the UK and the connections between them'.¹³⁰ This represented another shift towards global, rather than national, citizenship, with an emphasis on 'diversity' rather than unity. 'Diversity' is now a core value of British education despite it being essentially vacuous; differences between people are simply a fact of life.

Global citizenship

'Global citizenship' similarly suffers from being a hollow concept in comparison to the specific democratic rights associated with

national citizenship. The philosopher Chantal Delsol describes the project of promoting world citizenship as ‘a question of dis-incarnating humanity, of detaching man from his territorial and temporal roots, of making him abstract, of saturating him with indetermination.’¹³¹ The abstract concept of global citizenship can never unite a population as effectively as the more concrete reality of belonging to a nation-state. Indeed, its very goal, as Delsol makes clear, is to undermine the nation – the foundational democratic unit – by making it seem less significant than transnational institutions on one hand, or local action on the other.

Promoting global citizenship through education risks exacerbating problems of social exclusion and democratic disengagement that such lessons are meant to address. Ultimately, as Furedi argues:

*Whatever one thinks of national borders, there can be no democratic public life outside their confines. It is only as citizens interacting with one another, within a clearly geographically bounded entity, that democratic decision making can work.*¹³²

Bringing the nation back in

In 2013, three years after a change of government in the UK, the citizenship curriculum was again redrafted.¹³³ Its new aim was to ‘foster pupils’ keen awareness and understanding of democracy, government and how laws are made and upheld.’ It was given a more national focus but remained an ill-defined subject encompassing topics from personal financial planning to ‘how laws are shaped and enforced’. Such broad content, combined with a focus on practical, local activities, left the subject open to the different concerns and enthusiasms of individual schools and teachers.

The first real public criticism of England’s citizenship education came in 2021 with a report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. The authors argued that:

In order to develop a sense of citizenship and to support integration and aspiration amongst all ethnic communities, we believe that pupils need to be exposed to the rich variety of British culture and the influences that have shaped it, ranging from the influence of classical civilisations, the European

*Enlightenment, the inflows and outflows of the British Empire, and the stream of new arrivals in the post-war period to the present day.*¹³⁴

This positive vision sees the school's role in promoting citizenship as lying in the teaching of a range of academic subjects, rather than in explicit instruction in essentially invented values such as 'diversity'. The report's distinctive emphasis on British culture takes us away from a celebration of global citizenship, which had been promoted by teachers and professional bodies as a response to Britain's decision to leave the EU.

How citizenship classes will change in the future, under the Labour government's review of the national curriculum, remains to be seen. An updated curriculum is expected to be published in 2027, with implementation starting in 2028. We do know that Labour plans to make citizenship education a compulsory subject in primary schools for the first time.¹³⁵ Teachers will be expected to cover topics such as democracy, the law, rights, financial literacy, media literacy and climate education in an age-appropriate manner. What's notable is the context in which the discussion about the citizenship curriculum has taken place. Panics about the radicalisation, social media influencers, the spread of mis- and disinformation all lead to citizenship education as a solution. This suggests the subject is viewed as a means of resolving political and social problems in the classroom rather than as a means of imparting subject knowledge.

European citizenship

The EU has also identified citizenship education as an important means of influencing the next generation. In 2022, the EU announced plans to introduce a compulsory common citizenship curriculum into schools in all member states. Previously, the Council of Europe's Standing Conference of Ministers of Education called for 'a more proactive and European approach to the provision of quality citizenship education at all levels of education'. It wanted a new legal framework to compel states to 'prepare learners to live as active citizens in a democratic society, where democratic values and competences are increasingly recognised as an important element of personal and professional development.'¹³⁶

Although this common curriculum has not come to fruition, citizenship education is still described as ‘an education policy priority at EU level’. A 2023 briefing paper describes citizenship education as being ‘about establishing common values, and fostering certain behaviour and attitudes’. The emphasis on ‘common values’ underscores the perceived importance of cultivating a common European identity, grounded in children who see themselves as EU citizens. The paper is critical of the fact that this is not currently ‘done consistently across the EU’ because ‘some Member States give precedence to the national dimension of citizenship over the European one’.¹³⁷ In this way, citizenship education becomes an explicit means of manufacturing new loyalties within children.

Proposals to implement this project include lessons on ‘European integration’ to challenge what is perceived as a growing Euroscepticism. This is motivated by the assumption that ‘insufficient knowledge of or ignorance about the EU and poor understanding of its functioning’ lies behind the EU’s lack of popular support. To challenge this, it plans to set standards for a ‘minimum understanding’ of what it means to be a citizen of the EU, as well as the formation of a ‘European common identity’.¹³⁸

Using the school curriculum for ‘establishing common values, and fostering certain behaviour and attitudes’, is a political project that undermines the possibility for free intellectual inquiry and limits students’ freedom of conscience. It is difficult to see this as anything other than a crude attempt to exploit education for expressly political purposes. The European Parliament’s interest in this area speaks to the EU elite’s crisis of legitimacy far more than the educational needs of the continent’s children.

Active citizenship

In the European Parliament’s briefing paper, emphasis is placed on ‘active citizenship’, with pupils expected to become ‘active, informed and responsible citizens, who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and for their communities.’ The authors define active citizenship in the context of responsibility and ‘participation in civic and social life, based on the understanding of socio-economic, legal and political structures.’¹³⁹ This focus on ‘activity’ and ‘active citizenship’ is echoed in England and Australia, making citizenship education distinct from other school subjects, as

the approach suggests that instruction cannot occur solely in the classroom but must also take place in local communities.

In England, the Association for Citizenship Teaching defines active citizenship as ‘a pedagogical approach to give students a practical experience of democratic action and community involvement.’¹⁴⁰ This focus reveals that citizenship education has little to do with the transmission of knowledge. Instead, it:

*... involves students in learning how to take part with others in activities designed to make a positive difference to the world around them. This might involve taking action on a local issue like homelessness or a global issue such as climate change.*¹⁴¹

In 2019, for example, many schools let children miss lessons to participate in a Greta Thunberg-inspired school ‘strike’ for climate change. This was justified as being an exercise in active citizenship. With permission granted and learning outcomes to meet, children’s participation in the national protest took on the form of a field trip, rather than an act of rebellion.

The focus on ‘active citizenship’ is justified with the explanation that:

*Democratic societies are more likely to thrive when there is an active and engaged citizenry who contribute positively to political and public life as voters, community members and informed, active citizens.*¹⁴²

Classroom exercises involve children researching ‘an issue they are concerned about’, with a view to ‘undertaking a course of action designed to address the issue and make a positive difference’.¹⁴³ This is not the same as gaining theoretical knowledge or engaging in critical analysis. Bypassing intellectual study allows teachers to shape children’s emotional responses more directly. And working with children on ‘community projects’ bypasses adults as democratic change agents. The emphasis on ‘thinking globally’ but ‘acting locally’ in relation to an issue such as climate change shapes and limits both the understanding children might be expected to have of the nature of the problem and the perceived range of appropriate solutions.

In Chapter One, we described the role of activist teachers in politicising education and highlighted schools that asked children to make videos promoting the Welsh Refugee Council and to wear hats celebrating Fairtrade. We can see how a concern with ‘active citizenship’ and a desire to have children engage with global issues by taking action within their own communities makes such activities possible. Meanwhile, the distinct place of citizenship on the school timetable, often as a cross-curricular theme rather than a distinct lesson, means that this same pedagogical approach spills over into other, more traditional, academic subjects. A recent example, highlighted in the British press, was of a geography lesson where pupils were asked to plot an ‘illegal migration route to the UK from Syria.’ Top marks were to be awarded to students who devised routes in which ‘all controlled borders are avoided using land and sea.’¹⁴⁴ A focus on active citizenship helps justify this politically motivated lesson.

Conclusions

Citizenship classes often promote a one-sided political approach, but this is hidden behind a rhetoric of ‘values’ that are to be demonstrated rather than questioned. In this way, children are encouraged to adopt a particular moral framework with only limited capacity or opportunity to challenge the agenda being promoted. The focus on activity within local communities makes citizenship classes distinct from other school subjects. It is anti-intellectual and denies children access to the powerful knowledge that could transform their lives. Even in its own terms, active citizenship can be incredibly limiting, confining children to a group or community that may limit their potential. One Australian critic notes that some young people ‘reject the notion of becoming engaged in their low socio-economic community’ on the grounds that it ‘would only increase their own experience of being poor.’¹⁴⁵

Encouraging active, local engagement through the school curriculum has been described, approvingly, as a ‘palliative’ or ‘prophylactic measure’ in Australia and as ‘an antidote’ in the UK. This medicalised language is revealing. It suggests that classes can ward off future disease – but the ‘illness’ is social and political, not biological. This is an abuse of education and a degradation of politics. Citizenship classes were established to promote democratic engagement but, in presenting political decisions as moral imperatives, they leave

people further distanced from debate. Indeed, the very notion that alienation from politics can be addressed through the education system rather than the political realm is questionable. A values-laden curriculum enacted through behaviour modification undermines free intellectual inquiry and limits children's freedom of conscience.

The perceived need for citizenship classes speaks to a crude recognition of the problems that arise when children are encouraged, through the school curriculum and broader culture, to feel alienated from the legacy of the past and from the history of their own nation. However, in focusing pupils' attention away from the nation and on to the global stage, and away from intellectual engagement and on to activity, they are not only a poor substitute for the national identity-building role schools once played but, worse, they exacerbate the very problems they seek to solve. As Hirsch argues, 'The nation-sustaining enterprise of our school teachers must be revived.'¹⁴⁶

Chapter 4

Politicising academic subjects

So far, we have considered how the politicisation of education occurs through activist teachers using the classroom as a platform for their own views, and campaigning schools involving staff and pupils in pet causes, or inviting outside organisations to take assemblies or run events. We have looked at how additions to the school timetable, such as political, social, health and economic education (PSHEE), relationships and sex education (RSE), and citizenship education, come with a distinct moral and political agenda, as well as serving as receptacles for currently fashionable concerns. In this chapter, we explore how politics has come to influence the academic subject knowledge children are taught in schools.

While there is no grand conspiracy to impose a particular agenda upon children, national policy directives, often shaped by the work of international organisations, intentionally use education to bring about social change. At the same time, individual teachers and schools act on their own initiative, guided by their own priorities, even as they respond to demands from exam boards, the national curriculum, policymakers and government ministers. This means that pupils' experiences at school vary. Some may be introduced to a seemingly random selection of issues and teachers with all manner of views, while others may miss out on much of this. However, all children will experience values-laden content in PSHEE and other timetabled lessons.

As we will explore in the next chapter, schooling became politicised as policymakers and teachers lost faith in education as an end in itself. When education stopped being viewed as an important means of introducing children to the knowledge and culture of the society to which they belong, the classroom door was left open for politics. This is most evident in changes to the teaching of traditional academic subjects, particularly in the humanities. Here, we look at what children are taught in geography and history lessons and consider how subject knowledge itself has become political.

The increasing politicisation of school subjects has not occurred suddenly. There are few conspiracies to uncover. Rather, content has evolved over several decades to encompass social justice issues or

a particular moral or political standpoint. This has occurred within a context of other, more widely commented upon changes to school subjects, such as changes to the structure of exams and the nature of assessment, the introduction of technology across all aspects of education, and a greater emphasis on children developing skills rather than acquiring knowledge. These changes have occurred despite a push for a more knowledge-rich curriculum in the 2010s under the direction of Michael Gove, then Conservative Secretary of State for Education, and Amanda, now Baroness, Spielman, as Chief Inspector of Schools.

Case study: Geography

When adults think of geography lessons, they might imagine children learning the names of continents and oceans, the cause of earthquakes and the formation of rivers. Often, this is still the case. But alongside such instruction has long sat a focus on more contested topics such as climate change, migration and sustainability. This is particularly the case in ‘human’ rather than ‘physical’ geography.

When I was a pupil taking GCSE geography in the late 1980s, we studied population pyramids and the demographic transition model. We were also taught about Thomas Malthus and his theory that population growth would outrun food supply, a lesson reinforced with television footage of famine in Ethiopia. Unlike today, there was widespread concern about overpopulation. We learnt about acid rain and that the world would soon hit ‘peak oil’, after which global supplies would decline irreversibly.

In the intervening four decades, little of this has come to pass. My wonderful geography teacher was neither lying to us nor was he especially political (unlike some of my other, decidedly more militant, teachers). Instead, the curriculum itself centred on environmental concerns that turned out to be overblown and emphasised just one solution, reducing population and cutting back on development, which we now call sustainability.

Today, similar trends are still in evidence. In a model lesson on climate change, Key Stage 3 pupils (aged 11–14) are asked to ‘write down what they do in their own lives to reduce the impacts of climate change’. In response, teachers are told to:

*Look for terms such as: recycling, reducing waste, energy efficiency, using public transport, walking or cycling, turning off lights, reducing water usage, eating less meat, using less plastic, planting trees, supporting renewable energy, reusing items, conserving energy, reducing carbon footprint.*¹⁴⁷

It is interesting to speculate on how this list of currently fashionable preoccupations might be interpreted in 40 years' time!

But the lesson continues. After introducing pupils to the key terms 'mitigation' and 'adaptation', teachers should 'Introduce the concept of renewable energy and explain how it is a key part of mitigation strategies,' and then describe 'different adaptation techniques, such as flood defences, drought-resistant crops, and reforestation.'¹⁴⁸

With a focus on mitigation as well as adaptation, this seems to be a well-balanced lesson. However, what's presented to pupils as a debate actually pitches two forms of sustainable development against each other: wind farms versus reforestation, solar panels versus improved flood defences. And this 'debate' is set within the context of teachers approving pupils' personal actions to reduce climate change. In other words, whichever side of the argument pupils fall down on, their options are small scale and focused on sustaining the *status quo*, rather than larger pro-growth interventions such as investing in nuclear power or building entirely new cities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one teacher asks: 'Has school geography become a vehicle for promoting Green lifestyles and suggesting that Western models of development are unsustainable?' He wonders, 'Is a focus on sustainable development fostering an anti-modern, anti-development view of the world?'.¹⁴⁹

This is not to suggest that resources and textbooks deliberately mislead when reporting on the science of climate change. Rather, as geographer and teacher educator Alex Standish puts it, 'What matters most for young people is how their teachers present and frame climate change.'¹⁵⁰ While it is important for children to consider the best use of the planet's resources, the label 'sustainability' risks suggesting there is only one legitimate approach to addressing environmental concerns.

Often, as in the lesson described above, pupils are asked to make arguments for small-scale sustainable development projects rather than to critique such principles or to offer alternatives, perhaps

arguing for solar batteries rather than nuclear power or for water conservation rather than reservoir construction. They may be expected to show the importance of measures that are often anti-growth and anti-development to local communities, particularly in the Global South.

In this way, the curriculum is used to recast one perspective – sustainable development – as the ‘correct’ answer. In the process, geography moves from a discipline concerned with studying the relationship between people and their environment to one that advocates a particular form this relationship should take. Without sufficient knowledge to inform criticisms of this approach, children come to imbibe what they are taught as fact. More pointedly, geographer and teacher educator Alex Standish notes that ‘there are plenty of examples of climate alarmism being replicated by schools as well as an activist approach to teaching about the topic’.¹⁵¹ He argues this is encouraged through the input of non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations, including the United Nations.

Indeed, Angus Mackay, head of the UN Climate Change Learn Secretariat, argues that the ‘classroom is the new frontline in scaling up the response to climate change’. His organisation reports that over 3,000 UK-based teachers have taken its course and become certified ‘climate change teachers’.¹⁵² Meanwhile, in 2022, the Department for Education published *Sustainability and Climate Change: A Strategy for the Education and Children’s Services Systems*, which states that the education sector is required ‘to play its role in positively responding to climate change and inspiring action on an international stage’.¹⁵³ Schools are expected to work towards reducing environmental footprints, decarbonisation, supporting the UN sustainability goals, and working towards net zero. As Standish notes, this disregards the government’s own stated commitment to political impartiality in education.¹⁵⁴

Experienced teachers, committed to imparting subject knowledge, will no doubt be able to negotiate this territory and encourage children to develop their geographical understanding of the world rather than promoting specific viewpoints. However, for activist teachers, the curriculum provides leeway for more directly political instruction. For example, as we have previously noted, a secondary school in Wales tasked pupils with plotting illegal migration routes from Syria to the UK. Alongside introducing pupils to a map of Europe, the exercise can arguably be viewed as designed to elicit

sympathy for migrants and to demonstrate the difficulties they face on their journey to Britain.

Case study: History¹⁵⁵

The history curriculum is similarly vulnerable to politicisation. Politicians, supranational institutions, campaigning organisations and activist teachers have long shown an interest in the lessons children learn about the past. They know that knowledge of history shapes children's feelings towards, and understanding of, the society they belong to in the present. It is for precisely this reason that history teachers have a particular responsibility within schools: by introducing children to the story of their past, they cultivate connections with and attitudes towards previous generations and determine whether children feel attachment or distance from those who preceded them, and whether they feel pride or shame in their nation.

A recurring assumption, expressed in the pages of liberal newspapers and on the BBC, is that history teaching promotes an exclusively patriotic agenda that centres Britain's role in the world and celebrates the triumphs of powerful white men. Few things could be further from the truth. Since the end of World War Two, there have been repeated efforts, not just in England but in all the nations of the UK, and, further afield, in countries across Europe to promote a less nationalistic version of history grounded in understanding and empathy among nations that had previously been at war.

From its inception in 1949, the Council of Europe, an international organisation based in Strasbourg to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, saw history teaching as central to maintaining democracy and promoting intra-European co-operation. Throughout the 1950s, the Council of Europe regularly reviewed history textbooks to eliminate national bias and promote a less prejudiced view of history. Patriotic mythmaking was to be replaced by teaching about relationships between nations, including the world beyond Europe.¹⁵⁶

By the 1980s, history teaching in many schools in England had moved so far away from a national focus that even the most basic chronology was often difficult to ascertain. A focus on developing pupils' skills rather than on relaying a national story often meant that children were taught history through disparate topics rather than

as a coherent narrative. My own experience of learning history at this time very much chimes with this approach. Aged 13, my history lessons covered topics such as ‘Who shot JFK?’ and ‘Is the Turin Shroud really the body of Jesus?’, alongside imagining what it would be like to be an evacuee during World War Two. It was all great fun, but I grew up with little notion of what happened when in Britain’s past.

The Conservative government at this time, led by Margaret Thatcher and with Kenneth Baker as Secretary of State for Education, responded to growing concern about the state of history teaching by setting out a far more robust and detailed programme of study in the 1988 Education Reform Act that established England’s national curriculum. Baker oversaw the development of a history curriculum that would provide a standard for all children throughout primary school and the first 3 years of their secondary education (Key Stage 3). This new curriculum, approved by the Prime Minister, was focused on developing children’s broad historical knowledge, particularly of Britain’s past and national achievements, within a chronological framework. Following John MacGregor briefly taking the helm, Kenneth Clarke became Secretary of State for Education in November 1990, just months before the new curriculum came into effect. He sought to stamp his authority on it by arguing for a ‘20-year rule’ to prevent the study of very recent events and avoid the risk of turning history into current affairs or politically motivated debate.¹⁵⁷

The new history curriculum launched in September 1991. There were immediate improvements in the way history lessons were taught, prompting many schools to review provision and produce schemes of work that were more rigorous, and focused on the less recent past. The new curriculum established an expectation that schools should provide all pupils with a sequential study of Britain’s national story, from ancient times to the 20th century.

However, within this broad remit, schools had considerable freedom to choose their own route through the curriculum. Many teachers, trade unions, subject associations and commentators were ideologically opposed not just to Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government but to the history curriculum more specifically. Alongside this, some teachers, backed by union leaders, worried that the curriculum was overloaded and that they were expected to cover too much content, particularly in primary schools.¹⁵⁸

This ideological hostility, together with a perception that the curriculum was overcrowded, encouraged schools to use the freedom they had to avoid non-statutory requirements and use their own discretion as to which topics to emphasise. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, successive waves of migration, particularly from the Indian subcontinent, made Britain an increasingly multicultural society and some history teachers sought to reflect this social change in their lessons.

Often, such choices were influenced by the demands of the present, including a perceived need to impart skills – including, oddly, the ‘skill’ of demonstrating empathy – rather than mastering a body of knowledge. From my own time in the classroom, I know that history teaching was becoming more ‘hands on’ in the late 1990s, in an effort to engage children’s emotions and elicit empathy for under-represented groups. When it came to teaching about slavery, for example, rather than being given dates and statistics to memorise, it was not uncommon for teachers to ask children to group together on the floor, perhaps under the classroom tables, so as to experience what it would be like on an overcrowded slave ship. Rather than learning about England’s role in abolition, children learnt about evil slave traders.¹⁵⁹ Although coming towards the end of this period, a 2008 survey of 300 teachers found that three-quarters agreed that it was their responsibility to warn pupils *not* to feel good about their country.¹⁶⁰

In 1995, in response to such concerns, the then Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shepherd, oversaw a reduction in the content of the history curriculum at Key Stage 1 and 2 (for pupils aged 5–11), although the emphasis on chronology was reinforced. Later, under Tony Blair’s New Labour government, David Blunkett made further cuts to the primary school history curriculum. But throughout this period, the main elements of the 1991 curriculum remained in place for children in Key Stage 3.

The upshot is that history teaching became subject to two contradictory and competing demands. On one hand, a demanding national curriculum insisted children should have a detailed, chronological introduction to their national story, while on the other, teachers exploited permitted freedoms to exercise their own ideological opposition to such an approach. In defiance of the curriculum, some schools chose to teach history through skills or topics; this often meant, in practice, a focus on identity groups and multi-culturalism rather than a national story. This was made

possible because the Department for Education and Ofsted, the schools' inspectorate, largely turned a blind eye to such subversion of the curriculum.

For two decades, from the early 2000s, there was a failure to scrutinise how history was being taught in the classroom and the impact of the slimmed down curriculum introduced by Blunkett, and later reduced further when Ed Balls was Secretary of State for Education between 2007 and 2010. This meant that teachers had considerable rein to follow their own ideological leanings in the classroom, or for lessons to be determined by partisan organisations rather than the stipulations of the curriculum. In this way, at some schools, teaching came to be less concerned with imparting knowledge and more concerned with affirming identities. For example, the history of nursing became a fashionable topic, seemingly for little reason other than it afforded teachers the opportunity to place a black woman, Mary Seacole, on the curriculum.¹⁶¹

When history teaching is driven by ideological preoccupations or a perceived need to contextualise current events, it risks becoming indistinguishable from civics or citizenship classes. Yet far from being a cause for concern, this blurring of the boundaries between history and citizenship was welcomed by educationalists: 'historical critical knowledge and understanding of political, social, cultural, and economic systems intersects with the democratic culture necessary for active citizenship,' proclaimed the Council of Europe.¹⁶² As we noted in the previous chapter, 'active citizenship' is not a birthright or a status achieved through democratic participation but a particular set of skills to be mastered.

The culture war over the past

The fact that, while much good practice remained, some schools turned away from imparting a chronological national story and towards teaching history as a set of skills, accrued through engaging children with topics chosen for their relevance to present-day concerns, paved the way for the subject to become increasingly politicised. Decisions made about the choice of topics to cover, the perspective from which to approach analysis, and even what counts as a 'skill', add up to teaching that is less about passing on a national

story and more concerned with ensuring pupils arrive at a critical view of England's past.

In response to this negative, fragmented and politicised approach to teaching history, Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, argued for increased rigour and a return to chronology during his time in office between 2010 and 2014. Yet his approach was widely condemned. The Institute of Race Relations accused Gove of abandoning 'inclusiveness' and 'adopting instead a nationalist *modus operandi*'.¹⁶³ Over 100 academics and teachers signed an open letter, published in *The Independent*, where they argued that the new curriculum would 'severely erode educational standards'. 'The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity,' they argued.¹⁶⁴ An article in *The New Statesman* slammed Gove's history curriculum as 'a pub quiz not an education'.¹⁶⁵

Ultimately, Gove's draft history curriculum for pupils aged 5–14 was very similar to the original national curriculum guidance produced by Kenneth Baker. However, in another similarity, almost all of Gove's history curriculum remained non-statutory. As Nicholas Tate notes, although the curriculum compiled by Gove, along with then Schools' Minister Nick Gibb, 'looks excellent on paper ... most of it is non-statutory and leaves teachers free to omit topics that most historians would feel to be essential'.¹⁶⁶

In practice, this meant that schools were at liberty to apply their own judgement to what should be taught. For example, Gove stipulated that pupils in Key Stage 3 should study 'the development of Church, state and society in Britain 1509-1745'. But all the elements of this topic detailed in the programme of study were non-statutory.¹⁶⁷ This meant that rather than teaching children about the Glorious Revolution of 1688 or the Act of Union of 1707, teachers exercised their discretion, which might have meant additional lessons on the slave trade.

Although Gove's initial draft was modified, the curriculum that finally passed into law in September 2014 – after Gove had left office – was more substantial, had a firmer focus on British history and chronology, and emphasised knowledge over skills. However, Gove failed to win over a majority of history teachers to his cause, and failed to compel inspection of how lessons were being approached

in practice. This means that, although many improvements to history teaching occurred in the years immediately after Gove left office, the problem of the curriculum sitting alongside an ideologically driven understanding of how history should be taught remained, and Gove's proposed transformations – although not insignificant – were neither as impactful as some hoped and others feared.

The continued drive from teachers, campaigners and commentators to use history lessons to explore current concerns means that much of what children learn is driven by fashionable, often political, imperatives. It is this freedom, Tate argues:

*... theoretically highly desirable and enabling teachers to teach to their strengths – that gives schools the space to slot into the curriculum all the additional topics associated with initiatives like Pride Month, Black History Month and Women's History Month.*¹⁶⁸

As activists outside of the world of education became increasingly concerned with causes such as diversity, transgender identity and, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, anti-racism, so too were such concerns reflected in the teaching of history.

A 2023 Ofsted subject review, *Rich Encounters With The Past*, recognised the improvements that had been made in history teaching over the previous decade. It notes, for example, that 'the trend towards erosion of history as a distinct subject appears to have been reversed.' However, while overall quality has improved, the review states 'there were significant differences in the quality of history education between schools.' It highlights particular concerns about the depth of knowledge of children develop: 'In nearly half of schools, teachers expected pupils to make their own judgements on sources of evidence without having developed secure historical knowledge to do this meaningfully.' The upshot is that, 'In the best schools, pupils developed rich and connected knowledge of the past. In others, pupils' knowledge of history was disconnected or superficial, or there were significant gaps.'¹⁶⁹

The reviewers found that some primary schools focused 'only on developing broad skills and competencies' and had only recently moved away from a topic-based approach, while a couple still relied upon a topic-based curriculum rather than a sequential approach to teaching. Rather than topics, many schools introduced children

to new knowledge thematically. A focus on recurring concepts or themes can be a very useful way of developing pupils' depth of knowledge – not simply imparting new facts. However, much clearly depends upon the 'themes' chosen. The 2023 Ofsted subject review notes:

In some schools, the range of important themes that leaders had identified was narrow. For example, in one school, these were power, religion, society and empire. Even if these were had been thoroughly developed, they would not have covered what pupils needed to know to access the breadth of the curriculum.¹⁷⁰

In a post-Black Lives Matter world, where some schools prioritise diversity, equity and inclusion above the transmission of knowledge, the danger is that themes such as 'power', 'religion', 'society' or 'women' form the focus of study rather than a specific historical period. A focus on 'Black history', as opposed to the history of black people within British society, can serve to divide students and alienate them from a sense of national identity. This contemporary focus is further driven by continual efforts to 'decolonise' the history curriculum in order to promote 'a sense of social justice, to better represent the nature of history and the stimulus of recent events'.¹⁷¹ The danger is that currently fashionable causes, rather than what is important about the past, shape lessons.

Misinformation

One issue schools are increasingly being urged to cover is 'misinformation'. The Council of Europe's 2018 policy document, *Quality History Education in the 21st Century*, defines misinformation as 'rumours and fabricated content' which has become 'information pollution at a global scale'. Teachers are told to beware of:

... a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these 'polluted' messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers.¹⁷²

Once, scholarly striving for truth and objectivity in history would have meant careful scrutiny of sources. Today, there appears to be an assumption that what is ‘true’ and what is ‘polluted’ can be known in advance. And rather than students learning from analysing evidence, they need to be inoculated against harmful messages. History, *Quality History Education* informs readers, ‘develops critical thinking and provides analytical tools for unpacking mechanisms of manipulation’.¹⁷³ We have already noted that Bridget Phillipson wanted schools to teach children how to spot misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories. In both cases, the existence of manipulation has been determined in advance: students are to be taught how the process works, particularly in the online world, but this is very different to developing a capacity for critical thinking grounded in historical knowledge and understanding.

Identity and diversity

‘Diversity’ is another such fashionable cause. Research carried out by the Universities of Oxford and Reading in 2021 found that 87 per cent of secondary schools had made substantial changes to their history curriculum to address issues of diversity. Seventy-two per cent claimed to teach the history of migration, while 80 per cent taught ‘Black and Asian British history’.¹⁷⁴ This was confirmed by research for the think tank Policy Exchange, published in 2025, which claimed that following the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, 83 per cent of schools made changes to ‘diversify’ or ‘decolonise’ their history curricula.¹⁷⁵

Policy Exchange showed that children were not simply being taught additional topics in decolonised history lessons, but were being presented with contested, ahistorical or false claims, such as that Stonehenge was built by black people or that the West African kingdoms, which sold other Africans to European slavers, were unaware of their role in the global slave trade. In one case, the Policy Exchange report notes, a membership organisation for subject experts had produced teaching resources describing the genital mutilation of slaves in ancient Rome as an early form of ‘gender transition’.¹⁷⁶ The Council of Europe’s *Quality History Education* makes the case for the importance of empathy in enhancing students’ understanding of diversity, inclusivity and democracy.¹⁷⁷ This replaces a search for facts that may be open to interpretation with prompting emotions to engender a predetermined response.

Focusing history around the values of diversity and the stimulus of recent events further paves the way for the subject to be politicised. Indeed, the 2023 Ofsted report notes that ‘In nearly half of schools, teachers expected pupils to make their own judgements on sources of evidence without having developed secure historical knowledge to do this meaningfully.’¹⁷⁸ This suggests that a significant proportion of history teachers view their role as getting children to judge the past by today’s moral standards – and, presumably, find it wanting.

Beyond the curriculum

It is not just through the history curriculum that teachers convey messages about the past. Over recent years, many schools have changed the names of houses or buildings. In one ‘inclusivity drive’, a school in Devon removed the names of Elizabethan naval heroes Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake from school buildings. The head teacher declared that neither of these figures ‘represent the values and inclusive nature’ of the school. Drake and Raleigh, she explained, have ‘less than positive connotations’ in modern times.¹⁷⁹

Elsewhere, following a ‘comprehensive consultation’, students at one school voted to remove the name of old boy Samuel Pepys from one of their houses because of his ‘abusive and exploitative’ behaviour towards women. School staff said behaviour found in Pepys’s diaries did ‘not align with the values we hold as a school – respect, equality, kindness and high standards’.¹⁸⁰ At other schools, houses associated with figures such as Winston Churchill have been replaced by modern ‘stars’ such as footballer Marcus Rashford and environmentalist Greta Thunberg. The aim seems to be to erase the past and destroy heroes so that children can grow up in a Year Zero, willing recipients of new, more progressive values.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many children now wonder why, if the past is all bad, it is worth studying at all. Despite being studied by more children at GCSE level,¹⁸¹ and consistently in the top 10 of subject choices at A-level,¹⁸² the number of undergraduate and postgraduate history students has fallen since 2014.¹⁸³ Fewer students now see any reason to study the humanities in general and history in particular. Yet rather than challenging this instrumentalism and making a powerful case for the study of the past, many universities promote history on the basis of the transferable skills students can

develop. The study of the past is neither respected as an academic discipline in its own right nor as a culturally valuable endeavour.

Conclusions

History teaching is viewed as important today, not because children should know the story of the nation they belong to, its triumphs and crimes, victories and sins, but because it provides a resource to shape children's thinking in relation to the present. A focus on developing skills and competences, such as 'Valuing cultural diversity', 'Openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs and world views', and 'Empathy', through the curriculum, shows that developing the 'correct' attitudes and values is perceived to be more important than mastering a body of subject knowledge.¹⁸⁴ This deprioritises historical knowledge and makes history, as a subject, virtually indistinguishable from civics or citizenship classes.

Rather than gaining a deep understanding of the past, children learn to feel alienated from those who came before them. Rather than pupils being encouraged to take pride in a shared cultural legacy or past achievements, shared identity and common values now emerge primarily through collective guilt over past sins. Clearly, a balanced approach to history demands that pupils are taught the negative impacts of their own country's actions. But when children are taught history solely to condemn their nation, they are left estranged from the past, alienated from the present, distanced from older generations who do not buy into such national self-loathing, and estranged from a broader understanding of Western culture and enlightenment values. The undermining of national history leaves children with neither a foundation in the past nor a stake in the future.

Making the past subservient to fashionable lists of values risks reducing history to simplistic moral lessons and political point scoring. Yet despite the history curriculum urging them to do otherwise, teachers themselves repeatedly adopt this approach. As we have seen, geography also includes lesson content chosen specifically for its relevance to present-day problems. In every subject, core academic knowledge either sits alongside or gives way to the drive to inculcate desired attitudes and opinions.

As we explore in the remainder of this book, the politicisation of the curriculum is a problem because it denies children access to

crucial subject knowledge. It transforms the meaning of educational success from a measure of knowledge gained to an evaluation of the attitudes a student has adopted or can convincingly reproduce. And it changes the teacher's role from imparting a cultural legacy, or knowledge of the past, to bringing about social transformation in the present. In the next two chapters, we explore some of the key concerns driving this proposed transformation.

Chapter 5

Reframing race

Schools are increasingly concerned with shaping children's attitudes and opinions in relation to race and racism. Teachers should, of course, challenge incidents of racism and treat pupils the same, irrespective of their skin colour. But teachers are encouraged to go beyond simply opposing racism and, instead, promote anti-racism in the classroom. Unfortunately for well-meaning teachers, 'not being racist' and 'promoting anti-racism' are far from equivalent. Whereas the former suggests challenging problems if and when they arise, the latter takes a pre-emptive approach and assumes the presence of racism even when pupils themselves are unaware of it. As one guide to 'creating an anti-racist culture' in schools explains: 'Anti-racism moves beyond the promotion of equality and diversity and "not being racist" to actively opposing racism and being an advocate for individual, institutional and systemic change.'¹⁸⁵

Through promoting anti-racism, schools take on an explicitly political role and blur the boundary between education and activism. Geetha Marcus and Stefanie Van de Peer, teacher educators in Scotland, make this clear:

*We believe that anti-racist activism must start early, during education, and should be inherent to all higher education. Only then will younger generations learn about systemic racism and develop the tools and knowledge to become genuinely anti-racist.*¹⁸⁶

According to this approach, racism is not something that children might have the misfortune to encounter but something they need to be taught to recognise. It is not something a minority of adults consciously and perniciously propagate but something 'systemic' that exists in society and – crucially – in the psyche of every individual.

In this way, teachers set out to make children aware of themselves and others as racialised beings, with inherent levels of oppression or privilege, who must learn to act in ways that compensate for this inheritance. Schools, as institutions concerned with education, are

considered the place most suited for such instruction: ‘Education is the starting point for change and for people to imagine an anti-racist future,’ note Marcus and Van de Peer.¹⁸⁷ Promoting anti-racism in schools becomes an all-encompassing intervention in the life of the child. It transforms education into a project primarily concerned with re-engineering children’s moral attitudes and values. As we explore in this chapter, reframing children’s attitudes towards race in this way can create a sense of racial identity and an awareness of differences and potential grievances, where none previously existed.

What is happening in schools?

Most schools in Britain now have anti-racist policies that impact the daily running of the institution, including the monitoring of pupils’ behaviour, teachers’ classroom practice, and the content of the curriculum. For example, schools in Brighton and Hove have signed up to the council’s ‘Anti-racist education strategy’. This requires them to teach ‘key aspects of racial literacy’; in other words, to make children aware of race and to provide them with a vocabulary to describe racial differences and inequalities. This includes a:

*... historical understanding of the construction of “race”;
an understanding of structural or systemic racism and
an understanding of contemporary manifestations and
reproductions of “race” both within and outside of schools.¹⁸⁸*

This effectively teaches children to see themselves as racial beings, as members of a black, white or brown group, with a corresponding history, identity and interests.

Lessons do not stop here. Racial identities are presented as a social reality within a context of inequality, power and oppression. Children learn that to be black or brown is to be a victim of discrimination, while to be white is to be privileged. These ‘systemic’ racial inequalities must be counteracted through the promotion of a positive black, Asian, or, as it is now termed, ‘global majority’ identity through curricular and extra-curricular interventions such as wall displays featuring inspirational black scientists, entrepreneurs and athletes; themed lessons and assemblies to coincide with Black History Month, and Black Achievement Awards.¹⁸⁹ At the same time,

children ‘racialised as white’ must make amends for the privilege that comes with the accident of their skin colour.

More explicit ‘racialisation’ occurs through workshops and assemblies designed to challenge racism. In 2020, Channel 4 screened a documentary titled *The School That Tried To End Racism*. As part of a filmed experiment, children were separated into racial ‘affinity groups’. One girl is shown struggling to decide which group to join. She says: ‘Where do I go? I’m half white and half Asian, and I didn’t know which room to go in,’ and explains, ‘I don’t want to be described by my race. I want to be described as my personality and who I am.’¹⁹⁰ From the exercise, it was clear it was not racists, but ‘anti-racist educators’, who forced the young girl to see herself in terms of race.

Schools now employ anti-racist practices with even the very youngest children. The East Midlands Education Support Service notes that:

*By the age of two, children can become aware of racial and ethnic differences and use these to define themselves and others; from age three, they can develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards others.*¹⁹¹

The assumption that toddlers harbour racial prejudice moves racism away from associations with the adult sphere of politics, prejudice and power and redefines it as a naturally occurring phenomenon that exists in people’s psyches. According to this new definition, the teacher’s role is to replace pre-existing attitudes with new, school-approved beliefs. One primary school in Wales notes that it is: ‘starting the difficult and uncomfortable work of addressing White privilege in the school ... We will educate ourselves and our pupils to be anti-racist.’¹⁹² Pupils, all under the age of 11, will be expected to see themselves and others in racial terms and compensate for their inherent privilege or oppression.

Pranav Patel, author of *The Antiracist Educator*, explains:

*If you don’t need to worry about being safe in spaces it is dangerous to inhabit because of an immutable trait or have never needed to question or consider the impact of being there, you’re probably living a privileged existence.*¹⁹³

Schools may involve children in exercises such as a ‘privilege walk’ where pupils stand shoulder to shoulder but then take steps forward or backwards in response to statements such as ‘English is my first language’, ‘I live with just one parent’ and ‘I have never been teased about my skin colour’.¹⁹⁴

A similar exercise is known as the ‘invisible knapsack’. This derives from a paper published in *Peace and Freedom* magazine in 1989, written by the American educator Peggy Mackintosh.¹⁹⁵ She suggests that white people carry around ‘an invisible knapsack’ ‘of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks’ that white people can ‘count on cashing in each day’ that smooths their path through life. Schoolchildren might be given questions to help them consider what they do – or do not – have in their invisible backpack that makes them privileged or disadvantaged.

When privilege is linked to ‘immutable traits,’ we are in the realm of original sin. British schools, as a fundamental part of British society, become tainted by the same accusation. ‘We live in a social system built on white supremacy and oppression; those lines of power are seen clearly in our schools,’¹⁹⁶ claims Patel. Not only do such assumptions prompt white children to feel guilty about something over which they have no control, but they also tell black children they face insurmountable hurdles in life.

A guide to ‘anti-racist praxis for teachers and educators’ in Scotland, published in 2021 and funded by the European Union and the National Library of Scotland, goes further. It declares:

*If you are socialised as white, you grew up in a world where you were consistently told/fed by the culture around you that your way of life is the right, sophisticated, enlightened way to be.*¹⁹⁷

The booklet’s aim is to challenge this worldview, with teachers being encouraged to ‘Reflect on their own (racist) thinking with which they have been socialised.’¹⁹⁸ White pupils who demonstrate a ‘defensive reaction’ to this lesson are to be taught that they are displaying ‘white fragility’, a psychological mechanism that ‘safeguards a person’s privilege and directs support to the offender, instead of protecting/extending support to the survivor of racism’. The Scottish guidance warns against ‘white tears’, an apparent ploy

by which a ‘white person starts crying in response to an accusation of racism that they have committed’.¹⁹⁹

Introducing ideas about white privilege and systemic racism to young children can put them at odds with their family or members of their local community who may hold different views. This is made particularly clear in relation to migration. Another Welsh primary school notes that:

... there were local tensions, as asylum seekers were being temporarily housed nearby, and the conflict was reported in the news. Our own strategic equality plan has a target to reduce the number of racist and hate crimes in the community. From this, a whole school topic was brought together entitled ‘Don’t Hate, Educate’. We wanted to provide our learners with the ability to question what they were seeing and hearing in the media, in our locality and even in our school, and to not accept racism and inequality.’²⁰⁰

This might be considered an example of what teacher educators have termed ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’.²⁰¹ But it raises several questions. Why does a school have a target to reduce the number of racist and hate crimes, not just at school but in the community at large? ‘Hate crime’ is itself a political and contested category. For schools to have targets in relation to ‘hate’ makes clear that education has been redefined to manage children’s emotional responses and political views rather than the transmission of knowledge. The emphasis on providing children with the capacity ‘to question what they were seeing and hearing in the media’ and in their neighbourhood is framed around one favoured viewpoint. It is impossible to imagine pupils being permitted to conclude that levels of migration are too high or that integration has been unsuccessful.

What is critical race theory (CRT)?

Many of the practices we have discussed so far in this chapter racialise children and young adults and promote the view that racism is systemic, a view which emerges from CRT. Yet many advocates of such practices are quick to deny that children are being ‘taught’ CRT. On a technical level, they are right. Young children are not being instructed in the legal analysis that, in America in the

1980s, developed into CRT. However, key texts by Derek Bell and Kimberle Crenshaw, leading figures in the development of CRT, have influenced widely read books such as Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017), Robin DiAngelo's 2018 work *White Fragility* and Ibram X Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019). These books are the inspiration for teacher development days and anti-racism workshops for children. One American journalist has coined the phrase 'Antiracism, Inc.' to describe the burgeoning industry responsible for popularising and promoting CRT tropes such as white privilege and systemic racism.²⁰²

CRT emerged from what was, initially at least, a positive challenge to the 'scientific' racism of the 19th and early 20th century, when colonial exploitation and slavery were justified by a belief that white people were physically and mentally superior to the people they ruled over. This false biological reasoning began to be called into question after World War Two, and race came to be understood as a socially constructed rather than naturally occurring phenomenon. Following the gains of the civil rights era, academics and campaigners began to ask why, when legal equality had been attained, social inequality persisted. By the 1980s, black scholars found common cause with professors engaged in critical legal studies who sought to answer this question through a radical left-wing critique of dominant liberal approaches to the law. Together, they drew from 'liberalism, Marxism, the law-and-society movement, critical legal studies, feminism, poststructuralism/postmodernism, and neopragmatism'. A key aim was to examine 'the relationships between naming and reality, knowledge and power.'²⁰³ This led to racism being understood not just as legal and economic inequalities, but as social, cultural and psychological practices.

By the 1990s, a more identity-focused and postmodern understanding of race and racism, driven primarily by radical black feminists such as Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Harris, was becoming increasingly popular. Whereas a previous generation of anti-racists challenged the social significance attributed to biological differences to argue that there was one race, the human race, and emphasised universal traits that create a common humanity irrespective of skin colour, critical race theorists argue that, once constructed, race is an incontestable fact. As Di Angelo explains: 'While there is no biological race as we understand it, race as a social construct has profound significance

and shapes every aspect of our lives.’²⁰⁴ Today, CRT is mainstream and terms like ‘structural racism’ now refer to ways of thinking far more than any economic or material analysis of society.

When race is seen in this way, racism is understood as systemic; that is, built into the very fabric of societies designed by white people, for the benefit of white people. Proponents of CRT argue that ideas of white superiority and black inferiority are intrinsic to our language, culture and interpretations of history. Every aspect of our daily lives, from education, policing, the health service and employment, assumes a white norm, they argue, and this makes a mockery of equality before the law and the liberal notion of equality of opportunity. When viewed in this way, it is assumed that racism cannot be solved by challenging individual instances of prejudice; rather, the entire social hierarchy must be overturned.

Achieving this goal necessitates rejecting false beliefs in objectivity, neutrality, equality and meritocracy. People, it is assumed, can never hope to understand the world other than from the standpoint of their identity group; personal, or ‘lived’, experience trumps all else. To this end, people must, first and foremost, come to recognise themselves and others as racialised beings. ‘Colour-blind’ approaches are rejected in favour of actively promoting ‘anti-racism’. This necessitates white people acknowledging their own racism and battling the fragility prompted by threats to their privilege. From here, unconscious bias can be exposed and, with each word uttered, a new society constructed.

We can see that just at the point when ‘scientific’ racism was being thoroughly discredited, CRT breathed life back into racial thinking by insisting everyone has a racial identity, and this alone determines our perception and understanding of the world. Rejecting colour blindness pushes us to view each other as racialised beings. The emphasis on group membership simultaneously erodes both differences between individuals and the possibility of finding common cause across identity groupings. At worst, this provides fresh justification for racial animosity or grievance.

In schools, this plays out in the assumption that ‘race impacts almost every facet of education’. Patel argues that this has ‘multiple consequences in the school setting, starting with expectations impacting the pupils’ self-worth, perceptions of students, their testimony and the inherent sense of fear that Black students may bring.’²⁰⁵ Yet his proposed solution to this widespread and damaging

racial thinking is to introduce yet more racial thinking into schools. He argues that 'treating pupils the same actually reinforces this cyclical journey of prejudice and discrimination.'²⁰⁶ This view is in the ascendancy. A 2022 report by Professor Eric Kaufmann for the think tank Policy Exchange, *The Political Culture of Young Britain*, notes that almost 60 per cent of British school children encounter CRT-derived terms such as 'white privilege', 'unconscious bias' and 'systemic racism' at school.²⁰⁷ As noted in various national newspapers, 'according to polling by YouGov, 18 to 24-year-olds is the only age group that believe schools should 'teach students that Britain was founded on racism and remains structurally racist today'.²⁰⁸ Polling of pupils aged 16 to 18 carried out for Civitas, similarly finds that 'Sixty-nine per cent of pupils reported that they have been taught that Britain used to be a racist country and 42 per cent taught that Britain is a racist country today.'²⁰⁹

As Don't Divide Us, a group that campaigns against the 'divisive obsession with people's racial identity'²¹⁰ and the idea that Britain is systematically racist, notes:

When presented to school children, abstract nouns like 'systematic racism' or 'white privilege' are likely to be interpreted [...] as moral imperatives rather than knowledge, because they are cited by adults who are authority figures.²¹¹

... Once CRT is accepted as a basis for school policies, it becomes easier to treat groups of pupils differently according to skin colour, and an important part of schools' traditional socialising role, to create a common culture through a shared effort to realise educational aims, becomes very much harder, if not impossible.²¹²

Their report concludes that 'The embedding of CRT in schools, therefore, alters the key ethic of education, which becomes directed more towards anti-racist activism than knowledge.'²¹³

Monitoring the playground

Despite the contested nature of the concept, many policymakers seem to agree that tackling 'hate crime' begins in the playground.

The Department for Education expects all schools to record and monitor 'racist incidents'. A guide for head teachers recommends that schools should 'Investigate all alleged racist incidents within an agreed and co-constructed process, and communicate that you are doing so with involved parties.'²¹⁴ This suggests that even the very youngest children can be told that they are being 'investigated' as either victims or perpetrators of racism.

At the same time as investigations have increased, the definition of 'racism' that schools are encouraged to adopt has been expanded. Devon County Council suggests that:

*Racism is when someone is discriminated against (singled out) because of their race, the colour of their skin, their nationality, their accent or first language, or their ethnic or national origin.*²¹⁵

It provides examples, including: 'Making fun of someone's name'; 'Making jokes of someone's culture (e.g., food, clothing, scents, where they live)'; and 'Commenting about someone's hair and/or asking to touch it'.²¹⁶

Ultimately, Devon County Council concludes: 'A racist incident is any incident, which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person,' before adding, 'It is also important to be clear that racism isn't just about skin colour.'²¹⁷ In other words, any example of childish teasing, no matter how slight, that is perceived to be racist will be treated as racist, even if racism was neither intended by the alleged perpetrator nor experienced by the supposed victim.

As film-maker Adrian Hart argues in *The Myth of Racist Kids*, 'Schools are being encouraged to use a broad definition of "racism", including name-calling in the playground and excluding other children from games.'²¹⁸ Indeed, Hart adds, 'The government's recommended definition of a racist incident is "any incident perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person".'²¹⁹ This escalates trivial playground squabbles and actually degrades our understanding of racism by reducing it to childish name-calling. Hart points out that:

Very young children cannot, in fact, be racist, or at least not in the way that adults imagine: they do not yet have systematic beliefs about social groups or ethnicity. If they use words adults consider extremely offensive, they often do so without

*understanding their meaning.*²²⁰

Yet, as Hart notes, the presumption that children are racist cannot be challenged:

*If no incidents were reported [by a school] it was taken as hard evidence of the denial of racism; if incidents were reported they were seen as the 'tip of the iceberg'.*²²¹

Instead, we repeatedly find that discrimination caused by social, political and economic inequalities in the adult world is recast as unconscious attitudes and bias in the minds of children that 'stem from miseducation.'²²²

Legal obligations

Promoting anti-racism in schools racialises and divides children, problematises trivial playground incidents and politicises education. Yet schools continue to pursue such goals. Although some activist teachers and school leaders certainly make this cause their own, others feel compelled to engage in such a project by national legislation. Hart, writing back in 2013, noted that the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which required schools to report 'racist incidents' to local authorities, had 'resulted in the reporting of an estimated 250,000 incidents.'²²³ In other words, in little over a decade, a quarter of a million children had been branded 'racist'.

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act was superseded by the Equality Act (2010), which 'provides a single, consolidated source of discrimination law'. It specified that 'schools cannot unlawfully discriminate against pupils because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief or sexual orientation.'²²⁴ The ensuing public sector equality duty (PSED) requires public bodies (including schools) 'to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities.'²²⁵ In practice, this means that 'equality considerations' must be taken into account 'whenever significant decisions are being made or policies developed'.²²⁶

Government guidance on implementing the Equality Act in schools notes that:

It should be particularly easy for schools to demonstrate that they are fostering good relations since promoting good relations between people and groups of all kinds is inherent in many things which they do as a matter of course. It may be shown through – for example - aspects of the curriculum which promote tolerance and friendship, or which share understanding of a range of religions or cultures, the behaviour and anti-bullying policies, assemblies dealing with relevant issues, involvement with the local communities, twinning arrangements with other schools which enable pupils to meet and exchange experiences with children from different backgrounds, or initiatives to deal with tensions between different groups of pupils within the school itself.²²⁷

Despite the caveat that implementation should be ‘particularly easy’, we see that every aspect of school life is bent to the aim not just of tackling discrimination but of proactively advancing ‘good relations’ and ‘equality of opportunity’. As we discuss below, the rise of CRT in the years since the Equality Act was passed into law has further emphasised the need for proactive intervention in children’s lives to promote ‘positive’ race relations.

Third-sector organisations

Teachers are not the only ‘anti-racist educators’ children may encounter. Some schools spend considerable sums of money inviting outside organisations to address pupils either in assemblies, lessons, or extra-curricular workshops and activities. Show Racism the Red Card advertises schools workshops where ‘Our team of educators and ex-professional football players can visit your school for a whole day educating young people from year 4 up to year 13 against racism.’²²⁸ Stop Hate UK provides training for pupils that ‘addresses topics such as prejudice, discrimination, hate crime, online hate, fake news, exploring inclusion and diversity framed around critical thinking skills’.²²⁹ Meanwhile, Every Future Foundation aims to ‘create an anti-racist generation of students, educators and leaders that can identify, understand, and challenge racism, while building inclusive, representative, and safe school cultures.’ It claims to have ‘helped thousands of students and teachers build confidence, improve wellbeing, and strengthen inclusion’ through

its school partnerships programme.²³⁰ Meanwhile, more than 650 schools in England have signed up to the anti-racist curriculum programme *Diverse Curriculum – the Black Contribution*.²³¹ Pupils are taught the history of the Windrush generation, how to engage in activism, the problem with British identity, and the importance of diversity in the arts and science.

The campaign group *Don't Divide Us* highlights the influence of third-sector organisations that 'provide teacher training, professional development, mentoring, reading lists, staff directories, and organise support groups and conferences' to schools, in the process embedding 'a relationship between schools and ideologically motivated businesses.' Partly as a result of these activities, *Don't Divide Us* argues, the teaching 'profession, as well as the curriculum, is being re-racialised' with 'the necessary boundaries between knowledge, belief and opinion in the curriculum, making indoctrination easier'.²³²

Decolonise the curriculum

In schools, anti-racist education extends to lesson content through the decolonisation of the curriculum. The word 'decolonise' originally referred to the period following World War Two, when formerly colonised countries, primarily in Africa, sought independence. In this context, decolonisation was an important practical and political process. Liberation meant replacing Western institutions with more democratic forms of government that would, in theory if not always in practice, better serve the needs of national citizens.

The meaning of 'decolonisation' began to shift with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Said argued that imperialism persisted after the age of empire because of the dominant assumption that white, Western societies were the norm and formerly colonised nations were an inferior 'other'. This 'Orientalism', Said claimed, was created by 'a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators,' and now lives on in education, culture and discourse.²³³ In other words, Western governments could withdraw soldiers from African nations, but oppression would continue while Western knowledge and ways of thinking continued to exist in people's minds. In this way, the meaning of decolonisation shifted from a practical to an intellectual process; from occurring

within nations to within individuals; and from occurring in formerly colonised countries to within Western civil society.

Said and postcolonial theorists sowed the intellectual groundwork for the decolonisation movement in universities throughout the 1980s and 1990s. But as a campaigning force, it is generally recognised as having spread worldwide from student protests that began at South African universities. In 2015, campus statues of colonialist and philanthropist Cecil Rhodes became a particular target. Under the slogan ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, the campaign soon spread to the UK, and the University of Oxford in particular. Although the immediate demand was for the removal of statues, the movement had a bolder, broader aim to address the ‘unequal vision of the world as it manifests itself within universities’.²³⁴ That same year, students at University College London launched the ‘Why is my curriculum white?’²³⁵ campaign which demanded changes to the content of degree courses and, in the USA, campus protests against racial discrimination became widespread.²³⁶ The death of George Floyd focused renewed attention on the perceived need to decolonise schools and universities. Although ostensibly begun by students, campaigns have been readily taken up by schoolteachers, university lecturers and education unions. Many British, American, Canadian and Australian universities now claim either to have decolonised the curriculum or to be in the process of doing so.²³⁷

Advocates typically define decolonising education as a concern with ‘identifying, acknowledging and challenging the ways in which colonialism has impacted upon perceived knowledge and learning.’²³⁸ In the UK, the National Education Union (NEU), the country’s largest teachers’ association, argues that:

*Decolonising education involves examining the limitations and biases of the current curriculum; the omissions in initial teacher education and training; and examining the political and societal legacies of colonialism and how they have influenced education policies.*²³⁹

Decolonise campaigns are fuelled by the idea that the legacy of colonialism endures in the knowledge taught to students and that the traditional school curriculum is ‘Eurocentric’ and, crucially, that this is a means of asserting not just cultural superiority but also of racial superiority. The assumption is that the curriculum presents a white, Western intellectual tradition as universal and that the

privileging of Shakespeare, Pythagoras or British history normalises a Eurocentric, Enlightenment-focused view of the world. The movement's fundamental premise is that books, theories, works of art and musical scores have no intrinsic value but simply reflect the identity of their originators.

With this view established, decolonisers draw upon theories of intersectionality to create hierarchies of oppression. Work by white men who, it is argued, have traditionally been over-represented as the embodiment of white, Western ideas, must be dropped and replaced with work by more diverse, and therefore more deserving, others. This racialises knowledge in a way that overturns the intellectual gains of the Enlightenment. It ignores the objectivity of science, the political neutrality of mathematics and the universality of classic literature. Prominent black intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois and C.L.R. James once revelled in access to canonical works. 'I denounce European colonialism', wrote C.L.R. James in 1980, 'but I respect the learning and profound discoveries of Western civilisation.'²⁴⁰ Sadly, few make such claims now.

Decolonising education, then, means removing not just the legacy of the past as it lives on in statues, plaques and the names of buildings, but, far more fundamentally, rooting out 'white' knowledge in order 'to expose the extent to which the "centre" is written through with the colonial.'²⁴¹ Anti-racist educators take from Paolo Freire the idea that traditional, knowledge-centred teaching is primarily a mechanism for maintaining the *status quo*.²⁴² This, decolonisers argue, reproduces racism in the present, and so children and young adults steeped in a Eurocentric curriculum must unlearn what they have previously taken for granted. In practice, this means further racialising every aspect of schooling, with the goal of rejecting anything deemed to be tainted with the legacy of a sinful 'white' past. No matter how it may be presented, decolonising the curriculum is always about more than merely adding new, diverse authors into an already existing curriculum.

One teacher educator defines this process as constructing 'A curriculum that explicitly identifies the "cultural violence" of Eurocentric power, which promotes "coexistence" and "kindredness" through a "pedagogy of lovingness".'²⁴³ 'Kindredness' and 'lovingness' are nice feelings, but the blunt reality of associating traditional curricular knowledge with 'cultural violence' is to delegitimise the intellectual gains of Western civilisation by racialising them as 'white' and thereby suggesting that they are of no universal or intrinsic value

and are simply a reflection of elite power at a given point in time. The aim is to produce ‘a transformative intercultural pedagogy,’²⁴⁴ but from this relativistic premise, the ‘value’ of knowledge is determined only by the identity of its originator. The primary task in constructing a curriculum is to ensure previously under-represented identity groups are allocated space not according to truth, beauty, merit or universal relevance but sex and race.

In this way, the project of decolonising the curriculum exposes the political purpose driving education today. Not only does it give free rein to identity politics, but it also separates schools and universities from the transmission of a national culture and alienates children from the knowledge and values of previous generations. Decolonising the curriculum effectively creates an educational Year Zero and paves the way for the more explicit transmission of progressive values.

The goal of decolonising education is, then, to decentralise the Western intellectual tradition through a pedagogy that ‘challenges the sources of power implicit in the “centre” and recognises history and culture from the “periphery”’.²⁴⁵ It is identity, not intellectual or artistic merit, that now determines whether a book or an author is deemed worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. This represents a fundamental attack not just on the values of the Enlightenment but on the nature of knowledge itself. When all knowledge is questioned, and education is separated from the legacy of the past, schools and universities become hollowed-out institutions.

When knowledge is decentred, the authority of the teacher is also called into question, yet for anti-racist educators, this is to be welcomed. Patel explains:

*Teaching and learning should not be viewed as an expert-to-novice transmission. A teacher who feels they are the sole expert, who extols the contents of their brain and feels it is exclusive and exclusionary, has a tendency to accept no aberrations of truth.*²⁴⁶

He contrasts such teachers with ‘Students of Colour’ who arrive in the classroom, ‘with a vernacular and range of brushes that many white teachers have never heard or seen.’²⁴⁷ In the decolonised classroom, the traditional teacher-student hierarchy is turned on its head, and teachers must listen and learn from their students.

To decolonise the curriculum is ultimately to unravel the project of education itself. The transmission of knowledge is replaced by the cultivation of political views.

The project of decolonising education extends to school reading lists. Books have proved to be a particular source of controversy for anti-racist educators. Many schools stepped up efforts to ‘diversify’ the curriculum following the death of George Floyd by withdrawing previously popular books such as *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* from the curriculum because they ‘reinforced negative stereotypes or failed to shine a spotlight on relevant issues in relation to race and racism’.²⁴⁸ One school that removed *Of Mice and Men* said that ‘improving racial literacy and overcoming white fragility’ were key areas of focus in developing the school’s ‘anti-racist curriculum’.²⁴⁹

Fuelling racialised groupings and attitudes

Although not the explicit intention of anti-racist practice in schools and universities, the end result of many of the interventions detailed in this chapter is to encourage students to see themselves and others as members of a racial group. Sometimes this is explicit – for example, Brighton and Hove City Council aims to ‘Establish BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] pupil support groups’. As we noted earlier, this forces children who have never considered themselves in relation to race to identify as such. This racialisation risks groups of children coming to see themselves as being in opposition to one another. Brighton and Hove City Council offers to ‘Provide BAME pupils with further opportunities for networking, growth and development’.²⁵⁰ We have to ask why ‘further opportunities’ should be allocated on the basis of skin colour rather than, for example, parental income or academic attainment.

This racially divisive practice is to the detriment of all children – and adults. It can lead to everyday interactions being reinterpreted in ways that suggest people are victims of racism. ‘Throughout my time working in Scottish primary schools,’ writes one former headteacher, ‘I was “othered” and faced everyday racism, which I either did not recognise at the time, or recognised and ignored.’²⁵¹ In other words, her interactions with pupils and parents were not experienced as ‘racist’ at the time until she learnt to see the world through this lens. This construction of racism sows grievances between people. It

teaches black people to see themselves as victims and encourages white people to nurture a sense of resentment at being presented as either ‘bad’ or ‘privileged’ while also appearing to be denied opportunities afforded to others.

Indeed, there is growing concern with the poor educational performance of white working-class pupils. Labour’s former education secretary branded it a ‘national disgrace’ that white working-class children in Britain are being ‘written off’ by society. Her claim is not baseless. According to data from the Department for Education, in 2024, just 18.6 per cent of white British pupils eligible for free school meals achieved at least a grade 5 – equivalent to a high C – in their English and maths GCSEs, compared to 45.9 per cent of all state school pupils in England.²⁵² This is not a new problem. For well over a decade, Ofsted reports have highlighted the fact that white British pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are consistently the lowest performing of all the main ethnic groups, and gaps in attainment compared to other groups have widened over time. Whereas the attainment of white British pupils on free school meals improved by 13 percentage points between 2007 and 2012, this compared to an improvement of 22 percentage points for low-income Bangladeshi pupils.²⁵³

Other research suggests that white working-class children are punished more severely than those from other ethnic groups, with one in 10 of the poorest white working-class pupils suspended each year. This ‘behavioural divide’ is not so pronounced with children from other ethnic groups.²⁵⁴ At the same time, white working-class pupils are also more likely to be absent from school than their peers from other groups. Research conducted for FFT Education Datalab notes that in England in 2023, white British boys and girls in Key Stage 4 receiving free school meals had one of the highest persistent absent rates of all groups studied. Only three groups of children on free school meals (Gypsy and Roma, mixed white/black Caribbean, and white Irish), for both boys and girls, had a higher percentage of pupils persistently absent.²⁵⁵ There are undoubtedly many reasons for the poor academic performance, bad behaviour and high levels of absenteeism from white working-class pupils. Geography, family circumstances, cultural attitudes and a lack of future job opportunities all contribute to the devaluing of education. The demonising of white children as racist, at the same time as labelling those in dire economic circumstances ‘privileged’, must also play a part.

What's significant is that the underperformance of white working-class children has persisted for many years and yet has, until recently, rarely been a matter of elite concern. Even to mention such statistics was to risk being branded racist. It seems that CRT's obsession with racial categorisation and white privilege leaves little room to consider the impact of social class on people's life chances. Indeed, in the rush to construct intersectional hierarchies that position black people as oppressed victims of entrenched white superiority, it seems that the experiences of poor white people and wealthy black people are overlooked.

Conclusions

Today, the prevailing ideas on both 'race' and 'racism' are cultivated not by racists but by anti-racists. Hart argues it is 'state anti-racist policy that is keeping the question of race alive at a time when many people – especially children – are living increasingly colour-blind lives.'²⁵⁶ The only 'winners' in such a process are the diversity entrepreneurs and activist teachers who not only reap financial rewards from peddling divisive ideas but also gain unprecedented access to the interior world of the child to mould the next generation in their own image. What's more, this new social elite has a job for life. The consequence of racialising children is that they are forever more 'in need of protection or correction.'²⁵⁷

The promotion of anti-racism in schools reveals the extent to which education has become politicised. Introducing race into the classroom paves the way for a 'decolonised' curriculum that is critical of Western civilisation and the intellectual gains of the Enlightenment. Children are encouraged to feel contempt for the nation and its traditions. In this way, they are more easily detached from the values of their family and community and are made more receptive to new ideas and values. Perhaps more than anything else, children are made receptive to the need for lifelong professional intervention to manage their emotions and negotiate relationships. Meanwhile, racism is removed from the adult realm of public, democratic debate and becomes entrenched as an irrevocable problem that lives within people's minds.

Chapter 6

Cultivating vulnerability

One way in which teachers are encouraged to relate to children today, which becomes a focus for reshaping their attitudes and values, is through the prism of mental health. Psychologists, researchers and journalists declare that almost every country in the world is currently in the grip of a mental health crisis. In response, they argue, we need more therapists and to change the way we live; perhaps restricting social media use, engaging in meditation or mindfulness exercises, and learning to prioritise happiness and mental wellbeing over ambition and material gain. Schools are considered to be on the frontline of the childhood mental health crisis and also the institutions best placed to promote a more therapeutic culture. This chapter explores what happens when education plays this role.

I argue that, often, rather than solving a pre-existing problem, well-meaning teachers end up pathologising childhood and encouraging pupils to see themselves as psychologically vulnerable and mentally unwell. In the process, schools gain unprecedented access to the interior realm of the child and have the potential to mould children's emotional responses to everyday experiences.

A mental health crisis

Britain certainly appears to be suffering from an epidemic of childhood mental illness. According to NHS England, 'In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a probable mental disorder.'²⁵⁸ Between 2012 and 2022, there was a 65 per cent increase in the number of children and young adults admitted to general acute medical wards in hospitals in England, 'because of a mental health concern.'²⁵⁹ This includes 'more than 500 children a day' who are 'referred to mental health services for anxiety'.²⁶⁰ According to a report by England's Children's Commissioner, in 2022–23, anxiety, depression, a general sense of being 'in crisis' or having an 'unknown' mental health problem, along with self-harm and neurodevelopmental conditions (excluding autism) were the most common reasons for 'entering treatment'.²⁶¹ Alongside increased diagnosis of mental illness sit growing numbers of

children with learning difficulties and developmental disorders such as autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence estimates that five per cent of children in have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD),²⁶² All of this contributes to ‘a widespread sense of childhood in ‘crisis’.²⁶³

Yet things seem to get only worse as children grow up. According to one recent study, 34 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 report symptoms of a mental disorder, such as depression or anxiety. This has increased from 24 per cent in 2000. Young women are one-and-a-half times as likely to be affected as men.²⁶⁴ Among university students, rates are even higher. The UK’s centralised Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) reported an astonishing 450 per cent increase in student mental health declarations between 2011 and 2021.²⁶⁵ A 2022 survey conducted by the mental health charity Student Minds claims that 57 per cent of respondents self-reported a mental health issue, while 27 per cent said they had a formally diagnosed mental health condition.²⁶⁶ Such figures are truly alarming. One common explanation is that young people have always suffered, but as there is less of a stigma around divulging problems, more are prepared to seek help.

But claims of a large and growing mental health crisis among children need to be treated with caution. Diagnosis – particularly self-diagnosis – is not an exact science.²⁶⁷ An alternative explanation for today’s alarming statistics is that our understanding of mental illness has broadened to encompass emotional states that would not previously have been considered a mental health problem. Sadness in one era, or for one person, may be ‘depression’ for someone else, and while one is an intrinsic part of being human, the other is considered to be a serious problem. Similarly, ‘feeling worried’ is a normal emotional response to certain situations; labelling this ‘anxiety’ transforms a temporary state into a permanent condition. To be clear: this is not to say that there is no mental health crisis today; rather, it is to suggest that the crisis lies in a culture that trades on emotion and validates vulnerability.

The current focus on ‘mental health’ rather than ‘mental illness’ suggests a move away from negative symptoms to the absence of positive emotions. In a culture that compels people to be vigilant about their own mental state, negative emotional responses are simultaneously problematised as too complex for individuals to deal with alone and validated through labels and therapeutic

interventions. When vulnerabilities are publicly affirmed, having a mental health condition becomes central to a person's identity.

Pathologising childhood

Increasingly, it seems as if childhood itself is akin to having a mental health problem. As Abigail Shrier explores in her book *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids aren't Growing Up*, children are now perceived to be at risk, both physically and mentally, from life experiences, such as walking to school alone or falling out with friends, that would have been considered normal childhood experiences only a few years ago.²⁶⁸ Go back a generation or more, and even very young children routinely walked to school and played with friends in their local neighbourhood without adult supervision. Today's children, by contrast, are not allowed to play outside unsupervised until they are a full two years older than their parents were when granted the same freedom.²⁶⁹

The British Children's Play Survey, the largest of its kind, found that today's adults, now in their 30s and 40s, do not let their own children play alone outdoors until they are, on average, 11 years old.²⁷⁰ As Professor Helen Dodd, who led the study, notes, this stems from 'a trend to be protective'. Rather than viewing children as robust and resilient, we are now more likely to see them as fragile and vulnerable. This has practical consequences. As one expert told *The Guardian*, the findings of the play survey showed that British children had been subject to 'a gradual, creeping lockdown over at least a generation'.²⁷¹ Unfortunately, resilience develops with practice. It is through meeting challenges that they become robust. Although the instinct to protect children is totally understandable, keeping them from challenges does not make them stronger but more fragile.

Smartphones and social media have been widely condemned as the primary reason for children's deteriorating mental health, particularly by Jonathan Haidt in his global bestseller, *The Anxious Generation*. Certainly, constant bombardment with images of others having fun can enhance feelings of isolation; social media may open up new avenues for online, round-the-clock bullying, and algorithms may direct children to increasingly extreme and harmful content such as pornography or discussion of self-harm and eating disorders. None of this is to be dismissed lightly. But it is also worth

considering that children turned to technology *after* their freedom to explore the outside world independently shrank.

Virtual friendships only become attractive in the absence of real-life relationships. In schools today, children learn about friendship in relationships and sex education (RSE) classes, that is, through worksheets and classroom exercises, rather than by simply playing unsupervised. Since 1995, schools have reduced play time by an average of 45 minutes each week.²⁷² This complicates processes that children once negotiated for themselves, without formal instruction, as a routine part of growing up. Getting children to consider friendships in the classroom, rather than simply letting them have friends in the playground, replaces spontaneity with anxiety about having the ‘right’ relationships.

Alongside talk of childhood as a time of vulnerability exists a competing discourse that presents children, especially boys, as potentially violent or misogynistic aggressors, ripe for online radicalisation. In the summer of 2025, the Netflix series *Adolescence*, a drama about a young boy who stabs and kills one of his friends, captured the imagination of the public and policymakers alike. The then Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, suggested it should be made compulsory viewing in every secondary school. At every turn, children experience the world through an adult lens.

Everyone is a victim

The pathologisation of childhood presents us with two dominant images of children: victim or devil. Children are either victims in need of protection or aggressors in need of restraint; crucially, both states are to be understood as vulnerable, arising from mental health difficulties or developmental conditions, or resulting from a child’s previous traumatic experiences. This polarised view is most pronounced in discussions about bullying. Definitions of bullying have broadened considerably in recent decades. The old adage ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me’ has long been abandoned. Today, bullying can be physical, verbal and emotional. It encompasses punching, name-calling and excluding – leaving another child out of a game. And rather than ‘never’ being hurt, children are taught that the trauma of bullying can have a devastating and life-long impact upon their mental health.

Yet the attraction of such a broad definition of bullying is that it can be found everywhere and be experienced by everyone. In *The Myth of Racist Kids*, Adrian Hart describes his experience working with children aged 9–10 in a primary school in Essex. He notes that almost every child ‘did indeed confirm they were affected by bullying’ but among this ‘flash-flood of tales’ were ‘only two accounts of what sounded like serious bullying’.²⁷³ The rest were playground stories of friends falling out, engaging in petty name-calling, and making up. This normal childish behaviour is interpreted as bullying only after children are taught to see their experiences in this way.

The flip side of every child having been bullied, Hart notes, is that when asked if they themselves had ever been a bully ‘virtually every child confessed that this was true’. For those with anti-bullying programmes to sell and workshops to run, these are big problems, rooted in childhood trauma and underlying mental health problems, that can be resolved with professional interventions. Yet what’s clear is that the behaviour of children has not changed (other than, perhaps, to have become gentler over the years). It is the language children use to interpret interactions that has been inflated. And whereas a generation or more ago, children may have been reluctant to confess to an adult they were being bullied, perhaps fearful of reprisals or well-intentioned interference, today’s children have no such qualms. This reflects a broader culture where being a ‘victim’ carries little stigma and may even be afforded ‘special’ status.

Encouraging children to view the spontaneous interactions they have with each other through an adult-inspired lens of aggression and victimhood has serious consequences. It leads children to see themselves and others as victims or perpetrators. Rather than developing the resources to resolve issues on their own, they become dependent on adult intervention and emotional affirmation. When children and young adults come to see themselves as inherently fragile, new roles for teachers, as well as an army of counsellors, therapists and mental health experts, is justified.

Growing awareness of the impact of bullying, trauma and mental health problems speaks to a changed conception of not just childhood but, more fundamentally, personhood. A therapeutic culture posits fragility and vulnerability as central to the human psyche. As Furedi notes, ‘a therapeutic language ... suggests that people are “fragile,” “damaged,” “scarred for life,” or “broken.”’²⁷⁴ It is in this context that calls for compassionate pedagogy and trauma-

informed, therapeutic interventions in the classroom find a receptive audience. One academic defines this approach to teaching ‘as the *noticing* of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to *take action* to reduce it.’²⁷⁵ The common assumption today is that distress is widespread but goes unnoticed.

What schools are doing

As we will explore in the next chapter, over the course of more than a century, the role of ‘teacher’ has shifted from ‘an expert in academic subjects’ to ‘an expert in child development’. Today, a focus on child development is often equated with possessing expertise in and assuming responsibility for child mental health. This is reflected in the Department for Education’s demand for ‘a whole school ... approach’ to promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing. Teachers have to ensure that every activity undertaken not only poses no risk to the mental health of members of the school community but also actively supports positive mental wellbeing. This is a huge task for any school. Included within the ‘8 principles’ schools must follow are: ‘curriculum teaching and learning to promote resilience and support social and emotional learning’; ‘Identifying need for and monitoring the impact of interventions’; ‘targeted support and appropriate referral’, and ‘working with parents and carers’.²⁷⁶ It is notable that parents are presented almost as junior partners, people to ‘work with’ but who do not have ultimate responsibility for a child’s mental wellbeing. This lies with schools and teachers.

Schools engage in a number of activities to put these principles into practice. One primary school in the South West of England explains that:

*Support is embedded in all classrooms and is part of the whole school approach. This is achieved through a variety of initiatives such as Emotional registers, Circle Time, Relax Kids, Daily mile, Worry boxes in class and ‘My Happy Mind’.*²⁷⁷

Activities such as ‘emotional registers’ involve children observing and reporting on their feelings at various points throughout the school day, while ‘circle time’ engages children in more open-ended discussion about their emotions, with the teacher taking on the role of group therapist. Other schools make routine use of classroom

interventions, including mindfulness, meditation and yoga. Such activities might be part of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE) classes, but government guidance suggests that all teaching and learning should take place with a view to focusing on a child's emotional responses in order to help them manage their 'thoughts, feelings and behaviour'.²⁷⁸ This means that, alongside learning maths, children will also be asked to reflect on how they *feel* about maths. The upshot is that children spend time each day ruminating on the potential fragility of their own mental health.

Schools reinforce the message that everyone needs to be vigilant to safeguard their own mental health. This continues once students enter university. Lecturers are routinely encouraged to practice 'compassionate pedagogy', a way of teaching that 'notifies distress and disadvantage for all students and staff and actively seeks to reduce these barriers to learning'.²⁷⁹ Compassionate lecturers are expected to demonstrate empathy and kindness in their teaching methods and by being flexible with assessments and deadlines. Another British university explains that:

*Compassionate pedagogy is about ensuring that our teaching and interactions with students and colleagues are based on kindness and followed through by actions and practices that alleviate suffering and promote wellbeing.*²⁸⁰

This extends to the curriculum: the compassionate lecturer is expected to have a 'decolonised' and 'diverse' curriculum and provides students with advance warning of any content that might be deemed offensive or 'triggering'.²⁸¹ The message to students is that they are mentally and emotionally fragile and cannot be expected to cope with university life in the same way as previous generations. The danger is that this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Proponents of compassionate pedagogy draw upon theories that emerge from clinical psychology, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience.²⁸² This fundamentally alters the purpose of a university, the meaning of education and the relationship between lecturer and students. University is no longer a place of intellectual struggle but an institution dedicated to offering therapy to the vulnerable. Lecturers are not to challenge students but to care for them.

Schools are making things worse

When a ‘whole school approach’ to mental health is adopted, children end up being bombarded with demands to focus on their emotional state and sense of wellbeing. This means that they are rarely able to lose themselves in an activity or a subject without being asked to step back and note their feelings. The mere presence of a ‘worry box’ in a classroom tells children not just that worrying is normal – even expected! – but that minor concerns are not trivial and cannot be left to resolve themselves. They must be taken seriously and shared. Compelling children to share their emotions in the classroom shapes how their instinctive responses are interpreted. Children are taught an adult vocabulary of ‘stress’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘depression’ through which to express their feelings. The application of this framework pushes healthy children to worry about their mental health and, potentially, seek out a clinical diagnosis.

Problematising negative emotions may lead some children to believe that ‘happiness’ is a ‘normal’ state, and that anything less is indicative of a personal failing. It would hardly be surprising if, as a result, children without mental health problems begin to view normal emotional responses as problematic, or even begin to consider themselves unwell. This not only risks creating problems for children who are otherwise well but also provides justification for further escalation of classroom interventions, perhaps encouraging children to talk in ‘circle time’ or engage in meditation. In the process, teachers are recast as counsellors or psychiatrists, although they are unlikely to have received specialist professional training before taking on such a role.

As Shrier explains, ‘teachers, counselors, and school psychologists have all been playing shrink’ and, in the process, schools and universities have been gradually transformed into ‘an outpatient mental health clinic, staffed largely by those with no real training in mental health.’²⁸³ Back in 2008, Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes labelled the trend for routinely introducing therapeutic practices into the classroom, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*.²⁸⁴ While this has serious, and entirely negative consequences for education, Shrier also suggests that this transformation of schools introduces ‘the iatrogenic risks of therapy to ... a vast and captive population.’²⁸⁵ In other words, introducing pseudotherapy in the classroom may provoke negative responses,

such as pathologising normal emotional states, altering beliefs or creating dependence upon a person or practice, in children who were previously well.

Prompting emotions

A culture in which children are perceived as mentally vulnerable and where teachers are given licence to intervene in children's mental and emotional development paves the way for imposing what Furedi describes as 'an emotional script' on children, which he explains is 'at least as prescriptive as practices associated with religious indoctrination.' 'The objective of teaching children to name and deal with their feelings in practice constitutes a demand for emotional conformism,' he continues.²⁸⁶ For example, children are taught that there is a 'correct' way to feel about playground name-calling – sad, rather than angry. What's more, there is also a correct way to respond – look for adult help, rather than retaliating. In this way, attempts to change children's attitudes and values through emotional manipulation and behavioural modification represent a serious infringement upon their autonomy. Children are being taught to demonstrate 'correct' emotional responses to issues and situations, with teachers and peers policing each other's feelings.

This emotional regulation extends into lessons as children are taught the 'correct' way to feel about everything from sexual relationships and their own body to their nation's past. Certain emotional responses, such as sympathy or anxiety, are encouraged in order to compel a particular attitude or behaviour. For example, a growing number of children are reported to be suffering from 'climate anxiety'. One global survey of 10,000 children and young adults across ten countries, including the UK, found that nearly 60 per cent felt 'very' or 'extremely' worried about climate change, while more than half said they had felt afraid, sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless and/or guilty.²⁸⁷ It seems likely that teaching about climate change, either through traditional academic subjects or through citizenship classes and assemblies, is promoting alarmism rather than quelling anxieties.

Shrier points to a correlation between left-wing views and mental health problems. 'While teen girls have seen a severe mental health decline, those who identify with liberal and left-leaning politics have suffered worst of all,' she writes, 'Liberal teen boys evince worse

depression than conservative teen girls.’ This leads her to conclude that:

*... most of what we’re seeing isn’t a mental illness crisis. It’s deeply connected to the values and worldview we’ve given our kids, the ways we’ve raised them, the influences around them.*²⁸⁸

Clearly, ‘anxiety’ will not solve problems caused by a changing climate. It is a debilitating emotion which young adults experience because they have been taught to think about climate change in relation to their feelings rather than their intellect, and to panic rather than to approach the issue rationally. Yet increased anxiety levels are not seen as a sign that teachers should dial down the alarmism they themselves have helped to generate. On the contrary, as one submission to Labour’s review of the national curriculum urged, the impact of climate change and environmental breakdown should not be ‘sanitised’. A response from the Quakers stated: ‘While young people’s climate anxiety is not to be underestimated, circumspection is not the solution.’²⁸⁹ Rather than being seen as a problem, generating anxiety is considered by some activists to be a necessary first step in getting people to change their behaviour.

Generating emotions is often the goal of pedagogy in the politicised classroom. Recent documents from the European Commission explicitly make this case. For example, a 2021 report argues that gaining knowledge on its own is not enough for young people to avoid ‘inequity, poverty, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion’, and so education must ‘go beyond the narrow sectoral goals such as academic achievement.’ It then sets out an approach to integrating wellbeing within all aspects of schooling, including the curriculum, evaluation, engagement with the local community and the development of a ‘strong meaningful student voice.’²⁹⁰

Higher education is similarly less concerned with what students know than with ensuring they have the correct feelings. Compassionate pedagogues assume that feelings become public in our interactions with one another, for example, how we address other people or the way we make and maintain eye contact with others. The aim of teaching comes to be drawing attention to these spontaneous interactions, in a bid to get students to modify their behaviour and, therefore, their emotions. Writing for the University of Hertfordshire, Theo Gilbert urges lecturers to employ interventions

such as ‘initiating and sustaining inclusive eye contact around the group whenever speaking’ and ‘initiating and sustaining inclusive vocalisation’ in order to encourage students to notice and reflect ‘on reasons for others’ lived experiences of seminars: their silences, their hesitations, their monopolising and so on.’²⁹¹

By making students aware of their behaviour and instigating change, the lecturer-therapist seeks to alter their inner life.

The seemingly perverse goal of dwelling on sadness is among the aims of compassionate pedagogy. One guide notes that ‘Compassion literally means to “suffer with” and encompasses attentiveness, noticing another’s need, and a willingness to alleviate the suffering of others to enhance their wellbeing.’²⁹² This has been taken on board by researchers at Edinburgh Napier University, where it is argued that the ‘compassionate’ classroom should be a place for ‘generating a sense of “co-suffering”’.²⁹³ Compassionate pedagogy quickly becomes a highly intrusive and therapeutic-led practice akin to cognitive behavioural therapy delivered without the participants’ consent.

Compassionate pedagogy – or trauma-informed teaching in schools – vastly expands the remit of the teacher and lecturer. Students are not subjected to a critique of what they know, but to a critique of how they feel and behave. This is an intrusive attempt at regulating the individual psyche to meet political goals. If students are reluctant to participate in such a project, Gilbert advises, ‘course credits for compassionate behaviours appeared to positively motivate students to attempt compassionate group management, regardless of their ethnic or national status.’²⁹⁴ In other words, students are to be rewarded not for demonstrating knowledge acquired but for demonstrating correct emotional responses through their behaviour. This attempt at enforcing emotional conformity severely undermines individual autonomy. It can lead students to conclude that they have no right to a private, interior realm.

Problematising the family

When children are expected to discuss their emotions in the classroom, it is often their home lives and the intimate details of their relationships with their parents that they expose to public scrutiny. This sits within a broader cultural context that frequently identifies parents as a risk to their child’s mental health. Indeed, one

dominant assumption is that far from families providing a source of comfort to children, they may be the source of emotional problems. Researchers at the Anna Freud Centre note that within the home environment, ‘Children and young people may, for example, experience neglect, abuse, violence, poverty, witness domestic abuse, see parents or siblings go in and out of prison, among other things,’ all of which can, according to the centre, manifest in a child’s behaviour.²⁹⁵ Teachers who take this message to heart risk actively undermining the family relationships that are most fundamental to a child’s sense of emotional safety and security.

Creating problems

We opened this chapter with alarming statistics about the scale of the child mental health crisis in the UK. Within the Department for Education, schools and universities, the assumption is that awareness-raising initiatives and routine classroom interventions are needed to respond to this crisis and support the many children and young adults who appear to be suffering. However, as we have noted, not only does this lead to ‘normal’ emotional states being interpreted as problematic but, crucially, as academics Lucy Foulkes and Jack L. Andrews argue in a 2023 paper:

*... this then leads some individuals to experience a genuine increase in symptoms, because labelling distress as a mental health problem can affect an individual’s self-concept and behaviour in a way that is ultimately self-fulfilling.*²⁹⁶

In other words, people who come to believe they do not have temporary ‘worries’ but a permanent condition known as ‘anxiety’ may adapt their behaviour accordingly and can, in turn, come to experience genuine symptoms.

Unlike a placebo effect, where positive impacts are brought about as a result of a person’s beliefs about their own condition, constantly asking children to consider their own mental health may act as a ‘nocebo effect’, triggering negative mental impacts as a result of their own beliefs. People who come to believe they have a ‘social anxiety disorder’ may avoid public gatherings, whereas a person who sees themselves as simply ‘shy’ might persevere. The act of avoidance ensures that attending events becomes a much bigger mental ordeal in the future, while attending sends a message that

it is possible to cope – and perhaps even enjoy – such occasions. As Shrier warns, ‘the methods and treatments mental health experts champion and dispense are already making young people sicker, sadder, and more afraid to grow up.’²⁹⁷

Labour’s former education secretary promised a change of direction: schools are to teach children that feeling low is not a mental health issue, to focus on fostering emotional resilience and discourage children from self-diagnosis of mental health conditions.²⁹⁸ This sounds like a positive development, but the danger is that even a focus on ‘fostering resilience’ still asks children to dwell on their emotional responses rather than on the world beyond their interior realm. Evidence suggests that simply raising awareness about mental health problems may contribute to an increase in people experiencing mental health problems.²⁹⁹ For this reason, every mental health intervention, even if intended to promote resilience, ends up exacerbating the problem it seeks to address.

Cultivating vulnerability, re-engineering subjectivity

Through therapeutic education, teachers and lecturers have been empowered to manage students’ emotions during routine teaching interactions. This huge expansion of their role has been introduced with little public discussion or thought about its impact on children and society. Yet, as we have noted, prompting children and young adults to see themselves as vulnerable can have negative consequences for individuals. Sociologist Ashley Frawley describes this as ‘A tendency to assume and consciously seek to inculcate a diminished sense of subjectivity.’³⁰⁰ She goes on to explain that:

*Far from creating ideal, rational, self-governing subjects who do not need the enlightened sovereign to guide their will, subjects must be expressly warned away from autonomy, itself positioned as a threat for which discourses of emotion management ostensibly offer protection.*³⁰¹

Put simply, people overly conscious of their own vulnerability have a reduced sense of their capacity to act upon the world and change their own circumstances.

Such interventions have an impact on culture more broadly. Furedi argues that a ‘sensibility of emotional determinism’ or ‘the belief

that the state of our emotions is the cause of most of our social and personal problems' is now 'an integral part of western culture.'³⁰² Even people who do not see themselves as vulnerable must now negotiate what sociologists Bradley Campbell and James Manning have labelled a 'victimhood culture'.³⁰³ Specifically in relation to education, this leads to an assumption that 'attending to the emotional management of children is logically prior to educating them.'³⁰⁴ Safety, in this context, is understood as the removal of emotional, rather than physical risks, and the protection of a person's identity; for example, a safe environment might involve protecting transgender pupils from misgendering, and black pupils from racial microaggressions or a 'white' curriculum.

In this way, 'emotional management' merges seamlessly with a more political agenda. If children and young adults are perceived to be vulnerable, then they need to be protected from words, images and texts which may be offensive or just 'problematic'. Books written in the past necessarily use language and express attitudes reflective of the time in which they were produced. Today, they might be given a 'trigger warning' or dropped from the curriculum altogether. Likewise, in class discussions, children may be warned against using 'inappropriate' language, disregarding someone's 'lived experiences' or 'misgendering' by using the 'wrong' pronouns. Furedi argues this refocuses 'the project of censorship from conscious speech to unconscious thought.'³⁰⁵ It paves the way for demanding that pupils demonstrate an 'emotionally correct' response to a range of political issues, from gender ideology to climate change, without their ever consenting to such practices, because even debate can be considered harmful to a vulnerable person's identity.

Robbing children of agency

The introduction of thinly veiled political objectives into the classroom, through a deeply and sincerely held belief that 'the cause and solution to social problems lie within some defect within the human mind',³⁰⁶ hands unprecedented power to teachers while robbing children of the agency to determine their own views, as future adults, on a range of issues. As Frawley explains, 'Individuals are encouraged to look inward; even if broader social structures are implicated, their start and endpoint in individual psychology is underscored.'³⁰⁷ This means that children learn to view problems

in the world as problems with themselves. For example, one explanation for the increase in the number of adolescent girls seeking to change gender is that they are reacting against a highly sexualised society in which the prevalence of pornography sets assumptions about what it means to be a woman. Rather than changing society, a therapeutic culture validates children to change themselves.

Conclusions

Many policymakers, commentators and campaigners now argue that a deterioration in mental health is one of the biggest problems facing children today. But the solutions commonly suggested – widespread mental health interventions, including counsellors, in schools and universities – only seem to lead to an increase in the number of children said to be experiencing problems. At the same time, centring mental health and emotional vulnerability in the classroom threatens the very idea of learning and intellectual growth. People learn through confronting challenges and mastering the previously unfamiliar. But if such processes are considered to have a negative impact upon a child's wellbeing, self-esteem or even just happiness, then they can no longer be justified. In this way, the therapeutic ethos of compassionate pedagogy demands rejecting academic standards.

Worse than just lowering academic standards, a therapeutic approach to education provides teachers with the assumed capacity to access and reorder the child's emotional realm. This moves the educator's role from simply imparting knowledge, for children to critique for themselves, and from telling children what to think, to dictating to children the correct way they should *feel* about particular issues. Education comes to be transformed into a therapeutic and political intervention into the lives of young adults. This is a divisive practice that rides roughshod over the rights of parents and the autonomy of the child; it leaves children knowing little other than their own vulnerable mental state.

Part Two

How education turned into indoctrination

Chapter 7

What is education for?

The politicisation of education has not occurred suddenly, but slowly, over the course of more than a century. As we noted in Chapter One, the success of activists has less to do with the strength of their arguments and more to do with our collective failure, extending back over many generations, to make a convincing case for education as an end in itself. Instead, as we explore in Part Two of this book, education has long been conceived as a project of socialising children into new, more progressive moral norms and values. The notion that education is a means of creating citizens with the skills, competencies, attitudes and dispositions deemed relevant to today's world and necessary for society in the future has long been assumed by school leaders and curriculum planners alike.

For many decades now, all that has been seriously up for debate is the precise nature of the skills, attitudes and values towards which education should be directed. Schools, as institutions, have taken on increasing responsibility for socialising children by focusing on their behaviour, welfare, physical and, most significantly, mental health, as well as preparing them for future employment. In this chapter, we consider what education could be when stripped of external impositions and instrumental motivations and how this compares to today's politicised education system.

Lessons from lockdown

In 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, almost every country in the world closed schools and sent children home, some for many months. Schools remained shut despite evidence that the novel virus posed relatively little risk to children and young adults. Many remained shut even after vaccines had been developed and made available to vulnerable, older adults. Throughout this time, the vast majority of children were expected to stay at home, and teaching was reduced to occasional online lessons and printed worksheets. It soon became apparent that, despite 'social justice' being the driving principle of many educationalists, lockdown schooling privileged those with a speedy internet connection, their own laptop, a quiet

place to work and a parent on hand to interpret instructions. Even then, what children received could not be described as ‘education’ in any meaningful sense of the word. At best, some were kept busy with tasks to complete and videos to watch. For the most part, there was very little face-to-face interaction between teachers and pupils.

In the UK, teaching unions were at the forefront of arguing against a return to the classroom. Mary Bousted, then joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), emphasised the drastic measures that schools would have to undertake to ensure pupils observed social distancing, going so far as to suggest that children should be doused in disinfectant at the school gates. The union instructed members not to engage with plans to reopen schools and even threatened to sue those who made teachers return.³⁰⁸

Compensating for social inequality through the provision of free laptops or free meals, or reducing curriculum content in future years, were mooted as credible alternatives to reopening schools to all pupils. The decision to close schools, the reluctance of unions and many teachers to see them reopen, and the British government’s plan to reopen shops and leisure centres before getting all children back into the classroom exposed the lack of value placed on education as an end in itself. It showed that education is viewed as an expendable project that can be dropped and selectively restarted, or broken down into a series of discrete tasks for children to complete, seemingly on a whim.

Unable to make the case for education during lockdowns, few in the educational establishment were subsequently able to articulate exactly what children missed out on while schools were closed. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that research for Public First found that parental support for full-time schooling had collapsed across all social classes in the years after the pandemic.³⁰⁹ Put simply, mums and dads no longer believed that time in the classroom mattered as much as they once did. Getting children to go to school was no longer considered worth an argument or missing out on the opportunity for a cheap holiday.

We can hardly blame parents for drawing such conclusions when so few teachers can explain why education is important or describe the school’s unique role in this task. During the pandemic, it seemed as if overnight the message from schools switched from telling children – and their parents – that every minute in the classroom mattered to telling them that missing several months in a row was

not a big deal. When schools reopened, rather than reckoning with the learning children had missed, government ministers, the heads of exam boards and head teachers largely felt there was little option but to fudge the gaps in children's knowledge by artificially inflating exam results.³¹⁰ This points to the moral confusion around education today. It suggests that the purpose of schooling is for children to collect certificates and good grades, rather than the learning process itself.

This inability to make the case for education has persisted. When politicians of all stripes discuss schools today, they talk about breakfast clubs, mental health initiatives, uniform rules, mobile phone bans, poor behaviour, comprehensives versus private schools, PE lessons to tackle obesity and even instruction in toothbrushing. The closest they come to discussing the value of education is to talk about exam results, employability and social mobility.

Meanwhile, teaching union leaders and curriculum reformers all seem to agree that schools need to be more 'enjoyable' and more 'relevant'.³¹¹ Bridget Phillipson, when education secretary, argued that schools should move away from having 'tunnel vision' on exam results so that there can be more focus on pupil 'wellbeing'.³¹² But such suggestions will do little to persuade reluctant children back to class. Teenagers often have very strong ideas about what constitutes 'fun', and it rarely involves maths teachers, no matter how many zany tricks they have up their sleeves. By the same token, if the reason to go to school is 'wellbeing', then it is little wonder that some parents decide that their children's mental health is best served by a week-long holiday.

This failure to articulate the meaning of education predates lockdowns. Closing schools so readily simply exposed the fact that there is little overarching sense of purpose driving these institutions. Certainly, no one today dares suggest that the vital role schools play involves the transmission of knowledge or that the moral responsibility of teachers lies in passing on to a new generation of children their intellectual and cultural inheritance.

What is education?

Philosophers have long debated the meaning of education. Here, I present some initial answers to the question that seems so difficult to answer today: What is education for?

An end in itself

First and foremost, education is intrinsically valuable. It should be an end in itself, not a means to gaining future employment, contributing to national prosperity, making a living, feeling socially included, having greater respect for diversity or any other of the plethora of extrinsic goals that have been suggested over the years. As an end in itself, education has no predetermined outcomes. Teachers can impart knowledge and encourage learning, but what children understand and what, as adults, they do with this knowledge is for them alone to decide. In this way, education can be described as ‘liberal’. It is, as the philosopher Michael Oakeshott explains, ‘liberated from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants.’³¹³ For this reason, education should never be ‘relevant’. As the sociologist Frank Furedi argues:

*Education is not, and should not be, reducible to ideas that are directly relevant to a pupil – it is about imparting the knowledge and insights gained through the experience of others in far-away places and often in different historical circumstances.*³¹⁴

The knowledge children learn in the classroom allows them to position their individual experiences relative to those of other people across time and space and to recognise themselves not simply as individuals but as members of a community and of humanity. In this way, education enables people to think. Adults have a responsibility to educate children simply because it is better for them to be educated than not. It is as important for people to exercise their mental muscles as it is for them to exercise their bodies.

An intellectual inheritance

Education is an end in itself, but this is not the same as acquiring abstract ‘thinking skills’, or ‘learning to learn’. To be educated is to know something. Education has content. This is why the primary role of the teacher is not to master a selection of pedagogical tricks but to select from the sum total of all that is known in the world that knowledge which is worthy of being passed on to a new generation. They must then introduce children to this intellectual inheritance.

The task of selecting what to teach can be approached in several ways. Sociologist Emile Durkheim draws a distinction between the

‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ in relation to religion. The sacred is set apart from everyday life in contrast to the realm of the profane, which is ordinary and mundane.³¹⁵ We can think of education in the same way. School should be a place where children encounter sacred knowledge they would not encounter in their daily lives. For example, children might learn how to cook, brush their teeth, ride a bike, use a smartphone or enjoy rap music as part of the everyday experience of being young and growing up in the 21st century. Yet they are unlikely to learn the atomic composition of water, the causes of World War One, the tragedy of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, or how to solve algebraic equations without submitting to a purposefully planned, adult-led course of education.

Poet and school inspector Matthew Arnold wrote of the importance of ‘knowing and spreading the best which has been reached’.³¹⁶ Teachers, as subject experts, should be well placed to participate in a dialogue assessing the truth and beauty of what has been said and is known. Education, then, is the transmission of a cultural legacy, or, to use Arnold’s now famous phrase, ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’. This process of selecting from existing knowledge positions education in relation to the past. The best that has been thought and said is often that which has stood ‘the test of time’. Education involves adults evaluating the past to determine the cultural legacy they wish to pass on to the next generation. As philosopher Hannah Arendt puts it, ‘Since the world is old ... learning inevitably turns towards the past.’³¹⁷

A conversation between the generations

This focus on the past suggests that education is an intergenerational transaction, the passing on of knowledge from one generation to another. Arendt makes clear that this process is necessary because of the fact of natality – of children being born into a world that preceded their arrival and will continue after their death. ‘The world into which children are introduced ... is an old world, that is, a pre-existing world,’ she writes.³¹⁸ In other words, because the world does not start afresh with each new generation, adults have a responsibility to pass on to children knowledge of the world as it was before their birth. Education is the formal means by which an older generation introduces newcomers to this knowledge. For this reason, education has been described as a ‘conservative project’ in the sense that it aims to ‘conserve’ society’s cultural and intellectual legacy in the minds of a new generation. Educator Nicholas Tate

describes this as ‘a reasoned commitment to continuity and tradition.’³¹⁹

Oakeshott similarly defined education as a conversation between the generations, with different subjects having their own language and means of making sense of the world. The ‘language’ of these conversations, Oakeshott explains, is recognised, ‘not as the means of contemporary communication but as investments in thought and records of perceptions and analogical understandings.’³²⁰ In this way, education becomes a form of induction, or initiation, into a cultural, linguistic and intellectual community, a process involving a relationship between adult and child in which the adult comes to know the strengths and weaknesses, the interests and preferences, of the child, in order to best ensure their successful initiation.

However, the goal of education is always bigger than the needs of any individual child. The responsibility of the teacher is to the world, and to knowledge, more than to children’s wellbeing. The knowledge and culture teachers transmit are often grounded in national traditions. Through education, the nation unites people from disparate identities and backgrounds. As American educationalist E.D. Hirsch notes, children ‘need to learn the shared knowledge and vocabulary of the nation, the shared spelling, pronunciation, and other conventions in the public sphere of the grown-up world.’³²¹

A moral project

Finally, education is concerned with inculcating values and, for this reason, it is a moral project. Although this book argues against the politicisation of education and the imposition of attitudes and values upon children, the opposite of politicised education is not value-free teaching. Not only is such an endeavour impossible, but it would also be undesirable. The transmission of knowledge and the call on children to learn is inherently connected to the promotion of certain values, most notably a respect for knowledge. Oakeshott identifies several intellectual virtues cultivated through education. These include ‘disinterested curiosity, patience, intellectual honesty, exactness, industry, concentration and doubt’, as well as a willingness to ‘submit to refutation’ and a ‘love of truth and justice’.³²²

As Arendt concludes:

*... education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable.*³²³

The demands made of teachers go well beyond the individuals in the classroom. They play a special role on behalf of society as a whole. It is this responsibility that makes education a moral project.

The need to keep education and politics separate

The politicisation of education occurs when teachers lose sight of the reasons education is important in itself. From the moment the first schools were established, there have been attempts to impose instrumental goals on education, whether in relation to skills, personal wellbeing, the public good, the national economy or individual social mobility. Yet when we understand education as described above, it is easy to see how introducing politics into the classroom corrupts the very purpose of schooling.

Applying political objectives stops education from being an end in itself. It robs children, as future adults, of the freedom to interpret and change the world as they see fit, as teacher-imposed, predetermined outcomes must be imbibed. In the process, children are denied an induction into their intellectual inheritance as the legacy of the past becomes problematised. Perhaps most importantly, rather than adults assuming responsibility for the world, they unburden themselves of this duty by passing the onerous task onto children. Again, it is Arendt who makes this point clearly: ‘Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated.’³²⁴ Bypassing adults in the pursuit of social change degrades both education and politics.

Moral re-engineering

As we noted in the previous chapters, much of what happens in schools today has little to do with education as described here. When teachers encourage children to promote the services offered by the Welsh Refugee Council, or to question their gender identity, or to feel shame about their nation’s history, they encourage children –

a captive audience of those too young and ignorant to have formed their own opinions – to adopt one side on a contentious issue regardless of the views of the views of their family or community. When schools no longer seek either to transmit the legacy of the past or to introduce children to their intellectual birthright, they consign pupils to a perpetual Year Zero. This leaves teachers free to induct children into a new political outlook. When schools teach children about relationships, diet, sustainability and Fairtrade, they are not simply transmitting knowledge but imposing a particular viewpoint and enforcing behavioural norms.

Children from families with values aligned with school expectations, most likely middle-class children, will find it easy to adapt to the school environment. Teachers' affirmation of their habits, beliefs and ways of behaving forms a virtuous circle. Their ability to demonstrate the 'correct' response to a wide range of political issues – such as the treatment of migrants, the need to recognise a person's gender identity or the importance of recycling – helps them 'fit in' and feel as if educational success is within their grasp. Meanwhile, children from families and communities that do not share the values promoted within school, most likely working-class children, find the socialisation process more brutal. Not only must they take on board new attitudes and values, but they must also distance themselves from those of their home environment. They are subjected not so much to socialisation as *resocialisation* or moral re-engineering. They not only have to learn new ways of thinking and behaving but, in the process, become increasingly alienated from their own family and community.

The outlook promoted by schools and universities across much of the Western world today can best be described as 'progressivism', which we explore more fully in Chapter Nine. Progressive educators, including most famously John Dewey, have consistently made the case for a child-centred, rather than a knowledge-driven, approach to teaching. A focus on children rather than knowledge turns schools away from the past and towards the present and the immediate needs of pupils. Yet this progressive view of schooling only became widespread in the light of increasing cynicism about the worth of passing on knowledge.

The goal of progressive education is to promote social justice and, in the process, create the conditions for a better future society. One problem with this approach is that, unlike the past, which can be known, the future is yet to be determined. All that is certain is change.

This explains the generations-long obsession with getting children to develop ‘skills’. The assumption is that, unlike knowledge, which can become obsolete or is readily ‘Google-able’, skills will retain their relevance and help adults-to-be negotiate an unknowable future. In today’s schools, this form of education sits within a society where progressivism is the driving political philosophy of the social, cultural and intellectual elite.

When education is twisted to the purpose of changing society, it often ends up focusing on changing people. We saw this most crudely in calls to ramp up citizenship classes after Brexit.³²⁵ As author Ben Coble notes, the political project of changing people ‘generally means making them more favourable towards progressive politics’.³²⁶ Today, progressive politics encompasses ‘woke’ values. In pursuit of social justice, cultural elites in the education sector, the media and the arts focus on identity rather than social class, and on groups rather than individuals. What we might term a ‘woke worldview’ divides people according to race, sexuality and a contested notion of ‘gender identity’. These groups are, in turn, ranked according to their presumed levels of privilege or oppression, with speech rights and social status allocated accordingly.

Many aspects of education are now focused on convincing children to adopt progressive attitudes and behaviours. Schools that have changed the names of houses, removed books from reading lists and libraries, and altered uniform and behaviour rules, in response to movements such as Black Lives Matter or Pride, alienate children from the past. New subjects such as relationships and sex education (RSE) and citizenship exist solely to change pupils’ attitudes and values. Most troubling of all, subjects such as literature, geography and history have been ‘updated’ with new content selected not on the basis of academic merit but to increase the representation of diverse identity groups and to include new topics such as climate change. Taken together, these changes signify a blurring of the boundaries between education and indoctrination.

Often, what’s expected of pupils in response to such politicised schooling is not critical analysis but conformity. Children are not meant to challenge their school’s decision to remove books such as *Of Mice and Men* from the English literature curriculum or to drop Drake or Raleigh as house names. Instead, they are expected to fall in line with the message that the West was built upon white supremacy, and we now need to erase the past and cultivate

humility in the present. The only acceptable criticism is to call out teachers who are not fully on board with woke values, or to point out ways schools can go further down the path of transformation. Successful students are rewarded with praise, good grades and exam certificates. The most successful of all get to continue their education at high-ranking universities.

The politicisation of education and the culture of conformity it engenders in academia. A minority of students are at the forefront of campaigns to ‘no-platform’ outside speakers and cancel their peers who ‘mis-speak’. One recent Oxford graduate told *The Telegraph* that:

*Plenty of people had their university experience ruined due to one slip-up ... A loud few people acted as judge, jury and executioner, which set the tone for a lot of the rest of college culture. I think most people hated it, but couldn't speak up for fear of being cancelled themselves.*³²⁷

As in schools, higher education serves as a sorting mechanism. Those who find it easy to align with the values promoted are affirmed by the institution, awarded high marks and continue their academic journey. Many of those who struggle to conform self-select out.

Schools are not supposed to be political institutions. Indeed, in England, schools have a legal duty to be politically impartial. As we have noted, the Department for Education states that ‘teachers must not promote partisan political views and should offer a balanced overview of opposing views when political issues are taught.’ But this directive now comes with a warning. A new heading on the Department for Education’s website informs readers that it was produced by the Johnson Conservative administration.³²⁸ The implication is that the guidance is itself partisan and may change. Furthermore, such a statement assumes that teachers recognise when they are dealing with partisan political views, which is not always the case.

In universities, the guarantee of academic freedom should ensure, if not impartiality, at least a plurality of perspectives in the pursuit of truth. The UK’s 1986 Education Act compels universities to secure freedom of speech for staff and students. It has, most recently and controversially, been reinforced by the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. Institutions must have a ‘code of practice’

in the form of a policy or statement that often constitutes the university's only public commitment to securing free speech and academic freedom.³²⁹

The wave of campus protests that took off in response to the war in Gaza, prompted by the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th 2023, and the tacit backing they seemed to receive from some university leaders, led to calls for universities to go further and commit to 'institutional neutrality'. But, as of January 2026, only seven of the UK's 24 top-ranking 'Russell Group' universities have publicly endorsed this approach.³³⁰ Instead, the 'social justice model' of the partisan university, which adopts institutional positions on a range of contentious issues, is in the ascendancy. One British professor has argued that 'Universities have never been, are not and should never be neutral on the social issues of the day,'³³¹ and that neutrality allows 'populist' and 'evidence-free' policies to go unchallenged; although why this should be the case is unclear.

In *Bad Education*, Matthew Goodwin illustrates the problem with the current lack of political diversity on campus. 'Our universities are no longer interested in their original purpose', he writes, 'they are no longer prioritising the search for truth, learning, and evidence over dogma'.³³² They have been captured by a 'new dominant ideology', he argues, which has been imposed on staff, students and administrators, and now fully permeates all aspects of academic life. Institutional neutrality could pave the way for a greater plurality of critical voices on campus.

As we explore in the remainder of this book, turning education towards political goals produces students who are functionally literate and numerate and may even have learnt a considerable array of information, yet have little historical or cultural context for what they have imbibed. Whereas contested truth claims demand intellectual humility, a politicised curriculum insists upon moral certainty. Prejudice masquerades as knowledge. Children are left dislocated from their family's values, alienated from their community's history, and, through an incessant focus on identity, divided from one another.

Chapter 8

Excuses, excuses

Most teachers do not see themselves as political activists. They are very clear that the purpose of schools is education, not indoctrination. Yet, as we explored in the first part of this book, education itself has become mixed up with politics. It can seem as if the politicisation of education has happened not just without the consent of most teachers or lecturers, but without them even being aware that this is the case. Stories of classroom campaigning are often written off as extreme examples, notable only for their rarity. But broader changes to the curriculum, school rules, mission statements, values, uniform and reading lists pass with little comment. The political agenda being promoted in schools appears to be barely noticed by most teachers. In this chapter, we explore why this is the case.

It's not political – just common sense

The issues schools are primarily concerned with, such as climate change, are often not considered political matters. One reason for this is that they tend to transcend the heat of party politics. In the UK, until very recently, both Labour and Conservative governments supported achieving net zero carbon emissions, and few mainstream media commentators challenged this goal. In the run-up to each of the most recent general elections, there was little public debate about the need to switch to renewable energy to tackle climate change. It was considered to be beyond the political fray.

In the context of education, issues such as climate change and human rights are rarely considered political because they are assumed to be either scientifically factual or morally correct. Teachers see themselves as simply 'being kind' when it comes to promoting equity, diversity and inclusion, or as following 'the science' in pursuing net zero. As such, the possibility of there being two or more 'sides' to debate is not even considered.

There are, of course, scientific facts children should know about climate change. However, older pupils, especially, should be aware that science is rarely 'settled' and that what is proven to be 'true' in one generation can be revised in another. Of greater concern is

what happens in schools beyond teaching science. For example, children might be taught about the connection between carbon emissions and global warming. But as soon as teachers go further and consider what should be done to tackle this problem, they are into contested territory.

As adults, we can decide whether to invest in nuclear power or renewable energy, or to cut carbon emissions through lifestyle changes or to adapt to the impacts of climate change. But these are political decisions and should be taken by adults in the realm of politics. Teachers might get children to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, but they should not impose their own preferences upon them. Initiatives such as 'Zero Carbon Schools', getting children to make posters telling people to walk rather than use a car, or even assemblies on the importance of wearing jumpers rather than raising the thermostat, all suggest that political debate has been bypassed and conclusions already drawn. Children are taught to accept one side of an argument, unaware that there is even a discussion to be had.

A similar case can be made for moral issues. Human rights may seem to be an unimpeachable cause. No one, surely, can be against human beings having rights. But when we move beyond generalities and explore specific examples, we soon realise that real life is complicated and, again, political. Children's rights, for example, often impinge upon the rights of parents. The right of transgender people to access spaces that align with their gender identity conflicts with women's right to single-sex spaces. At a global level, rights for migrants conflict with a nation's right to maintain borders, while rights for a minority group might conflict with the democratic mandate of the majority. We are again in the adult terrain of politics. Teachers might ask older children to consider all sides of these morally complex issues. But joining initiatives such as UNICEF's 'Rights Respecting Schools' is to bypass adult debate and impose upon children one particular position.³³³

A minority of activist teachers no doubt see tackling climate change or promoting human rights in the classroom as an important political task. But many well-intentioned teachers are not so highly motivated. They, rightly, see their job as teaching, not proselytising, and yet, despite this, they end up promoting one political perspective. The question is not why teachers are indoctrinating children but why some contested perspectives are not considered to be political at all.

On top of the consensus between political parties and the mainstream media, there is also a growing viewpoint homogeneity between members of the teaching profession. As we noted in Chapter One, surveys of teachers and lecturers' voting intentions, extending back over many years, reveal overwhelming support for Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Green Party.³³⁴ There is far less support for the Conservative Party or Reform than within the population as a whole. Polling carried out for the *Daily Telegraph* notes that around 80 per cent of teachers, academics and culture workers (a group it labels the 'lecturing class') support 'leftish parties' compared with 54 per cent of the general public.³³⁵ This suggests that school staff, along with other middle-class professionals such as university lecturers, harbour a broad political consensus and one that is to the left of the public as a whole. In the midst of such agreement, when an overwhelming majority of teachers concur that cutting carbon emissions is vital and upholding children's rights is necessary, such issues stop being seen as political and become common sense. They are put beyond debate.

Younger, newly qualified teachers in particular are unlikely to question the ideas promoted by schools today, as they were taught the same, or similar, ideas themselves. It seems obvious to teachers well versed in critical race theory (CRT) or gender ideology, for example, that being a woman is a feeling rather than a biological reality and that racism is structural and systemic. This means that when schools teach children the contested notion that people have a gender identity, many teachers assume they are conveying a fact. In other words, telling children that sex is determined by biology rather than feelings would be like telling them that the Earth is flat. Teachers do not see themselves as political activists because they do not recognise that they are in contested terrain.

Agreement has the effect of transforming political opinions into neutral statements. From this perspective, politics only makes itself felt when opposing views intrude upon school life, for example, when parents complain about what their children are being taught. In turn, fear of being thought of as 'behind the times' or, worse, a bigot, ensures that teachers who do not share in the presumed consensus hide their disagreements. It is not just students but teachers who are under pressure to conform in schools, and when the cost of speaking out is jeopardising your career and your livelihood, the stakes are high indeed.

The historian and author Nicholas Tate, who spent many years working at a senior level in education in several countries, describes this agreement – this all-encompassing, single way of thinking that has come to dominate schools and universities – as a '*pensée unique*'. In *The Conservative Case for Education*, he explores how thinkers as varied as poet T. S. Eliot, the philosophers Michael Oakeshott and Hannah Arendt, and the educationalist E. D. Hirsch, all challenged a pervasive but barely perceptible single way of thinking. Tate argues this dominant view considers 'the development of values, attitudes and dispositions, and the promotion of a particular kind of society' to be 'more central to school education than the acquisition of knowledge or the studying of subjects'.³³⁶ This *pensée unique* can be considered as 'groupthink', barely noticeable to those who share it but all too obvious to those who do not. Matthew Goodwin describes it as a dominant ideology or, more crudely, a woke worldview. This single, dominant perspective reinforces a sense that what goes on in schools and universities is not political but common sense.

It's all political – knowledge is not neutral

Alongside arguing that what happens in schools is not political runs a counterargument favoured by more activist teachers and members of the educational establishment: it is *all* political. What's more, such ideologues argue, education has *always* been political. Schooling is considered to be inherently political, not because teachers bring their own views into the classroom, but because the formal structures of dividing children by age and, perhaps, by sex, ability, religion, home address and, as a result, often by social class, to the end of distributing certificates that lead to future employment prospects and income, create and reinforce social inequalities.

According to this argument, schools legitimise the myth of meritocracy that underpins capitalism today. A Eurocentric, heteronormative, patriarchal view of the world is assumed to be promoted through both the formal, subject-based curriculum and the 'hidden' curriculum of behaviour codes and expectations. In response, promoting diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, running anti-racism workshops or using the curriculum to challenge white supremacy are considered to be actions that simply neutralise an already existing political intervention.

Of significant influence has been the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who argues that each 'educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and power it carries with it'.³³⁷ In other words, schools and universities are powerful – and fundamentally political institutions – because they shape the system of ideas, beliefs and practices that construct the world, and they also determine who can contribute towards or access such knowledge. For Foucault, knowledge and power are inextricably linked and are reproduced in unison. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge and what qualifies some knowledge for legitimisation through a place on the school curriculum, while other knowledge is rejected. Foucault challenges the view that curricular knowledge should bear a relationship to truth.

Arguing for a connection between knowledge and truth is not to reduce the content of the curriculum to mere facts: knowledge can convey complex mathematical or scientific truths, moral truths or truths about the human experience. But for knowledge to be meaningful, it must have some relationship to truth. Over time, understandings of the nature of this relationship have changed. In the Ancient and Medieval periods, truth would have been understood as the word of God or the gods. The Enlightenment era broke from many of the intellectual traditions of the past and allowed a concept of knowledge based upon a secular view of truth to come to the fore. As Durkheim notes, the secularisation of education has been in process for centuries.³³⁸ Very gradually, empirical evidence and individual reasoning began to replace religious faith as the foundation for truth.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that the capacity to reason, and therefore the basis for critical thought and the authority of knowledge, was to be found in the minds of individuals. He suggested that objective knowledge was only possible through the synthesis of experience and reason, which 'transcends the point of view of the person who possesses it, and makes legitimate claims about an independent world'.³³⁹ Knowledge was considered to encompass an inherent truth derived from empirical evidence and independent reasoning. The role of philosophers, Kant claims, is to critique existing knowledge 'in order to test its truth'.³⁴⁰ This was not a search for an ultimate truth for all time, but a contestable truth that could be countered and superseded when new and better knowledge was proposed.

After World War Two, the legacy of the Enlightenment, and in particular its focus on rationality and reason, became discredited. Critical theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and, as we have already noted, Michel Foucault, linked knowledge not to truth but to power. They questioned the possibility of an objective relationship between truth and knowledge. The result is that, in the words of one scholar, 'Objectivity and disinterest are dismissed as pretences concealing the motives of power'.³⁴¹ This dismissal raises the possibility, taken up by a later generation of postmodernists, that 'truth' is multiple and simply a matter of perspective. What counts as knowledge, then, is no more than a reflection of the perspectives and interests of a social group or the individual identity of the 'knower'. When this is accepted, imparting a cultural canon becomes problematic. The 'best that has been thought and said' cannot be considered as an objective measure but only a reflection of the perspectives and tastes of socially powerful groups. In the interests of social justice, then, the school curriculum must swap knowledge of the powerful for knowledge of those whose voices have struggled to be heard.

There is much to criticise in this approach. The assumption that truth is a matter of perspective (taken to extremes by the likes of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle when they speak of 'my truth') denies even the possibility of objectivity. The assumption that canonical knowledge reflects only the interests of socially powerful groups denies the universal appeal of great authors such as Shakespeare. It suggests that black children or girls can only appreciate work by black authors or women. Such sentiment would have appalled the black American sociologist W.E.B Du Bois, who wrote:

*I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line
I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men
and welcoming women glide in gilded halls.*³⁴²

Suspicion that 'all knowledge is political' has grown since Foucault's musings on the relationship between discourse and power. British sociologist of education Michael Young, in line with his French counterpart Pierre Bourdieu, argued that the selection of 'academic' knowledge for school and university curricula reflects the tastes and interests of the powerful. According to this view, knowledge accredited by certificates is neither neutral nor objective but inherently political. The process of differentiating between curricular knowledge and 'everyday' knowledge, between credentialised and

non-credentialised knowledge, is indeed exclusionary – schools cannot teach everything and limits have to be drawn around what can be taught.

According to today's identity-focused outlook, such decisions are not simply political but privilege some social groups over others. As one anti-racist educator notes, 'The concept of the 'intellectual' – what and whose knowledge counts – can be used by dominant powers to restrict access to education, politics and other arenas of influence.'³⁴³ American author and educator bell hooks describes schooling as the site where students are indoctrinated to support 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.'³⁴⁴ The imposition of an elite perspective, via the curriculum and under the guise of intellectual neutrality, was described by Bourdieu as an act of 'symbolic violence'.³⁴⁵

As Michael Young critiques in his more recent work, rejecting knowledge selected by the powerful often means rejecting powerful knowledge – scientific and cultural work that could transform lives. The teacher as subject expert, ready to pass on the best that has been thought and said to the next generation, is called into question by an understanding that knowledge is not connected to truth but merely a reflection of elite power. The goal of education shifts from transmitting a cultural tradition to exposing the workings of power or highlighting previously under-represented voices. The result is a disparate curriculum and the hollowing out of education. The classroom becomes an intellectual 'Year Zero'.

It's not political – it's diversity

Education becomes increasingly political when knowledge transmission is rejected as an elite project that reinforces existing prejudices and power imbalances. For teachers who accept this view, engaging in projects to decolonise the curriculum, for example, merely counteract an already entrenched ideological framework.

Today's critics of the Western canon describe the production of knowledge as 'central to the imperial project'³⁴⁶ and point out that 'no piece of scholarship has ever been nonaligned'.³⁴⁷ The decolonisers assume, after Foucault, that white, Western power is reproduced through the construction and validation of white, Western knowledge in schools and universities. Attempts at objectivity are derided as methodological foolishness. 'If it claims

to be objective, then it's lying to you. And if it's not political, then it doesn't exist,' writes American scholar-activist Steven Salaita.³⁴⁸ One academic points out that 'Since its origins in the early nineteenth century, schooling [in the US] has been a *white* good, designed to promote white advantage.'³⁴⁹

One American teacher notes 'Our nation's curriculum primarily presents people of European descent, and specifically men, as the movers and shakers in history, math, science, literature, art, and music.' She calls attention to the fact that many of her pupils have never had the opportunity to learn about 'people who look like them' and concludes 'Education always has been political. I think we as white educators don't recognize that because we are accustomed to education reflecting and benefiting from our experiences.'³⁵⁰ In the UK, the case for decolonising the school curriculum is similarly premised on a belief that teaching has been dominated by Eurocentric perspectives, with methodologies and teachings from non-European cultures either side-lined or erased.³⁵¹ This is said to result in 'epistemic injustice', meaning that certain groups have their identity, knowledge and cultural traditions either ignored or demeaned when it comes to what counts as valid subject-matter for teaching and research.

Historically, it is undoubtedly the case that people with abundant time and resources have been best placed to advance knowledge in science, technology and even the arts and humanities. In Western countries, these people have often been wealthy, white men. Likewise, as 'gatekeepers' of the canon, distinguished critics and university professors would, historically, have been white men. It is also no doubt the case that the school system has, over the years, served to solidify and exacerbate social inequalities based on class, race and gender.

Educationalist and former teacher Diane Reay describes herself as being from 'a working-class background'. She argues that the education system:

*... operates as an enormous academic sieve, sorting out the educational winners from the losers in a crude and often brutal process that often prioritises and rewards upper- and middle-class qualities and resources.*³⁵²

Central to this process, Reay argues, is the curriculum that displays a 'systematic denigration of working class knowledge'.³⁵³

The UK's fee-paying and selective grammar schools often reflect class distinctions. A child's family circumstances, whether there is money available for books, school fees, tutors, museum visits and foreign travel – and, indeed, whether these things are a priority – can have an impact on their classroom achievements. But to suggest that there is 'middle-class knowledge' which working-class children, with their own, quite distinct variety of knowledge, struggle to grasp is untrue and demeaning. Similarly, the assumption that there is 'white' knowledge and 'black' knowledge racialises our understanding of the world. The beauty of scientific knowledge lies in its objectivity; that is, its capacity to transcend race, sex and sexuality. The laws of gravity apply to everyone, regardless of skin colour or nationality. Likewise, great works of literature transcend identity to speak to universal truths about the human experience.

The idea that people can only find truth, beauty, or even make sense of work by people who share the same biological markers, is new. At its heart lies the condescending assumption that Shakespeare, Mozart and Einstein are only accessible to white men and are beyond the comprehension of everyone else. It turns schools away from educational goals focused on the transmission of knowledge and culture and towards political goals of social justice, most notably the promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Teachers and curriculum planners should, of course, keep what is taught in schools under review. There will always be good arguments for introducing new texts, but the key question must always be the basis upon which such judgements are made. The decolonisers argue that adding to traditional subject content is simply a means of ensuring better representation and increased diversity within the classroom. But this is disingenuous. Every addition to the curriculum must be met by a corresponding removal, so decolonising is rarely a straightforward act of expansion. More importantly, the decolonisers judge the worth of knowledge by the identity of its originator rather than by other measures of truth or beauty. This reduces education to performative references to a diverse array of characters. The result is an increasingly politicised curriculum.

We should welcome the fact that educational opportunities are available to more people nowadays; indeed, in many countries, women now comprise a majority of university students.³⁵⁴ Opening

up knowledge to people of all classes challenges an old elitism, yet it has been met by demands for new barriers, not from elderly professors but from young, radical academics. The notion that we should stay in our intellectual or cultural 'lane' restricts us to that with which we are already familiar.

While the school curriculum should always be under review, the argument that knowledge – and therefore education – has always been political is, ironically, made by those most determined to politicise education by turning it into a project for transforming society. As Tate notes, 'Using schools as the prime agent of social engineering distorts education's more fundamental purposes.'³⁵⁵ This involves not simply removing bias and prejudice from the curriculum, but also removing all connections to the past from education.

As we explore in the next chapter, a belief that education reinforced social inequality through institutional practices and through the curriculum chimed with a generation of progressive educators who went on to run schools, local education authorities, university programmes and work in teacher training colleges, where they influenced new entrants into the profession. They established a consensus that promoting social justice is not activism but simply the job of being a good teacher.

Chapter 9

Permanent progress?

As the previous chapters have shown, the space for politicising schooling emerges from the rejection of education as an end in itself. When education no longer has an intrinsic sense of purpose, it requires external goals to justify not just the time and expense of teaching but, just as importantly, the demand on parents to send their children out of the home and into the world each day. The upshot is that teachers do many things that are not connected to education but are instead concerned with goals such as child development, socialisation, preparing future citizens for the world of work, and cultivating particular attitudes and viewpoints. We have also noted that these attitudes and viewpoints are rarely diverse and contestable but instead take the form of a dominant ideology, or a '*pensée unique*', that children are expected to imbibe rather than criticise.

Here, we explore where this dominant ideology emerges from and why it has a particular appeal to educators. Arguments for rejecting education as an end in itself and for imposing extrinsic goals in the classroom can be traced back to the very origins of formal schooling. However, this substitution has only become fatal to the project of education over the past century. The emergence of so-called 'progressive' education in the early decades of the 20th century, and its rapid spread throughout the US and, later, the UK and much of Western Europe, combines a 'child-centred' approach to teaching with a 'progressive' political outlook. This connection – between education and politics – is often made explicit to new teachers.

The American Mathematician Paul Ernest describes a 'progressive' ideology of maths teaching as adopting a 'child-centred teaching' approach based on 'activity, play, exploration' and that this can be equated with a 'liberal' worldview of 'caring, empathy, human values'. By contrast, Ernest points out, the 'industrial trainer' approach to maths teaching suggests a belief in 'hard work, effort, practice, rote drill, chalk and talk' and can be equated with the 'radical Right', and a 'crypto-racist, monoculturalist' worldview.³⁵⁶ As former Schools Minister Nick Gibb points out, a teacher 'with an interest in evidence-

led teaching methods' will be 'perplexed to hear it suggested that this made him – in essence – a fascist.'³⁵⁷

As we explore in this chapter, the inspiring idea of progress, the notion that humanity has advanced from barbarism to civilisation and is even now progressing and will continue to advance into the future, has, over the course of many decades, transformed into a technocratic programme of 'progressive' political reform. This produced a child-centred, future-oriented form of education that alienates children from the past, robs them of their intellectual birthright and, in attempting to create citizens for a better future society, politicises the classroom. In this chapter, we analyse the emergence and success of progressivism as both an educational and political movement.

The long history of the idea of progress

It is often assumed that the idea of progress is itself a modern invention and that in the pre-Enlightenment era, religion and superstition precluded any such future orientation. The scholar Robert Nisbet shows this to be untrue. In his book *History of the Idea of Progress*, Nisbet traces the belief that society will improve through mankind's increased knowledge and understanding of the world back to Marx, through Hegel, to St. Augustine, and, before that, to Seneca and Plato. This ancient idea of progress, Nisbet explains, was not driven solely by a belief in divine intervention but by a belief in people's capacity to act on God's will with rationality and reason. This old idea of progress lay in more than just technological advancements: it encompassed 'man's moral or spiritual condition on earth' and the development of moral virtue which would lead 'toward ever-greater perfection of human nature.'³⁵⁸ In this way, belief in progress, the idea that history inevitably bends towards a brighter future, becomes 'both an interpretation of history and a philosophy of action.'³⁵⁹

Protagoras, the first Sophist and moral philosopher, famously declared that 'Man is the measure of all things.' This centring of man, rather than a deity, as the means of charting human progress is recorded by Plato in a dialogue between Protagoras and Socrates on the nature of virtue and the extent to which people can learn to be virtuous through experience. As Nisbet explains, the 'story' Protagoras recounts to defend his position tells of 'the development

of mankind, from cultureless primitivism all the way to the civilisation the Greeks knew and loved.³⁶⁰ This narrative of progress is later echoed by Plato himself in Book 3 of *The Laws*, in which he explores the origins of government and the development of institutions. For both Plato and Protagoras, the history of humanity's progress, the emergence of civilisation, was a story of very gradual increases in knowledge over long periods of time, resulting in growing virtue.³⁶¹

Nisbet explains that Plato's belief in a supernatural world of perfect ideas did not preclude the existence of the material world of change and progress. Although far from a linear narrative, this view reappears with the emergence of Christianity; St. Augustine paid tribute to the greatness and beauty of man and his works. Of course, for Augustine, it was God's will that made human greatness and beauty possible in a process of continual, gradual education.³⁶²

The Enlightenment's move away from a belief in divine intervention led not just to the consolidation of a belief in progress but, significantly, to the understanding that progress was driven by man's own actions. Increased knowledge led to scientific and technological advancements which, in turn, made it possible for people to conceive of the 'conquest of the material world in human interest, of providing the conditions for the good life on this planet without reference to any possible hereafter.'³⁶³ This idea was realised most fully in the discovery and development of the New World. Charles Beard, writing in an introduction to J.B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress*, details the circumstances that conspired to make 'progress' the leading principle in the founding of America. He points out that 'Although many of the original settlers fled to this continent in search of religious liberty, the motive with the overwhelming majority was the improvement of their economic status.'³⁶⁴

Bury points to two conditions that allowed the idea of progress to flourish: a preoccupation with science and the rejection of classical education. He writes:

*So long as men believed that the Greeks and Romans had attained, in the best days of their civilisation, to an intellectual plane which posterity could never hope to reach, so long as the authority of their thinkers was set up as unimpeachable, a theory of degeneration held the field, which excluded a theory of progress.*³⁶⁵

Although classical education existed in America's early colleges, Bury suggests it had only a limited influence on the intellectual life of the new nation. Beard notes that:

*When the great development of higher learning appeared, especially in the new state universities, the secular, realistic, and practical spirit became dominant, with the classics at best as a sideline.*³⁶⁶

But it may be that the partial rejection of classical education was a result of economic and technological advances rather than their cause. With tremendous energy being put into all forms of scientific, practical, intellectual and moral improvement, it was perhaps inevitable that new forms of education should emerge to reflect this changed reality.

With economic and technological advances came a new spirit of democracy that would lead to revolution and, eventually, civil war. Although not yet realised in practice, the new American Constitution held out the promise that progress would lead to equality before the law. Yet for all the apparent rejection of classical education, Nisbet notes that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the notion of social and political reform 'almost invariably carried with it the message of return, renewal, or recovery', and sprang 'directly from a vision, religious or secular, of a past endowed more deeply than the present with virtues and therefore to be regained through direct action.' We perhaps see echoes of this in the current American President's slogan: 'Make America Great Again'. Whereas 'great' suggests progress towards a new golden age, the addition of 'again' suggests that rather than an unknown future, the golden age is to be found in the recovery of a past idyll.

The Enlightenment view of progress led slowly but inexorably to a 'belief that undeserved poverty could be utterly extirpated and a reasonable well-being assured to all.'³⁶⁷ The assumption was that progress was inevitable but needed to be shaped by policies and practices. The Progressive Era of the early 20th century was the first attempt to realise this belief, which persists today in both education and politics.

The Progressive Era

The Progressive movement that consolidated in America at the end of the 19th century brought together disparate reformers, campaigners and, initially at least, populist politicians who sought to instigate social change by curbing political corruption and limiting the influence of large corporations. This movement arose in response to the social problems created by the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation that had occurred in the second half of the 19th century. The goal of the progressives was to establish a more democratic and accountable form of government which could improve society through legal change and social reform, for example, by limiting the working week, expanding the franchise and regulating businesses. President Theodore Roosevelt advanced the Progressive cause and enacted programmes of social, political and economic reform. In the 1904 election campaign, he promised a 'Square Deal' for everyone and won re-election with a huge 57 per cent of the vote.³⁶⁸

Despite the scale of reform, many in the newly created middle class wanted to go further. There was a growing belief that society could progress faster if the nature of social problems were fully documented, their causes researched, and scientific solutions adopted. This pragmatic approach required social scientists and experts, not populists and ordinary citizens. Social problems could best be overcome, this new elite assumed, through experts within government turning the state towards goals of social justice. It was the push for technocratic solutions, and not populism, that came to characterise the Progressive Era. This new approach to politics initially brought considerable benefits to the public. The American economy more than doubled in size between 1896 and 1913, incomes grew and unemployment fell.³⁶⁹ For this reason, Progressivism became the dominant approach of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The spirit of national optimism only declined with the successive recessions that beset the American economy after World War One and the Great Depression that began in 1929.

Progressive education

Progressive education emerged in the context of this early 20th-century turn towards scientific research and expertise as the solution to social problems. A key concern among reformers at this

time was the quality of children's lives. Adherents of progressivism sought to improve health care and nutrition, build playgrounds and youth clubs, limit the hours and conditions of child labour and make education freely available to every child through the expansion of public schools. Reimagining schooling with a specific focus on improving child welfare and development gave rise to the research and thinking that led to progressive education.

Progressive education shares much with the broader political movement from which it emerged. Most firmly associated with the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey, progressive education emphasises the individuality of the child and promotes a democratic relationship in the classroom by removing hierarchies between teacher and pupil. It considers teachers experts in pedagogy, with their authority deriving from their knowledge of child development rather than from academic disciplines. In theory, if not always in practice, progressive education is characterised by child-centred, personalised, 'discovery' learning (that is, learning through 'doing' at the child's own pace) rather than subject-based lessons and whole-class instruction.

History of progressive education

Just as the idea of progress predates the Progressive Era, so too the idea of individualised, child-centred learning pre-dates progressive education and can be found in the European Romantic Movement, which arose in the second half of the 18th century, often as a backlash to the rationality of the Enlightenment, thereby demonstrating that belief in progress has rarely been linear. The educationalist E.D. Hirsch notes that Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, promoted an almost pantheistic sentiment that God was present in nature. According to this view, for people to come close to God, they did not need formal education so much as opportunities for their mind to develop in 'interchange with the natural world'.³⁷⁰ Attitudes towards childhood which emerged at this time became more generally popular a century later. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's fictional work *Emile*, which stressed that children must be freed from restraints and impositions to develop as individuals, was particularly influential on a later generation of progressive educators, most notably Dewey.

Progressive educators defined themselves in opposition to classical education and the forms of schooling common throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. At that point, education was still largely shaped by the view of knowledge as God given, with the teacher's role being to reveal the world (and therefore God's will) to children. In parallel with this, a widespread belief in original sin meant schools were places where discipline was often strictly enforced. In practice, some children received a far-reaching education, not just in Biblical texts but in the major works of classical civilisation in the original Greek and Latin. The basic premise of dividing education into the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) continued in a modified form from the Middle Ages. For many children, however, schooling meant a brief, harsh introduction to 'the three Rs': reading, writing and arithmetic.

In *Emile*, Rousseau questioned this approach to childhood and education. He argued that children have innate goodness and that the role of the teacher is, therefore, to keep children from knowledge of the world so that their intrinsic goodness can be nurtured and later revealed.³⁷¹ As Hirsch puts it, 'The classical aim of education was to correct nature through civilisation. The romantic aim of education is to correct civilisation through nature.'³⁷² He points out that by the 1840s, Horace Mann made reference to the 'development' of the mind 17 times in his reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education.³⁷³ This would have been unthinkable without a Romantic-era view of the importance of nurturing a child's own lifeworld.

Rousseau's philosophy was taken up in the 19th century by European educationalists, including Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel. The 'New Education Movement' led to the first 'child-centred' schools, which opened in Britain in the late 1800s. These 'experimental' privately funded schools focused on the development of the whole child through arts and crafts, other forms of manual work, simple living, and more tolerant and democratic approaches to discipline. Some of these schools, such as Bedales and Summerhill, still operate in the UK today. When they were first established, they represented a rejection of the newly industrialised 'mass' society that had displaced families and communities. They were a response to critics of the utilitarian or 'factory' model of education, famously caricatured by Charles Dickens in his novel *Hard Times*. The character Gradgrind, the owner of a school, famously orders: 'Teach these boys and girls

nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.' He refers to pupils as 'pitchers' and 'vessels' because they are to be 'filled' with facts. Unlike traditional education, which was derided as irrelevant and authoritarian, progressive, modern education would prioritise the child's developmental needs.

The influence of John Dewey

At the famous University of Chicago Laboratory School, the philosopher John Dewey and his colleagues developed teaching methods that focused on activities, projects and real-world experiences. Dewey made the case for child-centred education in his 1916 book *Democracy and Education*. His work met with a receptive audience: as we have already noted, older views about education and the nature of childhood were already being challenged. Dewey's argument that overly rigid classroom direction risked squashing what was natural in the child found fertile ground. For Dewey, education needed to connect children to nature:

*No number of object lessons can afford even a shadow of a substitute for acquaintance with plants and animals of the farm and garden acquired through actual living among them and caring for them.*³⁷⁴

His progressive schools were to be community based and connected to the neighbourhoods in which they were located.

Within three decades of the publication of *Democracy and Education*, the idea that schooling must respect the natural development of the child had become almost universally accepted in American schools and would soon cross the Atlantic. This approach to education gained followers among policymakers, academics, teacher trainers and teachers themselves. Dewey's ideas were influential because they chimed with an establishment keen to question traditional practices in all areas of life. In the years after World War Two, a modern, progressive approach to education that looked to the future, not the past, and positioned teachers as experts in a new science of child development was very attractive. Yet, as Furedi points out, this:

... new group of experts claimed that their science entitled

*them to be the authoritative voices on issues that were hitherto perceived as strictly pertaining to the domain of personal and family life.*³⁷⁵

As we explore in the following chapter, positioning teachers as experts in childhood undermines the status of parents and denies teachers their true claim to authority – subject knowledge. This dual attack undermines the status and authority of all adults.

By the 1960s, the UK had largely adopted a progressive approach to education. In the more liberal climate of the times, the comparatively short-lived experiment in tripartite selection at age 11 was slowly being dismantled and streaming pupils according to ability within non-selective schools was falling out of favour, as was corporal punishment. Primary schools no longer needed to prepare children for secondary school entrance exams, and teachers had more freedom than before to shape the curriculum according to their own concerns. What has come to be known as ‘The Plowden Report’, a wholesale review of primary education in England conducted on behalf of the Central Advisory Council for Education and published in 1967, captured the spirit of the times with its assertion that ‘At the heart of the educational process lies the child.’³⁷⁶ It recommended practices still found in many schools today, such as seating children in small groups rather than rows, and teaching cross-curricular ‘topics’ rather than subjects.

Dewey argued that a formal curriculum was not necessary for children who had a natural ‘instinct of investigation’ evident in their ‘ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry’.³⁷⁷ Progressive educators seek to foster an environment where a child’s natural inquisitiveness has free rein. As a result, learning subjects through disciplined application is rejected as merely ‘rote learning’, facts that ‘can always be looked up.’³⁷⁸ Listening, reading and writing to master a body of knowledge is dismissed as ‘passive’ and replaced by classroom activity. Arendt notes:

*The very thing that should prepare the child for the world of adults, the gradually acquired habit of work and of not-playing, is done away with in favor of the autonomy of the world of childhood.*³⁷⁹

The turn away from the past

Dewey is clear that teachers are to:

*... shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own.*³⁸⁰

This assumes the teacher's role is not to preserve the past but to shape the future according to their own preferences. As the future is uncertain, the value of any body of knowledge can be called into question in favour of teaching generic skills of interest to the child. This view was challenged by Hannah Arendt, who argued that because children are born into a world that already exists, adults are responsible for introducing each new generation to their intellectual birthright.³⁸¹

Arendt saw education as a means of preserving and transmitting culture while also enabling individuals to think critically and participate actively in democratic life. This was not just about loving 'the world' enough, but also about loving children:

*... enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.*³⁸²

Rather than framing progressive versus classical education as a clash between cultural transmission and child development, Arendt argues that welcoming children into the adult world is a demonstration of our commitment to the next generation.

Arendt understood that making children, rather than knowledge of the world, the goal of education moved schools away from the goal of passing on 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'. Rather than being grounded in the past, a focus on children orients education towards the future. Rather than teachers passing on their intellectual inheritance to children, they seek to predict the skills and attributes that will be needed in the future. This point was made explicit by Dewey, who argued that:

*As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society.*³⁸³

It was the presumed needs of this better future society that Dewey considered should shape child development in the present. He argues:

*The study of past products will not help us understand the present, because the present is not due to the products, but to the life of which they were the products.*³⁸⁴

For Dewey, then, knowledge of the past is not unimportant, but it is not an end in itself. It is simply ‘a resource in a developing future’.

Dewey is right that the problem of selection lies at the heart of the school curriculum. Crucially, however, selecting from mankind’s past achievements allows teachers to judge what is enduringly significant. But insisting upon only such knowledge, as it makes ‘for a better future society’, bends education to an instrumental purpose. Rather than considering what has stood the test of time, teachers are asked to predict what might be relevant to a society that does not yet exist. Dewey makes this explicit:

*The scheme of a curriculum must take account of the adaptation of studies to the needs of the existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past.*³⁸⁵

Ironically, while Dewey appears to leave open the question of what comprises a ‘better future society’, it is not children or the general public, or even their elected representatives, but teachers – or curriculum planners – who are to determine the needs of this better future world.

Writing shortly after Dewey, another American educationalist, George S. Counts, went further. He argued that ‘If schools are to be really effective, they must become centers for the building, and not merely for the contemplation, of our civilisation.’³⁸⁶ In his once widely read pamphlet, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*, published in 1932, Counts shows the extent to which education,

even then, was being used to solve social problems. He writes, 'Faced with any difficult problem of life, we set our minds at rest sooner or later by the appeal to the school.'³⁸⁷ Like Dewey, Counts sees education's connection to the past as a problem. Of 'the existing school' he writes, 'Almost everywhere it is in the grip of conservative forces and is serving the cause of perpetuating ideas and institutions suited to an age that is gone.'³⁸⁸

Rejecting the transmission of knowledge

Counts takes much from the progressive education movement, which he describes as being 'completely devoted to the promotion of social welfare through education'. But he rejects Dewey's notion of 'child-centred' education as too vague, anarchic, sentimental, open-minded and individualistic. Its weakness is that it has 'elaborated no theory of social welfare.' For Counts, 'If an educational movement ... calls itself progressive, it must have orientation; it must possess direction.'³⁸⁹ Again, we see that this 'direction' is to be provided by teachers, or an educational clerisy. They alone are presumed to have the knowledge and expertise to develop within today's children the skills and attitudes that will be needed by society in the future. Whereas Arendt argued that children need knowledge of the past to shape the future on their own terms, Counts wants teachers to liberate children from the past to prepare them for a teacher-determined future.

Counts argues education needs to 'become less frightened than it is today at the bogies of imposition and indoctrination'. He points out that 'teachers, if they could increase sufficiently their stock of courage, intelligence and vision, might be a social force of some magnitude.'³⁹⁰ In this way, schools become 'centers for the building, and not merely for the contemplation, of our civilisation', led by teachers who are political actors, arguing for a particular vision of social welfare among citizens in the community while imposing it on future citizens in the classroom. According to Counts and his acolytes, forward-thinking, progressive teachers must replace 'outdated' knowledge with the pursuit of social justice. This speaks to many of the shibboleths of the Progressive Era: a technocratic focus on expert solutions, a future orientation and a drive towards a more egalitarian, just society. It also paves the way for the politicisation of education, as the goals of schooling are not rooted

in traditions or the transmission of knowledge but in a teacher-determined understanding of social justice.

When education rejects the legacy of the past, it rejects national culture and tradition. When the goal of education is child development rather than the transmission of knowledge, there are few opportunities to bind generations and communities through shared cultural references. Perhaps aware of this concern, Dewey wrote that:

*Beings who are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap.*³⁹¹

This turns education towards the purpose of socialisation, not in order to aid teaching and learning, but as an end in itself. Dewey explains that the school serves an important social function because ‘The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment.’³⁹² This spontaneous ‘intermingling’ moves from a by-product of knowledge transmission to a key goal of schools.

Since the latter half of the 20th century, ideas first cultivated under the label ‘progressive education’ have been dominant in one form or another, in many countries around the world. Few cite Dewey or Counts nowadays, but their legacy lives on in the work of pedagogues such as Brazilian theologian Paolo Freire, who has a loyal following among Western educators. Although his theories are derived from experiences specific to the Brazilian *favelas*, the political implications of Freire’s work have been taken on board by teachers working in very different circumstances. In his global bestseller *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire makes the case for education as ‘liberation’. Yet rather than liberation *through* knowledge, Freire’s demand is that students are liberated *from* knowledge, especially ‘elite’ knowledge or knowledge from the past.

Freire’s work is influential in university education faculties where new teachers are encouraged to share his scorn for the ‘banking concept’, whereby knowledge is ‘deposited’ in children’s minds to be ‘withdrawn’ at a later date.³⁹³ Baylor University in Texas, for example, explains that:

*... educators are committed to the success of historically marginalized student subgroups by countering oppressive pedagogies ... The goal is for educators and students to collaborate in creating a classroom environment that is conducive to learning for all.*³⁹⁴

Freire criticised the hierarchical nature of traditional teaching methods and sought to replace the teacher/student relationship with a dialogue in which both parties learn from each other. In this way, education comes to be perceived as a revolutionary act: teaching interactions make power structures explicit and necessitate their collective transformation, changing the teacher from a 'sage on the stage' to a 'guide on the side'. Radical scholars such as bell hooks and Henry Giroux were inspired by Freire's work, with Giroux coining the phrase 'critical pedagogy' to denote teaching that promotes democracy in the classroom.³⁹⁵ The goal might be to change the world, but it starts with changing students in the classroom. This is not democracy in any meaningful sense of the word; children are too young and too ignorant to critique what they are taught. All too often, it becomes the imposition of a set of predetermined attitudes and moral norms on impressionable young minds.

The right side of history

The notion that society is inevitably progressing towards a better future, and that change is the only constant, is, as we have seen, an ancient and enduring idea. Nisbet considers the attraction of this position:

*Nothing gives greater importance or credibility to a moral or political value than the belief that it is more than something cherished or to be cherished; that it is an essential element of historical movement from past through present to future. Such a value can then be transposed from the merely desirable to the historically necessary.*³⁹⁶

Every day, we see new ways in which politicians and activists draw upon this sentiment as they urge the public to get on 'the right side of history'. The assumption, reflected in Martin Luther King's famous sentiment that 'the arc of the moral universe is long' but that

it bends towards justice, suggests that change might be slow, but it is inevitable, and its direction has already been determined. All that remains is for people to ‘get with the programme,’ fall in line, and accept the inevitable change.

Writing in *The Progress Trap*, Ben Coble explores how progressive organisations and causes put themselves at the forefront of this ever-changing world, not just accepting but directing change. He notes that *The Guardian* newspaper describes its journalists as ‘the change makers’, with the definite article suggesting a sense of change occurring in just one direction yet still needing to be ‘made’. The Royal Society of Arts likewise declares that it ‘is ready to fight for change; for a better, more equal, sustainable future.’³⁹⁷ Again, we see how ‘change’ is given direction; it will not just be ‘better’ but ‘more equal’ and ‘sustainable’. In short, the language of progress in the political realm tells people to turn away from the past and towards the future because change is inevitable, but its course has already been decreed by future historians who now know what is ‘right’.

Just as in education, this political progressivism compels the public to abandon tradition and assumptions grounded in knowledge of the past and to embrace a new set of attitudes and values that experts have determined are necessary for a better future society. Coble notes that as part of a decolonisation initiative, the University of Leicester adopted the slogan ‘Citizens of Change’, describing its students as ‘forward looking ... globally connected ... agitators and instigators’ and ‘diverse in our make-up’.³⁹⁸ The aim of higher education, it seems, is to grant membership in the elite class that gets to instigate, not simply accept, change.

Solving social problems

Belief in progressive education and critical pedagogy endures because of a long-standing, dominant assumption, found across the political spectrum, that the purpose of education is to solve social problems and bring about a better future society. It is only the nature of the ‘problems’ to be addressed that changes over time. Most persistent is the belief that education is the solution to poverty. Those on the right believe that educational success can provide a few talented individuals with a pathway to social mobility, while those on the left question such individual solutions

and argue that schools can help entire communities achieve social justice. British educators Ken Coates and Richard Silburn argued that the ‘solution’ to poverty was ‘the redistribution of effective social power’.³⁹⁹ The poor, they argued, lacked self-confidence as much as ‘material welfare’. Their argument, that ‘Education, if it is to succeed in encouraging people’s full capabilities, must start out as training for community action, for self-help and mutual defence,’ echoes Freire.⁴⁰⁰

Tackling poverty through schooling shows how progressive education maintains core principles for improving child welfare and promoting social justice, even as it takes different forms in new political eras. In practice, there has been a continued focus on training working-class children for future employment with the raising of the school leaving age and the introduction of vocational subjects to the school curriculum. This has, over several decades, sat alongside a generally more instrumental approach to education and lower expectations for all pupils.

Progressive education today

Just as a century ago, progressive education today is intrinsically connected to a broader notion of progressive politics. A comment piece on the website of the global institute established by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair provides a useful summation of today’s progressive mindset:

*Progressive politics starts from a deep belief in social justice. That politics has the power to change lives, particularly for those who need a helping hand. It is based on a vision to improve citizens’ lives across the country, across divides, across backgrounds. Knowing that societies should be judged on how much we help those who need it. With a commitment that each person is equal, progressive politics aims to deliver equality of opportunity for all, creating a level playing field for success. Critically, progressives embrace the future, confront the challenges of our time and have an optimistic vision for society.*⁴⁰¹

Much here would be familiar to Progressive Era politicians. The rhetoric of social justice, equality, optimism and embracing the future remains. But today, such concerns often point to a focus on identity, rather than class, and lead to the reification of characteristics such as skin colour, sex, gender and sexuality. Levelling ‘the playing field’ often means assuming some people have ‘white privilege’ while others are oppressed, and allocating not material resources but ‘speech rights’ accordingly. Blair’s call to ‘embrace the future’ justifies the removal of statues and museum exhibits, censorship of old films and books and giving new names to buildings. Yet for all the talk of living ‘across divides’, today’s progressives enshrine new divisions between people and have little tolerance for those who look fondly upon the nation or the past. As researcher Jo-Anne Nadler notes:

Whether delineated by race, sexuality, ‘gender’ or various other characteristics, Critical Social Justice projects the world as a system of hierarchies within which competing claims to victimhood sometimes coincide (that is, intersectionality) but are also progressively at odds, such as the increasingly bitter clash between sex-based rights and trans advocacy.⁴⁰²

Today, influential policymakers, teaching unions, learned societies, civil servants and university education departments argue that the primary purpose of schools is not the transmission of knowledge or the passing on of a national culture, but ‘critical social justice’. This encompasses both instrumental assumptions that education will improve the life chances of individual students and also moral assumptions that education will bring about racial and sexual equality. The addition of the word ‘critical’ to social justice suggests that a postmodern focus on identity groups will transcend a material grounding in social class – in other words, ‘justice’ will mean a redistribution of social power rather than material wealth.

Often, instrumental and moral goals come together in the belief that the purpose of education is to change individuals, not through the transmission of knowledge but by altering behaviour, attitudes and values. For example, schools teach children the importance of sexual consent, how to brush their teeth, to be aware of their racial privilege (or lack of privilege) and that a person’s gender can be fluid and multiple. Nadler found that ‘a great majority of pupils had encountered at least one of a list of partisan concepts at school’,

including white privilege, unconscious bias, toxic masculinity and gender/trans ideology. Her research suggests that four in 10 pupils had been taught that ‘Britain is currently a racist country,’ and roughly the same proportion that ‘young men are a problem for society’. Around a third had been taught, or had discussed in school, the idea that ‘a woman can have a penis’, and 20 per cent said they had been told at school that ‘a man can get pregnant’.⁴⁰³ Just as a century ago, progressive education today seeks to change children’s attitudes and values to create citizens for a future society built on an elite vision of social justice.

Lee Elliot Major and Emily Briant are typical of such progressive educators. Writing in *Equity in Education*, they argue that rather than equality, schools should focus on ‘equity’ and ‘justice’.⁴⁰⁴ Recalling the goals of Dewey and Counts, they reject social mobility and argue instead for social justice because ‘children should prosper whatever they choose to do in life,’⁴⁰⁵ and that rather than focusing solely on academic ability, schools should develop other ‘laudable human traits, from sympathy and generosity to creativity and more practical skills.’⁴⁰⁶

Despite an enduring commitment to many of the principles of progressive education among some sections of the educational establishment – most notably, union leaders, university education faculties, civil servants and some teachers – the UK has, over recent decades, witnessed a variety of approaches in practice. Although Margaret Thatcher is considered to epitomise right-wing thinking, during her tenure as education secretary (1970–1974) she oversaw the creation of more comprehensive schools than anyone else who held that role, and, while Prime Minister, the abolition of O levels and the introduction of GCSE exams. Tony Blair was elected Prime Minister with the slogan ‘education, education, education’, but his policies focused on social inclusion and the structure of the school system more than the content of the curriculum. Blair’s government moved away from comprehensives towards schools that specialised in sport, performing arts or languages, alongside free schools and academies that were not under local authority control.

As we discuss more fully in the next chapter, Michael Gove became education secretary in 2010, following the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, and he took schools in a direction strongly opposed by many progressive educators. Most notably, his reforms placed greater emphasis on testing pupils and on measuring school success by children’s

results. For primary school children, this meant a focus on spelling and times tables, with reading taught through phonics rather than ‘whole words’ and ‘real books’. For secondary-aged pupils, the national curriculum was rewritten to include a substantial increase in the content of each subject and a more prescriptive approach to what should be taught; for example, as we noted in Chapter 4, set texts were specified in English literature and particular periods in history. This was accompanied by an emphasis on a national tradition; children were to study Shakespeare and the chronology of British history.

Gove’s reforms were not popular with the educational establishment, which he unsympathetically nicknamed ‘the Blob’. Educationalist Diane Reay argued:

*... our current political elite is engaged in a restructuring of the educational system, a retraditionalising of the curriculum and the reintroduction of policies, including the reintroduction of grammar schools, that work to mark out the working classes as educational losers.*⁴⁰⁷

Gove did, at times, demonstrate an instrumental regard for league tables, school inspections, data monitoring and performance analysis that belied his rhetoric about a love of knowledge. But it was his ruthless pursuit of higher standards, refusal to accept excuses for failure, and desire to return to a more traditional, content-heavy curriculum that seemed to frustrate many teachers.

Increasing inequality

As Reay illustrates, campaign groups blame the poor educational outcomes of some working-class children on poverty and call for a ‘system change’ to ensure greater equity.⁴⁰⁸ Inside the classroom, Elliot Major and Briant urge teachers to prioritise ‘support for pupils that they can most help’⁴⁰⁹ by sitting ‘under-resourced’ children in areas they pass most frequently and marking their books first, when teachers are most fresh to the task. These are sensible suggestions. But all too often, calls for reform are, in reality, a demand that standards be lowered for all pupils, through making reading material more accessible, ending the practice of setting homework or changing assessment methods to limit testing. When this happens, better-off

families pay for tutors, move house to areas with better schools or opt out of the state sector altogether. More fundamentally, a focus on tackling poverty through classroom interventions moves schools away from education as cultural transmission, important in itself, and burdens it with instrumental objectives.

One of Gove's key arguments against progressive education was that it can further entrench social inequalities. Teachers, by definition, have knowledge that students lack; denying this risks robbing students of access to powerful knowledge. Only more privileged students can negotiate access to knowledge outside the classroom. Teachers who purport to be child-centred and seek to tailor lessons to individual pupils' interests compound this problem. Children with high levels of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as 'cultural capital' are rewarded for the knowledge they already possess, while less privileged children are not taken beyond their present limited horizons.

The growing inequality that ensues is exacerbated by a belief that working-class children, or children from minority ethnic communities, need a curriculum that is 'culturally relevant' in order for them to learn. Elliot Major and Briant recommend teachers use lesson plans, books and images that 'reflect the full cultural diversity' of pupils in the classroom because:

*Pupils will be inspired by reading texts featuring people like them with similar backgrounds and values; equally, they will feel excluded if classroom materials don't include anyone from similar backgrounds.*⁴¹⁰

This is a patronising assumption that, as we have already noted, risks restricting work by Shakespeare, Newton and Mozart to white males.

Yet this idea was reflected in many submissions to the Starmmer government's review of the national curriculum. One major exam board suggested that 'the literary canon should better reflect the range of cultures and experiences of all young people'. This leaves little room for common culture or for introducing children to worlds beyond their immediate experience. The exam board instead urges 'more media, non-fiction and multi-modal texts, including film, TV, drama and digital texts'.⁴¹¹ Rather than promoting a common national identity or shared cultural traditions, elite educationalists

look only to perpetuate cultural differences. This robs education of its intellectually transformative potential and confines children to their existing frames of reference. Education is tasked with meeting political goals beyond the classroom by alienating children from the values of their home environment and cultivating new, expert-approved values within the school. Ultimately, the aim of changing society comes to mean changing children, and, as Ben Cobley notes, this ‘generally means making them more favourable towards progressive political causes’.⁴¹²

Despite a century of educational reform and, in the UK at least, a huge expansion in the number of children passing exams aged 16 and 18 and continuing on to university, inequality persists. This is hardly surprising. Education is not the solution to economic and social problems. Yet schools, as institutions, are still discussed in this way by politicians who lack a view of education as the transmission of a common culture, respect for the past, and, crucially, a sense of the demos as agents of change.

Meanwhile, socialisation, no longer a by-product of the school’s intellectual role, must now be explicitly addressed. The Starmer government’s far-reaching changes to the school curriculum sit alongside new responsibilities for schools such as free breakfast clubs, fewer ‘branded’ uniform items and instruction in tooth brushing. These policies may or may not help some struggling families. But they are related to social welfare, not education. Oakeshott makes clear the consequences of this approach: ‘When to teach is identified with “socialisation,” education becomes the engagement to teach nothing.’⁴¹³ Labour’s addition of Value Added Tax (VAT) to private school fees, and curtailment of additional financial support to state schools that offer children additional Latin and maths classes, make clear the reality of education for social justice: providing a lower standard of education for all pupils.

Conclusion

The idea of progress, that through the application of reason, society will slowly but inexorably move towards perfectibility, is inspiring. But when the idea of progress is transformed into the political ideology of progressivism, it becomes a project to shape society from the top down rather than the bottom up, in line with an elite view of a better future.

Progressive, child-centred education becomes the mechanism by which the attitudes and values of the next generation are changed to meet the demands of this imagined future. This means separating education from knowledge of the past and from the transmission of a national culture, in order to pave the way for progressive political values to enter the classroom. Progressive education purports to be child-centred, but it often leaves children knowing little and alienated from their communities. It purports to promote social justice but often entrenches inequalities. Most damaging of all, progressive education paves the way for the classroom to be put to the purpose of indoctrination.

Part Three

Schooling today

Chapter 10

Collapsing standards⁴¹⁴

In the final section of this book, we consider what schooling looks like when education is politicised and turned into a progressive project to promote social justice. We look at the impact upon children, families and, in this chapter, educational standards. Traditionally, schools are places where expectations of children have been conveyed through behavioural and academic standards.

Standards are fundamental to both the quality and content of education. A nation with high educational standards is one where a majority of children leave school able to demonstrate successful mastery of complex subject knowledge. The determination of many parents to secure a place for their child at a good school suggests that, at least among the general public, high educational standards are valued. However, among teachers, policymakers and educational theorists, there is disagreement about the meaning of standards and little consensus that securing high standards is an appropriate aim for schools.

Over many decades, educationalists have dismissed talk of standards as implying a regressive focus on rote learning, exam passes and strict discipline, which they consider hostile to more progressive educational goals in general and the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs in particular. Their success is not just a long-term decline in educational standards but the broader problematising of even the aspiration for high standards. Here, we discuss what educational standards are, how and why standards have fallen, and, crucially, why this matters.

Why standards matter

Our most basic expectation is that children should leave school literate and numerate. An ability to read, write and perform simple arithmetic is essential for full participation in a democratic society and a prerequisite for further study. Ideally, all children should have mastered these basic skills before leaving primary school. School tests to assess performance in English and mathematics at this age

are an important accountability mechanism and provide parents, teachers, schools and the nation insight into the progress children are making towards meeting this standard. In this context, it might be assumed that a formal mechanism for checking that all children meet a basic educational standard is to be welcomed. Yet primary school tests are considered controversial by many. Reay argues:

England is unique in using testing to control what is taught in schools, to monitor teaching standards and to encourage parents to choose schools based on the test results—all to the damage of children's well-being.⁴¹⁵

In May 2023, the reading paper taken by 10- and 11-year-olds in England was criticised in the national press for being too difficult. Children had 1 hour to answer 38 questions about three sets of texts. The BBC highlighted one question which asked pupils 'to find a similar word to "eat" in a passage that contained both "consume" and "feeding"'. The vice-president of the National Association of Head Teachers claimed that children had 'gone home really struggling because they hadn't finished the reading test'.⁴¹⁶ Such claims were supported by groups, such as More Than A Score, that bring together parents and teachers in calls for all national tests for primary school pupils to be abolished.⁴¹⁷ Many campaigners, including teachers and teaching unions, seek to overturn the means by which schools are held to account for ensuring that children meet even the most minimal educational standards.

The significance of knowledge

Literacy and numeracy are vital not just for participation in society but for enabling individuals to share in humanity's collective intellectual and cultural legacy. In terms of schooling, being able to read, write and perform basic arithmetic enables pupils to access knowledge across a range of subjects. For this reason, the concept of educational standards speaks not just to quality – a person's ability to calculate accurately, write grammatically and understand complex texts – but also to content. There are certain things people educated to a high standard are assumed to know, and, to this end, dividing teaching time into subjects, each with its own distinct curriculum applicable to children of different ages, has traditionally been the form that schooling has taken.

In England, the first statutory national curriculum was introduced by Kenneth Baker in the Education Reform Act 1988. Prior to this, it was down to individual teachers, schools, subject associations and local education authorities to determine what children were taught. While some schools and teachers undoubtedly adopted an idiosyncratic approach to the curriculum, in general, teachers were aware of the key intellectual developments in their subject area. In English, music and art, this might emerge from tradition, knowledge of the canon or popular understandings of what was considered significant work. In other subject areas, formal and informal ties between teachers and university departments helped shape the content of school leaving exams and, in turn, the curriculum.

As we have previously discussed, establishing academic standards requires educators to pass judgment. They must discern, from among the sum total of human knowledge, that which is deemed sufficiently important for children to know. This act of passing on the best of humanity's collective knowledge, from one generation to the next, has been identified as the primary motivation for formal education by philosophers and sociologists, including Durkheim and Arendt. Arnold's oft-cited dictum about 'the best that had been thought and said'⁴¹⁸ requires teachers to discern knowledge worth passing from one generation to the next. Fulfilling this task requires taking responsibility not just for today's children but for the future of humanity, which will benefit from the survival of a collective store of wisdom.

Unfortunately, there are many trends which mitigate against judgement in the construction of the school curriculum today. Low levels of basic literacy stand in the way of teaching literature or other texts deemed too complex. A longstanding drive towards relevance calls into question historical material. Similarly, moves to 'decolonise' the curriculum see once-familiar works written off as 'pale, male and stale'. An assumption that knowledge is merely 'information' and readily accessible online deprioritises learning content in favour of accruing 'critical thinking skills' or 'learning to learn'. Low expectations of children more generally rule out the reading of lengthy books in favour of brief extracts. Taken together, we see a worrying fall in both the quantity and quality of what children know.

Falling standards

Concern about educational standards is not new. In the 1860s, when schools first began coming under state control, Arnold described the inadequacies of both secondary education for middle-class children and primary education for the working class. Thirty years later, in 1895, the Bryce Commission reported on the state of secondary education following government concerns that Britain was falling behind other countries, most notably Germany, in the teaching of science and technology.⁴¹⁹ In 1950, the UK's Ministry of Education published a report, titled *Reading Ability*, in response to concerns that reading standards had fallen following World War Two. It opens with the question: 'Is illiteracy increasing in this country?'.⁴²⁰

Four decades later, such concerns remained. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) compared literacy at Key Stage 2 between 1996 and 1999 and found that reading standards had fallen. Some of the recent improvements in reading results, it ruled, were 'illusory'.⁴²¹ In 2008, the Institute of Directors questioned the credibility of government statistics showing improvements in education performance and argued that standards had declined over the past decade.⁴²² In 2014, then Head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, argued that standards are falling in England's secondary schools because a small number are 'insulated' from proper governance and 'bereft of good leadership'.⁴²³ Most recently, there has been concern about the impact of Covid lockdowns on educational standards. In 2023, England's A-level results showed the biggest year-on-year drop on record.⁴²⁴

Discussion of educational standards can read like a tale of perennial decline. This has led some to write off such accounts as a 'moral panic'.⁴²⁵ Reality is, of course, more complicated: there have been neither two centuries of decline nor 200 years of continual improvement. Comparing educational standards in a historical context is difficult because many variables must be considered. For example, it was only with the 1944 Education (Butler) Act that free secondary schooling became available for all. This means that concern about falling standards needs to be understood in the context of a shift from an elite to a mass secondary education system.

Likewise, since 1944, there have been considerable changes in school structures: from a tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools to comprehensive schools. There have

also been changes in assessment methods: from O-levels (Ordinary Levels) taken by the academically able and CSEs (Certificates of Secondary Education) taken by the rest, to GCSEs (General Certificates of Secondary Education), taken by all. Put bluntly, the UK moved from providing high-level education to a small proportion of the population to a lower level of education to a far larger number of children.

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that concern with declining standards is not merely a moral panic. When looked at in historical perspective, we see that a combination of factors, such as changes to the curriculum, changes to teaching and assessment methods, and broader cultural shifts in relation to the perception of the purpose of education and schooling, point to a narrowing of expectations and a fall in standards, particularly for pupils at the higher end of the ability range.

Rising grades, falling standards

Historical comparisons are more meaningful when (almost) all children are sitting the same exams at the same age. However, even here, there are difficulties. Since the introduction of GCSEs almost 4 decades ago, the content of the secondary school curriculum has changed considerably. Some of these changes have been to update topics covered, for example, in science, or to make content more relevant and diverse, for example, in English and modern foreign languages. The nature of assessment has changed too, with coursework coming in and out of fashion, the introduction of an A* grade, and, most recently, a move from A* to G to numeric, 9 to 1 grades. All of this means that, even when considering a far shorter time frame, we are rarely comparing like with like.

The changing requirements of school inspectors and the publication of league tables have also affected educational standards. There is evidence that some schools have sought to ‘game’ results by opting to enter pupils for exam boards considered more lenient⁴²⁶ or steering individuals towards less demanding subject choices.⁴²⁷ Alongside this, there has been a general tendency towards ‘grade inflation’. Between 2010 and 2019, GCSE grades, across all candidates and all subjects, remained fairly constant at around 68 per cent of entrants achieving a grade C or above (considered a ‘good’ pass) and around 21 per cent achieving an A or above

(the highest marks).⁴²⁸ However, prior to 2010, there were over 2 decades of sustained grade inflation. In 1988, 41.9 per cent of GCSE entries were graded A* to C; by 2008, this figure stood at 65.7 per cent and by 2012, just 4 years later, it had increased again to 69.4 per cent.⁴²⁹ This is an astonishing increase in a quarter of a century.

The decade of consistency, from 2010, when Michael Gove was education secretary, stemmed the increase and even slightly reversed grade inflation. However, this changed dramatically between 2020 and 2022, when, due to Covid school closures, exams were either abolished in favour of teacher assessments or made easier by reducing content and allowing pupils to use ‘crib sheets’. During this period, A* to C (now level 4 and above) passes rose from 67 per cent in 2019 to 76.9 per cent in 2021.⁴³⁰ In 2023, grades in England returned to just above the pre-pandemic norm, while in Scotland, grades remained inflated.⁴³¹ The 2022 international PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test scores show a marked decline over the previous 3 years in the performance of British 15-year-olds in both maths and reading.⁴³² This drop in performance was more pronounced in Scotland than in England, suggesting that rising public exam grades sat alongside falling attainment.⁴³³

In England, the period from 1988 to 2012 saw the number of ‘good’ GCSE passes rise from just over 40 to just under 70 per cent. If exam results are an accurate measure of performance, then attainment will have risen to a similarly large extent during this period. However, we know that during this time respected bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Ofsted and the Institute of Directors were all raising the alarm about falling standards. This leads to a situation where we have simultaneously both increasing grades and falling standards.⁴³⁴ While this no doubt served a political purpose for the then New Labour government, the clear danger is that rising grades masked the true extent of falling educational standards. This situation is not unique to the UK and has been identified as a problem in the US, in particular in California.⁴³⁵

A similar process has been underway in universities. Between 2011–12 and 2021–22, the proportion of students receiving either a first or upper second-class degree increased from 66 per cent to 78 per cent. Universities explain that this increase arises as a result of better teaching and a focus on equality, which has led to a narrowing of attainment gaps between different ethnic groups.⁴³⁶ Yet this is barely credible. In 2024, the Office for Students (OfS)

noted that nearly a quarter of students who received three Ds in their A-levels went on to achieve a first-class degree..⁴³⁷

Other explanations focus on changing assessment requirements. Many universities have moved away from terminal exams and assess through essays, online tests and presentations. Administrators push for ‘authentic’ assessment to mirror a workplace experience and therefore demonstrate ‘relevance’. At the same time, practices such as stating ‘learning outcomes’ in advance of teaching and assessing students, and then instructing students on how best to meet the learning outcomes, change the nature of higher education entirely. An awareness that students pay tuition fees and have a right to expect satisfaction – and tend to be more satisfied when they achieve high marks – has no doubt also contributed to grade inflation.

Halting decline

In England, this situation was, to some extent, halted by Gove, who challenged the pervasive culture of low expectations by introducing a knowledge-based curriculum with more rigorous exams to match. Gove ended a system in which (potentially adult-assisted) coursework counted towards final marks, end-of-module tests could be taken early and often, and low-level vocational courses were deemed equivalent to academic exams for the purposes of league tables. For this, his many opponents turned him into a pantomime villain.⁴³⁸

Inevitably, given that one of Gove’s key successes was ending grade inflation, the impact of his changes cannot be straightforwardly measured in improved national exam results. Indeed, changing the ethos of the teaching establishment is not a task to be completed in just a few years. Cultural shifts take time to embed. For this reason, perhaps Gove’s lasting legacy can best be seen in the progress England’s children have made in international league tables since 2010, first consolidating performance, and then gaining ground, until 15-year-olds obtained a record high score of 504 points for maths in 2018’s PISA survey, up from 493 in 2015.⁴³⁹

In Scotland, a very different picture was beginning to emerge. In 2022, the international PISA test results made clear that the performance of Scotland’s pupils in maths, science and reading had been falling for at least 15 years.⁴⁴⁰ While maths scores fell in all

four UK nations that year, children in England scored well above the OECD average, while those in Scotland scored well below it. Significantly, results in England fell sharply from a 2018 peak (most likely due to the impact of lockdown school closures) but remained close to 2015 levels (just one point. However, in Scotland, there has been a decline every year since 2006 and a more significant drop since 2012, a decade before Covid-19 had an impact on education.⁴⁴¹

Scottish decline

One key difference among the three nations is the content of their school curricula. In 2010, Scotland introduced the so-called ‘Curriculum for Excellence’, which emphasised the development of transferable skills and interdisciplinary learning rather than traditional academic subjects. This downgraded the status of knowledge.⁴⁴²

A look at one subject, literature, illustrates the nature of this change. In 2024, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (now Qualifications Scotland) updated the set text list for National 5 and Higher English courses. Popular choices such as *Tally’s Blood* and Iain Crichton Smith’s short stories remained. But they were joined by ‘more modern and diverse works’, including *Duck Feet*, a 2021 novel that follows a teenager’s experience of high school and is written in Scots; the play *Sequamur*, works by Jenni Fagan, poets Imtiaz Dharker and Kathleen Jamie, and playwright David Greig. There is work by ‘more writers of colour, female writers, LGBTQ+ writers, and authors from a wide range of backgrounds’. Significantly, children were asked to contribute suggestions for set texts.⁴⁴³

Ely Percy, author of *Duck Feet*, said about the new specification:

It is important for young people to have the opportunity to experience writing and stories that they can see themselves in. Engaging with your reader is often one of the biggest challenges facing writers, but having readers who can hear their voice in your characters gives you an opportunity to connect and reflect their experiences.⁴⁴⁴

This comment is echoed by one of the pupils who contributed to the consultation. She said that she and her fellow classmates felt it was important for pupils to have the chance to study writing

that reflected their lives and experiences: 'We said we would like the opportunity to read novels, poems and plays that we can see ourselves in.'⁴⁴⁵

Those comments are no doubt heartfelt. But the decision to solicit comments from children suggests that adults are abdicating their responsibility to determine what children should know. They are effectively asking children to direct their own learning. This is a progressive challenge to the idea that education is a means of passing on children's intellectual inheritance or birthright. Arendt's idea that education is an opportunity for adults to demonstrate they love the world enough to assume responsibility for inducting children into knowledge of that world has been firmly rejected by Qualifications Scotland. Indeed, it is not knowledge of the world that children are expected to take from their study of literature at all; rather, it is knowledge of themselves.

Relevance seems to be the primary criterion for inclusion in the curriculum, and relevance is defined in the narrowest possible terms as 'all about me'. This focus on children 'seeing themselves in literature' suggests the purpose of reading is not to expand your mind, to enable you to experience worlds and emotions beyond your limited horizons, but simply to see yourself reflected back to you, almost as a therapeutic process of affirmation. This is not unique to Scotland. In England, Labour's curriculum review, published under Keir Starmer, also echoes the refrain that *all* children must be able to see themselves in the curriculum. The 'all' does not imply a common experience of childhood, or a common experience of being British, but that a potentially infinite number of identity groups must each be given their own moment in the spotlight.

The starting point for constructing a curriculum should not be children, but literature. Rather than asking children about their lives, adults should think about the very best novels, poems and plays that have ever been written and that future adults should know. When we aim to show children their own lives, we are consigned to the present. As discussed above, Qualifications Scotland celebrates the fact that its refreshed 'set text list for English courses' has been 'updated to include more modern and diverse works' and now features 'more writers of colour, female writers, LGBTQ+ writers, and authors from a wide range of backgrounds.'⁴⁴⁶ This emphasis on identity speaks to present-day concerns. It suggests that rather than focusing on knowledge and culture from the past, or to the

best that has been thought and said, teachers are expected to also engage children with current preoccupations.

According to Qualifications Scotland, it seems that literature introduces children to new ideas not through ‘diversity’ of thought but by presenting them with work by members of different identity groups. The risk with this approach is that we lose any notion of literature as beautiful or meaningful in itself. The criteria for entry to the curriculum are not the quality of the writing but the identity of the author, with some group identities deemed more worthy of inclusion than others. This is politics, not education.

Let’s contrast this with what happened in the past. The lower-grade paper for the 1959 Scottish Leaving Certificate Examination in English literature asked candidates to answer four questions in 2 hours. Options included:

1. *What do you regard as the best poem you have read or heard recently? What features of the poem made a strong appeal to you? Illustrate your answer as fully as you can by appropriate quotation.*
2. *Which one of the following characters would you like to have with you in a position of danger and difficulty, and why? Salvation Yeo; Allan Quatermain; Alan Breck Stewart; Sherlock Holmes; Richard Hannay; Horatio Hornblower.⁴⁴⁷*

These characters embody the values of bravery, stoicism, quick-wittedness, determination and courage – all of which would no doubt be labelled ‘toxic masculinity’ today. Notably, they allow children, even boys, not to ‘see themselves’ but to be excited by literature. Both questions assume that children are not being taught to the test, that there are no hoops to jump through or techniques to display, but that they will have read widely and deeply. Finally, knowledge of the literature specified gives children access to a shared cultural realm – they will have a connection not just with their peers but with older adults too.

The same trends can be seen in questions from the higher-grade paper. They include:

1. *Choose from any Shakespearean tragedies you know, two examples of innocent people who are involved in disaster through no fault of their own, and show how Shakespeare enlists our sympathy for them.*

2. *“Though Chaucer scarcely ever refers to contemporary events, yet he is the social historian of his age.” What references or allusions does Chaucer make to contemporary events, and what kind of historical information can we derive from his works?*⁴⁴⁸

Pupils were actually expected to know about literature in 1959 and to have such familiarity with canonical texts that they could make comparisons and construct and defend arguments. This required a classical education of the highest standard and needed to be accessible to the vast majority of pupils. Such an approach to education has long since disappeared in both England and Scotland. But decline has been hastened north of the border by Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, which was fully implemented in schools from 2012. It did not specify key texts or knowledge; instead, it set out broad expectations for children's learning experiences. While the national curriculum in England lists in detail (some say too much detail) what children should learn each year, the Scottish curriculum employed 'benchmarks' to ensure children become 'successful learners', 'confident individuals', 'responsible citizens' and 'effective contributors'.⁴⁴⁹

Back to England

Thanks to Gove's reforms, pupils in England had a curriculum grounded in knowledge, rather than the skills approach used in other UK nations. Yet his approach was not well received by teachers. One tells Reay, 'In some ways I don't feel like a teacher at all any more. I prepare children for tests.' Another argues that the focus on testing is bad because 'it's not as if it provided my class with any transferable, real-life skills ... one thing my children do know is how to pass tests.'⁴⁵⁰

These teachers make an important point. Too much of education is indeed driven by 'teaching to the test' and this, in itself, has contributed to a lowering of standards. Rather than children engaging in learning for its own sake, and then being tested on what they know, children are all too often drilled in how best to regurgitate the information needed to pass exams. Indeed, having knowledge beyond the exam rubric can sometimes backfire, as pupils fail to pick up points by jumping through the (more obvious) hoops. But the quoted teachers reveal that if they were not preparing children

to pass exams, they would be nurturing ‘transferable, real-life skills’. This suggests, sadly, that exams are often the only thing maintaining a semblance of a knowledge-based curriculum nowadays. And while exam results can – and have been – manipulated for political gain, maintaining high standards more broadly is an important responsibility teachers have towards children and the project of education.

The previous fall in performance of pupils in England reflected in the 2022 PISA results – though later pulling ahead in 2025 – shows that the rise in educational standards resulting from Gove’s curricular reforms is not always secure. We see continual efforts from the teaching unions to turn back the clock and undo the progress towards raising standards that Gove established, most notably in the review of the curriculum proposed by Labour’s former education secretary Bridget Phillipson, immediately upon taking office. When Nick Gibb, appointed Schools’ Minister by Michael Gove, announced his resignation in November 2023, Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), complained that the Department for Education had been too ‘preoccupied with Gibb’s own ideology’ and ‘his preferred method for the teaching of reading’. Kebede wrote that, ‘In the name of “standards”, these policies are actually reducing the quality of education, worsening the conditions of teachers and lessening pupils’ motivation and enjoyment’.⁴⁵¹ His use of ‘scare quotes’ around the word ‘standards’ reveals the derision of many in the educational establishment. Kebede forgets that reading is far more enjoyable when people can actually decipher text.

As previously noted, immediately upon taking up office in July 2024, one of the first acts of the new Labour government was to announce a wholesale review of what is taught in schools. Speaking at the launch of the curriculum review, the then education secretary, Phillipson, said: ‘This government, alongside leading education experts, leaders and staff on the front line, will breathe new life into our outdated curriculum and assessment system’.⁴⁵² The words ‘teachers’ and ‘subjects’ are notable by their absence. Instead, we are blithely informed that what children are learning is somehow ‘outdated’ and therefore of dubious relevance for a society that aims to break down barriers so all children can ‘get on’. The review was led by Professor Becky Francis, a specialist in social justice in schools⁴⁵³ and the co-author of the 2006 book *Understanding*

Minority Ethnic Achievement: Race, Gender, Class and 'Success'. The preface of this book claims:

*Our intention is to help lever social justice concerns back into mainstream educational debates that have been dominated by the neoliberal language of 'quality' — in which concerns with 'equality' have been evacuated and consigned to the margins.*⁴⁵⁴

Later in the volume, Francis despairs over an 'obsession with academic achievement' as evident in 'testing regimes, academic league tables and the regular high-profile publication of achievement statistics'.⁴⁵⁵

Labour's curriculum review focused on 'the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented'.⁴⁵⁶ The review was backed by teaching unions, think tanks, university teacher education departments, and learned societies. Proposals submitted by this group included calls to 'decolonise' subjects they have branded 'mono-cultural', and for subjects like English literature to be less 'traditional' and 'more diverse'. One union wanted to 'embed anti-racist and decolonised approaches' in the curriculum, while another warned that, currently, 'ethnicity and sexual orientation are under-represented'.⁴⁵⁷ The revised curriculum is scheduled for publication in spring 2027, with classroom teaching expected to begin from September 2028. If the submissions are accepted, we might expect subjects such as history to speak to the identity-driven concerns of the present.

Why are standards being eroded?

There are many reasons why educational standards have fallen over a long period of time. Most significant are changing political and cultural understandings of the purpose of education, the role of the school and the teacher, and the nature of childhood. Over the course of a century, most countries in the West have moved from viewing secondary education as an elite preoccupation to an institution of mass participation, and from a project concerned with academic merit to one that promotes social justice and employability skills. Teaching has become less focused on imparting knowledge

and more on inculcating values, and children are no longer viewed as robust young scholars but as vulnerable and in need of nurturing.

High academic standards require teachers to be subject enthusiasts, deeply committed to passing on the body of knowledge judged most significant to their discipline. This love of knowledge drives teachers to ensure children leave school having mastered complex bodies of work. Yet, for a century now, educational theorists and academics involved in teacher training have promoted the idea that the good teacher is child-centred rather than knowledge-centred.

Why standards matter

Standards are important in themselves. This is not, ultimately, a question of individual psychological gains, social mobility or increased social equality, important though these things are. Rather, establishing and maintaining high educational standards is a moral question. It speaks to adults' capacity to demonstrate a commitment to the next generation and to assume responsibility for guiding their entry into the world of knowledge and culture. And it speaks to the expectations a society has for its own future: high standards tell children they are worthy of knowing the best that has gone before them and intellectually capable of meeting the challenges to come.

In defence of exams

The expansion of state-supported secondary education in the early decades of the last century made a formal, standardised system of national exams necessary for the first time. Between 1918 and 1951, School Certificate Examinations were taken by 16-year-olds, with passes in six subjects needed for youngsters to obtain a certificate. This provided a useful means of recognising and grading pupils' achievements and of allowing employers to differentiate between job applicants, at a time when the overwhelming majority of people completed their formal education aged 16 or younger. But in the post-war period, as academically selective grammar schools became established across the country and attention turned to the need to expand higher education, a new exam was considered necessary to determine which youngsters were deemed capable of further academic study, first in the sixth form and later at university. The General Certificate of Education was introduced in 1951, with

exams at two distinct levels: O-level, designed for pupils aged 16, and Advanced Level (A-level) for 18-year-olds.

The fact that O-levels and A-levels were designed in tandem is significant. It meant that, from the outset, O-levels had an expressly academic purpose. They were tightly focused not on skills but on subject knowledge and, until 1975, were graded on a simple 'pass' or 'fail' basis. They were intended to assess which students had mastered sufficient prior knowledge to continue studying at a higher level. For this reason, they were deliberately rigorous; the aim was to exclude students who did not meet the required academic standards. Marks could be deducted for poor spelling, grammar or handwriting.⁴⁵⁸ O-levels were not designed to provide a school-leaving certificate for all youngsters, and in this regard, they were unashamedly elitist. They were intended to be taken by the top 20 per cent of the ability range, assumed to be primarily grammar school pupils.⁴⁵⁹

CSE exams, introduced in 1963, were intended for the next 40 per cent of the ability range. They would allow pupils not continuing on to further academic study to demonstrate their attainment to employers and/or vocational training providers. However, as educationalist Alka Sehgal Cuthbert notes, in practice, there was often overlap between the content of both O-levels and CSEs. For example, both included the study of canonical books, 'albeit with the former focusing mainly on older classics, while the latter also included some modern literary texts.' Cuthbert points out that 'The 1979 CSE English exam set by the East Midland Regional Exam Board (EMREB), for instance, featured recommended texts by Muriel Spark, DH Lawrence and Carson McCullers.' This suggests that CSE exams, although considered less academic than O-levels, were still intellectually rigorous. One reason for this is that CSE exam boards comprised people 'who came from various walks of life – including academics and serving teachers', and were 'supported by Subject Panels, which would meet regularly to disseminate policy, discuss educational matters and annually review/revise syllabuses.'⁴⁶⁰

Although O-level and CSE exams were intended only for a proportion of pupils, in reality, close to 90 per cent were entered for at least one O-level or CSE exam, with increasing numbers of secondary modern or technical college pupils opting for O-levels.⁴⁶¹ This trend escalated following the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1972. By default, O-levels had begun to move from being an elite formative exam (intended to prepare a small proportion

of students for A-levels) to a mass summative exam (providing a record of attainment for a majority of school leavers). However, the rigorous, academic nature of O-levels, along with a marking system designed to penalise rather than reward, meant the exams were poorly designed for the purpose they had come to serve.

GCSE exams were introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1986. They replaced both O-levels and CSEs, becoming the national examination taken by all pupils aged 16. From the outset, GCSEs were fundamentally different to O-levels. Significantly, the link with A-levels was broken. This meant that rather than a rigorous focus on the subject knowledge deemed foundational for further study, entrants were assessed on more generic skills. Alongside this, as Cuthbert argues, when O-levels and CSEs were disbanded, 'the authority of scholarship previously found in those relationships between university scholars, regional education boards and local schools' was sacrificed and, as a result, exams themselves 'became increasingly exposed to the economic and political pressures of the outside world.'⁴⁶² This paved the way for GCSEs to be less scholarly but more 'relevant' in content and, ultimately, more politicised than either O-levels or CSEs.

Indeed, in many subjects, the examination element of GCSE – the timed, unseen, written test, completed in silence and without recourse to help or resources – was either replaced entirely or in part by coursework that pupils could complete at home or during lessons. For example, in the early 1990s, about two thirds of 16-year-olds taking GCSE English language and literature were assessed entirely through coursework.⁴⁶³ Following concerns about falling standards, coursework was later capped to 40 per cent for English and 20 per cent for other subjects.⁴⁶⁴ But the need to produce exams that were accessible to pupils of all abilities was in fundamental opposition to the unashamed academic elitism of O-levels.

A major reason for the move from O-levels to GCSEs was an attempt to narrow the persistent attainment gap between middle-class and working-class children, a key goal of progressive educators. Yet the gap in GCSE attainment for disadvantaged pupils (often identified through free school meals eligibility) has remained largely unchanged for decades, with recent figures indicating a 27-percentage point difference between the proportion of middle-class and disadvantaged children (those on free school meals) achieving good GCSEs.⁴⁶⁵ As Nick Gibb makes clear:

... when “progressive” educators fail to bring the breakthrough in pupil attainment they promise, they look to social inequality and deprivation to explain away their failure, leading to a school culture in which failure is accepted.⁴⁶⁶

Testing times for exams

For the past four decades, government education secretaries have grappled with the challenge of administering a mass school-leaving examination, intended for pupils of all abilities, while maintaining academic standards. Over the years, coursework has been introduced, reduced, removed and reintroduced. In some subjects, tiered papers (where pupils are entered into higher or lower levels depending upon their ability) have likewise been introduced and then replaced. An additional A* grade was considered one way to demarcate excellence, but it was removed when grading changed from letters to numbers. These changes have occurred amid concerns about grade inflation and the curriculum. But most significantly, exam questions have moved from open-ended explorations of subject knowledge to something far narrower and more prescriptive. At the same time, teachers have moved from broad-based subject exploration to teaching to meet the examination mark scheme. The upshot is that an uneasy compromise between mass participation and academic rigour is maintained, to the dismay of seemingly everyone involved in education.

Calls to abolish GCSEs for 16-year-olds have become an annual ritual, one that has escalated since the Covid pandemic. Voices on all sides of the political spectrum are now making this demand. In the summer of 2020, the heads of some of the UK's top independent schools, including Eton, Bedales, St Paul's Girls' School and Latymer Upper School, joined with leading academy chains to champion an end to GCSEs.⁴⁶⁷ In an open letter they declared that the national GCSE system 'neither measures the right things nor is very reliable, and leaves in its wake a trail of stress and unfairness'. The head of Eton said GCSEs had an unhelpful 'stranglehold over schools' and hindered youngsters from 'finding their talents'. The high mistress of St Paul's Girls' School suggested GCSEs stifled children's creativity.⁴⁶⁸

In 2021, the NEU debated a motion at its annual conference calling for the abolition of GCSEs. Then joint general secretary, Kevin

Courtney, pointed out that the future of the exams was being called into question by former Conservative education secretary Kenneth Baker (who introduced GCSEs) and around 100 current Conservative MPs.⁴⁶⁹ The following year, the Ulster Teaching Union urged the Department of Education to consider the future of the exam, calling for greater ‘parity of esteem’ between academic and vocational qualifications and for the UK to fall in line with other European countries that do not assess pupils aged 16.⁴⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the Scottish SNP-led government has proposed abolishing exams in favour of teacher-assessed ‘real life skills’.⁴⁷¹ The Tony Blair Institute also joined calls for GCSEs and A-levels to be scrapped in favour of low-stakes assessments for pupils at the end of secondary school based on creativity and collaborative problem solving.⁴⁷²

Arguments against GCSEs often correspond to longstanding criticisms of academically rigorous, knowledge-based education. Those leading the charge want to shift the focus of schooling onto skills, creativity and ‘real life’. More specifically, there are questions around why pupils should be assessed at age 16 when the school leaving age is now *de facto* 18. These arguments show that academic exams are perceived to have little inherent value. Encouraging pupils to revise what they have been taught, work on topics they found challenging and consolidate their learning is not seen as an important process in its own right.

When this is the case, exams soon come to be seen as, at best, a waste of time and, at worst, standing in opposition to ‘true’ learning. In 2021, Mary Bousted, then joint general secretary of the NEU, said that schools were ‘spending a huge amount of time teaching to the test, which is eating into children’s learning time’.⁴⁷³ If exams are anti-educational and a waste of time, then the stress they are assumed to cause is also pointless. One commentator labels the school exam hall a ‘torture chamber’ and derides ‘this wasteful, costly, cruel and pointless ritual of teenage evaluation’.⁴⁷⁴

Although GCSEs remain in place, the continual questioning of their worth, combined with the recent return to grade inflation, undermines public confidence in the exams. This filters into other areas of the education system, too. Then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak used his 2023 speech to the Conservative Party conference to call for a new ‘Advanced British Standard’ to be awarded to students aged 18. This would involve scrapping A-levels, once known as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the UK’s education system.⁴⁷⁵

Why the tide has turned

One of the main arguments made by critics of GCSE exams is that they are ‘too high stakes’. A report by the Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) argues that ‘high-stakes, or “cliff-edge”, examinations should not be used as the only mode of assessing student achievement.’⁴⁷⁶ The Institute for Government likewise notes that:

*Secondary assessment in the highly centralised English system is particularly high stakes and multi-purposed – being used to test young people’s understanding of the national curriculum, provide the basis for their further and higher education applications and hold the schools they attend accountable for performance.*⁴⁷⁷

Because exam results are considered so significant to a young person’s future plans and to their school’s reputation, the one-off, timed assessment is viewed as high stakes. The argument is that as so much rides on what happens in just a few hours, a student who is having a bad day risks losing a great deal.

However, criticism of exams for being ‘high stakes’ often confuses cause and effect: the education system takes the blame for broader social changes that have occurred over several decades. For example, as we have already noted, O-levels and CSE exams combined were originally intended to be taken by 60 per cent of the population. Yet there was no sense that everyone else was destined for unemployment. It was understood that there were employment sectors (manual work, some manufacturing jobs or caring professions) that did not require academic qualifications. Today, this is less likely to be the case. Higher overall qualification rates allow employers to use exam results as a crude sorting mechanism. This raises the stakes of exams for individuals, but it is a result of changes in the economy and labour market, not changes in the nature of exams.

Likewise, when only a small proportion of the population took O-levels, their success or failure was not seen as a statement on the quality of the school. That this is now the case speaks to the pseudo-market in education created by parental choice, not a change in the nature of exams. When continuing education courses and evening classes were more widely available and affordable,

failing an exam at age 16 was less of a problem. A determined student could retake exams even many years later. On top of this, attempts to mitigate the high-stakes nature of exams often end up making the exam process more difficult for both schools and pupils alike. For example, single-paper, 3-hour exams are considered too onerous for 16-year-olds nowadays. But replacing the exam with several shorter papers spread over several days extends the exam period to several weeks, with students spending far longer sitting tests than previously.

Blaming assessment methods for social changes speaks to the educational establishment's confusion about the purpose of exams. When exams became separated from distinctly educational goals (such as when O-levels were linked to A-levels) and attached to social goals (employability, social mobility), their purpose in relation to learning was lost. It is not exams *per se* that have changed, then, but society: exams have become high stakes because society has invested academic qualifications with so much significance in relation to the economy, the labour market and the quality of schools. This suggests that exams are currently serving an important purpose, but one that is only loosely connected to education. In other words, if exams were abolished tomorrow, employers, schools and universities would be forced to find other mechanisms for grading performance and ranking people.

At the same time, it is worth asking exactly what exams are testing today. As we have noted, in the transition from O-level and CSE to GCSE, exams became more distant from universities, academics and teachers, and increasingly technocratic in their assessment of performance. As a result, the path was cleared for an increased focus on what was considered relevant to pupils' lives, instrumental to future employers' needs or socially desirable. Often, this is a mixture of basic skills, key facts to be rote-learned and personal reflections. In the context of a politicised education system, not just exams but qualifications themselves come to represent something different than they once did. No longer simply recognition of having met a certain academic standard, qualifications signify a candidate's ability to conform to progressive values or, at the very least, to remain within a system driven by such views.

In turn, qualifications serve as an entry requirement to membership of not just an academic but a broader cultural elite or 'clerisy'. Universities play a gatekeeping role in affirming and credentialising those deemed suitable to be 'change agents' in the push for

progressivism. In a revealing statement, former US President Bill Clinton criticised Donald Trump ahead of his second term in office, accusing him of demonising people with ‘a good education’ and who ‘wear ties to work’ with his cabinet picks.⁴⁷⁸ Trump stood accused of ignoring the formal mechanisms of gatekeeping entry to the cultural elite. Exam passes and qualifications today can indicate ideological conformity as much as academic attainment.

Exam stress

It is because exams have lost meaningful connection to educational goals that their value can be so readily called into question by such a broad spectrum of figures from the worlds of education, politics and business. This lack of educational purpose, combined with the increased social significance of exams, means teachers and parents are less likely to view exams as a positive intellectual challenge and more likely to see the stress and anxiety testing can prompt as potentially damaging to a young person’s mental health.

The word ‘exam’ has become almost synonymous with ‘stress’. Mental health campaign groups such as Young Minds offer advice to young people on coping with exam stress. Young Minds starts from the assumption that ‘Pressure to do well in exams can be a lot, and it can affect your mental health.’⁴⁷⁹ The NHS, Childline and Mind all express similar assumptions and offer advice to students.⁴⁸⁰ The government’s Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) features blogs from children who have experienced exam stress and warns that, for some, ‘levels of stress and anxiety are high enough that their well being and exam performance can be negatively affected.’⁴⁸¹ Each year, the association between exams and stress is reinforced in the media. Newspapers issue dire warnings about ‘Pupils in England showing high anxiety in run-up to GCSEs and A-levels’.⁴⁸² These warnings are accompanied by advice for parents: ‘Exam stress: how to help children cope with GCSEs and A-levels’.⁴⁸³

No doubt taking exams can be stressful. But rather than encouraging students to see stress as adrenaline, motivation or a normal response to a challenge, exam stress is pathologised as something potentially overwhelming and even dangerous. This situation is exacerbated by the previously noted trend of viewing childhood as inherently vulnerable and exams as a high-stakes determinant of

future life chances. Yet there is surely a risk that the association of exams with stress and anxiety becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more children are told that exams are stressful and that they must take measures to protect their mental health, the more children interpret their experiences through this lens and come to see themselves as stressed. Ultimately, this perception of exams as emotionally harmful lends weight to arguments that exams should be abolished.

Conclusions

Over the course of a century, schools have moved away from knowledge-based education to child-centred teaching, although, as we have seen, this process has been neither straightforward nor linear. However, despite the protestations of some educationalists that Britain has never had a truly progressive education system, we can see that the general direction of travel has been away from academic excellence and towards more child-centred, instrumental goals, particularly focused around social justice.⁴⁸⁴ The very existence of exams can be called into question when they are no longer perceived to be linked to a body of academic subject knowledge. Politicising education inevitably lowers academic standards.

Chapter 11

Socialisation in crisis⁴⁸⁵

The politicisation of schooling occurs when education stops being about transmitting knowledge and cultural capital and becomes primarily focused on solving social problems through creating the 'correct' kind of citizens. When this happens, schools do not sit above the demands of the external world in order to engage children in a conversation between the generations, but are driven by the need to meet an ever-changing list of political and economic goals. Such goals focus on society's needs. For example, at different times, schools have been tasked with increasing the number of people who are scientifically or technologically literate to grow the national economy; teaching basic literacy and numeracy to improve individual employability; preventing social exclusion; or promoting British values.

The focus on changing individuals, whether through re-engineering citizens to meet the challenges of the future or through a focus on health and psychological wellbeing in the present, indicates that schools, as public institutions, are primarily responsible for the socialisation of the next generation. When schools stop being concerned with passing on to a new generation the cultural and intellectual legacy of the past and look to morally and socially engineer citizens for an expert-determined future society, education becomes a political project.

This chapter explores what exactly is meant by socialisation and why it has become the key goal of schools. When teachers engage in explicit forms of socialising children by employing interventions to change their behaviour, attitudes and values, they risk usurping parents' responsibilities, driving a wedge between schools and families, and undermining adult authority more broadly. This leads to a crisis not just in education but, unintentionally, in socialisation itself. When adults other than teachers are made redundant from the task of initiating the next generation into the knowledge and culture of previous generations, they are robbed of the collective authority to enforce any moral and social norms.

Teachers who successfully encourage pupils to believe that people can change gender, or that Britain is a systemically racist country,

risk alienating children from the values held by those in their family, community and nation. For such children, their sense of where they fit into society and their own identity is called into question. In turn, schools respond to this crisis of their own making through a therapeutic ethos that prompts children to turn inwards and focus on their own mental health and vulnerability. The replacement of collective adult authority with expert-approved therapeutic interventions both arises from and, crucially, paves the way for further attempts to impose a new moral outlook on children. Here we explore how and why socialisation is in crisis today and the impact this has on children.

What is socialisation?

At birth, babies are entirely dependent upon adults for their every need. As they grow and gain independence, they learn not just how to meet their physical needs, but also to do so in ways deemed acceptable by those around them. For example, infants quickly learn to eat, but, as part of growing up within a family and community, they also learn social ‘rules’ or ‘manners’ about what, when and how to consume food. Writing in *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias notes that habits around food that we now take for granted actually developed over the course of many centuries as natural instincts were gradually suppressed and replaced with new customs, first by compulsion and later by engendering feelings of shame and repugnance.⁴⁸⁶ As a result, the natural inclinations that past generations had to be explicitly taught to reject are now dealt with so early in a child’s life that ‘certain kinds of “bad habit” which were quite commonplace in the medieval world scarcely manifest themselves in present-day social life.’⁴⁸⁷

An implicit process

Oakeshott defines socialisation as an ‘apprenticeship to adult life.’⁴⁸⁸ It is the product of the countless social interactions through which children are taught to think and behave in ways that conform to society’s dominant norms and values. This is rarely made explicit: children internalise the behaviours, attitudes and values of those around them, unaware that they are doing so. Elias notes that it is ‘Through the interdependence of larger groups of people’ that ‘a social apparatus is established in which the constraints between

people are lastingly transformed into self-constraints'. These self-constraints, he explains, 'have partly the form of conscious self-control and partly that of automatic habit.'⁴⁸⁹ Socialisation, then, is the process of 'moulding' children in order to make:

*... socially desirable behaviour automatic, a matter of self-control, causing it to appear in the consciousness of individuals as the result of their own free will, and in the interests of their own health or human dignity.*⁴⁹⁰

As an intergenerational project, socialisation is integral to the continuation of society. As Arendt notes, 'When we start life we find already established and all around us a complex of ideas, beliefs, and behaviors, which others have acknowledged and practiced before us.'⁴⁹¹ It is because children are born into an already existing world that adults have a moral responsibility to induct them into its ideas and beliefs. Durkheim defines morality as 'a system of rules of action that predetermine conduct', and socialisation as the process by which children are made aware of the 'system of rules' that determine acceptable behaviour.⁴⁹² Socialising children, then, is not simply for their own benefit, to smooth their path through life; it is necessary because the world does not begin from scratch with the birth of each child but grows out of what came before.

The importance of the family

The family, as the institution into which children are born, plays a key role in relation to socialisation. Through immersion in their parents' and siblings' lives, children imbibe habits, attitudes and values while simultaneously learning behaviours such as how to communicate, dress and interact with others. As Oakeshott makes clear:

*The human family (whatever form it may take) is a practice devised, not for the procreation of children, nor merely for their protection, but for the early education of newcomers to the human scene.*⁴⁹³

As sociologist Christopher Lasch explains: 'socialisation makes the individual want to do what he has to do; the family is the agency to which society entrusts this complex and delicate task.'⁴⁹⁴ For this

reason, the family, as the institution children are born into, is driven by love and the desire to care, and plays a key role in socialisation.

It is through the family that children first meet the world into which they have been born. Indeed, as Elias notes, it was only with the organisation of society into smaller family units that socialisation began, and civilisation could be truly said to emerge. 'What first aroused and increased the distasteful feelings and restrictions was a transformation of human relationships and dependencies,' he explains.⁴⁹⁵ As society developed, and ever greater control and restraint were expected of individuals, 'the more the task of first instilling socially required habits is concentrated within the nuclear family, on the father and mother.'⁴⁹⁶ The close relationships and 'incessant social interaction between the parents' and children's feelings, habits and reactions,' Elias explains, make it particularly suited to fashioning personality.⁴⁹⁷

The family, then, serves a dual role. It is responsible for the protection and development of the child and for the continuance of society. As Arendt explains, these responsibilities can conflict:

*... the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world. But the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation.*⁴⁹⁸

One solution to this inherent conflict is for the child to gradually form attachments to social groups beyond the family. Durkheim suggests that 'attachment to one's country' is important, 'providing that the country is conceived not as a narrowly selfish and aggressive personality but as one of the agencies through which the idea of humanity is realized.'⁴⁹⁹

As parents have incomplete knowledge of the world, schools play a significant role in socialisation, most explicitly through the transmission of knowledge and culture, and implicitly by bringing children into contact with teachers and peers within an institutional setting. Arendt describes school as 'the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all.'⁵⁰⁰ Schools represent the world to the child by passing on a more complete knowledge than can be garnered within the family alone. Through

adult-initiated education, training and imitation, children gradually acquire habits and values ‘congruent with adaptation’ to the culture in which they exist.⁵⁰¹ Schools provide children with a ready-made social group and with knowledge of the world beyond their home.

The role of the school

Education and socialisation are intrinsically connected through the need for children to be presented with and taught about the culture and knowledge of the society into which they have been born. Alongside this intellectual and cultural project, school attendance forces children to confront the world as it is and see themselves in relation to their peers. As Dewey argues:

*Beings who are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap.*⁵⁰²

Schools then serve a dual purpose: transmitting a cultural inheritance and compelling adherence to behavioural norms, beliefs, attitudes and values. Through the curriculum, teachers not only give children knowledge of the world but also, whether consciously or not, impart beliefs about the knowledge conveyed. History teachers introduce children to the story of their nation. Indirectly, they also teach children how to feel about this story: they may generate a sense of belonging, intergenerational connection or even national pride. Alternatively, they may cultivate feelings of shame or simply indifference. Geography can introduce children to the wonders of the natural world, provide lessons in man’s destruction of the planet, or, indeed, both. Through the choice of texts and the teaching method employed, literature can provide children with cheap moralising and opportunities for political indoctrination or reveal universal truths about the human condition. In this way, through the simultaneous passing on of both knowledge and values, education is inherently an act of socialisation.

Attitudes, values and social norms are instilled in children through the curriculum and through interactions in the school. The authority of the teacher and his or her capacity to inspire children and enforce expected standards of behaviour are central to the school’s role in socialisation. As Durkheim notes:

*It is by respecting the school's rules that the child learns to respect rules in general, that he develops the habit of self-control and restraint simply because he should control and restrain himself. It is a first initiation into the austerity of duty.*⁵⁰³

As the primary purpose of the school is the transmission of knowledge that cannot be gained from within the family, rituals enacted and rules enforced within the institution are not ends in themselves. Discipline is a means of ensuring children submit to the intellectual authority of the teacher.

The dual purpose of the school, transmitting a cultural inheritance and compelling behavioural norms, beliefs, attitudes and values, can occur simultaneously. If we consider education to be primarily concerned with the transmission of knowledge and culture from one generation to the next, then through the process of introducing children to their intellectual birthright, education comes to be understood as the formal means by which a new generation is introduced to an already existing world. Literature, history, and even mathematics, convey assumptions about what it means to be human and a member of society at a particular point in time. In this way, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge reveals to children the nature of the society they belong to. The transmission of knowledge is inherently an act of socialisation.

Schools have traditionally played a specific role in the moral education of children. Durkheim argues that 'the task of the school in the moral development of the child can and should be of the greatest importance.'⁵⁰⁴ Because 'to act morally is to act in terms of the collective interest',⁵⁰⁵ the sociologist Diana Baumrind argues that teachers 'sensitize children to issues of justice and caring, as realized in their daily lives.'⁵⁰⁶ Crucially, she argues, 'Moral judgements may, indeed must, be supported with reasons, especially in the absence of consensus.'⁵⁰⁷ Through education, then, children learn to act morally and, importantly, they are made aware of the reasoning that supports moral judgements. For Durkheim, developing in children both a sense of collective interest and moral reasoning comes together in teaching them to know and love their country. He argues:

... the way of developing the child morally is not to repeat to him, with however much emotion and conviction, a certain number

*of very general maxims valid eternally and everywhere; but to make him understand his country and his times, to make him feel his responsibilities, to initiate him into life and thus to prepare him to take his part in the collective tasks awaiting him.*⁵⁰⁸

Throughout the history of education, we see that the goals of transmitting a cultural inheritance and compelling behavioural norms, beliefs, attitudes and values are rarely afforded equal weight and can, on occasion, come into conflict with one another. Education introduces children to their intellectual birthright; it initiates them into a conversation between the generations, but what they then choose to do with this knowledge in the future should be for them alone to determine. Socialisation, on the other hand, aims to instil predetermined attitudes and behaviours; as Michael Oakeshott notes, it is ‘governed by an extrinsic purpose’.

For classical or conservative educators such as Oakeshott, T.S. Eliot and Nicholas Tate, the transmission of culture and knowledge is the school’s primary role. But for progressive educators such as Dewey, the need to focus on the child and the world as it currently exists comes first. Dewey argues that:

*The development within the young of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society cannot take place by direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge. It takes place through the intermediary of the environment.*⁵⁰⁹

This is to see schools primarily as social rather than educational institutions. As schools have, over the course of almost two centuries, abandoned classical education and the transmission of knowledge as an end in itself, socialisation has, of necessity, become a far more explicit focus of schooling.

Socialisation, then, is an ever-present but implicit process occurring at home, school and within communities. Crucially, it rarely draws attention to itself. Schools instil values in children not through timetabled classes or even talks given in assembly, but through daily routines and expectations. Pupils are not given lessons on respect; instead, they are taught to call teachers ‘sir’ or ‘miss’ and to be quiet when others are talking. Similarly, in the past, children

were not given lectures on the importance of competitiveness, ambition and self-improvement. Instead, schools held sports days and awards ceremonies and encouraged rivalry between different forms. The discipline and rituals enacted by teachers within the school were not without purpose: they were designed to create an environment that supported children's submission to the teacher's intellectual authority.

One value in particular shaped the implicit socialisation that occurred in schools: respect for knowledge. Children were expected to leave school knowing more than they did when they began their years in the classroom. Shared curricular knowledge bonded children to one another, to previous generations and to the shared historical memory of their community and nation. Teachers, in transmitting knowledge, were also shaping mental habits. Oakeshott labels 'intellectual virtues' the habits of mind and values that teachers instil in pupils. They include: 'disinterested curiosity, patience, intellectual honesty, exactness, industry, concentration and doubt.'⁵¹⁰ Such virtues were cultivated through the teaching of subjects, not as a distinct project.

Schools have, at different times, attempted to instil in children, more directly, attitudes and values such as obedience, religious piety, national pride, and respect for multiculturalism and sexual equality. Such values rarely attracted the ire of parents because they were shared by many adults. Schools reflected the broader culture: they were not attempting to change it. Just as there was general agreement about the values to instil in children, so too was there a general consensus about what schools should teach. Beyond the 'three Rs', there was an expectation that children would master the literary canon, key periods in national history, scientific principles and geographical features. Preserving and passing on canonical knowledge made schools inherently conservative institutions. Rather than seeking to change society in their own image, teachers looked to the past to determine what would be of value for the future. The ethos of many schools, represented in rules, uniforms and rituals, was rooted in tradition.

The problem with families

The expansion of education in the 19th and early 20th centuries was accompanied by growing concern about parents' capacity to

raise their children in ways deemed appropriate by a social and cultural elite. The philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that parents unable to provide ‘instruction and training’ for their children’s minds were guilty of ‘a moral crime’, and the state ought to step in to see the obligation fulfilled.⁵¹¹ Writing in 1939, Elias acknowledged that:

*... parents are only the (often inadequate) instruments, the primary agents of the conditioning; through them and thousands of other instruments it is always society as a whole, the entire figuration of human beings, that exerts its pressure on the new generation, forming them more or less perfectly.*⁵¹²

For Elias, adults acting together – ‘society as a whole’ – overcame individual inadequacies.

Over many decades, academics, policymakers and journalists have repeatedly questioned the family’s capacity to socialise children successfully. They have established a narrative that presents leaving socialisation to the family as a threat to the life chances of individual children and a risk to society more broadly. In response, social workers, health professionals and cultural commentators have sought to present raising children not as an instinctive or natural part of family life but as a distinct task requiring the mastery of specific skills. We explore the consequences of this more fully in the next chapter.

Explicit socialisation through the school

Rather than bolstering the authority of ‘society as a whole’, the assumption that schools have to correct the impoverished moral influence of the home undermines the authority of parents who must themselves defer to the presumed expertise of the teacher, not just in subject knowledge but in child development.

Scepticism about parents’ capacity to raise children leads to calls for schools to take on a far more explicit role in socialising children. As Furedi notes, responsibility for a child’s moral, spiritual, intellectual and behavioural development ‘gradually shifted from the parent to the school.’⁵¹³ Counts provides an early indication of what this means in practice: ‘The school must shape attitudes, develop tastes, and even impose ideas.’⁵¹⁴ Today, government ministers and campaigners alike look to schools to tackle mental health

problems, racism, homophobia, obesity, climate change, and to inoculate children against the harms of pornography, social media bullying, misinformation and smoking. At times, it can seem as if the answer to every problem is 'put it in the curriculum'. In the process, learning for its own sake is replaced by behaviour modification and the imposition of norms and values. The upshot is that socialisation becomes the purpose of schools and, as Oakeshott puts it, 'education becomes the engagement to teach nothing.'⁵¹⁵

The impact of this shift from socialisation as a by-product of education focused on the transmission of knowledge and culture to socialisation as the primary goal of schooling cannot be underestimated. Oakeshott labels it 'the most momentous occurrence of this century'.⁵¹⁶ Tate describes it as 'Leading to initiatives which are both personally intrusive and potentially highly authoritarian in their conception of the nature of the relationship between school and society.'⁵¹⁷ Teacher training programmes place great emphasis on behavioural modification practices, encouraging new recruits to explore in depth how they can persuade children to act appropriately without ever appearing to be a disciplinarian.

For socialisation to occur explicitly, teachers must ignore the intellectual legacy of the past and focus on child development. As we have seen, pupils meet this most explicitly in new 'subjects' such as citizenship and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). The perceived need for such lessons suggests elite educators lack confidence in both parents and subject knowledge to adequately convey appropriate values. Yet such instruction fuels further tensions between school and home. As collective adult authority is undermined, both education and socialisation are pushed into crisis.

Making teachers primarily concerned with socialisation rather than education undermines their authority, as they are no longer a source of knowledge but learners themselves, just like their pupils. Whereas the transmission of knowledge leaves children to reach their own moral conclusions, in line with their experiences and the values of their family, direct instruction in behavioural norms and attitudes offers no such freedom. When it comes to relationships or attitudes towards the nation, children are taught 'correct' answers. But they also learn that 'school' attitudes and values do not necessarily have broader purchase within society. They may be at odds with their parents' views.

Parents fighting back

Pandemic school closures and remote learning meant that many parents gained a thorough insight into what their children were being taught for the very first time. One survey suggests that 72 per cent of parents claimed to know more about what their children were being taught post-lockdown.⁵¹⁸ Another found that over half of parents felt more engaged in their child's learning compared to before lockdown.⁵¹⁹ Unfortunately for schools, some particularly vocal parents were unhappy with what they considered an overtly political approach to lessons, which they felt was at odds with their own beliefs and values.

This new scrutiny led to a degree of self-consciousness among some educators. For example, Derbyshire Local Education Authority advised schools providing remote lessons in relationships and sex education (RSE) that:

*Some parents and carers may be uncomfortable with some of the subject matter. They may lack confidence in discussing more sensitive themes. It may be the first time they've had a more in-depth look at the content of the RSE curriculum and may have questions or concerns about its age appropriateness.*⁵²⁰

Rather than defending its lesson content, the authority recommended that teachers practice subterfuge. It advised them to:

*... focus on less sensitive areas of RSE such as mental wellbeing, self-care, e-safety and security ... whilst pupils are not in school. The teaching of some more explicit RSE could be postponed [until] pupils are back in school.*⁵²¹

The authors are aware but unperturbed that children are being inducted into a set of values that neither their parents nor members of the wider community share.

Conflicts break out between school and home in relation to what children should be taught about sex, relationships, racism and history. There is confusion over who is responsible for child development, with teachers routinely offering instruction on diet and mental health while complaining that some parents seem to leave toilet training and discipline to schools. Children come to

recognise adult authority as individualised and contested. This poses a fatal challenge to the task of inducting a new generation into the norms of an existing society. For socialisation to be effective, all adults must share a common set of values that they can present to children as universal expectations. When children come to realise that parents and teachers disagree, the project of socialisation collapses. This became most apparent when societies around the world responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with lockdowns and school closures. Socialising children as a collective adult project ground to a halt. The impact continues to be felt across many areas of life today, most notably declining school attendance rates and increased reports of disruptive behaviour.

Behaviour

One sign of socialisation in crisis is mounting concern that pupils are behaving badly in the classroom. Research conducted for the NASUWT teaching union found that 20 per cent of teachers had been hit or punched by pupils and 25 per cent were subjected to verbal abuse several times a week. 'Backchat/rudeness' was reported by almost all respondents. Alarmingly, 85 per cent reported having experienced, in the previous 12 months, verbal abuse or violence from pupils.⁵²² Research for the think tank Policy Exchange, conducted in 2018, found that 75 per cent of teachers reported low-level disruption occurring frequently or very frequently in their schools. Many knew of colleagues who had 'left the teaching profession because of bad behaviour'.⁵²³ There is a consensus that pupil behaviour has deteriorated further since schools reopened following the Covid lockdowns. Research conducted in 2024 for the BBC found 'A greater proportion of primary and secondary teachers reported pupils fighting, pushing and shoving compared with two years ago.'⁵²⁴

The BBC's report also suggests that one in five teachers has experienced online abuse from a parent or guardian, and a similar number has experienced verbal abuse.⁵²⁵ Teachers are concerned that such actions undermine their authority in the eyes of pupils and lead children to think that such behaviour is acceptable. 'It's no wonder children are so badly behaved. Just look at their parents,' writes one commentator.⁵²⁶ Surprisingly, a similar conclusion is reached by researchers from the Mentally Healthy Schools initiative, who argue that 'behavioural problems and anger' may be

a sign that children are being ‘exposed to stresses’ within the home environment.⁵²⁷

Also of concern is the growing trend of parents protesting outside school gates. Parents in Birmingham demonstrated against a school’s sex and relationships curriculum,⁵²⁸ while parents in Batley protested against a teacher showing pupils a cartoon representation of the Prophet Muhammad, resulting in the teacher being forced into hiding.⁵²⁹ One primary school in London faced closure after parents protested a ban on children wearing pro-Palestinian badges to school. Police became involved when the school received bomb threats.⁵³⁰ At a school in Cornwall, protests against ‘harsh’ school rules led to the police being called to disperse angry parents.⁵³¹

When parents protest against lesson content or school rules, they challenge the authority of teachers. They tell their children that, far from adults agreeing about the importance of discipline and good behaviour, parents do not support teachers in enforcing rules. Whether parents are criticised for setting a bad example for their children through their own behaviour, actively challenging teachers or inflicting emotional harm on their children, leading to behavioural problems, it is now widely assumed that parents cannot be relied upon to encourage their children to behave well in school.

Attendance

Regular attendance declined after schools reopened following Covid lockdowns. The rate of persistent absence (defined as missing at least 10 per cent of school sessions) rose from 13.1 per cent of all pupils in autumn 2019 to 24.2 per cent in autumn 2022.⁵³² This fell to 20.1 per cent in autumn 2023 – an improvement, but still far higher than pre-pandemic levels.⁵³³ Explanations for the increase in absence include financial difficulties, mental health problems and unmet special educational needs. Research for Public First points to a shift in parents’ views on the importance of regular school attendance. Its report notes that some parents no longer believe it is their responsibility to ensure that their child is in school every day.⁵³⁴ The number of parents taking children out of school for term-time holidays has also increased.⁵³⁵

Josephine Hussey, a primary school teacher from Cambridgeshire, comments on changing attitudes towards school attendance:

*... school is no longer seen as compulsory ... if a parent is struggling with getting their child to school for any reason, they're more likely to say, "just have a day off," than they were before.*⁵³⁶

She notes that the rise in parents working from home has contributed to this shift: 'In the past, if you had to go to the office, there was more reason to send your child into school.' The response to Covid-19 triggered a shift in attitude:

*Parents were trained to keep their child off sick at the first sign of a sniffle lest they be accused of contributing to the pandemic. Now, when a child is mildly unwell, parents are not quite sure what to do, and look to schools for guidance.*⁵³⁷

Ultimately, she argues, 'there's a sense of adults not insisting that their children attend.' Hussey puts this change down to a lack of confidence in parents. Whereas previously they may have trusted their own instincts and sent their children to school with minor ailments, now keeping children at home has become the more socially acceptable response.⁵³⁸

Conclusion

The assumption that schools must correct the impoverished moral influence of the home only serves to further undermine the authority of parents, who must themselves defer to the presumed expertise of the teacher, not just in subject knowledge but in child development. But it also undermines the authority of teachers, who are no longer a source of knowledge but learners themselves, just like their pupils. With no special knowledge to impart, teachers have little basis to command respect. Furedi notes that within education 'a palpable loss of adult confidence has encouraged a growing reliance on expertise and motivational techniques.'⁵³⁹ In other words, when the science of pedagogy determines the actions of the teacher, rather than his or her own moral judgement, no one assumes ultimate responsibility for either educating or socialising the next generation. The upshot is that children are not taught to treat parents or teachers with respect, but rather with suspicion; they do not see adults as a source of wisdom and experience, but as outdated and problematic.

For some teachers, the collapse of their authority as subject experts and of adult authority more broadly, together with the imperative to orient education towards the needs of a future society, leaves them with little sense of purpose in the classroom beyond promoting their own political beliefs. It is not the case that teachers are so in thrall to political objectives that they no longer see teaching subject knowledge as important. Rather, it is because passing on subject knowledge is no longer seen as a worthwhile end in itself that the transmission of behavioural norms and moral values can lend a sense of purpose to teaching. But when schooling becomes politicised, a new problem becomes apparent. The views promoted are those of policymakers and pedagogues and do not necessarily have broader purchase within society. Indeed, they may conflict with a child's parents' values and trigger conflict between school and home. New norms are often individualised, ephemeral and grounded in a shallow concept of identity rather than an older sense of tradition or belonging to a nation.

Schools have been moving away from education and towards socialisation as their central purpose for almost two centuries. As Tate notes:

The support for these approaches across all political parties has meant that we have ended up with an education system whose chief function in the eyes of the government is to “champion social justice”.⁵⁴⁰

As a result, academic standards have fallen as teachers no longer carry weight as subject experts, and teachers undermine parents by taking on the task of socialisation. This has repercussions for teachers, who need parents' support in reinforcing behavioural expectations.

To resolve the crisis of socialisation, we need a clearer demarcation of the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers: teachers must be authorities in subject knowledge, while parents remain the experts in their own children. This separation will give teachers a renewed sense of purpose regarding the curriculum and allow the transmission of knowledge for its own sake to come to the fore once more.

Chapter 12

Reclaiming Education

The politicisation of education did not occur suddenly but slowly, over several generations. The gradual introduction of new subjects, the growing tolerance of activist teachers and the implementation of changes to the core academic curriculum suggest that schools have been influenced by numerous trends, with changes accruing incrementally.

Progressive ideologies have positioned children, rather than subject knowledge, as the driving force of education. Passing on knowledge of the past has given way to a project of socialising children into school-approved attitudes, values and ways of behaving; in the process, the role once played by families and communities has been usurped. New subjects such as relationships and sex education (RSE), citizenship, and personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE) play this role directly. The last vestiges of a traditional curriculum have been ‘decolonised’ and ‘diversified’, distancing education from the transmission of a canon of knowledge and the cultivation of national identity. Activist teachers and school leaders draw on their favourite causes for inspiration for extra-curricular activities and guest speakers. Meanwhile, charities and campaigning organisations see schools as a source of revenue and a captive audience of impressionable young minds.

When understood in this way, talk of ‘indoctrination’ seems far-fetched. Pupils in England’s schools have not been subjected to a centrally planned programme, designed at the behest of an autocratic regime determined to mould compliant citizens. Instead, a general lack of intellectual purpose and a failure to defend high standards have meant that explicitly political goals, often focused on race, gender, environmentalism and social justice, sit alongside apolitical tuition in basic literacy and numeracy skills and elements of a knowledge-rich curriculum in traditional academic subjects. At the same time, international non-governmental organisations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and International Planned Parenthood, along with charities, and campaigning organisations such as Stonewall, Gendered Intelligence, Amnesty International and Fairtrade, have exercised considerable influence over the curriculum. Here, it seems

that activists really do seek to use education to alter children's attitudes and values.

When education is no longer viewed as an end in itself, this combination of incremental changes to the curriculum individual teacher activists, campaigning extra-curricular activities, and new subjects imposed on schools can make time spent in the classroom feel like political indoctrination, even if this is not the intent of government ministers or individual teachers.

The politicisation of education is reflected in young people's attitudes towards themselves, their country and its past. Rather than proudly claiming the legacy of Western civilisation and the Enlightenment, young adults can see the past as a sin that must be atoned for in the present. They see themselves and each other less as robust adults capable of being productive members of a family, community and nation and more as vulnerable individuals in need of therapeutic support.

The views of young adults present a complex, contradictory picture. Some lean left, others have veered to the right. Some express a 'progressive' view on issues such as national pride, but a more conservative view on gender or marriage. They are neither one homogeneous group nor can their opinions be neatly labelled according to yesteryear's political categories. However, we can say with some degree of certainty that the people at the forefront of championing progressive causes today tend to be highly educated, middle-class, young women who live in cities. At the same time, there is a cohort of young, non-graduate working-class men who are more likely to rebel against what they perceive as the 'woke' attitudes they were taught in school. The politicisation of education has not changed the views of an entire cohort of young people, but it may have contributed towards creating a society that is increasingly socially, culturally and politically divided.

It does not have to be like this. Education should be at the heart of what makes us human. Through the person of the teacher and the institution of the school, wisdom amassed over centuries can be passed from one generation to the next. At school, children can gain knowledge they are unlikely to encounter through experience alone. The curriculum, divided into subjects, introduces children to mankind's scientific, artistic and humanistic achievements. They can come to know the abstract, the theoretical and the beautiful. As humans are born into an already existing world, this knowledge of

the past is each generation's intellectual birthright. Its possession allows society to advance, as old knowledge is critiqued and new knowledge is accumulated; mastery also permits continuity, as traditions are understood and maintained, and common threads bind citizens together. In this way, teaching is about more than imparting facts; it is a moral project of initiating children into the wisdom and values of civilisation.

Here, we consider how the political and educational progressivism that has hollowed out our schools, robbed teachers of their true purpose and left children rootless and culturally alienated from older generations can be reversed. I offer some suggestions as to how we might reclaim education for future generations.

1. Stop looking to schools to solve social problems

In recent decades, politicians have turned to schools as the solution to many social, economic and political problems they face, from unemployment to obesity, and from climate change to anti-social behaviour. Charities and campaigning organisations have been all too ready to meet this new demand for their services. Yet using schools to solve social problems is an abuse of both education and politics. We need a far clearer distinction between the world of adults and the world of children, between the political sphere where citizens exercise their democratic rights and the educational sphere where children are protected from the world and the world is protected from their childish impulses.

More specifically, we should:

- End the promotion of gender ideology in schools. No school should have unisex toilets or changing rooms. No teacher should introduce lessons or worksheets telling children that it is possible to change gender. No child should be expected to refer to a teacher or pupil by pronouns or titles that are not in line with that person's biological sex.
- Strictly limit the influence of outside speakers and campaigning organisations in schools. Polling carried out for the think tank Civitas found that three quarters of parents back a register of external groups allowed into schools to teach children about sex, gender and relationships.⁵⁴¹

- Outlaw school 'sponsorship'. No school should be branded as, for example, a 'Rights Respecting School' or a 'Fairtrade School'.
- Put an end to divisive, critical race theory (CRT)-inspired lessons that promote a message of white guilt or black victimhood.

2. Reconnect education to the past and the nation

For education to be meaningful, it must be rooted in the past. Teaching involves initiating children into a conversation that began long before they were born and will continue after their death. This makes education an inherently conservative project: teachers aim to conserve, within individual children, culture and tradition. When separated from the legacy of the past, schools become institutions in search of a purpose. The direct transmission of values, in classes covering topics such as comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), fills the moral and intellectual vacuum.

At the same time, schools are institutions within a nation. When teachers select a curriculum from the whole of civilisation's achievements, they look primarily to a national tradition from which to draw universal truths about the human condition. In other words, education is rooted not in the past in general but in the past of a particular country. Recognising this does not mean teachers should ignore global languages, literature, geography and history, but neither should they focus solely on the sins of a nation. History teaching can be objective, but this does not mean downplaying national achievements and reasons for pride. As Durkheim makes clear, 'The school is the only moral agent through which the child is able systematically to learn to know and love his country.'⁵⁴²

For Durkheim, love of country is not an end in itself, but a means by which children are helped to feel a deep sense of commitment to a shared community. He argues it is only through knowing their country that,

... the child and later the adult will understand that rights accorded him today, the liberties he enjoys, the moral dignity he feels—all this is the work not of such and such an individual or of such and such a generation but of that being, personal and impersonal at the same time, we call [the nation]. In other words, it is all of society, going back to its most remote reaches,

*that prepared his emancipation.*⁵⁴³

For this reason, attempts to ‘decolonise’ or ‘diversify’ history teaching are misguided. They deny children membership of a shared cultural inheritance and keep them divided by identity. More specifically, we should reverse decolonisation programmes that deride the accomplishments of Western civilisation.

There is nothing indoctrinating in wishing young people to feel they belong to a nation, are citizens of a nation state and feel positively about this, or in governments and educators striving to facilitate this patriotism through the educational arrangements they put in place. The hyper-liberal idea that each human being is sovereign in deciding who or what they want to be is incompatible with a well-functioning collective, within which as John Gray has put it, we ‘can never be wholly self-defined’.⁵⁴⁴

We cannot, of course, and should not, force pupils to feel patriotic. We also must not present contested political issues to pupils in a partisan fashion or censor views thoughtfully expressed in discussion. But that does not mean that we should not encourage patriotism or be anything but concerned about its absence among both pupils and teachers.

3. Recognise education as a collective adult responsibility

Teachers have specialist subject knowledge, which is the source of their authority in the classroom, but all adults share collective responsibility for the moral education of the next generation. Put differently, although education should never be sacrificed to the tyranny of relevance, neither should it be separated from the collective wisdom of adults as a whole. When teachers move from imparting knowledge and culture to the moral redesign of children’s attitudes and values to bring about social change, they promote their political preferences, or those of an expert class, above this collective wisdom. More specifically, when schools teach children that people can change gender, or that British history is racist, they are neither imparting objective knowledge nor reflecting the democratically determined view of a majority of people in society. Civitas found that almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of parents want

the right to remove their child from lessons on sex, relationships and gender.⁵⁴⁵

Progressive educators argue that teaching must change as society evolves. The curriculum, they suggest, must be continually updated to reflect the reality of a more diverse and socially liberal world. When, in any given classroom, some pupils may have parents who are gay, siblings who are transgender, neighbours who are a different ethnicity or religion, speak a different language and have a different skin colour, schools must, they argue, reflect this diversity and teach in such a way that every child's identity is affirmed. This both overstates the extent of social change and downplays the influence of teachers, who are not simply following society but are taking a lead in promoting ideas and practices associated with CRT and gender ideology. It suggests that the role of the school is to manage social change and align children's attitudes with what are considered progressive values, even though many adults may feel changes have been imposed on them without their consent.

To reclaim education, we need schools to be less relevant but more democratic. Teachers need to recognise that their role is not to pursue their own self-interest but to stand as representatives of collective adult authority. More specifically, we should:

- Establish clearer boundaries between teachers' and parents' roles. Teachers need to leave parents to raise their children according to their own beliefs and values, while parents need to let schools and teachers focus on education.
- With this in mind, we should abolish RSE. Sex and reproduction should be taught by science teachers in biology lessons, and parents, not teachers, should offer guidance on relationships.
- Parents should have the right to view all curriculum resources and lesson plans. Civitas found that almost eight in 10 (77 per cent) parents want a legal right to see all RSE materials.⁵⁴⁶

4. Consider the values we wish to impart to our children

Taking politics out of education does not mean that schools should become value-free zones. As we have previously noted, education is inherently connected to the promotion of certain values, most notably, a respect for knowledge. Oakeshott's list of intellectual virtues, including 'disinterested curiosity, patience, intellectual

honesty, exactness, industry, concentration and doubt', as well as a willingness to 'submit to refutation' and a 'love of truth and justice', still provides a useful moral foundation for education.⁵⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the promotion of morality and the desire to build a child's character have been replaced by pseudo-therapeutic classroom interventions such as 'circle time', meditation or 'feelings charts'. There should be no place for such practices in schools.

5. Raise standards

When education is not focused on the transmission of knowledge as an end in itself, and children are perceived as mentally and emotionally vulnerable, a collapse in standards is all but inevitable. University education departments tell future teachers not to expect children to sit still and listen for long periods. Exam boards offer qualifications in return for studying the slimmest of volumes. Routine testing is dropped in favour of group work, whole books for short extracts, Latin and Greek for a smattering of useful phrases in a modern foreign language, literature for literacy, and maths for numeracy. These low expectations tell children that application and effort are not qualities worth cultivating and that knowledge is not, in itself, a reward. Only certificates count, and they should be gained in the most efficient way possible. Working hard, especially when this means confronting what we do not know and meeting intellectual challenges, is not just worthless; it may also be damaging to one's mental health. We urgently need to raise standards and have higher expectations of our children. More specifically, we should:

- Maintain phonics as the means of reading instruction in primary schools. Rote learning of times tables, spelling tests and handwriting practice should be core activities in the early years of schooling. No child should leave primary school unable to read, write and perform simple arithmetic.
- Keep final exams for pupils aged 16 and 18. Regular testing for younger age cohorts can be a useful means for teachers and parents to monitor a child's progress.
- Use normative assessments to stop grade inflation. Only a small number of pupils should be awarded the highest grades each year.

- Involve teachers, as subject experts, in reviewing the curriculum. Emphasise the importance of reading whole books and classic texts in humanities subjects.
- Provide additional funding for schools in deprived areas that offer instruction in Latin, Greek or further maths.

6. Restore the teacher's authority in the classroom

As teachers have downplayed the significance of subject knowledge to their profession, they have given away the source of their authority in the classroom. They may consider themselves experts in children, but find they know less about any individual child than his or her parents, and less about child development than an army of psychologists and health professionals. Indeed, the call on teachers to be child-centred pedagogues forces them to downplay their intellectual status and adult autonomy, becoming a 'guide on the side' or just another learner. Many shy away from imposing their own will on the classroom in favour of cultivating a more therapeutic ethos. Often, this approach will be backed by school managers and even national inspectors. This leaves teachers powerless to enforce the discipline necessary to make learning possible. Pupils suffer when teachers lose control of the classroom, and many good teachers leave the profession each year, citing poor behaviour as a key factor in their decision.⁵⁴⁸ The success of schools with strict behaviour policies, such as Michaela Community School in West London, led by the indomitable Katharine Birbalsingh, shows that this need not be the case.

Teachers need to regain their authority in the classroom and enforce the discipline necessary for children to learn. More specifically:

- All schools should have, and be seen to enforce, strict rules for pupil behaviour, including punctuality and attendance, uniform and conduct. Any act of violence should lead to an immediate suspension and, if serious or repeated, permanent exclusion. Bullying and verbal abuse should not be tolerated and should be punished with time in isolation or detention.
- National school inspectors should conduct regular spot checks in order to monitor progress on enforcing positive pupil behaviour, including tackling persistent disruptive behaviour in lessons.

- Playtimes and lunch breaks are important for children's development. Schools should not cut back on breaks for all pupils in response to poor behaviour by some.

In addition, we need to lessen the influence of the organisations and institutions that have promoted the politicisation of education. In England, this includes civil servants in the government's Department for Education, teaching unions and university education departments responsible for teacher training. Almost every progressive idea about the role of teachers and schools has emerged from a university education department. In the short term, teacher education qualifications could be replaced with an apprenticeship-style programme for recruits to train on the job, in schools. This could be combined with an expectation that teachers demonstrate far higher levels of subject knowledge than are currently expected. Alongside this, school leaders should be free to recruit teachers without formal teaching qualifications where they feel this is appropriate – for example, former university lecturers, or people with specialist academic qualifications or vocational skills that can be shared with pupils.

Ultimately, education is far too important to be sacrificed on the altar of fashionable ideologies. Civilisational renewal demands the removal of politics from schools and a return to teachers focusing upon the important moral project of initiating children into the knowledge and culture of the nation to which they belong. We fail future generations if we do not rise to the challenge.

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 2. Reframing sex and gender

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Chapter 3. Creating citizens

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Chapter 10. Collapsing standards

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Chapter 11. Socialisation in crisis

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Chapter 12. Reclaiming Education

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Education used to be about the transmission of knowledge and cultural inheritance; but British classrooms today present a rather different picture. Children are taught to affirm their individual desires and identities, while educational content has become startlingly politicised. In *The Breaking of the Education Contract*, Joanna Williams exposes the extent to which the curriculum has been captured by progressive ideology, arguing that this is a symptom of a deeper malaise: a moral confusion about what education is for.

Politicians today speak of education either in reductive terms of employability or as a means of addressing mental health and other social problems, allowing a fixation on race, gender and sexuality to take hold. Williams documents the rise of activist teaching methods and external organisations seeking to influence pupils, particularly through sex education and ‘citizenship education’. These have expanded far beyond their original remit, becoming vehicles for shaping children’s values and behaviour. Even traditional subjects like history, geography and literature have become subtly politicised.

Williams traces the intellectual roots of these developments, considering the influence of Rousseau and John Dewey’s ideas of education as a means of individual liberation. Drawing on an alternative educational philosophy inspired by Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott and E.D. Hirsch, she defends education as an end in itself. Schools, she argues, should focus on introducing children to humanity’s accumulated knowledge – in Matthew Arnold’s words, ‘the best that has been thought and said’ – enabling them to reach their own conclusions rather than be inculcated with a particular ideology.

In light of the failures of the current system – not least declining academic standards, weakening teacher authority and deteriorating relationships between schools and families – Williams calls for a knowledge-rich curriculum, greater parental involvement and a clearer separation between education and politics. Fundamentally, schools must recover their sense of purpose: to transmit the knowledge and cultural inheritance that enable children to think for themselves.

“Williams asks what happens to education when politics enters schools and argues for teaching that focuses, above all else, on transmitting knowledge. High academic standards, rather than classroom activism, best allow children to decide for themselves where they stand on contested political issues.”

The Rt Hon Sir Nick Gibb, former Minister for Schools

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