



Show, Tell and Leave Nothing to the imagination:
How critical social justice is undermining British schooling

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1. Introduction

In October 2022 *The Critic* magazine published an article I had written about trends that had emerged over the previous two years in my son's school, an independent boys' school reputed for academic rigour. In newsletters previously concerned with sports fixtures and exam timetables it had become commonplace to see phrases such as 'white privilege', 'unconscious bias', 'toxic masculinity', and 'micro-aggressions'. These are expressions associated with political campaigns, hence the pique in my attention.

Our conventional school year, broken (at least nominally) by national celebrations around Christmas and Easter, had been augmented so that terms can now be noted as those celebrating Black History Month, International Women's Day, and various alphabetic variants of LGBTQ History month. The school flag, symbolising common purpose within an admirably multifaith, multicultural community, is now routinely joined by a Pride Flag, imposing as dominant, and assuming universal adherence to its associated vein of self-appointed 'social justice' values. If this were merely denoting support for the broadly liberal consensus shared by most British people, it would be of little concern, but the social justice signalled here is the partisan discipline Critical Social Justice, that encompasses a range of identity driven ideologies. 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.

As a result of the article, Civitas invited me to look more closely at these issues, suspecting that what I had noticed was far from a limited experience. So far indeed, it is reasonable to characterise what has happened in British schools, regardless of location or type of school, as a revolution.

It is a revolution that has been delivered largely by stealth but to which many parents and teachers are now alert, despite politicians remaining wary of acknowledging it. It has injected political ideology into schools, both organisationally through the adoption of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies relating to hiring, admissions and the wider school culture, and directly into the classroom through curriculum initiatives, via many legislative interventions with their associated, often unaccountable, agents. It is a process that has disrupted the distinct remit of schools and of teachers to educate, by adding responsibilities for areas akin to social care, mental health, and even the security services. Some of its agencies are state actors, albeit at arms-length, others international organisations – and accompanying this is a burgeoning industry of private and third sector external providers and self-declared 'expert' consultants on issues such as race, equity, gender and sexuality. This unholy alliance constitutes what might be labelled a 'Social Justice Educational Complex'.

The influences on school life have always been the subject of debate, with flash points of concern – such as those leading to the introduction of Section 28 in the 1980s, or the

controversy behind Victoria Gillick's attempts to test the boundaries of parental rights.¹ However, the growing complexity and reach of our state apparatus and the interaction with new technologies increasingly standardises schooling, leaving it particularly vulnerable to political manipulation. The actions and aims of the Social Justice Educational Complex are certainly radical because they are driven by a set of convictions that conflict with what has been our common understanding of the boundaries between state and family, between adults and children and between individual conscience and imposed groupthink.

Without doubt, many advocates for this movement have the best intentions, but its dangers are manifold – most notably to our established understanding of what is a good education, as teaching children *how to think* is being replaced with an activist-led vision designed to teach children *what to think*. Ironically, given its much-proselytised justification of 'diversity', this trend is unpicking the key tenets of what we generally understand as a 'Liberal Education', to respect plurality of opinion, and replacing it with an illiberal, uniform worldview on contentious social issues. Collectively we have been aware of, yet generally complacent to, this direction of travel within our universities,² so it should be no surprise that, what some call a 'snowflake generation' of undergraduates, may have been aided on their journey toward posturing vulnerability whilst still at school.

The influences on children are of course both far wider and more targeted (now with algorithmic precision) than those they encounter simply at school. However, material presented in the classroom or during an assembly has particular authority, hence the requirements on schools not to indoctrinate.³ It may be reasonable that race, sex, climate change and even gender are considered at school, but the challenge is ensuring that such discussions remain age-appropriate and impartial. Widespread anecdotal evidence to the contrary, including an extraordinary rise in home schooling (up by 40 per cent since 2018 according to well researched estimates⁴ and which suggests parents are losing confidence in conventional schooling) is now supported increasingly by research indicating that despite new guidance issued by the Department for Education in 2022,⁵ schools are failing in their duty to maintain impartiality.⁶

Civitas has undertaken its own research, polling pupils aged 16 to 18 and parents of children aged 12-16. The results appear to underline the change in school culture. We found that a great majority of pupils had encountered at least one of a list of partisan concepts at school, the list included 'White Privilege', 'Unconscious Bias', 'Toxic Masculinity' and 'Gender/Trans

¹ BBC, '1983: Mother loses contraception test case',

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/26/newsid_2499000/2499583.stm

² BBC News, 'Durham University to investigate Rod Liddle speech walk-out', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-59552264>;

Civitas, 'The Radical Progressive University Guide', <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Radical-Progressive-University-Guide-FINAL.pdf>

³ gov.uk, 'Education Act 1996', <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/406>; gov.uk, 'Education Act 1996',

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/407>; gov.uk, 'The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014',

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/3283/schedule?view=extent> (parts 5C and D).

⁴ *The Independent*, 'Warning children will be 'lost outside system' as homeschooling soars after pandemic',

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/homeschool-children-education-schools-pandemic-b2243502.html>

'Numbers of home-educated students have jumped by 40 per cent since 2018, Freedom of Information requests reveal. In the 171 local authorities that provided data, there were 81,250 children learning at home in 2022 compared to 57,531 four years ago, before the pandemic.'

⁵ Department for Education, 'Political impartiality in schools', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools>

⁶ Policy Exchange, 'The Political Culture of Young Britain', <https://policymexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-Political-Culture-of-Young-Britain.pdf>

Ideology' at school, with only 14 per cent not to have done so. As many as 42 per cent of the pupils we surveyed reported that they had been taught that Britain is currently a racist country, and 41 per cent that 'young men are a problem for society'.⁷

When presented within a pluralist approach it is completely appropriate that debates about racism and colonialism are well established in schools as they are properly in wider society, but the concept of 'gender ideology' as a suitable discussion for schools will seem to many as having come out of nowhere, although it has spread quickly and widely. Thirty-two per cent of the pupils we spoke to told us that 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'.⁸

It may not be completely surprising then, but no less concerning, that, of the young people we surveyed, one in 10 (10 per cent) said that they want to change their gender or had already done so.⁹

Just as alarmingly for an educational setting, as many as 46 per cent of pupils surveyed said they would not feel comfortable contributing their opinion on gender and sexuality within school.¹⁰

⁷ See appendices for polling results.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

2. Waking up

It is welcome at least that parts of the media and some politicians are now, to borrow a phrase, ‘waking up’ to what is happening in our schools and listening to what many dedicated campaigners, anxious parents and think tanks have been raising for some time. Potential flashpoints between schools and their wider communities have been snapshotted in a series of recent newspaper articles – for example, a teachers’ union strike at a Catholic state school which had disinvited an author of a sexualised version of the Lord’s Prayer,¹¹ a World Book Day event for a class of four-year olds which featured a book advocating transgenderism,¹² and the unconventional practice of using the previously adult entertainment of drag queens to read to children in schools and libraries as part of the ‘queering schools’ agenda.

Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH), as recently commissioned by the Tate Gallery for children’s holiday entertainment, has spread rapidly since its attributed ‘invention’ in 2015 by self-described queer author Michelle Tea, driven by her ‘personal desire to connect her toddler with queer culture’.¹³ Some commentators suggest that drag is akin to pantomime, hence not inappropriate for children, however the words of the proponents of DQSH appear open to a less wholesome interpretation:

‘Through this programme, drag artists have channelled their penchant for playfully reading each other ‘filth’ into different forms of literacy, promoting storytelling as integral to queer and trans communities, as well as positioning queer and trans cultural forms as valuable components of early childhood education.’¹⁴

Our polling of parents shows that they are generally opposed to inviting drag queens into schools to perform to students, with 45 per cent opposed or strongly opposed, almost twice as many as the 25 per cent who were supportive.¹⁵

On one vital front, the Prime Minister has at last signaled willingness to engage with such issues. Rishi Sunak has accelerated a review into sex education¹⁶ (although this would not include controversial issues elsewhere in the curriculum) following the exposure of explicit and ideologically driven materials being channeled to children from the earliest primary school classes. The nature and extent of this material is comprehensively laid out in an

¹¹ BBC News, ‘Croydon Catholic school closes due to strike over LGBT book talk’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-61245078>

¹² *The Telegraph*, ‘Parents withdraw four-year-old boy from school’s World Book Day in row over gender identity theme’, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/03/04/parents-withdraw-four-year-old-boy-schools-world-book-day-row>

¹³ Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, ‘Drag pedagogy: The playful practice of queer imagination in early childhood’, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03626784.2020.1864621> Very comprehensive Canadian academic resource on the aims of Drag Queen pedagogy and its connections to ‘queering’ primary schools. <https://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/1278/reader/reader.html?#!preferred/0/package/1278/pub/1278/page/43/article/NaN> A prominent exponent of this philosophy - Aida H D - who is practising in UK schools and has been hired to read to children by the Tate Gallery – explicitly conflates his drag queen identity with mental health conditions, perhaps in parody, but such subtlety likely lost on young children.

¹⁴ Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, ‘Drag pedagogy: The playful practice of queer imagination in early childhood’, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03626784.2020.1864621>

¹⁵ See appendices for polling results.

¹⁶ Department for Education, The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and The Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP, ‘Review of relationships, sex and health education to protect children to conclude by end of year’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/review-of-relationships-sex-and-health-education-to-protect-children-to-conclude-by-end-of-year>

essential report from the New Social Covenant Unit (March 2023),¹⁷ which rightly has had widespread coverage and should be required reading for parents, teachers and legislators.

The report evidences how activist-inspired consultancies have exceeded the legitimate boundaries of suitable sex education to introduce even primary-aged children to varied, some would say obscure, sexual practices and expose them to ideology drawn from Gender Ideology and its associated Queer Theory, which aim to ‘smash heteronormativity’ and eradicate the boundaries between sexes and sexualities, ignoring biological reality and social convention.¹⁸

I was already familiar with two of the prominent consultancies it references. Brook and The School for Sexuality Education had been engaged by a nearby senior school, where, even without having been able to preview lesson plans, their online content at the time (since amended) had seemed so questionable to many parents that it prompted an intervention and the eventual parting of the ways between the school and the agencies. Parents there had objected both to the reductive nature of materials which treated their children, not as boys or girls, but simply as extensions of testes or vaginas, alongside the seemingly contradictory advice about the fluidity of gender.

Also worrying was the advocacy of ‘sex positivity’, a judgement free, anything-goes approach, fine for adults but arguably at odds with government guidance that still places some emphasis on the importance of teaching about stable relationships. Citing ‘sex positivity’ as a component of lessons allows for the introduction of the highly subjective area of sexual ‘pleasure’ into the classroom, with all the potential that holds for inappropriate content.

In the Civitas poll for this essay, 41 per cent of pupils surveyed said they had encountered ‘sex positivity’ at school, 23 per cent reported having been taught about Bondage, Dominance and Sado Masochism (BDSM), and 59 per cent had been taught about masturbation.¹⁹

Whilst many consultants argue that this no-holds barred approach merely reflects the reality of images that pupils may encounter on-line, it seems wholly reasonable for parents (and carers) to question whether mediating and contextualising such imagery and the prevalence of pornography is best handled at home or within school, and if the latter, to defend their right to engage fully in the process. This right is written into the current legislation, as schools are meant to consult parents while they develop their Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum²⁰ but some agencies seem intent to resist

¹⁷ New Social Covenant, ‘What is being taught in Relationships and Sex Education in our schools?’, [https://www.newsocialcovenant.co.uk/RSE%20BRIEFING%20FINAL%201631%20\(1S\)_small.pdf](https://www.newsocialcovenant.co.uk/RSE%20BRIEFING%20FINAL%201631%20(1S)_small.pdf)

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, ‘Judith Butler: ‘We need to rethink the category of woman’’, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender> Here, one of the leading academic exponents of gender ideology and ‘third wave’ feminism, Judith Butler, is interviewed by Jules Joanne Gleeson, a queer historian (sic) and co-editor of *Transgender Marxism*. It is a useful introduction to the broad parameters of Gender Ideology and Queer Theory and its unapologetic revolutionary intent.

¹⁹ See appendices for polling results.

²⁰ Department for Education, ‘Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education’, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1090195/Relationships_Education_RS_E_and_Health_Education.pdf

transparency.²¹ This has been clearly exposed in a tribunal (May 2023) involving School for Sexuality Education, in which its chief executive explained that keeping materials private was essential to its business model.²² This tendency indicates why Rishi Sunak's recent intervention specifically recommended that copyright or commercial interest should not be used as a reason to prevent parents previewing sex education lesson plans.

Our polling indicates that many parents are concerned about these issues and want to be able to monitor what children are being taught in school and to retain – or effectively to extend – rights to withdraw children from classes.²³ Recent changes to legislation have minimised these rights, so whilst it remains the case that parents (except those in Wales) are allowed to request the withdrawal of their children from the specific sex-related stream within RSHE, this no longer applies where a child is within three terms of their 16th birthday.²⁴ It should also be noted that these withdrawal rights, limited as they are, only apply to that part of the curriculum which can be said to relate exclusively to sex education, meaning in effect that any teaching about sexuality or gender that can be presented as relationships or health education, remains compulsory.

When we asked parents, almost two thirds (64 per cent) said they want the right to remove their child from lessons on sex, relationships and gender, more than double the number of parents who say that they should not have the right (28 per cent).²⁵

Almost eight in 10 (77 per cent) parents want a legal right to see all sex and relationships education materials. Five times those (14 per cent) parents who do not.²⁶

Three quarters of parents (75 per cent) back a register of external groups allowed into schools to teach children about sex, gender and relationships. Only 14 per cent of parents say instead that it is not necessary for external speakers to have registered accreditation.²⁷

In another important recent report focused on the prevalence and potential dangers of gender ideology, Policy Exchange surveyed over 300 maintained secondary and academy schools in England.²⁸ It confirmed the rapid spread of gender ideology, with 72 per cent of the respondent schools teaching that people have a gender identity that may be different to their biological sex. The safeguarding concerns of this report has finally prompted rear-guard action from the Education Secretary, who has now written to head teachers²⁹ reminding them of existing statutory duty ahead of updated guidance on RSHE,³⁰ and long-

²¹ LBC, 'Parents blocked from viewing school sex education material which 'denies biological sex'', <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/parents-school-sex-education-denies-biologic-sex/>

²² *The Times*, 'Sex education group regrets web links to fetish material', <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ebed56e8-e9ea-11ed-bf4a-7aba37244b0f?>

²³ See appendices for polling results.

²⁴ Department for Education, 'Relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

²⁵ See appendices for polling results.

²⁶ See appendices for polling results.

²⁷ See appendices for polling results.

²⁸ Policy Exchange, 'Asleep at the Wheel', <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Asleep-at-the-Wheel.pdf>

²⁹ Gilligan Keegan MP, [pic.twitter.com/eKNeR5F8yR](https://twitter.com/eKNeR5F8yR)

³⁰ Department for Education, The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and The Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP. 'Review of relationships, sex and health education to protect children to conclude by end of year', <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/review-of-relationships-sex-and-health-education-to-protect-children-to-conclude-by-end-of-year>

promised new guidance on gender (now expected during Summer Term 2023).³¹ And further, the government is also now responding to an intervention from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission recommending clarification on the legal distinction between biological sex and gender.³² An anomaly arising from the framing of the protected characteristics within the 2010 Equalities Act, which plays a key role in the legislation around schools, has created the opportunity both for genuine confusion by anxious school leaders and for malign misinterpretation by determined activists.

As errant sex education tends to provoke a visceral response from concerned parties; it is quite understandable that despite the wider dangers of partisanship in schools, it is content related to RSHE that has finally prompted the Number 10 calls for a review. Long gone are the days when, on its introduction into schools in 1976, the focus was on biology, preventing teenage pregnancy and the spread of STIs – laudable aims which would meet the approval of most parents in this country. The conflation of sex education with ‘sexuality’ education (as made quite explicit by the Welsh Government and frequently used by sex education consultants despite not being the terminology within the English legislation), the commensurate ‘inclusive’ push to ‘affirm’ a panoply of sexual activities and the extension into the highly contentious area of ‘gender’, mean that for anyone paying any attention to what is appearing, even in primary schools, very basic questions arise immediately.

The starting point of such scrutiny should review whether the best interests of children who do have questions about their sexuality or gender are being served by much of this material, and whether their potential vulnerability, often heightened by the marked prevalence of co-conditions such as autism,³³ is being exploited rather than relieved. It is highly significant that when tasked with the review of Britain’s only Gender Identity Development Services (GIDS) for under 18s at the Tavistock Clinic,³⁴ Hilary Cass not only recommended that a ‘fundamentally different service model is needed’ but strongly advised against some elements of gender-non-conforming practice, such as ‘social transitioning’ (or indulging a child’s chosen gender identity by, for example, allowing a change of name and use of pronouns associated with the opposite sex), that had emerged in schools³⁵ and which has been confirmed again by the Policy Exchange survey.³⁶ The proposed closure of the clinic is now scheduled for Spring 2024.

We asked parents about some of the issues related to gender identity and our polling results would suggest that opinion is divided, with 44 per cent of respondents saying that if parental consent had been granted, it is acceptable for schools to allow children below the age of 16 to change their gender during the school day. Forty-one per cent of parents felt

³¹ *The Telegraph*, ‘Rishi Sunak launches review of sex education in schools’, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/03/08/rishi-sunak-launches-review-sex-education-schools/>

³² Equality and Human Rights Commission, ‘Clarifying the definition of ‘sex’ in the Equality Act’,

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/clarifying-definition-%E2%80%98sex%E2%80%99-equality-act>

³³ Transgender Trend, ‘Autism & Gender Identity – Introduction’, <https://www.transgendertrend.com/autism-gender-identity-introduction/>

³⁴ The Cass Review, ‘Interim Report’, <https://cass.independent-review.uk/publications/interim-report/> [paras. 1.33, 1.35 - 1.36]

³⁵ Bayswater Support Group, ‘The Cass Review Interim Report: The Significance for Schools’, <https://bayswatersupport.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Cass-Review-The-significance-for-educational-settings.pdf> A useful summary of the interim Cass Report main recommendations regarding schools’ practice.

³⁶ Policy Exchange, ‘Asleep at the Wheel’, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Asleep-at-the-Wheel.pdf>

this was unacceptable.³⁷ Yet the possibility that this might happen without express parental permission (practice that is evidenced within the Policy Exchange report) was strongly opposed, with 59 per cent of parents objecting and only 26 per cent approving.

The Cass Review was commissioned in acknowledgement of the unprecedented and exponential sudden increase in children reporting with gender dysphoria. Between 2010 to 2020 there had been a 1,891 per cent increase in children and young people being referred to the service for assessment and treatment. In 2011/12 there was also an unexplained reversal of the sex ratio, so that girls overtook boys questioning their gender by some margin. This suggests a school-aged contagion which demands investigation rather than the affirmative approach advocated by many high-profile agencies such as Educate and Celebrate.

Educate and Celebrate, which has received Department for Education (DfE) funding (of over £200,000 in 2015 alone)³⁸ and claimed Ofsted backing,³⁹ offer a broad range of consultancy services to schools and teacher training programmes. Its website recommends books for primary-aged children such as a *Trans Pride Colouring Book* and *The Pronoun Book* for ages five and over, that 'educates them on they/them pronouns, trans and non-binary identities, misgendering and neo-pronouns such as xe, zir and hir'. In a webinar to teachers, entitled 'Getting the Language Right for 2022', its director revealed her doctrinaire advice that school staff should be referred to as 'teacher' or 'headteacher' followed by their surname, and that terms like 'head pupil' instead of 'head boy', 'headteacher' instead of 'headmaster', and 'parent' rather than 'mother' should be used.⁴⁰

Sex education is inherently contentious because it so directly inserts schools into the relationship between children and parents, hence the concerns highlighted in our polling. The issues here though go beyond the traditional queasiness that any one community might have to discussions about sex in school at all but to the way in which this strand of education has become another potent vehicle for communicating an assertive, proscriptive, and hermetically sealed set of values, often at odds with the majoritarian views. It is important to see it, and its co-opting by activists, as part of a more comprehensive identitarian political agenda encompassing and prescribing how children should, within one overarching worldview, consider race, gender, sexuality, masculinity, family, mental health, and the environment. This is not to adopt a conspiratorial mindset; it has been explicitly framed in these terms by many of the external providers going into schools. So, for example, the School for Sexuality Education explain their approach to Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) as based on 'equality/equity... intersectional... rights based... decolonizing... and trauma-informed'.⁴¹

³⁷ See appendices for polling results.

³⁸ Goldsmiths, University of London, 'Teacher-training to tackle homophobia wins £214k funding', <https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/educate-and-celebrate-lgbt/>

³⁹ The Christian Institute, 'Controversial sex ed charity accused of falsely claiming Ofsted endorsement',

<https://www.christian.org.uk/news/controversial-sex-ed-charity-accused-of-falsely-claiming-ofsted-endorsement/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/32012712-d2ef-11ed-b1cd-5223fe349502?shareToken=f1b7d19e7f8d959b8dcca0742a19f671>

⁴¹ School of Sexuality Education, 'Our approach to RSE', <https://schoolofsexed.org/approach>,

Can one blame activists for taking advantage of the legislative framework, and the constitutional fraying of the United Kingdom, that has opened the door to radical actors, and ushered them straight into the classroom?⁴² Of course not. But what we have seen in schools, as in so many of our institutions, is the complicity of our political system, supposedly built on respect for individual freedoms, with forces that undermine its pluralist values.

⁴² Policy Exchange, 'Asleep at the Wheel', <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Asleep-at-the-Wheel.pdf>

3. Recent history

Like all revolutions, what may appear to have come out of nowhere has long roots. The notorious ‘long march through the institutions’ may have found its snappy summation in the 1960’s writings of Rudi Deutsche, but this German devotee of Marx was essentially offering pithy branding to ideas which had developed earlier in the century, in parallel with the political revolutions that reshaped Europe. Here, though, I will start with the culmination of that long march and examples of its plain site emergence into our schools.

In 2020, trends that had long been in play were suddenly amplified and exposed by the coincidence of extraordinary international and political events that followed the outbreak of Covid-19. Those families fortunate enough to have the facilities that enabled children to study at home during lockdown were exposed to their schooling in a far more direct way than ever before. When the news media’s relentless coverage of Covid was eventually interrupted it was by controversies about race and gender that flared into widespread, youth-attended protests following the murder in Minneapolis of George Floyd and, later that year, a scandal in this country about alleged sexual harassment in schools. The launch of ‘Everyone’s Invited’ (EI) (a ‘Me-Too’ campaign for schools) targeted independent schools in a retributive way but also spoke to wider, legitimate anxieties about how all teenagers should navigate an age in which hardcore pornography is effectively available to them on demand.

At its inception, EI was an angry campaign which offered an online platform for anonymous charges of endemic sexual impropriety – or, in its terms, the heightened charge of ‘rape culture’, homophobia and racism against named schools. Its most potent legacy though has been the further genericisation of the charge ‘toxic masculinity’, a subjective critique which left boys’ schools particularly on the defensive, and which has permeated school culture to the extent that 27 per cent of the pupils we polled said they had been taught about it and 41 per cent that they had been taught that ‘young men are currently a problem for society.’⁴³

Whilst as far as I am aware, no prosecutions or expulsions resulted from allegations posted on EI, many schools went into a crisis of reputation management – and to burnish their safeguarding credentials, wrote new mission statements, embraced EDI across its policies⁴⁴ (and even to hint at reviewing – ‘decolonising’ – the curriculum). EI has since gained charitable status and operates as one of the many third-party providers that offer specialist training to schools, particularly around issues of sexual violence. Despite the already widespread prevalence of teaching specifically aimed at challenging traditional gender roles, the Labour Party has recently announced that if elected to government it will further add to the societal responsibilities on schools by introducing specific lessons to teach boys how to respect girls.⁴⁵

⁴³ See appendices for polling results.

⁴⁴ As described across many Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies in Britain’s independent schools.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, ‘Boys will learn respect for women under Labour’, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boys-will-learn-respect-for-women-under-labour-dlc6vs3th>

Seemingly, the ceding of fear, coupled with the degree of conformity demanded by the Covid lockdown, contributed to a wider psychological loss of confidence amongst adults in general and school leaders in particular, whose responses to these various challenges seemed very often to fit a template of 'safety-ism' and least resistance. Their narrative of lockdown also seemed at times to invert traditional roles, with children presented as vectors of disease and the stalling of the education as necessary to protect teachers. As even the unprecedented (peacetime) decision to close schools was widely accepted throughout the sector, perhaps it is not surprising that when faced with criticisms about admissions policies, safeguarding and curriculum priorities, independents, some with annual fees upwards of £25,000, reflexively set about signaling their social relevance by parading souped-up policies on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). In some cases, even replacing the E of EDI with E for Equity, shorthand for the explicitly socialist value of redistribution, which, if a serious intent, could be addressed most effectively by extending bursaries.

4. In practice

How might these priorities play out within the classroom? Here's an example from Spring term 2023, when a prestigious centuries-old public school in South London marked its own version of LGBTQI+⁴⁶ month, which it fashions as 'Identity Awareness Month'. This is a clear alignment with the prevailing cultural interpretation of identity as being defined by 'external' characteristics such as skin colour, sexuality and body type, taking precedence over the traditional and universal virtues of character such as generosity, selflessness, bravery, and resilience. Of course, the former characteristics need not exclude the latter. Yet, the logic of identity politics is to inflate the importance of those factors that humans predominantly do not choose, at the expense of those qualities which we can, through application, develop.

This approach represents a significant departure from the key principles that have informed our understanding of education as being a process through which we acquire knowledge that can enable us to evolve and to improve and which we can then evidence as we form opinions. The very badge 'Identity Awareness Month' is a repudiation of the widespread Western consensus achieved since the 1960's Civil Rights battles. Martin Luther King's dream that everyone be judged not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character, is being, to borrow a phrase from the ideological left, systematically delegitimised.

Today's anti-racism movement rejects what is often called the 'colour-blind' approach, arguing that the tangible progress made towards post-racialism in the UK and, with a different history, the US, is illusory because both societies, indeed the West itself, is built on institutional and systemic exploitation of black and other ethnic groups by white people. The solution is therefore to rebuild these societies from the ground up, from the inside out. These propositions are fascinating, provocative, and (if handled correctly) worthy of discussion in schools, but they are essentially political, contentious, and partisan.

As part of the Identity Awareness Month, pupils attended a talk on anti-racism, followed by a break-out session and a further assessment the next day. These sessions used materials credited to the Future Foundations UK network, part funded by the National Lottery, and which, according to its minimal website, advocates for 'people of colour which refers to people who are not white and who share a common experience of systemic racism.'⁴⁷ So, whilst not offering any other credentials for presenting to schools, the website is commendably clear about its political inspiration.

Following the talk, pupils were asked to rank the extent to which a range of scenarios could be judged racist. These were mapped on paper within a pyramid graphic denoting ascending severity, with 'genocide' as the worst of seven examples of racism, and 'indifference' as the least. Indifference is exemplified as someone claiming not to be racist – this, a mere seven

⁴⁶ The author has applied whichever alphabetical conflation of LGBT favoured by each institution featured – hence variations of usage of the acronym throughout.

⁴⁷ Future Foundations UK, <https://www.futurefoundationsuk.org/>

steps away from genocide. The only option available to pupils therefore is to conclude that they are, to a lesser or greater degree, racist. The graphic presupposes racism at all levels of society, differentiated only by degree.

It is consistent with that approach that, as reported to me, this lesson, which refers to genocide, made no mention of the Holocaust, or of Anti-Semitism, which in the European context overwhelmingly affected what activists might call 'white' people. Even as an oversight this is a staggering omission in materials deemed appropriate for the classroom, but it is consistent with Critical Race Theories which define modern anti-racism as a reaction to its assertions that Western structures of power are built on exploiting people of colour, rather than as a matter of individual conscience. Other educational consultants are more explicit; The Teacherist, whose website is dedicated to 'Leadership, Mental Health, Well-being, and decolonisation of the curriculum',⁴⁸ explains,

'First, let us accept that systemic racism impacts People of Colour and simultaneously does not and cannot have the same effect on white people. Yes, I am saying that white people cannot be victims of systemic racism.'

Intriguingly, a recent report⁴⁹ from the Henry Jackson Society points to a significant recent increase in reports of antisemitic incidents within schools. Responses from over 1,300 schools recorded an increase of 173 per cent in the number of antisemitic incidents between 2017 and 2022. The reporting period coincides with the marked increase in anti-racism initiatives in schools. One piece of research cannot be taken as conclusive, yet it might indicate that today's anti-racism is not as inclusive as its language at first suggests.

Even mediated by the most thoughtful teachers, this subjective, experiential approach and concentration on external characteristics risks amplifying difference between pupils rather than commending common purpose. Indeed, this potential for ceding division in any school setting was made very clear by two high-profile exposes: one in an inner-city secondary school which featured in the Channel 4 documentary showing how children were being segregated in the name of 'anti-racism',⁵⁰ and by contrast in the exclusive American School in London (ASL), where in 2022 a similar racialisation of the school culture led to a parental push-back and intervention from school inspectorate Ofsted.

Our polling of pupils aged 16 to 18 confirmed that many are learning about race in what might be considered provocative terms. 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.⁵¹

⁴⁸ The Teacherist, 'Leadership', <https://theteacherist.com/category/leadership/>

⁴⁹ Henry Jackson Society, 'Antisemitism in Schools', <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Antisemitism.pdf>
Henry Jackson Society Centre on Social and Political Risk reported a 173.3% rise in antisemitic incidents of pupil misconduct and bullying in schools over the last 5 years – over 29% increase reported between 21 and 22 based on survey of 291 schools.

⁵⁰ *Evening Standard*, 'Viewers left in tears after boy reckons with white privilege on The School That Tried To End Racism', <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/the-school-that-tried-to-end-racism-henry-white-privilege-race-a4481176.html>

⁵¹ See appendices for polling results.

We asked parents whether schools should use a ‘colour-blind’ approach discussing ethnicity and race. A majority, at 56 per cent, were in favour of the colour-blind approach and only 15 per cent opposed it.⁵²

We also asked parents about structural racism (sometimes also referred to as systemic racism), the term drawn from the lexicon of the new anti-racism. Forty-four per cent of parents opposed or strongly opposed schools teaching that Britain is structurally racist. Twenty-seven per cent were in favour.⁵³

Assuming best intentions from the school which ran the anti-racism pyramid exercise, it was only doing as so many others are across the UK, but with more resources than the maintained sector. It does seem that the most exclusive schools can indulge a broad-spectrum approach to EDI, with pupil surveys to justify the need for extensive rolling out of staff training, the hiring of specialist agencies and invitation to prominent speakers.⁵⁴

However, the company in which one of Britain’s most established schools finds itself in using the pyramid graphic is quite striking. In 2020, Brighton and Hove council, then England’s only Green council, committed itself to being Britain’s first ‘Anti Racist Council’.⁵⁵ Whilst redolent of those councils which announced themselves nuclear-free zones in the 1980s, this is more than mere political signaling, involving a raft of costly initiatives across a range of services. Its anti-racist training programme for primary school teachers, alone reported to cost £100,000 annually,⁵⁶ featured the same pyramid graphic, first thought to have surfaced in the mid-2010s as part of college training for American elementary school teachers. Generally referred to there as the ‘pyramid of white supremacy or ‘pyramid of oppression’, the lesson was controversial even in the States, where its references, though provocative, might be a least considered germane to the nation’s history and politics.

Although not compulsory, the teacher training offered by Brighton and Hove County Council raised alarm amongst some attendees of the course, concerned local parents and eventually of the then Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi. At the launch of its anti-racism school’s programme, the council made clear its political aims for education to ‘include building understanding of the impact on pupils and staff of bias, discrimination, white privilege and institutional racism’, and that it would campaign for the introduction of mandatory training around the issues of ‘race, prejudice and privilege, with an urgent reform to embed BAME history in the education system’.⁵⁷ The pyramid training materials were brought to the attention of Nadhim Zahawi in early 2022, just as he was in the process of updating the official impartiality guidelines for schools, the review itself a reflection of concern around the vulnerability of schools to this kind of ideological seepage.

⁵² See appendices for polling results.

⁵³ See appendices for polling results.

⁵⁴ Examples to illustrate this point are available on request.

⁵⁵ Brighton and Hove City Council, ‘Becoming an anti-racist city’, <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/equality/becoming-anti-racist-city>

⁵⁶ *The Telegraph*, ‘Nadhim Zahawi intervenes over council’s ‘concerning’ race lessons for children as young as seven’, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/02/05/nadhim-zahawi-intervenes-councils-concerning-race-lessons-children/>

⁵⁷ Brighton and Hove City Council, ‘Tackling racism and bias in schools’, <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2020/tackling-racism-and-bias-schools>

Teachers in Brighton were being instructed, or rather the more prescriptive ‘trained’, according to a contested pedagogy called ‘Racial Literacy’. Whilst that approach is open to some interpretation, it is an ideological framing, honed within American academia, that takes as its starting point the undisputed racism of western societies, which it contends are built on a hierarchy of oppression perpetrated primarily by white men.⁵⁸ To be ‘racially literate’ means to concur with this assertion and to pledge to resolve it through activism to achieve ‘racial equity’. Equity requires interventionist and redistributive measures rather than the more widely understood term ‘equality’, which is less a call to action than an uncontroversial statement of intent. Where the term ‘equity’ is used, whether on the EDI statement of an independent school, or the explicit policy of a council, it is therefore reasonable to assume intent consistent with a partisan political view. The racial literacy training to primary school teachers advanced by Brighton was advocating that children as young as seven be made aware of racial differences, a clear departure from established values of treating everyone equally regardless of race and ethnicity.

Far from being a bulwark for tradition, then, it is frequently the independent sector⁵⁹ that most enthusiastically embraces the radical, perhaps as an opportunity to justify its privileged charitable status. A prominent boarding school in Berkshire, for example, is keen to be a ‘thought leader’ in this field. Last term (Spring 2023) it hosted what was described as innovative sex education session on consent (‘consent’ being a curriculum requirement) delivered by a consultant whose advertised credentials ran to ‘experience in youth empowerment’ and who regularly ‘provides workshops on consent, intersectionality and pornography’.⁶⁰

Interactivity is a key feature of such sessions, effectively ‘activating’ pupils to communicate messages to the wider school community. Many schools refer to this, as do activists, as ‘allyship’, which somehow does not quite capture the spontaneity or sincerity of what school children have previously called ‘friendship’.

This holistic approach to embedding contentious values is intrinsic to the pedagogy favoured by many of the consultancies visiting schools and manifests in pupil-led assemblies on ‘heteronormativity’, student councils built around how to achieve EDI goals or advocate for net zero.⁶¹ Educate and Celebrate, the prominent LGBT consultancy which runs a series of benchmarking ‘awards’, to which schools (at a price) can accredit, supplies resources for a pupil pride network. It promotes pupil activism, with suggestions such as ‘forwarding a motion to bring in pronouns on email sign offs of staff and pupils’.⁶² Educate and Celebrate are clear about their purpose to help ‘numerous nurseries, primary schools, secondary

⁵⁸ National Council of Teachers of English, ‘Racial Literacy’, https://ncte.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SquireOfficePolicyBrief_RacialLiteracy_April2021.pdf; Educate and Celebrate, ‘Pride Youth Network’, <https://www.educateandcelebrate.org/pride-youth-network/>

⁵⁹ Schools’ Inclusion Alliance, <https://www.schoolsinclusionalliance.co.uk/>

A set of resources for associated independent schools which recommends materials overwhelmingly drawn from one political perspective, including reading lists and a very limited range of external consultants – all of which are clearly committed to Critical Social Justice.

⁶⁰ Colourful Peach, <https://www.colourfulpeach.com/about>; Stonewall, ‘Creating an LGBTQ+ Inclusive Primary Curriculum’, https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/stw_pearson_creating_an_inclusive_primary_curriculum_2022_1_-_march.pdf

⁶¹ Putney High School, ‘Protest has turned to action at Putney High School’, <https://www.putneyhigh.gdst.net/protest-has-turned-to-action-at-putney-high-school/>

⁶² Educate and Celebrate, ‘Pride Youth Network’, <https://www.educateandcelebrate.org/pride-youth-network/>

schools, colleges and businesses nationally and internationally to successfully embed gender identity and sexual orientation into the fabric of their organisation'.⁶³ As with the pyramid exercise, this immersive approach makes little allowance for pupils who may have reservations about aspects of the agenda, to remain neutral or disinterested. Indeed, any such option at the Berkshire boarding school was countermanded ahead of the lesson in an email directly to pupils in Year 11 (aged 15 and 16) which required both their 'full participation' and their commitment to 'ensure the safety of the visitors'. Pupils were required to sign up to 'The Deal' to 'actively engage in tasks'; they were warned that 'anyone who displays ableism, biphobia, transphobia, racism or sexism will be removed from the session, with the college leading in disciplinary action'. This 'deal' feels more like instructions for a 'boot camp' than a school lesson on something as sensitive as issues around sexual violence, and would appear another example of a reversal in the expected duty of care of adult to child by placing an unwarranted safeguarding responsibility on the pupils.

The suggestion to pupils that their behaviour might put at risk the safety of adult visitors echoes the circumstances in which the government in the Isle of Man recently suspended all its sex education lessons, after reports that a guest speaker claimed he had been put at risk by a pupil questioning his contention that there are 70 genders.⁶⁴ Initial accounts of the incident, which drew press attention because the visitor was reported to have been a drag queen, have been disputed – but what is not is that the speaker was addressing a class of 11-year-olds about 'gender neutral language and the concept of gender in the LGBTQ+ environment'.⁶⁵

Those of us concerned about this corruption of schooling consider that it constitutes 'indoctrination'. That can sound hyperbolic, but a methodology which obligates children to participate so actively both in the absorption and further dissemination of contested ideas certainly presents as a kind of 'Maoist Ponzi' scheme. Sceptics could counter that the influence of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and RSE lessons are likely balanced out by the rest of the curriculum and wider school experience. That assumes that the rest of school life is shielded from social justice ideology, yet increasingly these strands are being delivered in what is described as a 'whole school experience',⁶⁶ here succinctly put in the Welsh Government's guidance, 'The learning for RSE refers to both what is taught expressly and what is embedded throughout the curriculum and in the school environment through the whole school approach.' Further, as with the example from the Isle of Man or the Brighton teacher training programme, the phenomenon is also well-established at primary level, where children are necessarily at their most impressionable.

Proponents are very clear about their intention to embed this cultural shift throughout the school experience. As the transgender-promoting lobby group Stonewall advised, primary schools might consider using maths lessons to refer to budgeting within LGBT families, or to

⁶³ Educate and Celebrate, 'Pride in equity, diversity and inclusion award', <https://www.educateandcelebrate.org/award/>

⁶⁴ BBC News, 'Isle of Man sex education suspended amid lessons complaints', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-isle-of-man-64811129>

⁶⁵ Manx Radio, 'Sex education investigation: 'There was no guest speaker dressed as a drag queen'', <https://www.manxradio.com/news/isle-of-man-news/sex-education-investigation-there-was-no-guest-speaker-dressed-as-a-drag-queen/>

⁶⁶ Welsh Government, 'The Curriculum for Wales – Relationships and Sexuality Education Code', <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-01/curriculum-for-wales-relationships-sexuality-education-code.pdf>

raise gay icons when discussing sporting heroes, using a religious education lesson to create the order of service for a gay wedding, using a geography lesson to map out the route of a pride parade, elsewhere discussing the meaning of each colour in the rainbow flag and teaching children that 'they/them' pronouns can be used in the singular.⁶⁷ Likewise, inventors of LGBT History Month, formerly known as Schools Out, back the Rainbow Awards Scheme, as a means for schools to associate themselves with the agenda. The scheme offers 'a free set of LGBT+ inclusive lesson plans and resources, that link to the English national curriculum. Lessons have been written across all key stages and all curriculum areas'.⁶⁸

Reducing stigma around same-sex families may be laudable, but populating the whole school experience is doctrinaire and, by creating alternative discussion points, diverts from teaching the essential subject knowledge.

The SNP-led Scottish government has made great fanfare of its commitment to becoming an international innovator in this wholistic approach. In 2018, John Swinney, as Deputy First Minister, announced that,

'Scotland is already considered one of the most progressive countries in Europe for LGBTI equality. I am delighted to announce we will be the first country in the world to have LGBTI inclusive education embedded within the curriculum.'

The 'I' included here is for intersex, an extremely rare,⁶⁹ naturally occurring chromosomal abnormality, which on occasion requires the 'choice' of a sex to be assigned to an infant. It is this genuine but rare occurrence which may help to explain why the expression 'sex assigned at birth' has entered the lexicon. It could appear to have been co-opted by advocates of gender ideology and queer theory to suggest that fluidity between genders is universal. Sex is a biological reality evident in utero, it is not 'assigned' at birth, yet it is a measure of how ubiquitous this ideology has become that our polling reported that 67 per cent of pupils had learnt about this phrase at school. Perhaps some are being taught that this is a specious concept, but our polling about the prevalence of gender dysphoria (when someone feels their gender identity is at odds with their sex) indicates otherwise.

When pupils between 16 and 18 were asked whether they knew of anyone at school who wanted to change gender, 66 per cent said yes (either themselves or someone they know). As reported in the opening section above, 10 per cent of our pupils said they had or still wanted to change their own gender.⁷⁰

When the same cohort were asked if they supported allowing 16-year-olds to apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate (this is currently prohibited below the age of 18), a majority of 56 per cent were in favour of such a reform, with only 22 per cent opposed.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Stonewall, 'Creating an LGBTQ+ Inclusive Primary Curriculum',

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/stw_pearson_creating_an_inclusive_primary_curriculum_2022_1_-_march.pdf

⁶⁸ The Rainbow Flag Award, 'The Classroom', <https://www.rainbowflagaward.co.uk/the-classroom/>

⁶⁹ Parents with Inconvenient Truths about Trans, 'A Better Way to Look at DSD/Intersex Frequency', https://pitt.substack.com/p/a-better-way-to-look-at-dsdintersex?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

⁷⁰ See appendices for polling results.

⁷¹ Ibid.

By contrast, our poll of parents found that 32 per cent would support such a change, with 43 per cent opposed.⁷²

Far from being outlying practice, this embedded pedagogy has the implicit backing of the Department for Education (Stonewall received £900,000 of public funds between 2015 and 2019) and is explicit policy in Scotland, and in Wales where parents no longer have any rights to remove children from this strand of what is called Relationships and Sexuality (note, not sex) Education. When this was challenged in an action brought by the parents' group, Public Child Protection Wales, in December 2022, the High Court ruled in favour of the Welsh Government. The court supported the right to introduce LGBTQ+ teaching to all children from the age of three under a 'whole school approach', so ensuring that the themes permeate the whole curriculum. More surprisingly, perhaps, although he was responsible for the most recent impartiality guidelines, Nadhim Zahawi used similar language at COP 26 when unveiling his plan to ensure 'young people will be empowered to take action on the environment as part of new measures designed to put climate change at the heart of education.'

Although the Impartiality Guidelines⁷³ require that schools consider different perspectives on how climate change might be resolved, the problem itself is presupposed, yet any claims challenging anthropomorphic causes must be substantiated. The COP 26 initiative has placed climate change into a 'model science curriculum to support teachers in delivering "world leading climate change education."' Just as with the common approach to embedding LGBTQ+ through the school experience, so here too the plan extends to projects in school grounds, a national data base or virtual Education Nature Park and a new 'prestigious national climate award ceremony.' Climate change may not be controversial in the same way as some subjects which fall within PSHE, but a line has been breached, between 'informing' and, to use Zahawi's own word, the more emphatic and activating, concept of 'empowering'. This language crosses into the instrumentalisation of education, such as is explicitly suggested by the education lead to an academy trust in the following article, where within one sentence the political concept of 'climate emergency' is referenced twice:

*'Our current approach to educating young people about the **climate emergency** is far too atomised and piecemeal, and it's time for more radical action. Our MAT is therefore reviewing its teaching about the need for bold action to combat climate change, about the science that underpins the current **climate emergency** and how local, national and international collaboration are a strength and a virtue'.⁷⁴*

Such alarmist language, combined with an assumption that it is the role of schools to train activists, could be a contributory factor in the distressing degree of anxiety about climate change that many children report. As the academic and geography teacher Alex Standish explains in an essential counterinterview, this should not be the default way to discuss climate in

⁷² See appendices for polling results.

⁷³ Department for Education, 'Political impartiality in schools', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools/political-impartiality-in-schools>

⁷⁴ Schools Week, 'Climate Change: Curriculum must face the inconvenient truth', <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/climate-change-curriculum-must-face-the-inconvenient-truth/>

schools, arguing with merit that schools have a duty to place climate change within a wider context of historical progress.⁷⁵

The responsibility on schools to frame their teaching about climate change in moderate terms is pressing, given our polling of pupils aged 16-18 found that 53 per cent think that it is likely that the world will end from climate change in their lifetime and 50 per cent believe that people should have fewer children to help prevent over population and climate change. Climate change was mentioned by 26 per cent of the pupils we polled as the reason for, or a contributory factor in, any anxiety or sadness that they feel.⁷⁶

Concerns about children's mental health more generally have been rising in recent years, most markedly since the Covid 19 pandemic, with frequent calls from health professionals, children's advocates and parents for more counselling services in schools.⁷⁷ Indeed, the government has committed considerable resource to its goal of providing training for a mental health lead in every state secondary school by 2025.⁷⁸ The need for this could appear borne out by our polling which found that over half the pupils we spoke to, 53 per cent, admitted to very often, or quite often, feeling sad or anxious. Of the parents we spoke to, 40 per cent said they felt that today's school pupils are much more anxious than those of a generation ago, and a further 29 per cent felt they are a little more anxious.⁷⁹

No one should dismiss or minimise this very disturbing trend, and the contributing reasons will be complicated and varied of course, but within schools there is a danger that solutions for help can stray into political proselytising. By example, the Anna Freud Foundation, a highly regarded children's mental health charity working with schools and whose patron is the Princess of Wales, suggests 'activism' as one way to improve mental outlook. That makes good sense, but 'activism' (as opposed simply to activity) as a word is predominantly associated with left-wing causes, hence suggestions for 'participating in climate change events, supporting animal rights, promoting better LGBTQ+ rights or even highlighting the importance of good mental health.'⁸⁰

Responsible schools will always have had and must have concern to pastoral care, but the stress now on mental health within the wider anti-bullying agenda, and the increasing emphasis on neuro-diversity, creates yet another set of competing identity markers and opens a further front for activist sentiments to take hold within schools. The very approach of 'affirming' the self-identified gender role of a pupil can be argued by advocates to be an act of safeguarding or an appropriate therapeutic response. This is elucidated in a *Guardian* article (May 2023) featuring a teacher openly undermining the role of parents as the senior

⁷⁵ Teachwire, 'Young People are Concerned about Climate Change – We Need to Teach Hope', <https://www.teachwire.net/news/young-people-are-concerned-about-climate-change-we-need-to-teach-hope/>

⁷⁶ See appendices for polling results.

⁷⁷ Local Government Association, 'LGA: Make school-based counselling available to all children to tackle rising child mental health issues', <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-make-school-based-counselling-available-all-children-tackle-rising-child-mental>; House of Commons Library, 'Provision of school-based counselling services', <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0178/>

⁷⁸ Department for Education, 'Schools and colleges to benefit from boost in expert mental health support', <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-and-colleges-to-benefit-from-boost-in-expert-mental-health-support>

⁷⁹ See appendices for polling results.

⁸⁰ Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 'Activism', <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/activism/>

arbiters in such a decision.⁸¹ This teacher tells the newspaper that if the forthcoming schools' guidance on transgender issues obligates teachers to inform parents about pupils who want to change their gender within school, they, 'would be very, very reluctant to pick up the phone'. This teacher argues that informing parents may expose children to abuse, but many parents, as our polling bears out, will be deeply concerned about any teacher's right to interfere in private family matters based on a subjective presumption hence the need for clear guidelines, if not statutory ones.

Anti-Bullying initiatives, including an anti-bullying week (November) which schools can elect to mark may yet prove an effective counter to the spread of teenage anxiety and poor mental health, but its framing is often via a social justice set of criteria. For example, the Scottish government guidance⁸² refers to considering the 'intersectionality' of potential victims. Yet, our survey of pupils showed that 46 per cent of those we polled, reported feeling uncomfortable expressing a 'different viewpoint' on contentious social issues of gender, sexuality, and sex in case it leads to reprisals from other students.⁸³ This suggests that the focus on the protected characteristics of the equalities legislation may not address other potent sources of bullying, such as simply voicing an unfashionable opinion. There are wider implications too in rolling out this agenda in a way that risks systemising and formalising ethical obligations that we have previously expected of each other as fully functioning individuals bonded by shared values regardless of our externalities, we lose our capacity for self-regulation, we amplify difference, and we learn to see kindness not as a virtue but as an order.

⁸¹ *The Guardian*, 'Trans pupils put school policies to test amid heated debate in England',

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/may/08/trans-pupils-put-school-policies-test-heated-debate-england>

⁸² Scottish Government, 'Respect for All: national approach to anti-bullying', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/respect-national-approach-anti-bullying-scotlands-children-young-people/pages/5/#page-top>

⁸³ See appendices for polling results.

5. Nietzsche and nurture

It is clear that contested ideas and experimental approaches to teaching are widespread, regardless of the age of children involved and the designation or location of their school. Whilst we are all becoming more familiar with the tropes of Critical Social Justice, with its calls for 'equity' and ever emerging 'phobias', we should be no less alarmed that these ideas have passed so efficiently from the arcane discussions of largely US-based academics into British schools. This should not be dismissed simply as schools 'moving with the times.' Notions that are being presented as merely reasonable and compassionate have at their core a partisan political intent, hence why their injection into school settings demands to be scrutinised more rigorously than anywhere else.

The philosophical and political roots of today's social justice movement are rightly the stuff of debate, although it is easy to see why many reflexively categorise that intent as 'cultural Marxism'. A power dynamic in which one class exploits and oppresses another lies at the heart of Marxist analysis, and here, in place of class and capital, we have race, sex and sexuality as the defining characteristics of the exploiter. It is the white heterosexual man who replaces the wealthy industrialist as the key perpetrator.⁸⁴ Many Marxists balk at this attribution though, arguing that Marx was too much of a rationalist and an empiricist to indulge the inconsistencies within identitarianism.

Those inconsistencies (most obviously, race is absolute but sex is non-binary) would seem to require an actual leap of faith from adherents. Certainly the fervour with which young people have taken up and practice their associate causes such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), Black Lives Matter (BLM) and trans rights, resembles a cult, or a Godless religion. Perhaps then Nietzsche, with his much-quoted aphorism of the death of God, is just as appropriate a source? Or maybe the inspiration for this quasi religiosity actually lies not so much in secular ideologies but within the theology and practice of religion itself, particularly a Catholic preoccupation with original sin repurposed now particularly in the American setting as the original sin of slavery, advanced by author Joshua Mitchell,⁸⁵ and the Protestant, specifically Puritanical, virtues of disciplined adherence, giving rise to the judgementalism behind cancel-culture?⁸⁶

The relentless focus on our own identities, rather than on external motivations such as church, war or simply survival, seems to have its roots in psychology, as much as in politics, and particularly in the Freudian elevation and nurturing of the idea of the 'self' and the pursuit of sexual pleasure, particularly focused on the genitalia which, perhaps coincidentally, now feature widely in graphicised memes across the websites of many of the widely used sex education consultancies).⁸⁷ Others raise less iconic 'influencers', including

⁸⁴ FEE, 'Cultural Marxism Is the Main Source of Modern Confusion—and It's Spreading', <https://fee.org/articles/cultural-marxism-is-the-main-source-of-modern-confusion-and-its-spreading>

⁸⁵ 'American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time'. Joshua Mitchell, Encounter Books, 2020.

⁸⁶ 'The Rise of the New Puritans', Noah Rothman, Broadside Books, 2022.

'The New Puritans', Andrew Doyle, Constable, 2022.

⁸⁷ School of Sexuality Education, 'Why?', <https://schoolofsexed.org/why>; Brook, 'Penises and Testicles', <https://www.brook.org.uk/topics/penises-testicles/>; Safe School Alliance UK, 'The School of Sexuality Education', <https://safeschoolsallianceuk.net/2023/02/05/the-school-of-sexuality-education/>

the Hungarian Georg Lukacs, who, writing in the 1920s, promoted the role of subjectivity through his 'standpoint epistemology', a concept which now informs the 'my truth' logic of social media; and Anthony Gramsci, whose advocacy of a working-class ideology to counter the prevailing worldview morphed into the aforementioned 'long march through the institutions'.

With specific relevance to schools, the American polemicist and determined scourge of this movement, James Lindsay, lays great stress on the 1970s work of the Brazilian Marxist Paulo Freire. Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, lays out a model of education that turns schools into vehicles for instilling 'critical consciousness' via various forms of 'literacies', none of which relate to any traditional understanding of the word literate. Freirean ideas have found enthusiastic backing in educational circles, particularly in America – where *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has achieved a hallowed status in every college of education.

The relative significance of individual thinkers will rightly remain the stuff of intense debate, but the broad parameters of their radical legacy, given added impetus by the social transitions of the 1960s onwards, and the rise in academia of post-modernism, post-structuralism, new waves of feminism and evolving technology, all collide into today's social justice movement. As such, critical theories developed apace on university campuses from the late 1960s onwards. (There are many explicit examples of texts translating this ideology into a model for education.)⁸⁸

Its transition into UK schools has been enabled by activists, educators, governments, and corporations whose aims are increasingly advanced by globalisation and new technology but whose common goals could be traced back to the lofty ideals of the post-war settlement with the founding of the United Nations (UN) and the birth of international human rights.

We might associate UN offshoots like UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), UNICEF and the UNPF (Population Fund) with benign projects to assist the developing world, but increasingly they play a role in developing transnational educational programmes. These advocate progressive ideas that may well conflict with the priorities of individual nation states even to the extent ironically that many consider them a form of cultural imperialism. Only this spring, in March 2023, a concerted effort by a coalition of faith and conservative groups, mainly drawn from African countries, the Caribbean and the Gulf, successfully campaigned to prevent the UN Commission on the Status of Women adopting its preferred model of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) which advocated gender ideology and emphasised 'non-traditional families' to advance a global LGTQI vision.⁸⁹

Whilst resolutions passed at the UN and its various agencies are not binding in law, they establish significant markers for national policy makers and seemingly create new rights and

⁸⁸ Gloria Landsden Billings 'Toward a Critical race theory of education'; Pat Bydall, Education and Racism: An Action Manual, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED073214>; Medium.com, 'The Other Side of Social and Emotional Learning: Culture, Identity, and Community Concepts of Teaching and Learning in K-12 Education', <https://medium.com/inspired-ideas-prek-12/the-other-side-of-sel-culture-identity-and-community-concepts-e1582c9a5dee>

⁸⁹ CitizenGO, 'Stop the United Nations from corrupting our children at CSW67', <https://citizengo.org/en-gb/lf/210300-stop-united-nations-corrupting-our-children-csw67> and IPPF, 'The Commission on the Status of Women adopts Agreed Conclusions', <https://www.ippf.org/media-center/commission-status-women-adopts-agreed-conclusions>

norms with which governments, and activists, keenly associate to burnish their international credentials.⁹⁰ An excoriating analysis of CSE⁹¹ has just been published by the campaign group Safe Schools Alliance UK, which argues with good reason that elements of the programmes are as likely to sexualise children as they are to equip with them the knowledge and skills they need to safely manage their transition to adulthood. Safe Schools Alliance sees the inclusion within CSE of ideas drawn from Queer Theory, Gender ideology and sex positivity, all now present in UK schools, as potentially conflicting with safeguarding responsibilities. UN agencies are also directly engaged with nearly 5,000 schools across the UK through the UNICEF project, Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) (of those, over 2,000 schools have been granted a Silver: Rights Aware and a Gold: Rights Respecting accreditation by UNICEF UK since 2006.⁹² That is around one in six of the UK's 29,682 maintained schools).⁹³

The idea that children should be brought up to respect 'rights' may not sound controversial, even allowing for the lack of a correlating stress on responsibilities, but whose rights, and who gets to define them? And as many of the schools involved with the RRSA are primary schools, we are introducing the language of rights, itself a political idea, to be absorbed uncritically by children not yet old enough to query the context or legitimacy of these 'rights' which are often framed as supranational, and therefore effectively beyond the accountability of any one government.

These dilemmas are hard enough for adults to resolve, as is evident in our current societal spasm around the conflicts between women's rights and the case for 'trans' rights. Further, since 1992 as signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the capacity of any UK school (RRSA-affiliated or not) to prevent pupils joining protests, such as the 2019 Thunberg-inspired climate 'school strikes', is compromised by the state's duty to protect the rights of children to protest. Not only is the obligation on signatory states to uphold these rights to protest, the 'rights' are to be put to political ends, so that the UN Human Rights Committee stated that as children are particularly vulnerable to the 'effects of climate catastrophe', they should be included in the decision-making processes for its resolution. This has bolstered the cause of activists (or over enthusiastic teachers) who used the climate strikes to recruit and train an intersectional cadre primed for protest. Extinction Rebellion (XR), which helped organise the school strike movement, drilled activists to know their rights and linked climate change to racial injustice, so that when⁹⁴ the BLM protests erupted in 2020, they were not as spontaneous as may have appeared.

This merger of rights and politics is evident on the RRSA's website, which explains,

⁹⁰ United Nations, 'International Human Rights Law: A Short History', <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/international-human-rights-law-short-history>

⁹¹ Safe Schools Alliance UK, 'Pushing boundaries: 'Sexuality education' from UNESCO and WHO', <https://safeschoolsallianceuk.net/2023/04/29/unesco-who-sexuality-education/>

⁹² UNICEF, 'Awarded schools across the UK', <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/awarded-schools/#%3A~%3Atext%3DMore%20than%205%2C000%20schools%20across%20the%20UK%20are%2Cunits%20in%20England%2C%20Northern%20Ireland%2C%20Scotland%20and%20Wales>

⁹³ gov.uk, 'Education and training statistics for the UK', <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk>

⁹⁴ *The Guardian*, 'It was empowering': teen BLM activists on learning the ropes at school climate strikes', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/11/school-strikes-were-empowering-teen-black-lives-matter-activists-on-their-environmental-awakening-extinction-rebellion>

‘The RRSA programme unifies a range of educational priorities in all UK jurisdictions; the global dimension, social and emotional aspects of learning, community cohesion and sustainable development’.

Here, in one sentence, is a complete and holistic worldview, incorporating globalisation, environmentalism, ‘inclusion’ and, explicitly, ‘social and emotional learning’ (SEL) – which is a specific pedagogy, elevating the centrality of emotional rather than intellectual engagement with material, now present in most American schools and increasingly so in the UK via the curriculum obligations to PSHE education. Indeed, SEL is so prominent a feature of American school life that it now features as an opening page on Microsoft windows (sometimes unprompted), creating a perfect circularity for those parties interested in embedding not only a particular worldview but a technological means to ensure its ubiquity.

In this case, Microsoft offers children the option to download tools, in the form of various cartoon monsters which are meant to help them understand and express their feelings.⁹⁵ Microsoft’s SEL programme (MS Reflect) argues that this approach will help children to learn. No evidence is offered in support and whilst it is not contentious to suggest that emotional intelligence is positive, should this be the specific remit of schools at all? Next, consider the effortless way in which on this platform alone, with its phenomenally powerful cultural reach, emotions are linked with political activism. In ‘Imagine Gen-E’, we are encouraged to ask,

‘what would our world look like if it were run by people who were raised to be emotionally intelligent?... How would we approach our most pressing challenges like climate change? It is a future where feelings come first’.

SEL, whilst an American programme, is like many of the PSHE and RSE EDI initiatives in UK schools in making claims to objective and expert ‘evidence’ data driven research to justify its urgent requirement in schools. There are no objective standards for the collection and analysis of this data so that, for example, when schools commission external agencies to survey the opinions of pupils on race, gender and sexuality, how can we be sure that the questions did not lead towards a conclusion that points to the need for action against a supposed endemic problem?

Even if following the very highest industry standards (and it is hard to know what these are given this practice is unregistered and unregulated) is it ever appropriate for children below the age of 16 to be surveyed about political and deeply personal issues such as gender and sexuality, particularly within a school setting? When the Scottish government attempted to conduct a sexual health survey amongst pupils aged 14 and over, the intrusiveness and explicit nature of some of the questions led some local authorities to withdraw their support from the endeavour.⁹⁶ There are big ethical issues here about the collection of data, the framing of the questions, the transparency of the whole process and the subsequent use to which it is put. Yet this has become a little-reported feature of school life, with private

⁹⁵ Microsoft, ‘The hidden power of feelings’, <https://unlocked.microsoft.com/reflect-feelings-monster/?ocid=cmmw8o09xh1&form=M402JX>

⁹⁶ BBC News, ‘What is the school ‘sex survey’ row about?’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-59518427>

agencies such as Flair, a million-pound business (Companies House last accounts), that currently works with over 100 schools in the independent and maintained sectors, applying its own 'data analytics' to drive 'racial equity' and 'systemic change'. Flair is perfectly entitled to pursue its own business and political purposes, but are such stated aims which presuppose both a particular problem (systemic racism) and a particular solution (equity) suitable as the basis for a campaign in schools?

The UN commands particular status but it is far from the only transnational agency, including the World Bank, the WHO and the OECD, with an interest in education. There are many positives in benchmarking and establishing international best practice. Indeed, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) markings officiated by the OECD are generally considered to have created a framework for improving educational outcomes, if one accepts the parameters by which that is judged. However, all these international agencies, regardless of the relative value of all or individual programmes, have the effect of standardising a vision of education deemed best suited to a corporatist worldview in which an international workforce should be equipped with the new 'literacies', the common currency of EDI. This vision may incorporate objective standards for measuring the traditional core subjects and yet even PISA trains these outcomes toward wider social goals such as achieving net zero by 2050, asking in its report of December 2022: how can education endow students with the 'pro-environmental attitudes' they need?⁹⁷

There is little or no room in this instrumentalist approach simply to engage with the principle of education for its own sake. At least with Brexit we may have dodged a huge EU-shaped bullet explicitly aimed at undermining the classic case for education. In a raft of recent documents from the European Commission, the case is comprehensively made for 'activising' schools. Here, with reference to mental health particularly,

'A general consensus exists within Member States that gaining academic knowledge on its own is not enough for young people in order to avoid... inequity, poverty, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion. In the 21st Century education needs to go beyond the narrow sectoral goals such as academic achievement.'

The document goes on to lay out a comprehensive, whole school approach to integrating wellbeing throughout the pedagogy, with a curriculum addressing stigma and prejudice, school practice, evaluation, engagement with the local community and a 'strong meaningful student voice'.⁹⁸ There seems to be no consideration in this hyper-efficient approach to embedding 'mental health literacies' to the wisdom and therapeutic potential within literature itself, or religious studies, or history, let alone art or music, if there is much time left in a school day to teach it when schools have delivered their raft of responsibilities.

Ironically it was the need to educate a growing workforce in response to the industrial revolution that had spurred the expansion of schools and the development of education for

⁹⁷ PISA, 'Are Students Ready to Take on Environmental Challenges?', https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/are-students-ready-to-take-on-environmental-challenges_8abe655c-en.

⁹⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Simões, C., Caravita, S., Cefai, C., *A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU: analytical report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/50546>

the masses in the second half of the 19th century. The prominent campaigner Matthew Arnold argued that the state was duty bound to ensure that working- and middle-class children had access to a broad liberal education such as he had seen on the continent, and his broad vision of a knowledge-based approach was to emerge as the consensus model for the best part of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, that idea of education, as valuable for its own sake, has been consistently diluted in Britain by rafts of reforms since the 1960s. Many traditionalists date a turning point to the abolition of grammar schools and the assumption, implicit in the very concept of comprehensive education, that schools should perform a structural function akin to social engineering, rather than seeing the quality of the education itself as the engine for social mobility. With that state-driven vision of egalitarianism intrinsic to the system itself, it is easy to see how schooling could be further co-opted to suit specific political ends, particularly with the emphasis on testing and centralisation which all governments have pursued, and which, despite its intent to raise standards, was necessarily deepened by the introduction of the national curriculum by a Conservative government in 1988.

New Labour's emphatic cry of 'Education, Education, Education', with its rapid expansion of the tertiary sector (building on John Major's ill-considered reforms), increasingly conflated academic and vocational qualifications, so could more accurately be characterised as a call for 'Training, Training, Training'. However, it was constitutional change and liberalising social reform rather than attention to education per se which enabled many of the subsequent developments within schools. The 'new' in New Labour was less about its forced acceptance of market economics than of its shrewd immersion into the burgeoning politics of identity. No doubt, too, Thatcher's shrillest tones which had been realised in laws to prevent local authorities from promoting homosexuality (Section 28) simply seemed out of step with changing mores by the time Blair's government repealed them in 2003. The social conservatism, no doubt informed in part by homophobia, that presaged the introduction of Section 28 in the 1980s had been provoked by the activities of hard-left councils and the introduction into some schools of books equating same-sex households with a traditional family unit. Political campaigning within schools is not new, but in Thatcher's government, whatever the motivations, there was an attempt to restrict it, both in the Section 28 legislation and in the attempts to limit the scope of radical education authorities, most obviously in the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority in 1990.

A mere two decades later the New Labour government departed office, but not before burying the logic of those Thatcherite reforms, both by reintroducing London government (and national devolution more widely) and in the strengthening and deepening of equalities legislation, embedding the human right's agenda into the British constitution and creating a political bind for Conservatives unable to articulate a response for fear of being branded every shade of chauvinist.

The Equality Act 2010 applies directly to schools, including to pupil admissions,⁹⁹ provision of education, facilities and disciplinary processes. Whilst not intended to undermine the

⁹⁹ The protected characteristics of age and marriage and civil partnership are expressly excluded, although these would apply in relation to staff, staff recruitment.

Education Act, its influence on schools has been profound; by creating another diversion from the fundamental business of teaching established knowledge, by bringing the heightened consciousness of ‘protected characteristics’ into the school environment and, through its obligations, incentivising the creation of an industry of ‘expert’ consultants to supply the lessons that cautious school heads feel unqualified to offer. Indeed, Ofsted, the Schools Inspectorate, acknowledge the challenges to schools posed by the Equality Act, particularly with reference to handling sexuality and gender issues, writing in 2021,

‘The increasing political sensitivities in these areas have made it harder for schools to handle equalities well. For example, school staff can occasionally confuse the legal, the moral and the political, and so (often inadvertently) bring overtly political materials into their curriculum and teaching without acknowledging it as such, despite the statutory requirement of political neutrality.’¹⁰⁰

The expanded legal requirements on schools go beyond the Public Sector Equality Duty mandated by the Equality Act, and indeed the Education Act, with its requirements to promote ‘spiritual, moral and cultural’¹⁰¹ and ‘safeguarding and welfare’¹⁰² and into the highly instrumentalising legislation of the Conservative-led Coalition government. Ironically, as education secretary Michael Gove was portrayed by his many critics on the left as a dangerous reactionary intent on using every means to re-traditionalise schools. If only. His controversial Free Schools reforms, building on Labour’s academy reforms, held great promise as a vehicle for increasing an element of selection, emphasis on discipline and enhanced parental choice. But as all schools are subject to common legislation and pupils to common examinations, the scope for innovation through genuine competition has proved limited, and the expansion of the academy chains has created new bureaucracies whose policies and practices are now arguably less accountable to parents than those of the former local education authorities.

Just as the direction of education reform under the Coalition appeared to be decentralising, an increasingly interventionist layer of legislation was being enacted. The tensions inherent in offering a universal education that sits within a multicultural environment have been exposed both by the so-called ‘Trojan Horse’ affair and through a series of protests, by parents concerned with some elements of the LGBT+ agenda which had been returning to schools after the repealing of Section 28.¹⁰³ In the former case the charge was that sectarian Islamists were intent on radicalising local schools; in the latter, the concerns which have proved enduring are those of many parents confounded by explicit content directed at children within schools which is at odds with their values at home.

The resulting legislative solutions, strengthened by the 2014 amendments to the Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural obligations already on schools, left them with the duty not just to

¹⁰⁰ Ofsted, ‘Research commentary: teaching about sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment’,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/research-commentary-teaching-about-sex-sexual-orientation-and-gender-reassignment>

¹⁰¹ gov.uk, ‘Education Act 2002’, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/section/78/2002-09-02>

¹⁰² gov.uk, ‘Education Act 2002’, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/section/175>; gov.uk, ‘Children Act 2004’, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/section/10>

¹⁰³ BBC News, ‘Birmingham LGBT school row: Protests ‘won’t stop lessons’’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-48401641> and BBC News, ‘No Outsiders row: Drag queens read books to children’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-47759172>

respect but actively to promote 'British values', which hitherto, in a country with no written constitution, were a settled, innate, and scarcely debatable distillation drawn from our common inheritance. The struggle to define British values, let alone to teach them, seems an ironic but inevitable outcome of the diluting of a liberal education that is rooted in our own history, literature, institutions and culture, and which for the most part had effortlessly inculcated a common understanding of such values with their intrinsic capacity for tolerance and inclusion. Whilst teaching about British institutions and law would reasonably form our equivalent of civics classes, the departure into defining the subjective area of values has opened the door to assertive interpretations of concepts such as 'racism' and 'sexism'. In addition, the pressure on schools to deliver this strand was further increased by new obligations from 2015 to incorporate a Prevent (counter-extremism) programme required under the Security Act.

6. Other bricks in the wall

During the Conservative Party leadership election in summer 2022 I took an opportunity to raise some of these issues with Rishi Sunak. It was a brief conversation as he was leaving a hustings meeting, but it was clear that he was familiar with some of my concerns, particularly around the issue of Relationships, Health and Sex Education. He told me that, based on what he then understood, it would be appropriate to review the terms of the Public Sector Equality Duty (that is the requirement to put the Equalities Act into practice), as it falls on schools.

The good sense in that approach is borne out by the findings of the two key reports I have referenced, from the New Social Covenant Unit and Policy Exchange, which confirm that material is being presented in schools, particularly in RSHE, which many will feel goes far beyond the legal minimum requirement within the Public Sector Equality Duty, or indeed a ‘reasonable’ interpretation of the law. The Chief Inspector of Schools, Amanda Spielman, has also recently expressed frustration at the limitations available to her as a regulator, and suggested the government consider instituting a maximum requirement.¹⁰⁴ This would be a useful amendment, and having now been raised as a proposal should at least be considered in the review that has been announced. The question this raises however is why it is that schools, and teachers, are in some cases pushing the limits of the law beyond what is required and ignoring impartiality requirements.

Schools should never be hermetically sealed institutions, and they will of course reflect wider society where these discussions are ever more prevalent. It must also be true though that some teachers bring a specific activist intent to the classroom. Take, for example, the National Education Union, notoriously radical by reputation, it is nonetheless the largest representing teachers in the UK. Its General Secretary elect, Daniel Kebede, is a political activist who is clear about his own convictions, telling the Marxism Festival 2019 that,

‘The British education system is fundamentally and institutionally racist. Because the national curriculum has continued to be organised by powerful white men, it has continued to be whitewashed.’¹⁰⁵

National Education Union (NEU) policies are consistently supportive both of Critical Social Justice theories and of the ‘whole school approach’ to embedding them. At its most recent conference, in March 2023, its members voted for a motion to support the LGBT ‘heteronormativity challenging’ practice of inviting drag queens into schools and libraries to read to children. In its recently revised LGBT guidelines for schools, the union says that schools should review the curriculum to,

‘ensure it includes... teaching about LGBT+ involvement in culture – art philosophy etc. ...teaching about prevalence and resistance to homophobia ...reviewing lesson

¹⁰⁴ *The Telegraph*, ‘Ofsted chief’s warning over explicit sex education lessons’, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/03/09/ofsted-chiefs-warning-explicit-sex-education-lessons/>

¹⁰⁵ *The Times*, ‘Teaching union’s new leader attacks ‘brutally racist state’, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/teaching-unions-new-leader-attacks-brutally-racist-state-wdr6s9kl>

plans across all subjects eliminate heteronormative bias, to challenge gender stereotypes and to ensure diverse families and sexual orientations and gender identity are represented across all subjects.'

It also argues that LGBT+ inclusion is essential to a broad and balanced education and supports members to deliver good, evidence-based practice, **rather than simply meet legal requirements**. In summary, the NEU concludes that these approaches are connected through a 'virtual circle of Equity, Justice, Respect, Wellbeing and Belonging'.

Some practicing teachers are also involved in external consultancies that deliver PSHE/RSE content and lessons to other schools. Take as an example Queered.co.uk, headed by 'a senior leader of a primary academy in London, England and an openly gay man (preferred pronouns he/him)'. This consultancy, and more importantly this teacher, uses his website to argue that schools should feature lessons which go further than the minimum requirements of the law to a point that:

*'Every school is not only delivering an LGBT+ inclusive curriculum **beyond** the Department for Education's PSHE/RSE guidance.... Our aim is to empower education professionals and schools across the UK and beyond to become 'queer inclusive' through...fighting social inequalities in education...critiquing the heteronormative culture of educational institutions and challenging cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions.'*

This instructive website is neat encapsulation of a partisan, holistic worldview that is clearly set on going beyond 'official' PHSE/RSE guidance, with ideas around gender that are now being exposed for the very real danger they pose particularly to impressionable adolescents who may be set on a course to pursue irreversible medical interventions. As a principle, allowing schools flexibility and independence around setting their own curriculum and lesson content is right, but the very real vulnerability of PSHE and RSE in particular, to the injection of ideas which are certainly partisan and may sometimes amount to safeguarding breaches and explains concerns over the lack of a ceiling within official guidance.

Mainstream education unions have long been notoriously left-wing, or certainly inclined against sitting governments, so it is not surprising that the NEU so blatantly politicises what is meant to be a representative role. The ubiquity, and normalisation, of Critical Social Justice is revealed elsewhere throughout the rest of what is meant to be the impartial ecosystem around schools, including teacher training, curriculum and exam boards, even ostensibly neutral educational publishers.

The campaign group Don't Divide Us has compiled instructive examples in evidence for its campaign against indoctrination. One leading educational publisher is promoting a new Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14) French course to teachers, senior leaders and heads who could reasonably expect a key industry player to meet established educational criteria in language teaching. Yet this prominent university press is offering a particular interpretation of a traditional school subject in arguing that it is important for pre-GSCE students to learn,

'how French came to spoken in parts of the world other than France. We must lean into these conversations about colonization... the author has worked closely with a leading member of the Association for Language Learning... to go some way to achieving an anti-racist, decolonising approach to the unit'.

Decolonisation, a phenomenon which has gripped universities,¹⁰⁶ fillets curriculums ostensibly to give great prominence to minority voices, but can metastasise across all academic disciplines upending empirical truths and the values of western civilization. Its logic has informed the reflexive decisions of some schools to change their names if associated with historic figures,¹⁰⁷ but more significantly at school level this inevitably means removing established classics from the syllabus to make way for works which may have value, but whose place within the pantheon of classic texts is certainly debatable. It is hard to understand how removing those foundational texts which help all children to understand our history and culture and interpret their place in it, can enhance inclusivity. Yet a major UK exam board, the AQA, justify removing a Noble Prize-winning author, Kazuo Ishiguro, from their recommended books to improve 'the balance of ethnicity and gender of writers'.

¹⁰⁶ Civitas, 'Free speech and decolonisation in British universities', <https://civitas.org.uk/content/files/Free-Speech-Decolonisation-and-British-Universities-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ BBC News, 'London school votes to change name over slave trade link', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-64212115> and *Watford Observer*, 'Haberdashers' Aske's schools drops slave trader name', <https://www.watfordobserver.co.uk/news/19558381.haberdashers-askes-schools-drops-slave-trader-name/>

7. Parent power

The widespread ideological capture of the many institutions shaping schooling has happened despite long-standing legal and cultural conventions which should give greater weight in the framing of the values of schooling to the priorities of parents. Since the 1944 Education Act it has been statutory for ‘pupils be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents’. Indeed, although in practice the absorption into our culture and politics of the excesses of the international rights agenda is proving problematic, the foundational values of the UN declaration as ratified in 1948 also stated that ‘parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children’.

Parents of course do not speak with one voice. Many may be comfortable with or support a social justice vision of schooling, and our polling indicates that on some of these most contested issues there is a sizeable minority which has yet to take a view, which would indicate that greater transparency over curriculum content would at least help parents to become better informed.

The heightened attention to this whole area seems to have reminded practitioners of their responsibilities so that, for example, the Sex Education Forum (SEF), an alliance of third sector, educators and private providers of Sex and Sexuality education which argues that ‘Gender and power dynamics needs to be a thread throughout relationships and sex education’,¹⁰⁸ issued a statement welcoming the Prime Minister’s intervention to propel the review into RSHE, with a clear acknowledgment of the importance of parental involvement.¹⁰⁹ Yet, shortly before the review had been given such high profile, there was no mention at all made to parents in a statement in which the SEF urged:

‘the Government to place the experiences of young people at the core of its evaluation and development of the next iteration of curricula. Policymakers need to actively solicit and listen to the opinions of students and what information they feel they need... more time dedicated to RSE, LGBTQ+ inclusion and specialised, skilled teachers who can discuss contemporary issues. Policymakers risk letting down a whole generation if they pass up this year’s opportunity to engage young people on curricula development and deliver on the teacher training investment.’

The Sex Education Forum’s own polling¹¹⁰ of young people indicated that 42 per cent of the polled felt that schools were not informing their parents enough about RSE. Whatever conclusions parents come to, having been informed, the recent political interventions would suggest that the anecdotal evidence of parental concern is mounting into something of a grassroots protest movement, widespread albeit uncoordinated.

¹⁰⁸ Sex Education Forum, <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/>

¹⁰⁹ Sex Education Forum, ‘Our statement welcoming the RSHE Review’, <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/news/news/our-statement-welcoming-rshe-review>

¹¹⁰ Sex Education Forum, ‘Young People’s RSE Poll 2022’, <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/evidence/young-peoples-rse-poll-2022>

In Wales, where parents no longer have any rights to remove their children from sex education, there are now regular protests outside the Senedd, organised by the plucky parents' campaign Public Child Protection Wales, concerned primarily with what it sees as the overt sexualisation of children enabled by the curriculum. In Scotland the recently formed Scottish Union for Education¹¹¹ grew out of a successful campaign in 2014 against the SNP's intention to challenge family boundaries with its plan to appoint guardians for all children.

In England, the campaigner and health professional Isla Mac has worked with over 600 sets of parents across the whole country to challenge inaccurate and inappropriate teaching about gender identity within schools. Elsewhere, a mother from the home counties has set up her own Parents Support Hub, to explain to her 1,500 followers how she is taking her school through an official complaints process. On Twitter, Parents for Education, a group of volunteers who help to steer parents through the tricky process of school complaints, have well over 3,000 followers. And a mix of campaign groups, including Transgender Trend, Sex Matters, Don't Divide Us and Safe Schools Alliance UK, receive regular enquiries from parents who need help in navigating the school complaints process. In recent weeks I have personally come across one set of parents who have removed their child from a local primary school in order to home school, a mother who has had to take on the gender-neutral toilet policy of her daughter's Berkshire primary school which had socially transitioned a nine-year-old boy, a parent challenging a local secondary over its 'queering' agenda, and a parent querying the legitimacy of obliging his primary-aged child being obligated to take an anti-racist pledge at school.

Unsurprisingly, faith is a motivating factor for some – with Muslim parents having been at the forefront of high-profile school protests in the Midlands and making up a significant proportion of the over 200,000 signatories of a petition to parliament calling for an end to LGBT education in primary schools.¹¹² This call illustrates the tensions inherent in trying to navigate a consensus approach in a secular society, and it is hardly surprising that it has had short shrift from the government. However, the extreme nature of some ideas being discussed in schools almost seem set on provoking a strong backlash. In more moderate terms, the Christian Institute report a steady stream of enquiries from concerned parents, around two per week over the last year. Campaign groups often established by disaffected people from a liberal left tradition but motivated by specific aspects of Critical Social Justice, the safeguarding considerations of gender and queer ideology, for example, have large social media followings.

One example of parental activism working within the current system that did bring results was the concerted effort by parents at the American School in London to bring it in front of an Ofsted inspection over concerns about the sectarian outcomes of its radical application of Critical Race initiatives which saw children in certain activities being segregated by race. The school was marked down by two ratings and the head teacher left after the report in Spring

¹¹¹ Scottish Union for Education, 'Welcome to the Scottish Union for Education - Newsletter No1',

<https://scottishunionforeducation.substack.com/p/welcome-to-the-scottish-union-for>

¹¹² UK Government and Parliament petition, 'Remove LGBT content from the Relationships Education curriculum',

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/630932>

2022, albeit Ofsted later found all its standards were being met. However, as if to illustrate the persistence of partisanship, newspaper reports highlight new concerns around radical gender theory within the library at the school.¹¹³

With no single representative body or uniform complaints process it would be premature to describe all this spontaneous activity as a single ‘movement’, however there seems to be the making of an intriguing coalition, rather more ethnically and culturally diverse than easy insults of ‘phobic’ intent could sum up. At the very least there seems to be a case for a parents’ union that could assist parents and concerned teachers with basic information, advocacy and legal help if required. Two recent cases have shown the sheer dedication required of any parent compelled to elevate a formal complaint about a school: a judge found against a Christian parent who had wanted the right to remove her then four-year-old from a Pride Parade at school;¹¹⁴ and in a separate case, the mother, Clare Page, felt forced to take her school to the Information Commissioner when it denied her access to RSE materials.¹¹⁵

Our polling of parents showed strong support for parents having the right to remove their children from lessons around sex, relationships, and in particular, for the right for them to access sex education materials in advance of these being used in class. Three quarters of parents polled would like to see external agencies visiting schools being required to have registered accreditation.¹¹⁶ Whilst this is no automatic guarantee either of quality or impartiality within the guidelines, it would make it easier for parents, and indeed teachers, to find and compare the approach and content offered by different agencies.

Four in 10 (39 per cent) parents of teenagers think schools spend too much time covering issues about race, gender and sexuality. Almost twice as many parents think schools should spend more time on traditional subjects rather than spending more time discussion social issues on race, sexuality and gender issues (46 per cent versus 24 per cent).¹¹⁷

Almost two thirds of parents (64 per cent) want to retain the right to remove their child from lessons on sex, relationships and gender, more than double the number of parents who say that they should not have the right to remove their children from lessons on issues related to sex, relationships and gender (28 per cent).¹¹⁸

Almost eight in 10 (77 per cent) parents want a legal right to see all sex and relationships education materials. Five times the figure (14 per cent) for parents who don’t think they should have this legal right.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ *Daily Mail*, ‘After parents at Britain’s most expensive day school found violent and pornographic sex education books available for 10-year-olds, GUY ADAMS asks - do you know what’s in your child’s school library?’, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11874067/GUY-ADAMS-asks-know-whats-childs-school-library.html>

¹¹⁴ *The Times*, ‘Devout Christian mother loses Pride parade case’, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/c18bf378-e3af-11ed-9d9d-927ca944996b>

¹¹⁵ *The Times*, ‘Mother’s campaign to lift lid on graphic sex ed lessons’, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mothers-campaign-to-lift-lid-on-graphic-sex-ed-lessons-zckhz3kzq>

¹¹⁶ See appendices for polling results.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Three quarters of parents (75 per cent) back a register of external groups allowed into schools to teach children about sex, gender and relationships. Only 14 per cent of parents say that this is not necessary.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ See appendices for polling results.

8. Conclusions

What has happened in schools is both a consequence of, and a contributor to, changes within wider society. I hope that people reading this will share my concern about the dangers to education and the commensurate diminution of our capacity to absorb, understand, interpret, and apply factual knowledge. Its repercussions are profound for the individual, for our common bonds and for society. We have seen already how impartiality itself has become a controversial value and something which once lay at the cornerstone of our broadcast and wider professional culture is being eroded daily. In a world where activism is embedded at school, is it any wonder that the BBC (once the gold standard for objective news coverage) struggles to uphold or even understand impartiality, or that barristers, once bound by the law, now feel fit to redefine it¹²¹ according to their own political priorities?

Whilst we are adding to the demands on schools to offer any number of new so-called 'literacies', we are also still turning many children out of school with inadequate basic skills; according to the government's own statistics, 41 per cent of children leave primary school struggling to read, write and do basic maths.¹²² The logic and intent of Critical Social Justice is to undermine the traditional knowledge-based curriculum and teaching methods, as well as to fill out the school day with so much else. If schools were actually prevented from indoctrinating, in line with the legal requirements, they would have more time to teach.

The complex policy infrastructure and ideological ecosystem we have built around schools militates against any fundamental reform, but the problem is not a lack of legal foundation. We have the law, and it states clearly that schools should not indoctrinate. The problem is one of political understanding and of will, and it requires a government with a committed reforming and patient agenda determined to liberate schools from various onerous obligations. As the Prime Minister indicated, a good place to start would be to address the Public Sector Equality Duty as it falls on schools. It should be made clear that the duty does not extend to using the Equality Act as a tool to advance equity within the curriculum. The primacy of the Education Act, with its requirement for impartiality, must be reinstated. The micro-movement in that direction which we are currently witnessing is welcome, but we are a long way off anything approaching a UK version of the kind of concerted approach we see in the US from governors Ron DeSantis and Glen Youngkin, where tough action is finding electoral favour because the divisive effects of identity politics within wider society are already more clearly exposed.

Here, the vested interests built into the system seem to have become too vested and too established. So, although there is a need to introduce important reforms around specific problems, such as ways to bolster parental rights with full transparency over controversial materials, an impartiality inspection obligation on Ofsted and the Independent Schools

¹²¹ Good Law Project, 'Why our founder would refuse to prosecute climate protesters', <https://goodlawproject.org/why-our-founder-would-refuse-to-prosecute-climate-protesters/>

¹²² gov.uk, 'Key stage 2 attainment', <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment>

Inspectorate, some sort of registration system for third party providers, and a new Parents Union, such measures while vital are only incremental.

The remarkable rise in the number of children being home schooled (whilst the government is looking to restrict these rights) does point to a serious and recent shift in the public perception of our education system and indicates a radical direction of reform that could take on the original energy behind the Free School Movement and the logic of education vouchers to enable market liberalisation. But opting for a wider variety of school models, even if this were practical, does not in itself create more competition around school policies, curriculum priorities and examinations. Any move to create a real competition in schools should be matched with moves to repatriate regulation from international agencies and efforts to unpick the rights culture that feeds identity politics.

This is blue sky thinking within broad parameters, but if we continue to consider education as an instrument of social justice or just a means to getting a particular type of job, we limit our interest in considering ideas. As a parent I worry that these trends in education are degrading the capacity for children to think objectively, but also whether the emphasis on separate identities is just dividing us, the fixation with sex and sexuality borders on 'sexual obesity', the tendency to climate alarmism at school contributes to an 'activated' hysteria, and the particular focus on wellbeing and emotional literacy is rendering a generation unable to process feelings in a rational manner? All totalitarian belief systems know that education is the route to submission. If we do not put objective, established knowledge back at the heart of schooling, there is a great deal more at stake simply than schools themselves.

Appendix A: What *parents* think

Deltapoll interviewed 1,097 **parents** of 12- to 16-year-old children in England online between 20th - 27th March 2023. The data have been demographically weighted to be representative of the target population as a whole.

Thinking about what you may have seen, read or heard, how worried are you, if at all, about the teaching of issues around sex, sexuality, and gender in your child’s school? Would you say you are...	
Very worried	14%
Quite worried	32%
Not very worried	32%
Not worried at all	20%
Don’t know	2%

To the best of your knowledge, do you think that schools are or are not currently able to refer a child under the age of 18 to a counsellor or therapist (for a variety of issues including those relating to sex, sexuality, and gender) WITH parental permission?	
Yes – schools are able to refer under 18s to a counsellor with parental permission	60%
No – schools are not able to refer under 18s to a counsellor with parental permission	16%
Don’t know	24%

To the best of your knowledge, do you think that schools are or are not currently able to refer a child under the age of 18 to a counsellor or therapist (for a variety of issues including those relating to sex, sexuality, and gender) WITHOUT parental permission?	
Yes – schools are able to refer under 18s to a counsellor without parental permission	37%
No – schools are not able to refer under 18s to a counsellor without parental permission	38%
Don’t know	26%

At the moment, schools are currently able to refer a child under the age of 18 to a counsellor or therapist WITHOUT parental permission. Do you think schools should or should not have this right?	
Yes – schools should have the right to refer without parental permission	41%
No – schools should not have the right to refer without parental permission	47%
Don’t know	12%

As far as you are aware, which one of the following do you most agree with?	
Schools spend much too much time promoting social issues on sexuality, race and gender	20%
Schools spend a bit too much time promoting social issues on sexuality, race and gender	19%
Schools spend about the right amount of time on this	31%
Schools don't spend quite enough time promoting social issues on sexuality, race and gender	17%
Schools don't spend nearly enough time promoting social issues on sexuality, race and gender	5%
Don't know	8%

Which one of the following would you say comes closest to your preference?	
Schools should spend more time promoting social issues on sex, gender, race	24%
Schools should spend more time on traditional subjects	46%
The current balance is about right	24%
Don't know	6%

Do you think that parents should or should not have the right to remove their child from lessons on issues related to sex, relationships, and gender?	
Parents should have the right to remove their children from lessons on issues related to sex, relationships, and gender	64%
Parents should not have the right to remove their children from lessons on issues related to sex, relationships, and gender	28%
Don't know	8%

Do you think that parents should or should not have the unrestricted legal right to see all Relationships and Sex Education materials and lesson plans?	
Parents should have the right	77%
Parents should not have the right	14%
Don't know	9%

As you may know, there is currently NO official register of external groups that can visit schools to present lessons on relationships, sex, and gender. Do you think external speakers coming into schools to talk about sex, relationships, and gender should or should not have to be registered?

Necessary for external speakers to have registered accreditation	75%
Not necessary for external speakers to have registered accreditation	14%
Don't know	11%

We would now like you to think about gender identity specifically. Do you think it is acceptable or not acceptable for schools to allow students under the age of 16 to change their gender during the school day WITH parental permission?

Acceptable	44%
Unacceptable	41%
Don't know	15%

And in a situation where parental permission is not required, which one of the following do you think should apply?

Schools should allow the pupil to change their gender	22%
Schools should not allow or discourage the pupil one way or the other	47%
Schools should discourage the pupil from changing their gender	17%
Don't know	15%

And do you think it is acceptable or not acceptable for schools to allow students under the age of 16 to change their gender during the school day WITHOUT parental permission?

Acceptable	26%
Unacceptable	59%
Don't know	16%

To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose changing the age in which someone can apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate from 18 years old to 16 years old?

Strongly support	11%
Tend to support	21%
Neither support nor oppose	22%
Tend to oppose	16%
Strongly oppose	27%
Don't know	4%

In each of the following cases, do you support or oppose schools..... 1 = Strongly support 2 = Tend to support 3 = Neither support nor oppose 4 = Tend to oppose 5 = Strongly oppose 6 = Don't know	
Telling pupils that a woman can have a penis	Strongly support: 6% Tend to support: 11% Neither support nor oppose: 25% Tend to oppose: 18% Strongly oppose: 35% Don't know: 4%
Telling pupils that a man could get pregnant	Strongly support: 6% Tend to support: 11% Neither support nor oppose: 20% Tend to oppose: 18% Strongly oppose: 41% Don't know: 4%
Promoting events like Pride Week or LGBT+ History Month	Strongly support: 16% Tend to support: 29% Neither support nor oppose: 24% Tend to oppose: 11% Strongly oppose: 17% Don't know: 3%
Teaching pupils that Britain is structurally racist (that the system in this country discriminates against people who are not white)	Strongly support: 10% Tend to support: 17% Neither support nor oppose: 24% Tend to oppose: 17% Strongly oppose: 27% Don't know: 6%
Should discuss or use a 'colour-blind' approach (treating people the same irrespective of their skin colour) to issues on ethnicity and racism	Strongly support: 29% Tend to support: 27% Neither support nor oppose: 23% Tend to oppose: 8% Strongly oppose: 7% Don't know: 5%
Inviting a drag queen into schools to perform to students	Strongly support: 9% Tend to support: 16% Neither support nor oppose: 26% Tend to oppose: 16% Strongly oppose: 29% Don't know: 4%
Decolonising the curriculum	Strongly support: 8% Tend to support: 14% Neither support nor oppose: 36% Tend to oppose: 14%

	Strongly oppose: 12% Don't know: 15%
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To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'boys in my child's school are made to feel ashamed for being male'?	
Strongly agree	7%
Agree	17%
Neither agree nor disagree	19%
Disagree	25%
Strongly disagree	25%
Don't know	7%

Compared to say a generation ago, do you think that school pupils today are.....	
Much more anxious about things than they used to be	40%
A little more anxious than they used to be	29%
About the same level of anxious	19%
A little less anxious than they used to be	3%
A lot less anxious than they used to be	2%
Don't know	6%

And finally, do you think that discussions about climate change in your child's school are leading to.....	
Much higher levels of anxiety and depression than would otherwise be the case if it were not discussed	17%
Somewhat higher levels of anxiety and depression	35%
No difference one way or the other	34%
Somewhat lower levels of anxiety and depression	3%
Much lower levels of anxiety and depression than would otherwise be the case if it were not discussed	2%
Don't know	8%

Appendix B: What teenagers think

Deltapoll surveyed 1,168 **young people** aged between 16- and 18-years-old in England online between 20th – 27th March 2023. The data have been demographically weighted to be representative of the target population as a whole.

Thinking about the last 12 months or so, which, if any, of the following have been celebrated or commemorated in some way at your school?	
Christmas	73%
Easter	59%
Pride	33%
Black History Month	48%
Platinum/Diamond Jubilee	31%
St George's Day	30%
Diwali	24%
Chinese New Year	33%
International Women's Day	40%
International Men's Day	13%
Eid	25%
Ramadan	31%
Pancake Day	46%
Hanukah	13%
LGBT History Month	32%
Transgender Day of Remembrance	10%
Black Lives Matter	36%
Remembrance Day	50%
International Earth Day	23%
None of them	1%
Don't know	1%

Thinking about the school you attend or attended, have you ever been taught or discussed any of the following concepts?	
White privilege	30%
Unconscious bias	25%
Microaggressions	17%
Toxic masculinity	27%
Structural racism	32%
Sex positivity	41%
Gender/trans ideology	33%
Critical race theory	19%
Surrogacy for gay and trans couples	19%
Queer theory	16%
Ableism	16%
Decolonisation	15%
Heteronormativity	15%

Inclusive reproductive	14%
Intersectionality	14%
None of them	14%
Don't know	3%

Would you say that during lessons that you have been taught that Britain used to be a racist country?

Yes – I have been taught that Britain used to be a racist country	69%
No – I have not been taught that Britain used to be a racist country	27%
Don't know	4%

And would you say that during lessons you have been taught that Britain is currently a racist country?

Yes – I have been taught that Britain is currently a racist country	42%
No – I have not been taught that Britain is a racist country	52%
Don't know	5%

Which of the following statements would you say comes closest to your view?

My school positively encourages different viewpoints when discussing contentious social issues (on gender, sexuality, and sex) and I always feel comfortable contributing my opinion	45%
My school positively encourages different viewpoints when discussing contentious social issues (on gender, sexuality and sex) but I don't feel comfortable contributing my opinion in case it leads to me being judged or bullied by other students	35%
My school presents a single viewpoint on contentious social issues (on gender, sexuality and sex) but I don't feel comfortable contributing my opinion in case it leads to me being judged or bullied by other students	11%
My school presents a single viewpoint on contentious social issues (on gender, sexuality and sex) but I would feel comfortable expressing a different opinion	5%
None of the above	2%
Don't know	2%

And would you say that during lessons you have been taught that young men are currently a problem for society, or not?	
Yes – I have been taught that young men are a problem for society	41%
No – I have not been taught that young men are a problem for society	55%
Don't know	4%

Moving on, do you personally, or do you know of anyone at your school, who wants to change their gender or has done so in the past?	
Yes – you yourself	10%
Yes – one person (not you)	29%
Yes – several people	25%
Yes – you yourself and other people	2%
No	31%
Don't know	3%
Prefer not to answer	1%

To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose changing the age in which someone can apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate from 18 years old to 16 years old?	
Strongly support	24%
Tend to support	32%
Neither support nor oppose	19%
Tend to oppose	9%
Strongly oppose	13%
Don't know	2%

Have you ever been taught or told any of the following by any of your teachers at school, or by someone invited to speak at your school?	
Sex is assigned at birth	
Yes	67%
No	28%
Don't know	5%
A woman can have a penis	
Yes	32%
No	62%
Don't know	6%
A man can get pregnant	
Yes	20%
No	76%
Don't know	4%

Thinking back to your sex education lessons at school were you ever taught about?	
Bondage, Dominance and Sadomasochism (BDSM)	
Yes	23%
No	71%
Don't know	6%
Masturbation	
Yes	59%
No	37%
Don't know	4%

Moving on, how often, if at all, would you say you personally feel anxious or sad?	
Very often	14%
Quite often	39%
Not very often	37%
Not often at all / never	9%
Don't know	1%

Have any of the following caused, contributed to or made any anxiety or sadness you've felt worse? When answering, please consider not only how your personal experiences of each of these issues has or has not made you feel, but also how other people's experiences of these issues in general makes you feel.	
Climate change	26%
Racism	27%
Sexism	23%
Homophobia	17%
Transphobia	10%
Feeling guilty about your ethnicity	15%
Feeling guilty about your sexuality	13%
Feeling guilty about your gender	11%
Feeling unsure about your sexuality	15%
Feeling unsure about your gender identity	11%
None of the above/something else	11%
None of them	21%
Don't know	2%
Prefer not to say	2%

How likely or unlikely to you think it is that the world is likely to end in your lifetime as a result of.....

- 1 = Very likely**
- 2 = Quite likely**
- 3 = Quite unlikely**
- 4 = Very unlikely**
- 5 = Don't know**

Nuclear war	Very likely: 16% Quite likely: 35% Quite unlikely: 26% Very unlikely: 17% Don't know: 6%
Climate change	Very likely: 21% Quite likely: 32% Quite unlikely: 24% Very unlikely: 18% Don't know: 4%

Some people believe that having multiple children can contribute to over-population and climate change. Do you think that people should or should not have fewer children to help to stop over-population and climate change?

Yes - people should have fewer children to help prevent over population and climate change	50%
No - people should have as few or as many children as they want	43%
Don't know	7%

Writer and broadcaster **Jo-Anne Nadler** provides a thought-provoking analysis of trends in UK schooling which she describes as a '*Social Justice Educational Complex*' that threatens core values of impartiality and universality in our schools.

Nadler argues that a 'revolution' delivered 'largely by stealth' is supported by a burgeoning industry of external providers and often self-declared 'expert' consultants on issues such as race, equity, gender and sexuality.

This publication reviews controversial concepts introduced in schools through the 'Relationships, Sex and Health Education' (RSHE) curriculum as part of a wider ideology. She explains how what can be seen as a specific worldview has come to permeate schooling through a deliberate process of embedding, advocated by activists and by governments alike.

Two separate polling exercises commissioned for this report find that contentious ideas are seemingly widespread in schools, with evidence too that these are not always presented in accordance within the legal obligations to impartiality. This polling found that almost half of pupils felt uncomfortable challenging contentious ideas at school and a large majority of parents want unrestricted legal rights to see all RSHE materials and lesson plans.

Responding to this evidence, Jo-Anne Nadler recommends parents come together to form a 'Union of Parents' and that urgent steps need to be taken to give parents more power to see what is going on in our schools system.