



Schools: What are they good for?

by Jane Turner

As the Christmas decorations get removed and packed away carefully for another year, the school uniforms are retrieved from the back of the wardrobe in readiness for a return to school this week and parents quietly breathe a sigh of relief as they have just about reached the limits of their energy and patience.

But wait! Is it still wise to pack young people off to school anymore - as it's now widely recognised as an institution that's failing? Is it really worth investing around 36 weeks of the year for over 11 years in a place where little of any worth is actually taught or learned?

Despite increased expenditure, constant political pressure, various strategies and consultancy, changes of ownership, new styles of management and billions of pounds spent on physical and technological infrastructure, over decades – schools, especially state ones, are still worsening and generally not doing a very good job. So maybe “little Johnny” would be better off in front of his computer or why not just give him a good book instead? Last week, in a remarkable admission, the incoming Ofsted Chief, Sir Michael Wilshaw told The Times that many Academies are failing because of a lack of monitoring. So previously, schools failed because of over-control, and now it seems because of a lack of it... hmm!

It wasn't that long ago that Academies (schools “freed” from or independent of local authority control) were said to be the panacea to all the educational ills. With “freedom” they were expected to flourish and yet they are not, which begs the question “why”? But I'm not sure that Sir Michael has come up with the right reasons as to why schools are failing, nor is he proposing any new solutions that have not been tried before in some other guise?

Sir Michael has declared that it is now time to appoint “dozens of independent local commissioners”, to identify incompetent teachers, failing schools and halt the decline in standards. He said that by the time Ofsted recognised a school as failing, it was often too late (an indictment of Ofsted if ever there was one). He said that there was a need for “intermediary bodies that could detect when things aren't going well, look at the data and have their ear very close to the ground”.

Perhaps he could just talk to the staff in schools themselves? But I'm not sure he has much time for them because he also held that “scruffy teachers should be rebuked for “not looking professional” and sacked for incompetency – however defined. I had a very good “scruffy” teacher once, and several well-dressed ones who were useless – although I take the point about appearance and standards, I'm just not sure that recommending smart dress as a way to solve the myriad of problems in schools today is the right way to go? “All fur coat and no

knickers” is a phrase that comes to mind.

Failing Education

It's rather exasperating to witness the constant “education debate” and remain a passive bystander whilst money gets wasted, solutions tried and failed with a certain regularity; it's difficult to remain detached, as the effects of this are serious and there for all to see – disillusioned and poorly-educated students, worn-out teachers, a failing mixed-bag of schools and an awareness that the once lauded British education system is now falling behind education systems in other parts of the world. University lecturers have noticed that incoming students can't spell, read or write properly, have difficulty concentrating and employers complain that today's graduates are no longer up to the mark.

And it's even worse if you are working class, as it is working class students who are more likely to be adversely affected by the sorry situation in schools, as the majority of middle class students (regardless of the school) tend to do well, pass exams, get a place at college and university and more often than not go on to get the pick of the best jobs. Whereas working class students, who were in theory supposed to benefit most from the state system just get hectorated and lectured about diet and lifestyle, re-cycling and the environment, patronised and bored because of low expectations and a curriculum short on academic rigour and subject based content and where they are so over-safeguarded that they are unable to participate in meaningful and so-called “risky” activities. And paradoxically, despite the expansion in numbers of working class students going on to further and higher education, they now have even less chance of social mobility than ever before (it has actually declined). After 11 years – and more – in educational institutions, it really beggars belief that many students can't even read and write to a suitable standard! Evidence shows poor and declining levels in reading, writing, and arithmetic or literacy and numeracy as it is now called.

Who is to blame?

Schools and teachers often blame the students and claim that working class students from economically deprived backgrounds don't behave well and are not interested in an academic education. So instead they get directed towards a particular timetable and an inferior qualification structure that is more likely to take them down a vocational route and less likely to give them the same or higher standard of education that is available to their middle class counterparts or those in "better" schools, state, independent or otherwise. Those three little words – achieve your potential – are applied, and of course ones prospects are considered to be vastly different if you live in the wrong part of town, have parents in the lower socio-economic category, speak with an accent "exceedingly rare" (as the words to an old Liverpool ditty call the Scouse accent), or live in rented as opposed to private accommodation.

The Government blames teachers, poor managers, parents, society and everyone else except the ministers with ever changing titles. At least this Government has a minister for Education, as the last lot called themselves the Dept. for Children, Schools and Families, ironically emphasising its own lack of commitment to education, despite its mantra of Education, Education, Education. And yet how dare they not take responsibility after decades of having their fingers firmly embedded in the school pie? Initiative after initiative, testing and more testing, league tables for just about everything, focus on safety and lifestyle, watering down the curriculum, moralising and indoctrinating in Citizenship and Personal Social Health and Economic Education (PSHE) classes and money squandered on over-designed and under-functional buildings.



Teachers as Facilitators and Learners

I have been astounded at how easily a whole army of professionals in schools have been taken in by various Government theories about teaching and learning from people with little knowledge of education, education theory or of working in schools. From being a teacher with a profession and an armoury of knowledge teachers have been downgraded to “facilitators” and even learners in their own classrooms, told to put the child at the centre of learning and learn from them and alongside them, allowing them to find “stuff” out for themselves, carry out self and peer assessment (formerly known as marking and done by the teacher) and decide what level they are at and what they should be doing next. In addition, outside the classroom, children are invited onto interview panels and to set up various school committees to make demands from schools and influence who is recruited to “facilitate” them.

Parents as Consumers

Whereas once children went to the nearest local school and nobody batted an eyelid, with the introduction of league tables and the idea of parental “choice”, it is now possible for parents to make a choice (albeit limited by other factors) about where to send their children. They use league tables to compare schools by results, go to school open days where they are shown the latest school facilities, get to peruse healthy menus, consider the range of extra-curricular

activities, and find out how many support services and support workers are on offer for counselling, anti-bullying, mentoring and dealing with emotional and behavioural problems. (One school I worked in had the same and increasing number of support staff as it had teaching staff – bizarre!). With less value attached to academic knowledge and more emphasis placed on the happiness and well-being of the child (see ECM agenda); most parents now view schools through the eyes of a consumer, admire its range of facilities and consider them as just another service to choose from. They have no opportunity or desire to question the curriculum content as the national curriculum is largely dictated by central Government.

So, what is to be done?

We seem to have a constant stream of solutions and initiatives and a whole industry created around schools from re-building them, equipping them with the latest technology and deciding how they should be run, what and how they should teach and what they should focus on, and yet it is widely accepted that standards have fallen and that education is failing.

Society's problems are often placed at the door of schools and educational institutions, as if it is possible that through education alone, all the inequalities that exist in a capitalist society can be eradicated – however, the great irony here is that education is really likely to be of the greatest benefit to those with a thirst for knowledge when it is given the autonomy it deserves, is separated from the concerns of wider society and protected from political interference.