

BBC Panorama's 'Failing at Four': a valuable contribution to the discussion over the future of education

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The BBC *Panorama* programme, 'Failing at Four', was a damning indictment of the education policies of both the Labour and Tory parties over the past period. It put forward a well-researched case against formal teaching methods which focus on the 3R's (Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic) too soon in a child's school life.

The *Panorama* programme was timely as it raises the issue of teaching methods when Labour has just introduced its new Literacy Hour into primary schools. The aim of the Literacy Hour is to raise the number of pupils achieving a 'level 4' score in government tests (SATs) at age 11, from present figures to 80 percent by the year 2000. Its application has serious implications for how children are expected to learn. The government-imposed tests and curriculum imply that teachers forget their previous educational practice, based on a more child-centred approach that takes cognisance of childhood development. Instead there is to be a return to the type of learning by rote, so graphically portrayed by Charles Dickens in the novel *Hard Times*. The entrepreneur Thomas Gradgrind views his children as empty vessels to be stuffed with facts, and wages war against childhood fancy or imagination. The government's Literacy Hour also equates learning with the assimilation of facts learned in a formal way.

'Failed at Four' began by noting Labour's failure to honour its commitment to provide a nursery place for every four-year-old child by September this year. Instead, four year-olds are entering reception classes in primary schools because there is little nursery provision. Over 1,700 nurseries have been closed in the past two years and parents are worried that if their children do not start school at four, they may not get a

place in a school of their choice due to competition.

Parents interviewed, who had reluctantly sent their children to school at four years of age, found that the pressured environment of school had a detrimental effect on their children's psychological well being. Quite simply, they were unhappy.

Not only is there a much higher pupil/teacher ratio in nurseries compared to primary schools in Britain, but the curriculum in nurseries is designed to fulfil the physical, intellectual, emotional and social needs of the young child through play-based activities. Children learn through play. 'Play is the work of childhood' is a notion which is ABC to all nursery staff. Yet this conception is now passed off as an easy option, despite the fact that it is the most efficacious, as *Panorama* went on to demonstrate. A consideration in this denunciation is that play learning is also more expensive than sitting in a classroom facing a blackboard.

A four-year-old child entering a reception class in school will in the first few weeks have to sit and be tested for alphabet and number knowledge. They are subjected to the Literacy Hour, which means sitting and receiving instruction as well as writing at a table. *Panorama* suggested that this formal approach intellectually damaged children and impaired their ability to learn. The effects, moreover, remained throughout life.

The programme visited schools in Norway, where children enjoy a nursery curriculum until the age of seven years and are allowed to be children with needs specific to childhood. Staff specialise in early years teaching. While the curriculum looks like a lot of fun (children spend half the time playing outdoors) it is

rigorously designed to aid child development. Staff are not passive observers, but act as facilitators. Norwegian children then enter school on a half-day basis and for the next year are gradually introduced to the skills needed to become numerate and literate. Yet by age nine they have not only caught up with their British counterparts but, according to the programme, outperform them.

Panorama further supported its contention that children are damaged by being taught too much too soon by reviewing the 'Highscope' study of Ypsilanti, Michigan in the US, conducted by Dr. David Weekart. He looked at the long-term effects of teaching methods on young children and found a significant correlation between children subjected to formal teaching methods and higher divorce rates in adulthood, and a greater tendency to end up with a criminal record and change jobs frequently. It was a weakness of the programme that it used this research uncritically, as so many other factors come into play in determining the life outcome of individuals.

The past period has seen relentless erosion of the education budget. As a percentage of GDP the previous Tory government spent more on education in 1993/94 than Labour is spending today. Though the budget is set to rise by the year 2001/2, it will still not match the levels in 1979 when Labour was last in office.

At the recent Labour Party conference Prime Minister Blair made yet another attack on teachers, saying, 'Money's not the only problem. There are too few good state schools. Too much tolerance of mediocrity. Too little pursuit of excellence.' The government's own national league tables of test results show that there is a strong correlation between low scores and poverty and deprivation, a link the government denies. Today they blame not society but the teachers. Tomorrow they will say it's all the fault of the parents who are lacking in discipline. Soon it could be the children themselves.

Blair, Education Secretary David Blunkett and Chief Schools Inspector Chris Woodhead lead an administration that is not only starving schools of finance, but encourages the most philistine notions about teaching. Education in Britain has never been perfect by any means, but certain notions regarding childhood, child development and psychology and scientific teaching methods have permeated through to the teacher training colleges. Infant schools have had a

foundation in the philosophy that a child undergoes developmental stages as outlined by Piaget, for example; that children learn through play and that environment plays an overriding role in shaping the individual. These ideas can be traced back to the Enlightenment and represent progress in human thought.

Compare the philistine Blair with Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote the following in 1758: 'Nature intends that children shall be children before they are men.... Childhood has its own methods of seeing, thinking and feeling.'

The Labour government's education policies are already meeting opposition. Recently, Professor Peter Mortimer, who heads the Institute of Education at London University, published a book criticising the government for 'naming and shaming' schools in disadvantaged areas for low test scores. After 25 years researching the effectiveness of schools, he concludes that schools cannot compensate for the problems of society and need extra help, not punishing. *Panorama's* 'Failing at Four' programme made a serious contribution to a discussion of these issues.



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