

Britain: The Cambridge review

A damning refutation of Labour's education lies

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When the Labour government was elected in 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair promised that a central plank of its policies would be “education, education, education”.

This was an issue of great concern to millions, as educational standards in Britain were woefully poor. Schools had been chronically neglected and under-funded, as Conservative governments under Margaret Thatcher and then John Major conducted a fierce assault on the state education system.

Spearheaded by an ideological attack on “trendy”, “progressive” and “leftist” teaching methods, a major restructuring was undertaken of the comprehensive education system to open it up to private capital and destroy the supervisory power of Local Education Authorities.

Twelve years on, any illusions that Labour would challenge this right-wing shift have been dashed. “Comprehensive education” exists in name only, as Labour has presided over a school system ranked one of the worst in terms of educational achievement and where British children are the most tested, stressed and socially deprived amongst the advanced capitalist nations.

A recently published study, the “Cambridge Primary Review: Children, their World, their Education”, details how this has come about. Edited by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, it is a damning critique of the destructive impact of Labour’s policies on an entire generation of children.

The independent review, published last month, is a major intellectual and practical undertaking. Prepared over six years, it is based on 28 surveys, 1,052 written submissions and 250 focus groups. It is the biggest review into education in England in 40 years. Just the findings and recommendations (78 in total) run to more than 500 pages.

The authors state, “England’s primary schools have experienced two decades of ‘reform’ in which considerable claims were asserted especially in relation to educational standards...this did not match up to the reality”.

They challenge statements by the government and Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) that Britain has the best generation of teachers, and that Labour’s policies have raised standards in literacy and numeracy. The report firmly rebuts the fallacy that constant testing is a means of driving up educational standards.

It characterises the existing primary education system as “Victorian”: “It is cheap and efficient, that is still why we have it. It’s not there for educational reasons, but for economic reasons”.

The report is scathing towards the tendency to regard maths and

English as the only elements of education worth focusing on, and appeals for a broad curriculum. “Too much stress is being placed on the three R’s imposing, a curriculum on primary schools which is even narrower than that of the Victorian elementary schools.” The report argues that “memorisation and recall have come to be valued more than understanding and enquiry and transmission of information more than the pursuit of knowledge in its fullest sense.”

The two recommendations that have provoked the highest level of attention in the media and official responses are calls to scrap testing seven and 11-year-olds and the national “league tables” based on the results. It calls for formal schooling to be delayed until the age of six, rather than the current five years, to give children more time to develop.

The report argues, “Children in England start their formal schooling at a younger age than in most other countries, and there is strong support for the view that England should conform.”

The review provides a scientific basis for showing that the imposition of a rigid, target-based curriculum on young children is damaging to their long-term development. It puts children off schooling from their very first days by producing failures at five and undermines their self-esteem and confidence.

Children in England are the most heavily tested of all the advanced nations. Furthermore, this testing is extremely narrow in focus, with the aim of enforcing selection and a class-based education system. League tables ensure that schools in areas of high social disadvantage struggle to attract pupils and face closure or a massive reduction in funds, as funding is pegged to the number of pupils enrolled.

Another major focus of the report is Labour’s attack on the teaching profession itself—both through endless demands for “accountability” and the streamlining of every aspect of curriculum delivery.

The review condemns what it calls “The Stalinist overtones of ‘state theory of learning’ enforced by the ‘machinery of surveillance and accountability’—league tables, testing targets,” stating, “The general pessimism and powerlessness [that has resulted amongst teachers] could be an accurate reflection of how people feel, anywhere, when their freedom of action and thought in the area which lies at the heart of their work is reduced.”

“In 2009, teaching methods in primary schools are subject to a degree of government prescription undreamt of four decades ago, and without parallel in most other countries.”

By one account, between 1996 and 2004 government and national agencies issued 459 documents on the teaching of literacy alone—an average of more than one a week for eight years.

The report is also critical of the “fast-track” teacher training initiatives that have de-skilled the profession. It explains that the aim of this initiative is to train teachers in the practical tasks of delivering government initiatives such as the literacy and numeracy hours. Very little attention is paid to training teachers in pedagogy or child development.

The authors advocate more use of specialist teachers in the latter years of primary schooling, arguing that it may be necessary to extend the period of primary training from one to two years to give new staff the necessary expertise.

They are critical of the influx of untrained staff, such as teaching assistants and learning mentors who are deployed to work with the most needy and disadvantaged children without the necessary expertise or skills. The report calls for a review of special needs provisions in the education system, which have never been assessed since the closure of special schools from the late 1980s onwards and the integration of children with particular needs into mainstream schooling.

Most damning of all is the finding that many of the problems facing the British education system are the outcome of the increased divide between the richest and poorest sections of society. While Labour had pledged to end child poverty within 20 years, the reality is that inequality is firmly entrenched and growing.

“Social disadvantage blights the early lives of a larger proportion of children in Britain than in many other countries, and this social and material divide maps with depressing exactness on to the gap in educational attainment” the review said.

In an implicit rejection of the government’s own report on “social mobility” issued in 2009, the review states, “Inequality does not just come from your gender or ethnicity, your sexual orientation or your disability. Co-existing and interwoven with these specific inequalities lies the persistent inequality of social class...the persistence of class divides in education is revealed by concerns about the under-achievement of many white working class boys,” who the review later identifies as the most marginalised social group in the education system.

These findings correspond with a report by Unicef on the well-being of children and adolescents in 2007, in which the UK was placed bottom in the league table of economically advanced countries. The Unicef report found that children in the UK suffer greater deprivation, worse relationships with their parents and are exposed to more risks from alcohol, drugs and unsafe sex than any other wealthy country in the world.

On educational attainment, Britain ranked 17 out of the 21 most advanced nations.

The government has arrogantly sought to dismiss the Cambridge Review’s findings, without attempting to specifically counter any of its findings or consider a single one of its recommendations. Vernon Coaker, Labour’s schools minister said the report was “out of date”.

The contemptuous response to the Cambridge Review underscores Labour’s transformation into a party of big business

and the financial oligarchy.

The last major report into state education, the Plowden Report, was produced in 1967. From the early 1950s onwards, there had been growing criticism of the highly-selective secondary modern/grammar school system based on exams sat at the age of 11.

Just prior to Plowden’s publication, the Labour government had sought to encourage this shift, requesting Local Education Authorities to begin fully transferring over to a comprehensive system that, by establishing a common curriculum taught to classes of mixed ability, would raise the educational attainment of all children. It was at a time when progressive and child-centred theories, dedicated to broadening children’s intellectual, emotional and cultural horizons, had wide support. Tuition in foreign languages, music, dance and sport were offered to working class children for the first time. The injection of increased public funds into education, the lessening of selection and the broader curriculum resulted in illiteracy dropping by one million in just a decade.

The comprehensive project was never completed. Always opposed by sections of the ruling class, Labour’s reforms were piecemeal, voluntary and remained under-funded. But if the Labour government of the 1960s was hesitant in its push for comprehensive education, the Brown government today is hammering the nails into the coffin of any notion of universal, well-funded, child-oriented (as opposed to big business-oriented) schooling.

The Cambridge Review is to be welcomed for laying bare the disastrous results of this onslaught, and for its defence of progressive teaching. It has rightly won the support of many of those involved in education who have long opposed Conservative and Labour attacks but have been prevented from mounting a determined fight back by the trade union bureaucracy.

A widespread discussion on the Review and its findings is important in developing a broad-based struggle for universal education, equipped with the latest technology and staffed by highly-trained professionals. This is bound up with the radical restructuring of economic life to ensure that the interests and needs of society, including its cultural requirements, are what predominate—not profitability and the maintenance of class inequalities.



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