
‘What Are We Doing to Our Children?’ Report on the Reclaiming Education Conference, 2018

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ABSTRACT Reclaiming Education is an umbrella campaigning group made up of the following organisations: Campaign for State Education (CASE), Comprehensive Future, Socialist Education Association (SEA), Forum, Alliance for Inclusive Education, Information for School and College Governors, New Visions Group and Rescue our Schools. In November 2018 it held a conference, ‘What Are We Doing to Our Children?’, addressing the issues of the negative impact current policies have on many of our children. This article, written on behalf of the group, is a summary of the conference.

The 2018 Reclaiming Education Conference [1] addressed the very basic question, ‘What are we doing to our children?’ In the face of growing international evidence that mental health issues, stress and anxiety are worse here than in most advanced countries, we sought to identify what it is about our system and our society that is having such a damaging effect. And then, of course, what kinds of different policies could make things better. The conference heard from academics, campaigners, head teachers and trade union leaders. What was striking is how consistent the messages were.

The most fundamental issue raised by speakers was the inexorable rise in child poverty since 2010. Diane Reay described how poverty impacts on children’s education. Her evidence shows that working-class children, of whom 50% are in poverty, have lower levels of well-being and are unhappy about school – unhappier than those in any other developed country. The head teachers confirmed this picture with their accounts of how schools have to try to make up for the failings of other support systems. However, their ability to do so has been hugely affected by the cuts in school funding. Jayne Grant and Emma Murray described how their inner-city schools are finding it extremely

difficult to meet the increasingly complex needs of children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities. Funding stringency means there are not enough teachers and teaching assistants to give the close support that many children need. The staff make heroic attempts to cope with the pressures by working long hours and morale is maintained by an effort of will. But there is a strong feeling that the children, the staff, and the whole community deserve more support than they are getting.

The other key factor identified by all the speakers is the curriculum and testing regime that has been imposed on children. Diane Reay explained that England is top of the league tables when it comes to testing young people. Even well-prepared children show anxiety in tests, but working-class children and SEN children predominate amongst low achievers and are most anxious. Children aged 11 years often believed that to perform badly in the Key Stage 2 SAT is to ruin your chance of a good job. The government narrative about testing is that it raises attainment. The reality is it produces more anxiety and failures for working-class children.

Diane went on to identify the impact on children and families of the marketisation of schooling. There is the emotional and financial stress which attends getting a child into a school where white, affluent children go. Black, Asian and minority ethnic and working-class children are often left with no choice and find themselves ghettoised. She had heard plenty of anecdotes demonstrating the anxiety which surrounds going to a school with a 'poor reputation'. It was not uncommon to hear children talk about 'bad schools for bad kids or stupid schools for stupid kids'. Even in good schools the narrow curriculum has a negative effect on working-class children. An OECD report in April showed that the UK was second from top in the use of memorisation and rote-learning in classrooms, and second from bottom in the use of creative thinking.

Diane described research by University College, London for the National Education Union which showed that children as young as 2 or 3 years old were being set for literacy and numeracy lessons. Children aged 3 and 4 are already seeing themselves as of low 'ability'. Children often land up in bottom sets, saying things like, 'I've just become rubbish'.

Head teacher John Hayes argued that children develop at different rates and cannot be on top form all the time. Nevertheless, they are required to meet specific targets on predetermined days or be noted down as failures. The system should be much more flexible with a greater use of online learning, giving children an opportunity to study at a speed and in a manner which suits their capacity, circumstances and personality. The inflexibility of target dates and league tables should be replaced by bespoke systems of lifelong learning.

The relentless culture of testing and inspection and the associated workload is also impacting on the well-being of teachers and is a big reason for the crisis in teacher retention. Teachers in England are under more pressure and more stress than in other countries. They have a teaching workload comprising 65% of their time compared with an OECD average of 45%.

Richard Rieser began by saying that the movement towards more inclusive education had gone into reverse in the last decade. This is driven in large part by the pressures on schools of the accountability agenda combined with the collapse in funding for supporting special educational needs and disability (SEND) students in mainstream settings. Particularly alarming is the growth in numbers of highly expensive independent settings and the growing volume of exclusions and off-rolling. Mainstream schools are closing SEND resource centres, there are 6000 fewer teaching assistants compared to 2010, and local specialist support services have in many areas disappeared. Some 70% of permanently excluded pupils have some form of SEND.

There is great variation in levels of integration and quality of provision across the country. Too many students are in inadequate alternative provision or have simply vanished from education. The problems faced by parents in getting adequate provision for their children have been well documented and have included legal challenges.

Richard emphasised that we have obligations under the UN Declaration of the Rights of People with Disabilities. The 2017 Labour manifesto promised that the National Education Service would deliver fully inclusive provision with adequate funding and support. However, the report to the 2018 conference contained no specific commitments and consequently was referred back by unanimous vote. Richard argued that the party should be doing much more to develop a proper strategy for inclusion by creating a formal advisory group and working towards a policy conference next year.

The main thrust of Kevin Courtney's speech was that political action is required to address the many crises facing education. The mobilisation of parents and teachers against the cuts to school budgets provides the best opportunity in years. In the snap General Election called in 2017, three-quarters of a million people changed their vote because of the cuts to schools funding.

Kevin echoed the analysis of the other speakers. English schoolchildren report as the most unhappy in the western world. Excessive use of high-stakes testing stresses children and teachers alike. Teachers in England have the highest workload compared with teachers in any other country and this has led to a huge turnover of teachers and a recruitment crisis. The punitive micromanagement of education by people who are not educationists is a major factor here. Parents complain about the curriculum because so much teaching has become teaching to the test. Exam stress is leading to high levels of child mental health problems and, in extreme cases, suicide.

The English system is structured to ration success. Commitment to norm-referenced testing means that there will always be failures. In such a system, the children who do best are the ones who start with an educational advantage – the children of the better off. Labour should acknowledge that one of the best ways to improve education nationally is to reduce poverty nationally. Baseline testing in particular disadvantages working-class children most of all because it labels them as failures at the start of their lives.

Kevin argued that we need to bring about change and that means persuading politicians that they need to act. Parties seeking success in the next election should understand that undoing this education crisis will be popular. Labour's education offer needs to be bolder. Reshaping our education system to more closely resemble that of countries and states whose systems are successful – for example, Finland, New Zealand and Ontario – would be popular with voters. Such reshaping is essential if things are to improve.

Delegates at the conference were in broad agreement with the messages coming from the speakers. There was a strong feeling in the hall that public campaigning needs to be more coordinated and high profile. This was a theme also addressed by Madeleine Holt in her presentation. In particular, they identified the need for much more detail about what a National Education Service would be like. There is a range of high-profile individuals and institutions promoting the Tory agenda. We need to build something just as powerful to promote our alternative vision.

The speakers at the conference were:

Diane Reay, Professor of Education at Cambridge University. Her latest book is: *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes*.^[2]
Kevin Courtney, joint General Secretary of NEU
Jayne Grant, former primary deputy head for inclusion
Emma Murray, primary head teacher, Haringey
John Hayes, primary head teacher, Camden
Richard Rieser, inclusion campaigner
Madeline Holt, campaigner, Rescue our Schools.

Notes

[1] www.reclaimingeducation.org.uk

[2] Diane Reay (2017) *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes*.
Bristol: Policy Press.

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