

Story time with Nick and Bob

A summary

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Reforming Lessons: why English schools have improved since 2010 and how this was achieved

Nick Gibb and Robert Peal, Oxford, Routledge, 2025

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I am sure many readers of *FORUM* are rushing to their local independent bookshops to order a copy of Gibb and Peal's recently published defence of post-2010 Tory education policy, *Reforming Lessons: why English schools have improved since 2010 and how this was achieved*. I therefore provide this summary of its contents. Not, I hasten to add, to limit sales and prevent further royalties making their way to the authors, but simply to fill the existential void, dear reader, that you will inevitably experience between hurriedly making your order and the book landing on your doormat.

Front cover

The cover picture shows two primary-aged boys, happily laughing at what appears to be a lollipop stick in a book. Somewhat disconcertingly, one of the children has an asymmetric collar, one side tucked in to their red 'shabby sweatshirt' (p22) and the other out, indicating a clear absence of a suitable uniform policy within their school. Even more concerningly, it seems that the children are sat not in rows but in a group at a table. And as Gibb points out: 'As progressive education gained popularity, schools began deemphasising knowledge in their curriculum, moving rows of desks into islands to encourage "group work"' and abandoning whole-school behaviour policies' (p9).

The front cover therefore seems to illustrate for the reader the kind of chaotic mess that the Tory government inherited in 2010: children talking to each other, utilising apparatus independently, and enjoying their lessons. Furthermore, although Gibb claims that he is 'not for a moment draw[ing] a parallel of any sort between Russian Communism and the progressivist ideology in English schools' (p16), the obvious red of the uniforms here does beg the question – were all primary schools in England communist before 2010, or just this one? The front cover excels in drawing the reader in. What further horrors might be revealed in Gibb's account?

Introduction

Well, dear reader, the picture painted is dreadful. Before 2010, children were pretty

much unable to read or write, and the cause of this was diabolical educationalists working in local authorities and universities. These educationalists effectively gaslit teachers in schools into believing that children should have some agency or interest in their schoolwork. However, once the Tories took over education in 2010, they managed to release some teachers from their subterranean dungeons – Katherine Birbalsingh, Daisy Christodoulou, Michael Wilshaw – and these teachers started spreading the word about how amazing it is to teach facts and tell children off (because teachers absolutely were not allowed to share a love of their subject or control a class before Michael Gove came to power). As a result, lots of graphs show that England’s kids are now cleverer than kids in Scotland or Wales, at least in terms of things that are counted by the OECD, and all parents are really happy about it.

Chapter 1: the inheritance

At the beginning of this chapter there’s some basic education history that might feel a little clichéd to the *FORUM* reader: Callaghan’s ‘secret garden’ speech, the Plowden report, circular 10/65 etc. The Black Papers are, curiously, never explicitly mentioned, although of course their spirit lingers in the background, occasionally making spooky noises to remind the reader of their legacy. Their spirit is felt, for example, when Gibb compares his experiences at ‘a former grammar school turned comprehensive in Roundhay, Leeds where standards remained high, and a comprehensive school in Wakefield where standards did not ... which was notorious for classroom disruption and violence’ (p20).

However, worry not! Things soon take an interesting turn. Ruth Miskin is teleported in as the hero of the hour, and her phonics pals Debbie Hepplewhite, Sue Lloyd and Shahed Ahmed come along for the ride as a kind of Marvel’s Avengers-style team ready to fight the evil of the national literacy strategy. Before they met Nick Gibb, this gallant crew (or ‘dissident group’, p28) ‘would joke that it was only when the door was closed, the blinds were down, and the corridors were empty that they felt able to take out their phonics flash cards’ (p28). Thanks to Nick Gibb’s epistolary skills and staunch belief in evidence-based practice (and by evidence I mean one small-scale study conducted in a primary school in Scotland) the infallible efficacy of compulsory phonics teaching is now entirely accepted by everyone of sound mind and body. Furthermore, thanks to Nick Gibb’s historical intervention, children are now just as good at reading made-up, nonsense words as real ones. This is important, because we are sure that the industry representatives who bemoaned the lack of their staff’s literacy skills to James Callaghan in the early 1970s would be immensely pleased to know that now, in 2025, all school leavers can be expected to read ‘words’ like ‘yech’, ‘chuss’, and ‘virp’.

Chapter 2: peak progressivism

This chapter is all about how amazing E. D. Hirsch is. Gibb considers Hirsch's book *The Schools We Need: and why we don't have them* to be a modern masterpiece, even gifting a copy to Michael Gove on his appointment to shadow secretary of state. Unfortunately, Gibb does not recall gifting any copies to his Labour rivals, which is why they completely ruined education 'from 2006 onwards' (p43). If only they had just read Hirsch, whose books are marketed here as an effective vaccine against the disease of 'progressivist' education ideology. Surprisingly, in this chapter there is no mention (yet) of Daisy Christodoulou – our very own home-grown Hirsch – although she so kindly provided the foreword to *Reforming Lessons*.

Chapter 3: laying the foundations

Beyond Hirsch, and Gove, and of course Gibb himself, who is the hero of this tale? Well, dear reader, you have a choice between Andrew Adonis (the political chameleon who was once a LibDem, then championed Labour's academies programme, but whom Michael Gove 'endlessly praised ... in public', p55) or Michael Wilshaw (a 'remarkable leader' with 'bravery and independence', p61). Michael Wilshaw has been constructed as a hero before of course – see Christy Kulz's 2015 [article](#) 'Heroic heads, mobility mythologies and the power of ambiguity'¹ – however, to his credit, Gibb manages to pull this off without any of the irony which pervades Kulz's account.

Chapter 4: creative destruction

Some more heroes are introduced: Dominic Cummings, Sam Freedman and Henry de Zoute, a sort of Three Musketeers whose job it was to tell schools that they weren't getting the nice new buildings they had been promised under 'Building Schools for the Future'. This initiative was, after all, indicative of the 'wastefulness' (p74) of Labour's education policy, as I'm sure all those head teachers of schools whose corridors have had to be closed because of aeroconcrete will agree. The chapter ends with a little insight into working with this group of three policy advisors – apparently their 'drawers were crammed with sugary sweets to power their long hours of work' (p75). We can only assume, dear reader, that these government advisors were undertaking some form of policy 'method acting' wherein they took on the role of a child in order to fully understand the necessary direction of education policy, although this is never explicitly stated.

Chapter 5: primary basics

Here's a riddle for you, dear readers:

Q: When is an employee of a university institute of education, a quango or a local authority not a member of the 'education establishment'?

A: When they do what Nick Gibb wants them to do.

Luckily, for any members of the educational establishment wanting to curry favour with Nick Gibb it seems pretty easy to do so. Just teach 'proper grammar' (whatever that is) and phonics. In order to do this without any moral or ethical qualms, I would recommend anyone wanting to take this route towards career advancement that they meticulously avoid reading the work of either Ian Cushing or Alice Bradbury. Ian Cushing has repeatedly evidenced how language policing across the English education system cements, rather than challenges, race-class inequalities (see his article with Julia Snell in *FORUM* 65, 3, to start with).² Alice Bradbury's research shows how the intensive obsession with phonics teaching in English schools has led to practices of 'educational triage' – wherein students are segregated according to 'ability' and educational time and resources are rationed accordingly – to become established in classrooms for children as young as four and five years old.³ Such nuanced sociological investigations into the (perhaps) unintended consequences of post-2010 Tory education policy are food for thought indeed. Although it crosses my mind that maybe the Tories weren't too keen on teachers who thought too much.

Chapter 6: qualification reform

Before Gove and Gibb, there were many, many exams in secondary school. Some were good, some were bad, some were called GCSEs, others were called BTECs, some were coursework, some were not. But one thing that all exams had in common from about 2004 onwards was that they were completely and utterly untrustworthy and children didn't have to learn anything at all to get an A in them (although when in opposition the Tories didn't like to say this out loud because it made them look like meanies). So, when they got into power in 2010, Tories at the Department for Education decided that they needed ultimate control over exam boards to make exams harder, more horrible and generally more disheartening for more children, because this is what will make our country great again. So, our children get worse grades now, but that's good because their feelings are less important than our performance against Hong Kong in the PISA tests.

The trajectory of the discipline of English literature provides an excellent example of the impact of curriculum reform on our youngsters. All school students now have to read a 19th-century novel because, as Gibb explains, Gove studied English literature at Oxford University.⁴ In fact, not only do they have to read a 19th-century novel once, but they have to read it many, *many* times because the exams are now closed book so everything has to be memorised. The end result of this is that many, *many* students have decided that they have done enough English literature at school, having read all

this stuff and learned it off by heart, and don't need to go on to study it at university. This is of course sad news for all the academics whose English literature and linguistics departments are shutting down in universities across the land, but just goes to show the real value of the new, post-2010 qualifications on offer. These qualifications are so good, students don't have any desire to bother going on learning once they have finished them. Indeed, the DfE's plan to control every granular detail of qualification reform in England has been such a runaway success it was later repeated with the process of re-accrediting university initial teacher 'training' (ITT – of which more later ...).

Chapter 7: the network effect

What does Nick Gibb mean by 'the network effect'? Simply put, a few highly influential teacher bloggers led to Ofsted completely reforming its policies so that 'Teachers around the country, exasperated by the Ofsted teaching style, breathed a sigh of relief' (p136). Gibb is so modest that he doesn't write about the recent history of Ofsted – how these changes mean that head teachers now hang around the phone hoping for the call, disappointed every day a lunch hour passes without it; how teachers now welcome inspectors into their classrooms with open arms; and how loud and frequent is the public discourse around how fair and reasonable Ofsted inspectors now are. Good work, Gibb and Wilshaw!

Chapter 8: academies and free schools

One of the criticisms of Conservative education policy post-2010 is that it has stifled creativity within schools. Reading this chapter, it becomes obvious, dear reader, that this slander simply cannot have any basis in reality. At a number of schools which were lined up as ripe for academy conversion, highly creative approaches were taken by those opposed to academisation. Gibb quotes Lord Harris, who remembered one demonstration in which a parent with connections to a trade union 'had the kids, in their uniforms, parading outside wearing Michael Gove masks and shouting abuse' (pp148-9). Similarly, Lord Nash, walking into Pimlico Academy 'had to walk over pupils lying outside the school in cardboard coffins, no doubt intended to signify the death of state education. Once inside the room, he was confronted with the unnerving sight of a front row full of pupils wearing paper plate masks adorned with his face' (p152). These children obviously had a bright future ahead of them working as creatives in horror movies (of which Britain has a proud industrial heritage, perhaps explaining why the Conservatives continued with academy expansion – in order to spark these sort of creative oppositions as a type of curriculum enrichment). Of course, the real horror in this chapter are the salaries (both 'legitimate' and illegitimate) paid to multi-academy trust bosses, but the least said about that the better if we want a decent night's sleep any time soon.

Chapter 9: phase two

Gibb describes a sliding-doors moment here. Nicky Morgan gets into power and starts to talk about character education (as if it matters what kind of people are being churned out by our education system, rather than what facts they know). Luckily, Gibb is working behind the scenes, redacting any language which might hint at progressivism, like ‘groupwork’ and ‘school year’. This chapter also recounts a successful stint for Liz Truss in the Department for Education: successful in the sense that, in this role at least, she doesn’t manage to tank the economy.

Chapter 10: the reform movement

If you are a teacher, dear reader, and want to become better at your job, then this is the chapter for you. Gibb sets out four features of successful teaching, which I summarise:

1. Teach children facts, facts, and then more facts.
2. Don’t allow groupwork (groupwork is the devil’s work!).
3. Check children understand what you have taught them before moving on to teach them something else.
4. Practise the facts.

None of these pedagogies was allowed under New Labour it seems, because of the ‘educational establishment’, who were absolutely determined that children should learn nothing. Even better if they could learn nothing in groups.

Chapter 11: bedding In

As the main locus of the evil ‘educational establishment’ was universities, this chapter tells the story of how the Conservatives tried to remove as much responsibility as they could for teacher training from these institutions, and hand it over to school-led training schemes. These school-led schemes included Troops for Teachers (which recruited 22 undergraduates in 2019 – and no, there isn’t a zero missing at the end of that number), Researchers in Schools (government funding removed in 2021), School Direct (used to be two routes, now one), Teach First (missed recruitment targets in 2022 and 2023) and Now Teach (government funding removed in 2024). Unfortunately, as any member of ‘the Blob’ working in an ITT department of a university will tell you, these ‘school-led’ schemes still generally require that students spend some time in universities. This is because in the 1980s the Conservatives decided that teaching should probably be a graduate profession, and they have not yet invented the time machine which will enable them to undo this decision.

Once Ian Bauckham clocked this problem in 2021 (a year when, arguably, there were bigger problems going on in education than the fact that university-led ITT still

existed, despite the best efforts of the Conservatives to eradicate it) it was decided that the best thing to do would just be to threaten to remove teacher training contracts from universities who refused to do exactly what politicians wanted. Strangely, however, limiting the amount of it on ITT courses does not appear to have made teaching more attractive. We are still suffering from a mysterious shortage of teachers in England, despite teaching being so much better recently because teachers are now allowed to teach facts. Gibb blames teacher supply issues on Covid and the cost-of-living crisis rather than the fact that teachers are experiencing limited autonomy and joy in their working lives after 14 years of Conservative education policy. And, indeed, there is no clear evidence that Gibb is wrong, except of course the extensive research recently undertaken by Jane Perryman on why people choose to become teachers and then what eventually drives them to leave the profession.

Chapter 12: self-improving school system

The United Kingdom comprises four nations, dear reader, and this chapter pays particular attention to Scotland (and to a lesser extent Wales). In these countries (where you will inevitably be itching to move to, once you have read this chapter) curriculum decisions have been made which focus on developing children as engaged, democratic citizens who are able to make a positive contribution to their world around them. Gibb clearly considers such issues to be complete nonsense. PISA grades are again wheeled out in an effort to convince the reader that unless children are stuffed full of facts from the age of four our country will implode.

I recommend reading this chapter alongside the recent National Education Union report ‘Are you on slide 8 yet?’, which tells the sad tale of how school-level enactment of Gove and Gibb’s knowledge-rich curriculum has significantly decreased teacher autonomy, rendered many curriculum resources stultifyingly boring, increased anxiety about teacher performance and quality, led to wasted public funds, and – finally – failed to adequately support the most vulnerable pupils with additional learning needs.⁵

Chapter 13: conclusion

What can we conclude from reading *Reforming Lessons*?

So fantastical was this book that I often expected a unicorn to pop out from behind the back cover and tell me I was dreaming. The tale of the evil educational establishment peddling their progressivist wares, only to be defeated by the brave knights Daisy Christodoulou and Katherine Birbalsingh, was laughably elementary in its construction of both social and educational issues. Although I did initially promise a ‘proper’ review for *FORUM* on its release, after reading the first few pages I became very aware that to write such a thing was not just impossible but unethical. To treat this text as Gibb’s

serious contribution to the education debate, rather than a mendacious attempt to garnish his reputation, might, after all, encourage Gibb further. And so, dear reader, I have offered you this instead.

My final comment. On the front cover, Doug Lemov – author of *Teach Like a Champion* – praises *Reforming Lessons* thus: ‘Perhaps the most important story in the education sector over the last two decades’. He couldn’t be more right. It’s just a story.

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Notes

1. Christy Kulz, ‘Heroic heads, mobility mythologies and the power of ambiguity’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16 June 2015: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/12696/1/SOC_Kulz_2015.pdf.
2. Julia Snell and Ian Cushing, ‘Institutional language policing and the maintenance of race-class inequalities’, *FORUM*, 65 (3), 2023: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-65-issue-3/article-9827/>.
3. See Alice Bradbury, ‘The impact of the phonics screening check on grouping by ability: A ‘necessary evil’ amid the policy storm’, *British Education Research Journal*, 44 (4), 2018: <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3449>.
4. Indeed, within the Conservative party, curriculum development rarely went beyond ‘I studied that at university so it must be good’ – see also Gavin Williamson’s drive for Latin and classics in state schools under Boris Johnson’s ‘stewardship’ of the country.
5. National Education Union, “‘Are you on slide 8 yet?’”, NEU, 25 March 2025: <https://neu.org.uk/latest/library/are-you-slide-8-yet>.