

A plea for a more empathetic, imaginative and inclusive educational system

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What Are We Doing to Our Children? A teacher's journey through our British education system

Karen Wilson, Cragside Publishing, 2026

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In his 1911 book *What Is and What Might Be* former chief inspector Edmond Holmes condemned the arid drill methods of the elementary school, whose teachers were 'the victims of a vicious conception of education' exacerbated by the 'despotism' of the revised code and payment by results. He argued for schools in which 'the life of the children is emancipative and educative'.

Holmes's book marked the start of a century of initiatives aimed at making education more child-centred. Groups like the *New Education Fellowship* and the *New Ideals in Education Committee* sprang up; schools such as Summerhill, Dartington Hall and Bryanston offered alternative styles of education; the kindergarten movement was based on the work of Froebel; books and articles were written by Margaret and Rachel McMillan, Maria Montessori and others; and reports were published – Hadow's *The Primary School* (1931) said education should be thought of 'in terms of activity and experience, rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored', while Plowden's *Children and their Primary Schools* (1967) famously declared that: 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child'.

More recently we've had the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review 'Children, their world, their education' (2010), and countless books bemoaning the current state of education in England, including Melissa Benn's *School Wars: The battle for Britain's education* (2011), Peter Mortimore's *Education under Siege* (2013), Eric Macfarlane's *Who Cares About Education? ... going in the wrong direction* (2016), Geoffrey Marshall's *What is Education About?* (2021), Robin Alexander's *Education in Spite of Policy* (2022) and Lorna Smith's *Creativity in the English Curriculum* (2023).

So what have we learned about children, their needs and how they learn in the 115 years since Holmes's book was published? Not a lot, apparently. Today, most schools in England are stuck with a mandatory system which prioritises accountability and

competition over collaboration and creativity; the curriculum over the child. It is seen at its worst in Michael Gove's 2014 version of the national curriculum which, against all advice, contained no mention of creativity.

What Are We Doing to Our Children? is Karen Wilson's contribution to the debate about what education could and should be. It is 'a plea for a more empathetic, imaginative, and inclusive educational system' and 'a love letter to the arts in education' (p10).

Karen Wilson had a performing career in her twenties, and then gained a degree in theatre at Dartington College of Arts and an MA in drama education at Chester University. She has taught drama for 30 years both in and out of school in a wide range of situations.

She seeks to show what children are capable of 'when we create an environment where they can be confident, curious, engaged and authentic' and that the consequences of not doing so are 'deteriorating mental health, escalating truancy, and the haemorrhage of dedicated, qualified teachers leaving teaching, because they feel bullied, burnt out and miserable' (p17).

In her first chapter, *'Rejected by the system'*, she relates her experience of teaching boys excluded from mainstream education in a special school whose buildings had 'multiple locking doors along corridors, secured reinforced windows and fencing worthy of a category A prison' (p29). The boys had been branded 'no hopers and failures and they weren't going to play the game here' (pp31-2).

Before teaching in the special school, Wilson had worked with the lowest set year seven group in a comprehensive – 'the kids who had simply said no, no you don't get to label me, and if you try, I won't play' (p43).

In the regular school it wasn't as blatant, but it was there. It was in the negative stamps in their planners for lateness, rudeness, lack of cooperation. It was in the vacant far-away expressions of children who weren't listening. It was in the horrible little room next to the staff room where ... children sat in cubicles working in silent isolation. (p43)

In her chapter on primary schools she writes about a boy from a difficult home and how his little village school 'stepped in quietly to provide basic care' (p48): how the head's wife would take him home, give him a bath and wash his clothes. She watched as 'this little community found ways to gently coax him out of the self-contained world he lived in' (pp48-9). Wilson comments:

This could never happen now. Much of what this lovely couple did would be outlawed by safeguarding regulations. There would be a referral to social services and a great deal of paperwork. It might be a long time and some very difficult meetings before anything like the kind of quiet intervention he had here could happen. Much of the time he might be on a waiting list. (p49)

As a primary school teacher, says Wilson, she was bothered how often the children ‘were instructed, quite forcibly, to sit still, stop talking, line up, eyes on the teacher, put that down’ (p55). She objects to parents and teachers reprimanding children by telling them ‘they are not making the right choices’. It would be fairer, she says, to say they are ‘not obeying orders’ because it is not about choice but compliance. ‘The system is absolutely not interested in what the child would choose to do’ (p60).

As to the curriculum and its associated testing regime, she notes that: ‘By year three, in English alone there are 35 separate learning targets to cover, to produce evidence for and record weekly on a scale’ (p62). The resulting statistics and graphs, she says, ‘are a statistician’s dream, but perhaps not always adding value to the child’s learning journey, self-confidence or positive experience of their lives’ (p62).

She gives a very moving account of her work with the OurSpace project, particularly how groups of rural and inner-city children on two-day residentials got to know one another.

She then considers the transition to and content of secondary education. With regard to the national curriculum, she remembers from her student days being ‘horrified by the framework it put around drama’ (p85). She acknowledges that the national curriculum was ‘an understandable answer to several needs’, but: ‘The level of content, sub categories, assessment targets and evidence tracking are overwhelming to both young people and their teachers’ (p90). ‘It does not have to be this way’, she says: ‘From the national curriculum in 1988 to Michael Gove’s top-down reforms causing an impossible workload, we have evolved a system of coercive control leaving too many students and teachers stressed, angry and disempowered’ (pp112-3).

In the next two chapters she writes about teaching in one-to-one situations and what might be achieved ‘if we loosened the reins and gave young people choices’ (p116); and describes some of the differences she has observed in her own career between private and state schools.

She then considers the place of exams in the education system. She argues that: ‘It is time we took notice of the mental health statistics and the rhetoric on “falling grades” or comparing international league tables’ (p167). Academically gifted children are not the only ones with an important role to play in society: ‘We need a broader curriculum, more agency, and choice for the young people themselves, and a more imaginative way of assessing it in order to spur them on’ (p167).

In her chapter about teachers, she begins by observing that they are all different: ‘Some are passionate about education, some are not. We learn something from all of them’. But we now have an education system whose designers ‘are trying very hard to remove any trace of difference in what is learnt, how it is taught and how it is measured’. As a result, she argues, ‘a great deal is being lost’ (p173).

In the interests of safeguarding our children, we also repel them. In the interests of a world class education, we are also sanitizing away every shred of an imaginative approach to life. Don't make them rationalise every emotion. Leave them time to dance, be a unicorn and bake brownies. Teach them the difference between a dangerous intrusion and an impulsive hug (pp193-4).

The teaching profession, she says, is in crisis for 'both the children we want to develop into happy successful adults and for the adults who want to make this happen' (p194).

She then asks 'where did our education system come from?' and uses her own experiences to illustrate the history. Her children's school was originally established in the 1830s 'in some first-floor rooms in the new flax mill on the river'. It offered the working children of the mill 'four hours schooling at one end of the day to balance the six hours of labour they did in the mill at the other' (p198). In 1860, 'our village got a classic Victorian primary school ... with its huge lancet window, reminiscent of a cathedral' (p199). The children – including her great grandparents – would have endured the payment-by-results system involving: 'rigorously tested rote learning ... achieved through constant punishment for inattentiveness or even just error. Children were caned, shamed and forced by whichever means, to concentrate and produce the evidence. Where were the dyslexic or ADHD children then? I shudder to think of what the lives of some of the children in my village must have felt like' (p200).

We have 'come some way from the Victorian system of rote learning', she says, but 'have we actually shaken off the top-down system of measuring children by memorised knowledge and compelling and coercing a system of learning that takes little account of individual aptitude and ability?' (pp204-5).

She goes on to discuss the ideas of some of her favourite educationists, including Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, John Dewey and Paulo Freire, relating their writings to her own experience.

In her penultimate chapter she looks to the future and asks, 'so how could we do it differently?', (p220) and in her final chapter, *'Towards a new model of school'*, she describes types of alternative education, some of which she has had personal experience of.

Her impression of David Gribble's Sands school, where she taught as a freelance, was of 'a deeply safe space for children to thrive in' (p252), a view endorsed in the comments of a past pupil and a past head teacher.

A friend whose daughter attended Summerhill School, founded in 1921 by A.S. Neil, told her that the school had given her daughter 'confidence, a non-judgemental outlook, a sense of belonging, and of not being "put in a box"' (p254).

She expresses interest in the Soka Schools – a network of alternative schools in Asia, North America and Brazil – noting in particular that: 'Soka schools study peace. Peace is discussed, debated by children and envisioned as a clear aim, beginning with

the school community' (p256).

She mentions the notion of self-directed education in relation to the Sudbury schools and Lucy Stephens's *The New School*, which has mixed-age classes and, instead of a behaviour policy, operates 'community accountability' (p261).

She notes some of the initiatives that aim to support children in state schools who are not thriving, including Derry Hannam's call for a 20 per cent reduction in directed curriculum time. Children, she says, need 'time to think, time to wonder, time out to process and digest' (p264), and she observes that the teacher unions 'are also well aware of the crisis in schools and campaigning for change' (p264).

She argues that children learn so much more than the particular skill being taught:

If we try to teach them how to thread a needle, what they see is not just how to do it. They see the encouragement or frustration, the confidence or impatience. They see the way we talk to the child who has said they need the loo. They hear the tone of voice we use when we talk past them to another member of staff. We think we are teaching them knowledge, but it is so much more. We are teaching them adult attitudes, how to relate to adults, to each other, and to themselves. We are teaching them patience or total intolerance. If we castigate their day dreams when we want them to concentrate, we shouldn't wonder why they argue and fight when their friends don't play in the way they want them to. (p269)

And she concludes that: 'If we want our children to be ready for the challenges that face them in the world we are bequeathing them, we need to model our fight for that change (p271)'.

What Are We Doing to Our Children? is a powerful book which I thoroughly enjoyed reading. Karen Wilson's writing is personal, passionate and perceptive: she discusses all the major issues in the light of her own wide experience; she clearly cares deeply about children and young people; and she understands their needs and the damage done to them by aspects of the current education system.

She describes how, as a supply teacher, she learned that the lives of the children in her class involved 'long term terminal illness, early morning police cars, parent marriage break ups'. Sometimes, she says, 'it feels like a wonder they are in school at all' (p24). She compares this with her own childhood at a private boarding school where the rules were 'strict and seemingly always came back to stop talking'. After '3 tortured years of being in trouble endlessly, I was expelled at the age of 10' (p27).

In the boys' special school, she remembers particularly watching 'the youngest, most vulnerable child in the school, holding a nervous rabbit and calming it' (p34). The boys in this school, she says, were teaching her something fundamental 'which I have yet to fully understand ... a kind of wisdom in the way they tested every new face, to see if we could still reflect back the humanity after they had done their worst. Every one of

them had a story' (p35).

She is concerned about attitudes to angry and abusive behaviour, noting that in political debate it always 'seems to trigger calls for tighter discipline, greater sanctions, punitive measures'. Surely, she says, it is time to take a closer look at the causes of such behaviour and 'get beyond the idea that it is solely the fault of the young people themselves' (p109). She worries about the use of isolation rooms: 'For a child already experiencing social isolation through poverty, family breakdown or loss of their culture and community as refugees, it can be the tipping point' (p111). How many of the children being sent to isolation, she wonders, have 'come from a home life too distracting to leave much attention for conjugating verbs? How many are struggling with an internal world fuelled by social media overload and causing them real everyday pain?' (p43).

In 2022/23, she notes, 27,500 children aged six and under were suspended or excluded from school. 'How have we got it so terribly wrong for so many children just beginning their learning journey?' she asks. 'Every single one of those children will carry that stigma, as I did, whatever comes next for them' (p72).

I urge you to read Karen Wilson's book and can only hope that the creativity, kindness and humanity she displays in her writing will find their way back into an education system from which they seem to have been progressively expunged in recent years.

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