



## CASEnotes 100: The State We Are In

July 2024

Eighty years on from the great 1944 Education Act and with an election imminent, it seems appropriate for this hundredth edition of CASEnotes to begin by taking stock of our education system. What has changed for the better since 1944? What has changed for the worse? What has not changed at all? Here are just a few things that come to mind. No doubt readers will be able to think of more...

### LITTLE OR NO CHANGE

The **social structure** of the education system continues to reflect and reinforce the existing social hierarchy. The rich still educate their children separately from those of everyone else in a system that focuses lavish resources upon the already advantaged and promotes them through a powerful network of social contacts into elite positions in society. Meanwhile the marketisation of state schooling leads to the children of the most disadvantaged being concentrated in “failing” schools.

The **educational narrative** continues to be the one derived from the setting up of the current private school system in the 1860s: the purpose of education is not seen as the fostering of the common good but as a means of promoting the interests of individual children. Within the state system parents feel forced into competing for scarce resources for their children, inevitably at the expense of other peoples' children.

**School teaching** in state schools continues to be seen as not so much a profession as a craft skill to be learned “on the job”. In the private sector a model of the “gifted amateur” is promoted by the former pupils who dominate public life.

**Academic achievement** continues to be seen as the pinnacle of success at school, with practical and creative subjects seen as leading to occupations for “other people's children”. Vocational education continues to be subjected to ineffectual tinkering while nothing is done to raise its status.



## **BETTER**

The **class based** selective system has been replaced, if only partially, by a system of comprehensive secondary schooling and schooling no longer ends at 14.

**Access to university** has been greatly expanded (although the idea is under frequent attack from privately educated editors).

## **WORSE**

**Ill-judged government interference** in the content and management of the curriculum has become endemic, resulting in its having been stripped back to a “Gradgrindian” model in which practical and creative subjects, along with modern foreign languages, are in danger of disappearing.

**Further education** has become seriously underfunded and neglected.

**Narrow and outdated forms of assessment** along with **inappropriate and largely hostile systems of inspection** have come to dominate school life to the detriment of both pupil and teacher well-being.

**The administration of state education through local government** has been undermined by an “academy” system, whose governance is secretive, expensive and democratically unaccountable.

**Real terms underfunding** for almost a decade and a half has led to a serious crisis of resources from school buildings to teacher recruitment and retention.

No political party seems to have recognised the scale of the challenge that will face the new government, let alone have any policies to tackle it.



## Uncritical Teachers, Uncritical Thinkers

*Louise Vincent*

In March of this year, the shadow education secretary Bridget Phillipson said that school pupils must “learn to challenge” media narratives. Speaking at the annual conference of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Phillipson said, “[Our young people need, more than ever before, to be questioning, critical, discerning.](#)” Besides cultivating a mature citizenry, critical thinking skills become even more important in the modern economy, one which continues to shift away from manufacturing and manual labour and towards services and tech. Indeed, it is a familiar truism that schools must educate their learners for jobs that do not yet exist. Still, I cannot fathom many teachers today would claim that they are teaching critical thinking skills effectively. How could they, when teachers themselves are no longer active agents in the content that they are “delivering”?

With the [expansion of academisation](#) and the [centralisation of educational resources](#) away from individual schools and towards corporatist “independent public bodies,” such as the [Oak National Academy](#), the answer to the question, “what should today’s lesson be?” is likely to be decided by a “Curriculum Lead” rather than an individual teacher. In Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) especially, the trend is towards “curriculum packs” that structure the short, middle, and long-term teaching across “units of learning,” with pre-prepared classroom content, as well as homework, revision sheets, and end-of-term assessments.

The rationale for these developments is certainly well-intentioned. [Given that teachers in England work longer hours than their European counterparts](#), any opportunity to reduce workload is warmly welcomed. However, this becomes problematic when educational *resources* become educational *prescriptions*. Many teachers today are not, I believe, active agents in what they teach. They cannot choose either *what* they are delivering, or *how* to deliver it. The consensus in academic research is that the schoolteacher today is less “educator” and more “[craftsperson](#).” Teachers are “[deliverers](#),” “[technicians](#),” of education, not public-facing intellectuals.

It seems that the ideal teacher, at least in the current paradigm, is a classroom *manager*. They passively take the “content” - discrete objects of “knowledge” - and regurgitate it to likewise

# CASE

passive students. Along with being boring and patronising, the problem of having the *what* and *how* withheld from teachers, is that the *why* is lost along with them. This way, you are prone to find a scene that I have witnessed many times in my short teaching career:

*Student:* “Why are we learning this?”

*Teacher:* “Because it’s on the syllabus.”

This is very far from Ms Phillipson's “questioning, critical and discerning.”

Besides failing our learners, I would wager that this teaching model is more implicated in the [present staffing crisis](#) than is generally recognised. Together with [inadequate pay](#), the gradual erosion of [teacher autonomy](#) is deeply associated with the overall de-valuation and [de-professionalisation](#) of what once was a respected career. After all, what aspiring teacher, propelled by a sincere desire to inspire young people and “make a difference,” looks forward to nothing more than doing what they are told?

Certainly, I am not proposing a world in which each teacher is a king and each classroom their kingdom. This has already been settled by the “[Great Debate](#),” launched all the way in 1976, partly in response to the [William Tyndale affair](#) where a radical child-centred ethos hindered children’s learning and resulted in serious disciplinary problems. But the present “I say, you do” chain of command running from Executive Head Teachers and Senior Leadership Teams, down to teachers, then subsequently hammered into students cannot be “delivering” critical learners. Surely if we want students who think, their teachers must have the freedom to do so first.

*(In the little time she has available while studying for her doctorate, Louise acts as CASE's Administrator)*



## Labour and Education

*Trevor Fisher*

Writing about Labour's education policies before the manifesto has been published\* is a challenging but important task because the real focus of any election is not the policies to which the parties commit but the ones that they do not mention. Parties set out their priorities according to what they think will win votes so, for example, Labour will not move to abolish the last pockets of 11+ selection, damaging as they are to the development of a proper system of comprehensive secondary schooling. Nor will Labour commit to doing anything about the divisive and wasteful “academy” system even though this election will see the retirement of Schools Minister Nick Gibb, who accepted nine years ago in a *Schools Week* article that academies are NOT more successful than local authority schools. Labour is not going to risk fluttering feathers.

This almost paranoid caution makes it odder that one of the items in Keir Starmer's “six steps” risks a massive hostage to fortune. This is the pledge to recruit 6,500 extra teachers. How this figure was arrived at and what it means is not clear but what is clear is that the media did not realise how small a promise this. As Michael Gove pointed out, three quarters of English schools would not see a single extra teacher. That this is the only education related pledge in the “six steps” testifies to how little grasp our media has of how schools work. It is even more telling that as teacher supply is a critical and growing problem, Labour is not disputing a key Tory policy – that of the pre-eminence of STEM subjects, a curriculum area where teacher shortage is particularly acute.

STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) is promoted by government on the basis that those with good qualifications in these subjects have particularly good earning potential.

Unfortunately, this does not apply to those who teach STEM subjects, so teachers leave as soon as they can for better jobs and recruitment targets are missed. What kind of teachers the 6,500 might be is perplexing, but there is no sign they will be in such shortage subjects.

The other major gap in the campaign strategy is a worked-out defence of the policy of levying VAT on the fees received by private schools. This has come under heavy attack with a return of the old chestnut that Labour is opposed to aspiration. This is untrue, and the obvious reply is that Labour is in favour of aspiration for all, and not just for those who can afford to pay for education, but this

# CASE

point is not being made by Labour spokespeople. Two policy changes to make the point should be a priority, restoring policies abolished by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition in 2010. The first would be to restore the Educational Maintenance Allowance, thus making it possible for all post-16 students to stay on at school or college, and the second would be to reinstate the Every Child Matters programme.

It is also possible to spend more per child by without having to rely on the VAT raised from school fees. However, the canard that the VAT policy would lead to overcrowded schools needs to be discredited, as the real problem for state schools will lack of pupils due to falling rolls. In London in particular schools are having to consider merging owing to lack of pupils. The spend per pupil could be increased simply by keeping the global figure of expenditure constant and with fewer pupils the spend per pupil increases – if inflation can be kept under control.

Unfortunately, education has not been a high-profile policy area in the development of Labour's manifesto and, if Labour wins the election, their education offer will need to be boosted.

*(\*since this article was written, Labour has published its election manifesto; its content bears out Trevor's expectations).*



## **Labour's Manifesto: a response by the National Children's Bureau**

We welcome Labour's commitment to a cross-government child poverty strategy and will be keen to work with them to shape this into actionable steps towards sustainable change in children's lives. We are disappointed to see a lack of substantial commitment around abolishing the 2-child limit, as this would be a clear way to lift 300,000 children out of poverty. We hope that their upcoming child poverty strategy works towards a long-term investment and concrete action.

We are happy to see the commitments around specialist mental health support for children and young people in every school, as well as community hubs for young people. Further, we are very pleased that developing a Unique Child Identifier has been made a firm commitment in this manifesto. This is a key step in improved data-sharing, communication, and multi-agency working.

However, the manifesto does not fully address the urgent needs of the children's social care system. Although we welcome the support for children in care and support for kinship carers, foster care, and adoption, we are disappointed that the manifesto makes no reference to supporting family help and early intervention services. We would invite Labour to put greater attention and investment into prevention and early support services.

We welcome a commitment to deliver the extension of funded childcare families are entitled to and hope that this commitment will come with a plan to support the workforce and that these entitlements are met with ensuring high-quality care that supports the best outcomes for babies and young children in the first 1,001 days. We further welcome the commitments around ensuring high-quality maternity care, and training for thousands more midwives as part of the NHS Workforce Plan. We would welcome further commitments and emphasis on the health and wellbeing of babies, young children, and families to give children the best possible start.



## **THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FORUM: notes and a manifesto for the new government**

### **The Foundation of Our Future - Investing in Early Childhood**

**Introduction:** the Early Childhood Forum firmly believes that the foundation of a prosperous society begins with its youngest members. The first seven years of a child's life are critical, shaping their future health, learning, and well-being. However, despite the well-documented importance of these early years, the UK currently lags behind many countries in its provision and support for this crucial developmental stage.

**Importance of Early Years:** from birth to age seven, children experience rapid brain development, laying the groundwork for their future. Research has consistently shown that high-quality early childhood experiences lead to better cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes. Conversely, early adversity can result in long-term negative effects on health, behaviour, and learning.

**Government Investment:** to truly prioritize early childhood, the government must significantly increase investment in early years provision. This includes ensuring that early years settings are staffed with well-paid, highly qualified professionals. These educators play a vital role in creating stimulating environments that foster exploration and learning, helping children develop resilience and a lifelong love of learning.

**Focus on Birth to Three:** the period from birth to age three is particularly critical. During these years, children's brains are developing at an unparalleled rate. High-quality care and early intervention can prevent future issues, making it imperative that families have access to supportive services, including health visitors and early years educators.

**The Role of Play:** play is not just a leisure activity for children; it is their work. Through play, children develop essential physical, cognitive, and social skills. It fosters creativity, problem-solving abilities, and emotional resilience. Ensuring that play is a central component of early childhood education is crucial.





**Supporting Children with SEND:** children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) require tailored support to thrive. The current system often leaves families struggling to access the necessary resources. By increasing support and ensuring adequate funding, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all children.

**Staff Well-being:** the professionals who care for our youngest children are undervalued and underpaid. Improving their pay and working conditions and recognizing their essential role is critical. A well-supported workforce is better equipped to provide the high-quality care that children need.

**Qualifications and Professional Development:** ensuring that early years staff have access to high-quality training and ongoing professional development is essential. This not only benefits the children but also helps retain skilled professionals in the sector.

**Conclusion:** investing in early childhood is investing in our future. By prioritizing these early years, we can ensure that every child has the best possible start in life, leading to a healthier, more educated, and happier society.

**About the Early Childhood Forum:** The Early Childhood Forum is dedicated to advocating for high-quality early years education and care. The Forum brings together experts, practitioners, and stakeholders to promote policies and practices that benefit young children and their families.



## **Manifesto for the Election: Early Childhood Priorities**

### **Key Messages**

- **Critical Early Years:** recognize the first seven years as the most crucial in a child's development, with government support from birth to age 7.
- **Investment Priority:** prioritise substantial investment in early childhood education and care.
- **Quality and Qualified Staff:** ensure that all settings have well-paid, highly qualified staff to provide high quality care.
- **Stimulating Environments:** create environments that encourage exploration and the development of interest.
- **Family Support:** offer robust support for families to address issues early and effectively.

### **Focus Areas**

- **Children from Birth to Three**
  - Emphasize the importance of brain development during these years.
  - Provide support through Health Visitors and Early Years staff.
  - Address the crisis in services with attention and investment at the highest levels of government.
- **The Importance of Play**
  - Highlight play as essential for physical, cognitive, and social development.
  - Ensure play is child-led for maximum benefit.
  - Recognize the role of play in developing language skills, supporting mental health, and empathy.
- **Support for Children with SEND**
  - Ensure no family has to fight for necessary support.
  - Address capacity issues in successful early years settings.
  - Provide adequate resources and specialist provision for all children.
- **Staff Well-being**
  - Improve pay and recognition for early years professionals.



- Alleviate stress by addressing funding and support gaps.
- Allow freedom for providers to deliver services based on their unique beliefs and values.
- **Qualifications and CPD**
- Promote higher qualifications for staff to enhance child development.
- Address inconsistency in qualification standards.
- Ensure ongoing professional development and adequate remuneration for qualified staff.



## WHY THE EDUCATION SYSTEM STILL FAILS LOW INCOME

### CHILDREN

*Michael Pyke*

*The Guardian* has reported that a recent study carried out by researchers at UCL, led by Professor John Jerrim, which tracked high-ability children from the age of five, from the lowest and highest income groups, found that both groups progressed at similar rates until the first years of secondary school. But by the time the children sat exams at 16 years old, those in the wealthier group were much more likely to gain top grades than those in the low-income group and were more likely to take A-levels. Researchers also found that, after the early years of secondary school, those from low-income backgrounds were more likely to have contact with the police, more likely to have lower self-esteem and more likely to have developed negative attitudes towards education. The reasons for this falling off may be complex but, whatever they are, the researchers believe that something goes badly wrong for many low-income children during the first three years of secondary school.

In my experience (40+ years working in comprehensive schools) some of what goes wrong is due to socio-economic and other circumstances over which schools have no control (insecurity, family breakdown, poor parental expectations etc etc) but neither do I believe that schools could not be doing much better if they were given the right resources, of which the most important one by far would be a teaching force professionally educated to post-degree level and trained to have a much more ambitious view of its purpose than the narrow, transactional one currently dictated by successive governments whose ignorance has been matched only by their propensity for meddling. Top of my list would be the idea that it is a *professional duty* for teachers to get to know their pupils properly and, as far as possible, their parents; do their best to form positive and mutually respectful relationships with them and work out how best to motivate them. This cannot be done in the current circumstances, in which teachers are badly overworked and have their energies diverted into soulless (and completely pointless) “accountability” tasks and, even if working conditions in schools were better, it would require a much more selective approach to admission to teaching – a pipe dream in the current situation.

Secondly, government needs to stop pretending that schools are not social institutions. In the mind



of government, a school seems to resemble an 18<sup>th</sup> century church, where, although there is a congregation, they are all separated from one another by high box pews and the only person they can see outside the pew is the vicar (or minister) standing high in the pulpit – a concrete expression of the idea that our relationship with God is entirely individual and that going to church is not a social activity. Parents know that school is very much a social activity, which is why those who can do so (not usually those with low incomes) will anxiously seek out schools where they judge that their children will meet and form friendships with people like themselves. Early adolescence is probably the most uncertain time in our lives, which, along with the unconscious drive to establish ourselves as beings who are independent from our parents, makes us enormously vulnerable to peer group pressure. Young adolescents are desperate to belong and working hard at school may not be the best way to gain acceptance and have friends. Many children from low-income families have parents whose own experience of school has been quite negative. Many of them also live in situations of constant anxiety and stress caused by financial insecurity and the fear of family breakdown to which financial insecurity can lead. “Market forces” inevitably lead to the least “popular” schools having large over-concentrations of deprived children and, however hard they try, teachers simply becoming overwhelmed. It is not surprising that low-income children have lost motivation by Year 9, and this is without even beginning to consider how a child living in poverty looks at the future.

All the research shows that the best chance for low-income children to do well is to attend a comprehensive school where the intake is both academically and socially balanced. Unfortunately, the obsession of both Labour and Conservative governments with “parental choice” and “market forces” has led to such schools being few and far between.

*Michael is the Press Officer for CASE and has edited CASEnotes for the last few years.*

### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

This will be the last edition of CASEnotes in its current form. The COVID pandemic caused us to abandon the previous paper version and Louise's superb rebuilding of our website now enables us to move to an interactive format in which members of CASE will be free – and are strongly encouraged – to take part in a continuous online discussion. This change will be introduced in the autumn. Have a good summer.