

A Manifesto Club Thinkpiece

# A Liberal Education Policy Michele Ledda



### In short...

Our education authorities no longer believe in education; they attack the subjects that make up human knowledge.

Privatising trends in both economic and cultural spheres corrupt learning, and make it difficult to champion universal values and the virtues of public life.

Education has become inward-looking, obsessed with the child's inner self, ultimately creating passive consumers who must depend on the state for guidance throughout their lives.

We must reclaim liberal education, we must challenge policies that undermine the subject-based curriculum, and champion rigorous testing and the authority of teachers.

The ideal of an enlightened and autonomous citizen who looks out on the world and can choose for herself should guide education policy.

In June 2007, the government announced the curriculum would focus on life skills at the expense of traditional academic disciplines. Ken Boston, chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, explained that a more 'personalised curriculum' would allow schools to teach some pupils, instead of history, say, how to open a bank account or take out a mortgage. [1] As someone with no formal teaching in the area, yet who can cook and even open a bank account (you walk into the bank and ask), I am absolutely sure some things are better learned at the university of life.

Many educationalists would disagree. Early in 2007, John White of the Institute of Education claimed that the academic, subject-based curriculum is an obsolete 'middle-class creation' that favours middle-class children. He wants a new curriculum aligned to the five aims of New Labour's flagship education legislation, Every Child Matters (ECM): stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, achieve economic well-being, make a personal contribution to society. Turning children into educated citizens seems no longer a priority of the education system.

Writing in White's edited book, *Rethinking the School Curriculum* (2004), the mathematician Peter Gill further maintains there is no reason to think studying maths 'develops logical reasoning... and the ability to think in abstract ways.' Algebra should be scrapped, Pythagoras' theorem is 'almost entirely useless' and adding fractions should not be taught before A-level. The minister for higher education Bill Rammell is also unconcerned about knowledge as a public good. In 2006 he responded to news that university applications were down for disciplines such as classics and philosophy by commenting that if students make calculations about how best to get a job, then he thinks that 'no bad thing'. [2]

That the minister responsible for higher education doesn't even pretend to believe in the importance of knowledge is bad enough, yet even his critics in universities were unable to defend their disciplines as public bodies of knowledge: 'We provide the full range of transferable skills...a degree in any humanities subject is an excellent training for the world of work' protested Professor Douglas Cairns, honorary secretary of the Classical Association and head of history and classics at Edinburgh University. Jonathan Wolf of the British Philosophical Association released a similar statement.

Even the teachers' union ATL doubts the value of traditional forms of knowledge. It rightly recognises that a school curriculum based on the acquisition of subject knowledge is incompatible with the five aims of ECM. [3]

It is worth noting that what undermines traditional subjects today is not the latest discoveries and developments. Historically, a discipline's content and methods have changed with the times, and textbooks and the curriculum updated accordingly. Current changes to the curriculum are instead motivated by profound doubts about the importance of academic knowledge for the majority of the population, and the capacity of most children to acquire it.

### **The strange defeat of education**

At a recent RSA conference John White criticised the subject-based curriculum, which he traced to the dissenters and Scottish Presbyterians of the eighteenth century. These were, worryingly, he said, people 'deeply attached to knowledge, which for them was a necessary condition of personal salvation.'

White seems oblivious that all modern nation states have adopted a subject-based curriculum. This is part of a secular project of democratisation devised when nation states were still able to conceive of the ideal educated citizen. The omission is significant: it is precisely this 'deep attachment' to knowledge, secular or religious, that many educationalists find out of place in our disenchanting world.

Even those who believe in the importance of academic education think only a minority of children should have full access. Former 'maths tsar' Celia Hoyles, also of the Institute of Education, appointed specifically to promote the teaching of mathematics, thinks the subject is important only for a gifted few: 'Maths has always had a dual function in school: to produce the future mathematicians and engineers while

providing the rest of [the population] with a survival kit.' [4] She favours a more functional maths syllabus.

The new functional syllabus will ensure pupils who do not achieve a grade C will still be recognised as 'successful' at a lower level. This is what politicians really mean when they use phrases such as 'success for all', 'every child matters' or 'no child left behind': providing children with the bare minimum to 'function' at work and in private life. The level of education previously aimed for by primary schooling has become the ideal aim of secondary education for many children.

And it is precisely because they don't believe in education that politicians and educators rely on dubious alternatives.

In September 2006, Alan Johnson announced plans to train new school cooks and introduce cookery lessons. He told BBC Radio Four that children's diet 'is central to everything we do in education. Previously this was peripheral to what we did and I think what Jamie Oliver has done is show that this is absolutely essential'. Jamie Oliver, you may remember, dominated the Labour Party campaign on education in the last general election.

In June, Johnson bizarrely expressed his hope in a local education authority's scheme to improve GCSE results through a diet of fish oil supplements. Later in the year Catherine Carr received the Norwich Union Medical Journalism Awards for her radio report exposing the junk science behind the fish oil claims. 'This was a wonderfully assembled piece helping to protect the public from bad science' explained the awarding body. [5]

Yet, the search for miraculous remedies continues. This year a new scheme to be rolled out across 16 primary schools in Scotland will test the impact of the Nintendo computer games More Brain Training on pupils' motivation, concentration and attainment in maths. Derek Robertson, of Learning and Teaching Scotland, the authority responsible for curriculum development claims that, 'Game-based learning can provide dynamic and culturally relevant contexts that engage, motivate and challenge today's young learner.' [6]

### **The problem of motivation**

Whilst anything that helps children learn should be welcomed, we cannot motivate pupils through a technological fix. Only adults can engage, motivate and challenge children. Indeed, the very attempt to replace adult authority with superficial appeals to science, technology

or celebrities can be seriously demotivating. Feeling rightly unable to motivate pupils, adults hope they will become addicted to maths just as they are 'addicted' to computer games.

Real motivation can only come from great belief in one's goals, coupled with the possibility of success. Motivation is what gives you the strength to study hard, day after day, whatever your mood or frame of mind, often for little immediate reward. Children must see adults have no doubt that maths is essential. They must feel certain their efforts will pay off. Once the child understands the importance of becoming an educated person, everything becomes a little easier. The nagging question that crops up in the face of momentary failure – what's the point? – is not so difficult to answer.

It is obvious that policymakers, educationalists and even teachers think most traditional subjects are boring and obsolete. Normal pupils are unable to learn and must be treated as 'special needs'.

The problem of motivation, then, does not lie in pupils' brains or modern lifestyles. Rather, it is an entirely adult problem, a *crisis of authority*, which is displaced onto children. It affects all adults in positions of authority: parents, teachers, doctors and politicians, including those who devise education policies. In this context, trying to borrow the authority of science or technology as a substitute for the judgment of teachers can only exacerbate the problem. Children can only be motivated if they see that adults know and value what it means to be an educated human being.

### What is education?

If we discovered a pill that increased our intelligence and ability to retain information, this would be a fantastic medical treatment but it wouldn't be education.

Education is a conscious process. As Hannah Arendt writes in *The Crisis in Education*, it is the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, where the older generation describes and justifies the world, out of love and a sense of responsibility both towards the world and the young.

It is often said that the word 'education', from Latin *educō*, means 'to lead out' or 'draw out' something that is inside the child, a view summed up in the title of the influential UNESCO publication, *Learning: The Treasure Within*. However, since abstract words were originally used to describe concrete objects and situations, it is more

likely that *educō* meant to lead the child out of the home and into the world, until he knew it well enough to survive without adult guidance and protection.

These two definitions represent contrasting orientations. The first, which premises the self, is dominant today. It sees knowledge primarily as private, a personal asset of the individual. This private aspect is certainly part of learning, but it is not education.

The second definition, embodied by what remains of the subject-based curriculum, sees education as oriented towards the world. It stresses the social aspect of knowledge as a public good that must be acquired by the child. It is the knowledge accumulated by humanity through millennia of struggles, discoveries and inventions. It is the modern world itself, built by humans in our long adventure from the caves to the present age. This is astonishing progress, even though the modern world is far from perfect.

Through education, children begin to access the common world that is common to all human beings regardless if we see it from different standpoints. Learning to read and the study of grammar and maths are the first formal steps towards providing us with the abstract thought necessary for our minds to move across time and space and look at the world from other people's points of view.

The subject-based curriculum sums up the development of human thought throughout history. That is why it is still important that children learn knowledge developed thousands of years ago, such as Pythagoras' theorem and Euclidean geometry. Both are still an integral part of modern, logical reasoning. Even quantum physics and relativity 'didn't so much replace Newton as extend his reach. Like a tree, mature sciences grow by adding new material while leaving their heartwood intact.' [7]

An educated person doesn't have to know everything, but knows enough to feel a sense of responsibility for the world, its maintenance and improvement. US sociologist Christopher Lasch provides a good example. He writes how Mary Antin, an 'immigrant intellectual', felt a new sense of dignity through her schooling:

*'I had never been ashamed of my family, – but this George Washington, who died long before I was born, was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens.'* [8]

Today's crisis of authority originates from society's inability to validate the process through which the modern individual can assume respon-

sibility for this world and become, through being a public citizen, one of its authors.

### **The crisis of authority and privatisation of knowledge**

As society has become more atomised, it has made it difficult for those in positions of authority to affirm public, universal values. Yet authority means nothing without the capacity to affirm such values. Therefore, people from the prime minister all the way down to teachers and parents often feel isolated.

This leads authorities to exercise power by distancing themselves from the source of their authority. For instance, politicians distance themselves from the values of their own party, as Blair and Cameron have done. They become isolated, private individuals, just like the rest of the public, to be credible in their representative role. Likewise, leaders of particular institutions find it difficult to defend those institutions as a public good and often end up attacking them.

Only private values, which are a matter of personal choice, seem to be legitimate today. In many areas of policy, 'choice' has become the substitute for universally valid ideas. Feeling unable to win people over to a particular ideal of public service, and being uncertain about what such an ideal should be, politicians maintain they want to offer choice, to even let individual members of the public *shape* public services.

According to this model, individual users pursuing their own interests will lead to excellence in education, by forcing individual providers to compete for users. Unable to devise an ideal education system, the authorities hope this will spontaneously emerge through competition. They make a democratic virtue of what is in fact an abdication of responsibility.

This attitude is exemplified by education minister Lord Adonis, who recently encouraged parents to behave more like customers. 'I want every parent to be a pushy parent. It is a jolly good thing' he declared. [9] Adonis was announcing the expansion of Academies, schools funded mainly by the government but privately run. The outsourcing of responsibility to private sponsors clearly indicates that for the government education is not a public thing, but a private transaction, best regulated through a commercial contract. Yet even private schools, in order to educate, must regard knowledge as a public good.

Today's prevailing idea of education is due to an entirely private concern to acquire personal skills for work and private life, rather than a curiosity to explore, understand and later shape the world through participation in public life.

Some secondary school departments now look like job centres, advertising their subjects with posters showing related jobs and their annual income. One school in Bradford has a big screen in the hall, with animations showing the value of qualifications from GCSE to degree level through increasingly higher piles of money, representing future incomes.

Even when the desire to improve one's socio-economic status is a positive one, the idea of a higher income some time in the future cannot inspire young people to study maths or history now. Young people cannot be inspired by the prospect of a life as a satisfied consumer, with a decent job and a pension. Even their desire to become famous is much more inspiring, though a pale ghost of the real thing. Through fame, they can make something more of their lives than a succession of jobs and private events, however pleasant these may be imagined to be.

Rather than the educated, autonomous, sovereign citizen, which is an indispensable element of any true democracy, the aim of education now is only to produce a semi-autonomous consumer who needs guidance throughout life: the lifelong learner.

### **The cooperation of left and right**

It is mainly the left that has promoted a shift in education away from our common, public world and onto the authentic, private self. New Labour's enthusiasm for personalising public services does not come from any conversion to Thatcherism, as some claim. Rather, over the years both left and right have cooperated on the more fundamental issue of *privatising society*.

The modernisers in both parties are those who follow this seemingly unstoppable trend. In education, it was apparent from the beginning of Cameron's Tory leadership. On 5 January 2006 Baroness Perry, a Tory official adviser on public services, announced that she was keen to give back teachers their professional autonomy. Four days later Cameron announced a new initiative 'signalling more aggressive government intervention in classroom teaching if the Tories came to power.' [10]

The Conservatives are not simply hypocritical; like New Labour, they are genuinely uncomfortable with some consequences of privatising society. In the past, this has led to occasional corrective measures, significantly creating the National Curriculum in 1989. The then Thatcher government, despite its ideological dominance, tried and failed to devise a national curriculum which prescribed a common body of knowledge for all British citizens. Instead, they devised a curriculum influenced by multiculturalism, which had already begun to value acquiring skills over knowledge.

It is often said that in the 1980s the right won the economic war while the left won the culture war. It is more accurate to say that privatisation won in both the economic and cultural sphere. The universalist ideals necessary for devising a National Curriculum, whether of the nationalist variety once favoured by the right or the internationalist kind the left used to champion, are incompatible with privatisation.

Hence, Brian Cox, the educationalist appointed Chair of the English Working Group by the Thatcher government, was unable to argue unambiguously for teaching Standard English to all pupils. Standard English, he claimed, is not the neutral variety we should all aspire to speak in public, but the particular dialect of the middle classes, whom he called 'native speakers'.

From this point of view, teaching Standard English to children who do not speak it at home can be seen as an act of cultural imperialism or class domination, rather than the most obvious duty of an English teacher. Most of all it is seen as an encroachment on the sacred rights of the child's self.

Whereas in subject-centred education it was the child's duty to listen to the teacher, the report of the English Working Group insisted that the teacher must respect and pay attention to 'the child's language' – meaning both his language and his talk in the classroom.

### From autonomous educated citizen to dependent lifelong learner

Through granting the child 'autonomy' against the teacher and subjects taught at school in this way, child-centred education actually makes it harder for children to develop into autonomous adults. Child-centred education prevents education as we understand it, as leading the child out of the private realm of the home and into the public sphere.

School is not yet the world of autonomous citizens, but a semi-private place that prepares children for the world of adulthood. It is

a space where children should have time to study, think and develop their minds under greater pressure than at home, but away from the pressures of the workplace and adult responsibilities.

Today's child-centred education makes 'the self' into a sacred part of the individual, over which the rational, grown-up side is discouraged from asserting control. The child is granted a false autonomy that 'protects' him from socialisation and the transmission of knowledge, while at the same time asking him to disclose his most intimate thoughts and emotions. Ultimately it is the teacher, just like the therapist, who provides the interpretive framework for the child to make sense of his own experience.

All this is done in the name of offering help and support to the individual. Although, it is important to note that the sacralisation of the self is not a state project. Rather, the state is adapting to the emergence of long term trends in society, recognising them and institutionalising them.

The fragile, private individual that is the ideal outcome of the modern education system is encapsulated by the concept of the lifelong learner. Whereas in the past the ideal of education was to form educated, autonomous citizens, the lifelong learner is supposed to be constantly in need of help and guidance from the 'empowering state'.

2020 Vision, a government report on personalised learning by a group of educationalist chaired by Christine Gilbert, subsequently appointed as Ofsted Chief Inspector, explains that 'during their school years, children should grow from relative dependence from their parents and teachers into *mature learners* with the skills to adapt to changing demands' (p.5 my emphasis).

It is becoming a citizen's duty to be a 'learner', someone open to outside guidance, both in the workplace and in their private lives.

### The end of education

Of course, in a banal sense we keep learning throughout our lives, from books, experts of various kinds and from direct experience. It is good to be open-minded and listen to other people. But it is equally our moral duty as responsible adults to use our own understanding and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong.

Many have attacked this 'myth' of the autonomous individual as a dangerous Enlightenment ideal. Yet the persona of the lifelong learner is just as much of an ideological construct, one based on a denial of

people's proven capacity for making decisions in their daily lives. Yet only people who have successfully assimilated and understood tradition in any field can free themselves from its fetters and break new ground.

The main obstacle to improving the education system is not practical but ideological. The first step is to start imagining an ideal 21<sup>st</sup> century educated citizen, a public person we wish every child to become. We can all be equal in the public sphere, while maintaining our individual identities in private.

We should not do this in the naïve hope it can be soon or easily realised, but as a benchmark against which to assess the progress made. Once we can imagine an education system that values both the disciplines that make up human knowledge and the acquisition of this knowledge to a sufficient level by the majority of the population, then it is not too difficult to see the practical steps that would improve our education system.

It should be subject-centred, oriented towards the world and put the acquisition of knowledge firmly at its centre. It should value teachers' expertise in their subject and autonomy in the classroom. Courses in every subject should be demanding. Examinations should be frequent and rigorous, but they should not be interpreted as a fixed measure of a pupil's ability. IQ-type tests such as the Cognitive Ability Tests should not be used to determine children's potential and predict future grades.

Indeed, we should stop believing one's education can be quantified with mathematical precision. The education system should be indifferent to the future careers of pupils and trust that the better they are educated, the more they will be able to choose the right life path for themselves. Pupils' examination results should not be used to assess teachers, schools, LEAs and government. It should be obvious to everyone that a system that assesses its own performance when marking pupils' work is inherently corrupt. League tables should be scrapped for both schools and universities, as they penalise institutions which provide demanding courses.

Every Child Matters and its five objectives should be scrapped as they directly undermine schools' primary function of educating children. Similarly, the department for Children, Schools and Families should be abolished and a government department that concentrates on education should be created. The government should facilitate the production and dissemination of research in education, but it should

not impose it on schools and teachers. Most of all, research should not be used to validate and promote government policy.

Ofsted should be abolished before it does any more damage. We can perhaps think of some form of accountability to replace Ofsted, but we should abolish something that is so obviously destroying standards in education. Children should be provided with good textbooks, which follow the programmes of study specified by an integrated curriculum.

In summary, education should have a definite end in both senses of the term. It should have a clear purpose and there should come a moment in people's lives when education finishes and adulthood begins. By that time, citizens should be considered autonomous by the state, whatever their level of education.

Schools should concentrate on educating the young and should not have any opinion on the jobs they will do, the lives they will lead. We should trust them to develop their own informed opinions, with the help of the knowledge we pass on. The better the next generation is educated, the better their formal knowledge of the world in the shape of English, maths, history, science, foreign languages and so on, the more choice they will have over their future.

## Endnotes

- [1] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/jul/12/schools.uk>
- [2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/feb/15/highereducation.accesstouniversity>
- [3] [http://www.atl.org.uk/atl\\_en/images/New%20Thinking\\_tcm2-23065.pdf](http://www.atl.org.uk/atl_en/images/New%20Thinking_tcm2-23065.pdf)
- [4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/jan/22/highereducation.academicexperts>
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- [6] [http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/news/2008/pressreleases/march/news\\_tcm4480706.asp](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/news/2008/pressreleases/march/news_tcm4480706.asp)
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- [10] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/jan/09/schools.uk2>

## About the author

Michele Ledda is an English teacher and writer on education. He campaigns for an elitist education for all. He runs two subject-centred Saturday schools for the think-tank Civitas, and is a founding member of Leeds Salon. He has written the chapter on English teaching for *The Corruption of the Curriculum* (2007) and articles for various publications. With the Manifesto Club, Michele has launched the Hands Off Poetry petition against the banning of Carol Ann Duffy's poem *Education for Leisure* from a GCSE syllabus on health and safety grounds. The petition has been signed by many teachers, students, literary critics, writers and poets.



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