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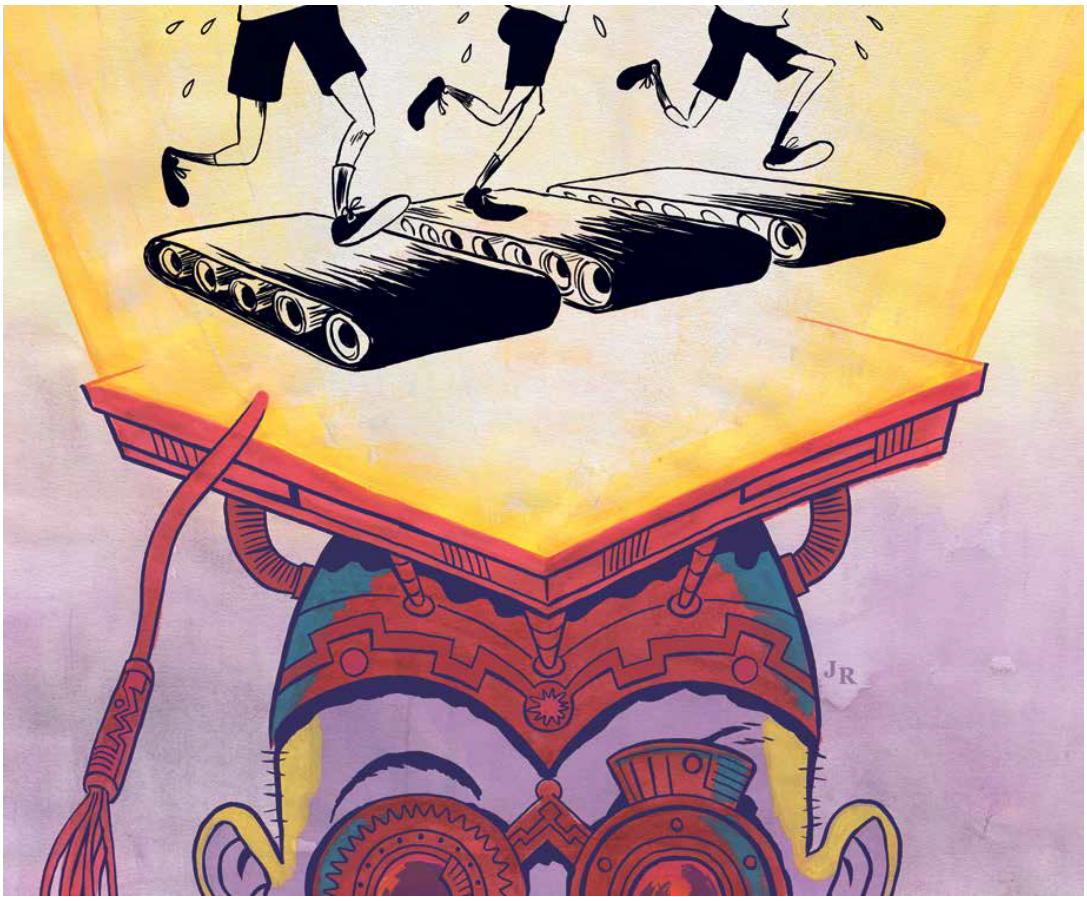
How we might BETTER SCHOOL Ourselves

A view from 100 years hence by Danny Dorling



We cannot know what the future will bring, but we can use the idea of the future to look at the present in new light.

I hope that one day I might have grandchildren. If I am really lucky I might even live long enough to get to talk to my grandchildren when they are adults, but I know that is unlikely. Even if my future health is fair and my children become parents, it may be too late for me. Like most of today's English middle class I became a parent too late. So this is a letter for an imagined adult grandchild. I'm trying to explain to her something about how we live today. I am far from the first person to carry out a thought experiment in this way. The year is 2064. I want to tell you about how schools in England worked in 2014. As always there were good and bad. We concentrated most on what we thought was bad. Often it wasn't bad at all, we just had very strange ideas of what good was. In hindsight we were in a mess, but if you are in a mess you may not know it. And we were largely in a mess because we had forgotten what education, life and caring, should be about. Schools had become competitive, education a competition, children had to compete to be 'the best'. There were many unforeseen consequences.

Not all children were in school in 2014. Huge numbers were excluded from education every year. In any one year a fifth of children with autism were formally, although illegally, excluded from schools. Of all children, boys were three times more likely to be excluded than girls. Children receiving free school meals were four times more likely to be excluded than those from better-off families. Children from particular ethnic minority groups more likely still, and those with a statement of special education need even more likely. The numbers being permanently excluded a year, normally for violent or disruptive behaviour had been falling. However, by 2012 the number permanently excluded that year rose to 5170, more than one in ten of whom were in a primary school. Many tens of thousand more school children were expelled for a short period. Others were not missed much when they were not at school. Their presence did not help the school 'excel'.

Every so often if a story was extreme enough a small part of the world of missing children was revealed. In 2013 in Oxford the story of six local girls who were abused between ages 12 to 15 was revealed in the press. The men who abused them were sentenced to 95 years in prison. But just as they had been almost totally ignored when they first complained, the girls' story was quickly forgotten. No one by 2018 was asking whether it could be happening again. It was old news. There were many adults responsible for caring for children on the margins of education, but the overall system didn't care that much. The overriding ethos of the time was all about aspiration and getting better and better 'results'. The products were children.

Children in England had never been scored against each other as much as they were in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Each child was repeatedly tested, given individual learning targets. Each teacher was individually assessed and monitored. Each school was repeatedly evaluated and schools that tested and trained their charges in the prescribed manner were labelled 'outstanding'. Segregating primary school children on different tables within a classroom by ability was apparently an outstanding thing to do; despite evidence that such setting or streaming of kids reduced their overall achievements by the equivalent of losing a whole month of schooling for every child in the class. Squeezing the most out of every child to realize what was then called their 'potential' was what mattered most. England had to do this, it was said, if the country was to compete in what its politicians called 'the global race'.

England's leading politicians had been taught to compete. They had done well at school, got to the right university, done the right course (often the same course), crushed the ambitions of others who might have wanted to have led their political parties, former school-friends, colleagues, partners and siblings. They had become adults and later parents surrounded by the ethos of educational competition, of winners and losers. In hindsight we were silly to expect more of them, but all the

time they thought they were racing to the top, they were actually striving for changes that damaged the education of the nation's children. Children were taught more and more about how to pass the next test, and less and less about what it was they were supposed to be studying. They appeared to be learning – but weren't.

It took us a long time to work out what was going wrong with education in England. Some of the early evidence became clear when it was revealed that children who had gone to private schools were 10% less likely than children from state school to gain a good (2.1) degree at university even if they had identical entry grades at A level. The private school children had been taught-to-the-test even more rigorously than state school children were and so, although they inevitably gained higher scores in the tests, they had actually learnt less. This only became evident when they were tested at the next level, at university. Their private school 'education' had not equipped them with the skills they needed to continue learning. Instead it had maximised what could be squeezed out of each child in the short term. Their parents had paid for those short-term results.

It was international comparisons that most clearly revealed that the English schooling system was turning into a race to the bottom. Of all the statistics revealed, the most dramatic showed that out of 22 countries that were compared, England ranked among the three lowest in terms of the mean proficiency in numeracy achieved by its young people. Only the United States scored significantly worse. The countries that scored highest were Finland and the Netherlands. However, when ministers were confronted with these figures, rather than travel to those two countries they jetted off to the highest scoring small area, the Chinese city of Shanghai. Within two months of the minister's visit it was revealed that that city was considering withdrawing from the international comparisons because they were causing teachers to teach too much to the test, exposing students to dangerous levels of study and causing

teachers to devote ‘between two and five hours every day to designing, reviewing, analysing and discussing homework assignments.’

Any group of children can be forced to score highly on a test if trained long and hard enough. That is not the same as a good education or a good life. In England boarding schools showed the extreme of what was possible. In 2014 campaigners lead by psychiatrists wrote of the damage that could result from a boarding school education, especially one where the emphasis was on wringing the highest possible marks out of every single child, a child who spends all day and all night at school. And a child who was told that their parents’ lives were so busy and important that they could not be there for them.

You’re probably wondering how it all got this bad. The problem was that the competitive ethos was self-reinforcing. The more that children were tested the more testing was accepted as normal and doing well at tests became seen as more and more important and valid as a measure of success. Children brought up in this way became teachers who had never known anything else. The most aspirational teachers joined school senior management teams and further reinforced the sentiment. Dissenters were chastised. Entire management teams were replaced if a school was seen as not trying hard enough to compete.

Eventually schools became one of the main determinants of how much housing costs in each local area. The average increase in housing prices around a so called good school anywhere in England was much higher than any within Paris, the most economically competitive area of France. Private school fees soared, even during the great recession. Universities entered this game and from summer 2014 almost all undergraduate students in English university were paying around £9000 a year in fees, most through loans. They were told they would easily recoup this money in future earnings. Over half of all young women in England were going to university at this time. It was no surprise when they did not all become

rich enough to pay off their enhanced debts with little effect, especially the women who continued to be paid less than men for many years to come.

I know you know how it all ended, and of course it had to end. It was unsustainable. But I thought I should write this down because I know it's so hard to imagine that all those parents and teachers and politicians put up with such a situation for so long – let alone the children. But in 2014 it just appeared inevitable to most people that this was what good education was about. Some of those who had been most taught-to-the-test even described their school experience as 'privileged'. A whole nation had become obsessed with marks, subservient to letters and numbers, and when they ran out of enough letters they even created * marks (yes there really was an A*). At the height of the idiocy a new geneticism became popular and the mayor of London, a man now long forgotten called Boris, talked of supposedly clever children as 'top cornflakes'.

The English became so educationally myopic that they no longer looked back about what had been better in their recent past, or what was happening in neighbouring countries or just over the channel in most of Europe, or even imagined what a better way might be that was not just an even more concentrated version of more of the same. They had taught themselves how to be stupid. It's easily done and well worth remembering how it happened back in 2014.

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