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English education policy is based on a nasty little theory

Underlying education policies in England is the misguided idea that only a few children are clever and that the rest are less valuable, argues Prof **Danny Dorling**



[Danny Dorling](#)

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Danny Dorling: 'Pupils in free schools, academies and private schools need not be taught their place so rigidly'. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

At the very core of the latest version of the [national curriculum](#) for maintained [schools](#) in England is a nasty little assumption. It is an assumption that has been harboured by a few for many decades, and one that often rises to the fore during hard times. It is what underlies the current government's approach to education. This assumption first gained popularity following the popularisation of Darwin and Wallace's discovery of evolution. The assumption is that [children](#) vary greatly in what they might be able to achieve, that some have far greater potential to do well than others, but all have only a fixed potential.

The job of government is routinely described as being to aid children to achieve within limits. As the deputy prime minister put it [last week](#) when announcing tests for five-year-olds: "I make no apology for having high ambitions for our pupils. But for children to achieve their potential we need to raise the bar."

In July 2013 the Department for Education made it clear that the underlying purpose of the new national curriculum had remained unchanged since Michael Gove first announced [the detail](#) of his intention in January 2011: "... to allow teachers greater freedom to use their professionalism and expertise to help all children realise their potential". All the so-called consultation since then has added not a word of nuance. The implication: it would be foolish to try to help too many try to achieve more than we think they can manage. Time and again children do better than any early testing suggested their limits would allow. An enlightened education secretary would aim "to help all children do well and learn without being restricted by our expectations".

At the start of [July's re-draft](#), another aim was added: "It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement." So, every child will hear what the secretary of state and his friends believe are the best thoughts; and all will be given the chance to appreciate what was produced by those few who had their great potential tapped. However, only a few children are assumed to have great potential.

Pupils in free schools, academies and private schools will not have to follow these prescriptions. They need not be taught their place so rigidly. The new curriculum provides a blueprint for the future product of the shrinking maintained sector. It is medicine for other people's children, designed to produce the common workers England is thought to need. Under the heading "cooking and nutrition", it will be a requirement that children should learn "to feed themselves and others affordably". On one level laudable, perhaps, but on another level you wonder whether the minister thinks this will solve the need for ever-growing numbers of soup kitchens, as benefit levels fall. Teach them to budget better and buy the cheapest foods, rather than

to question why inequalities have grown so great and others eat more healthily.

The majority of the curriculum concerns making children presentable to an employer who is a stickler for 1950s grammar. So it will become a requirement that by years 3 and 4 children are "using commas after fronted adverbials". Disappointingly, this clause remains despite a sensation when the initial [consultation suggested](#) that this be applied to children as young as seven and eight. The consultation altered little of great substance, but it did highlight the language of the past that education ministers prefer. Always use the word "disappointed" if you want to get through: it hurts when other words don't hit the psychological spot. Were you a disappointment because you didn't try hard enough, or because you didn't have it in you?

"Disappointed" is not in the spelling list for children aged seven and eight, but "strange", "naughty" and "experiment" are. For year 5 and 6 children, "criticise" "disastrous", "government" and "hindrance" are all words to be memorised. I'd suggest they should be rote learnt in that order. You have to get past page 90 of the curriculum before you are free of Gove and his friends' obsession with what they see as the correct use of English. Understandable, given his background in journalism but, nevertheless, disappointing.

In statistics, by year 6 it will be a requirement that all pupils should be able to "calculate and interpret the mean as an average". There is no mention of "median" or "mode" here, perhaps because those in power don't want people to work out that when, eventually, mean incomes rise again, for most people in the middle, earnings might not rise and may also still be falling for those receiving the most common incomes (the mode is the minimum wage). I believe those who drafted this curriculum had the potential to do better.

Those in the UK outside England are not to be subject to such strange and naughty experiments and hopefully will grow up freer to think and criticise and to be more playful with words and thoughts. But where does the thinking come from that sees precise prescriptions for the maintained masses as so essential? Pupils have to be able to spell the word "average" by years 5 and 6, but they are now only to be taught about one kind of average, the kind that exists in the phrase "regression to the mean".

Underlying this curriculum there lurks a nasty little theory: that not all children have it in them to think like a few are able to think. The theory has been debunked often, but it remains attractive to some who find themselves lifted above others. If a few are inheritably special, they deserved to be at the top: it was in their potential. They can best help others by spotting the few children like themselves and keeping the masses in order, occupied memorising the correct placement of commas. In the 1920s, a thoughtful psychiatrist helpfully explained: "We often hear of hereditary talents, hereditary vices, and hereditary virtues, but whoever will critically examine the evidence will find that we have no proof of their existence."

I recently collected the evidence again for a book on worldwide demographic trends. I needed to show how understanding has grown since the 1920s that when it comes to our mental abilities, we are not made up of classes or races or genders that vary in our genetic mental endowment. We are not made up of groups that are clever and groups that are slow and we do not need some kind of continual survival-of-the-fittest contest to ensure our future adaptability, as if our species evolves within a matter of years rather than aeons. We will not evolve to become less racist, bigoted and sexist: we have to learn to.

A new phrase is creeping into the English language. In the same month the new curriculum was unveiled, a Conservative councillor and school governor was quoted lamenting the lack of "[quality people](#)" willing to become headteachers in his county. Increasingly often the adjective "top" or "high" is missed before "quality". The underlying assumption is that there are two kinds of people – quality and non-quality. In the discussion about MPs' pay, I heard Conservative MPs on the radio talking of the need for supposedly "quality candidates" to be MPs. What is needed are "quality people", they say. They mean people like them. These are the kinds of people who allow bankers to keep scamming us and who think that because they have fond memories of their school and what it helped to turn them into, they are qualified to set the curriculum for the rest.

[Laura McInerney](#), writing on these pages last week about free schools, explained: "Any government writing a policy specifically avoiding [local consultation] must be doing so because they believe ordinary people could not possibly add anything to their perfect

decision-making. That anyone in power would think like this is a sad example of the current government's all-too-pervasive disdain for common people." Common people here are those whose children have to be "maintained" in education. People who the nasty little theory suggests need to constantly pull their socks up.

When it was revealed recently that many inner-city state schools were helping children to achieve remarkable exam results, especially in some of the poorest parts of London, the official response was to say that: "Hit squads of top teachers should be sent in to rescue failing rural and seaside schools". If part of the maintained sector does unexpectedly well for a while, aided by being located in areas of high immigration, rather than look at what lessons can be learnt, the spotlight is simply shifted to the next set of schools that rank lowest.

Meanwhile, despite having done so well, those inner-city schools will now have to teach a curriculum that could not have been better designed to alienate many of the children they serve. These are children whose parents or grandparents often came from those parts of the world that will no longer be included in the revised geography curriculum (which concentrates instead on the Americas). I don't think that is deliberate. Just as we all have the capacity to excel, we also all have great capacity to be stupid. Ministers are most likely to behave stupidly when setting policy for schools or areas or people least like those they went to or know.

For as long as the nasty little theory has existed, it has been debunked. As co-discoverer of the theory of evolution, Alfred Russel Wallace explained to the Royal Geographical Society exactly 150 years ago this year that "future ages will certainly look back upon us as a people so immersed in the pursuit of wealth as to be blind to higher considerations". I believe that one day soon he will be proved right – a future generation will come that will reject the nasty theory. A national curriculum that lauds Victorian ethics will be discarded in place of higher considerations.

Across Europe, this economic approach of pulling ourselves up by our collective bootstraps to win in the mythical "global race" has resulted in more young adults today being deemed to be economically useless, unemployed and socially discarded than at any point in European history. A disproportionately high number of these discarded young people live in England, where youth unemployment

is especially high. Many of them were labelled as "gifted and talented" when at school. Where did that labeling get us, how has it benefited them?

The nasty little theory is easy to spot in [education policy](#), but it extends across all areas of government. Non-quality people are seen as less valuable. Researchers writing in the [British Medical Journal](#), just as the new curriculum was unveiled, explained that the largest cuts to local services since 2010 had occurred in areas with the highest premature mortality rates. I have heard it explained that these are the least important people in society, and we (the quality people) can no longer afford to carry them.

The nasty little theory continues by sugg

esting that most taxpayers' money comes from "quality" people. It implies that the future of the country depends most on how well their "quality" children perform, augmented by a few gifted and talented others plucked from the masses. It is a theory that comes from the age and prejudices of Empire and it is a comfort to those who wish they were back in those times. For the English child of the future it will be the theory they learn that explains why they were treated at school as they were. I expect they'll be disappointed, but I hope they'll understand.

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