

About Our Schools: Foreword by Danny Dorling

We often don't truly value something until we have lost it. In the short term, children losing access to schools in the UK in 2020 suddenly brought home not just what schools do for most children physically but also what they do in the round. Schools are about far more than education. They are places where we become socialised into our society, where we learn to respect others and, in some cases, to look up to or down on others. They don't just teach skills. Schools help us form our attitudes, beliefs and prejudices.

At some times and in some schools we are told that others are our betters, often other people not at our school. We learn to behave and to be disciplined, so that later in our lives our apparent superiors will find that we have been well trained; that we are respectful; compliant; that we know our place. This still occurs in England today. Not everywhere, of course, but the idea that different children are of different rank and worth is still endlessly stamped into young minds in ways that do not often occur so forcefully elsewhere in Europe.

When the classrooms emptied during the COVID-19 crisis of 2020/2021, it quickly became clear which schools were equipped and had the resources to teach online and which could not cope and handed out paper worksheets instead. The huge advantage of very low pupil-teacher ratios in private schools suddenly became glaringly obvious, not just normally but especially in a crisis. At the other end of the scale – for those for whom school was a sanctuary from harm and indifference at home – no longer being able to go to school was devastating. In a very small number of cases it will have been deadly. Schools do far more than teach. If we have learned anything from the pandemic, we now know that schools should be the last public institutions to close and the first to reopen.

The authors of this excellent book had school closures foremost in their minds because they began writing in earnest in early 2021, in the weeks when it became clear that, yet again, schools would be closed for many months. State schools were only kept open physically for the children of 'key' workers and those identified as being in special need. It turned out that everyone who worked in a school was a key worker – something that had barely been acknowledged before. It also turned out that the politics of education was not quite as clearly divided between good and bad as we might have thought. You are probably reading these words many months after it has been accepted that the new coronavirus is endemic and a zero-COVID strategy is impossible. However, it was a right-wing government that tried to keep the schools open and the left-wing unions (championing zero COVID) that demanded they close.

In hindsight, it is much easier to see what the right course of action would have been. This book has been written in contemplation of a much longer period when we could all take stock of what we were losing without our schools even being closed – the decades during which funding per head was cut for 13 out of 14 children, all those who attended a state school in England. Note: it is a much higher proportion than 93% in most parts of the UK and a much lower proportion among the people who get to determine education policy. Furthermore, division had been sown within the state system, with schools forced to compete against school for pupils, to attract and retain staff (not least teachers) and to be able to afford the upkeep of their buildings.

This book begins in 1976 which was the year that marked the end of optimism and trust in teaching and saw the dial adjusted to a new belief in the power of markets, centralisation and managerialism. The authors confess that their hope that the previous system would have thrived well was ‘probably misplaced’, which illustrates their freedom from conventional dogma. However, it is worth noting that in 1976 the UK was one of the most economically equitable large countries in Europe, second only to Sweden in terms of income inequality. By that measure, Germany, Italy, Spain and France all had more socially fractured societies in that year. In contrast, in the decades that followed – when markets, centralisation and managerialism were allowed to take over much of life in Britain, not just in education – the UK saw its levels of economic inequality grow to become by far the largest of any Western European country. It was not just education that fractured after 1976. Health, housing, employment and the distribution of material assets (including wealth) and other life chances also all saw developments that worsened lives and increased division.

Economic inequality matters in education. In the 1980s, a large number of places in private schools were sponsored by the government under the Assisted Places Scheme for (those deemed to be) the academically able children of parents who would not otherwise be able to afford the fees and the school would have had to close. Furthermore, incomes were more equal at the start of the 1980s and so not enough adults were paid so much more than others that they could afford to educate their children privately, so the commercial future of private schools was at stake. Private education only prosper in places where there is high income inequality. However, by the time Tony Blair abolished the Assisted Places Scheme in 1997, income inequalities in England had grown to such an extent that there were now enough pupils with very well-paid parents to fill the private school quotas without the need for a direct government subsidy. (The indirect subsidies that enabled tax avoidance were maintained.) But it is important to note that in no single year during the period since 1997 (which included all the New Labour years as well as the decade of austerity) did income inequality fall by any measurable amount.

It is perhaps unsurprising that during the same period there have been many changes in education but few progressive movements. In fact, there has been no progressive government in the UK since the early and mid-1970s. Most recently, under New Labour and then the coalition, we have witnessed the almost wholesale privatisation of universities.

One of the ways we hold on to hope is the belief, at times not entirely unfounded, that after many decades of banging your head against a wall and going in the wrong direction, a group of people – in this case, those interested in education in Britain – realise that a change of tack is required. At this point we need to know what to do next. The solutions offered in this excellent book are based on learning from what did not work in England between 1976 and today. Although the overriding ethos of markets and competition was not conducive to progress, many individuals and some organisations, most schools and millions of children and their parents struggled over those long years to improve many things. For example, we should not forget that these were years in which school became dramatically less violent places, a significant part of which was banning teachers from beating pupils – not everything was rosy before 1976.

There are so many wonderful suggestions in this book that you will have to read it to discover them; they cannot be summarised in a short foreword. One I particularly like is that ‘we should treat pupils not as they (sometimes infuriatingly) are but as they might become’. Recently, I met a teacher who is teaching in a school that I attended almost four decades ago. She told me she thought that none of her pupils would ever write a book. It was an ‘average school’: avoided by most of the wealthiest parents in the city and aspired to by many of the parents who live just outside its catchment area. I had some sympathy with her exasperation, but I had also been a child (at that school) who failed at English at age 16. I knew that did not mark me for life. I read my first word in 1976 – very late at age 8. I had good teachers, but I found reading hard. In the end, my mum taught me to read; my school barely improved on that although they tried and they taught be enough of maths and geography and science that I ended up writing many books. No one would have believed I could if they had seen how I wrote when I was at school.

We have all followed our own individual educational paths and each of these will have shaped us and, in turn, our views on education. Very probably, Margaret Thatcher, the education secretary from 1970 to 1974, would not have believed so strongly in her own personal superiority had she not been sent to a grammar school by her father or been awarded a place at an elitist university. Tony Blair, who came to power with the mantra ‘education, education, education’, and his one-time education advisor Andrew Adonis might well have had very different views on what a good education consisted of had they been differently educated too. In contrast, the authors of this book explain how every ‘young person can walk more than a few steps with genius’. They could have added that the geniuses among us tend not to seem quite so clever when you spend long enough hanging around them.

So many people who have steered the course of English education in recent decades, from prime ministers through to policy wonks, appear to have held the belief that they have truly realised their own personal potential and that it was because they held within themselves such great potential, which had somehow been allowed to burst forth and be realised, that their amazing ideas should be implemented. Such pomposity is pricked at many points in the pages that follow, including examples such as how, for all the hours of senior management teams brainstorming risk assessments, no one foresaw what might happen during a pandemic, through to how ridiculous it is that so many children are excluded from schools in England. Some 1,579 pupils are permanently excluded from English schools each year for each one of the five children excluded a year in Scotland - so almost 8000 a year in total in England. Try to imagine how that feels each year for each and every one of those children, for the rest of their lives.

Education, at its best, frees you from being told to believe that you are the natural inferior of others. At its worst, it leaves you with the impression that you are the natural superior of others. Education in England is in a terrible mess. If you don't believe me, try describing what happens in your town, city or village to someone from elsewhere in Western Europe. Tell them how different children are selected to go to different schools. Tell them about the languages and arts that we no longer even try to teach. Tell them what ensues when our children are asked a maths or science question that is not directly connected to one of the answers they and their teachers have guessed would be on the exam paper. And then ask them what happens where they live in other Western European countries that did not travel the post-1976 road we took in England.