

## **PRAISE FOR *THE WORKING CLASS***

For a number of reasons, *The Working Class* represents an original contribution to the literature around social class and education in the UK.

Firstly, it has a clear sense of who its readership is yet does not assume that they are already steeped in the theoretical canons, so where theory is used it is clearly explained and fully exemplified within each chapter. Secondly, the chapters come from a wide variety of contributors with quite different backgrounds in academia, schools and the arts, which enables a range of distinct voices to be heard and offers insights into the multiplicity of different sites of social class reproduction. A third strength of the book is that, although it is an edited volume containing a diverse range of contributors, there is a coherent narrative voice to bind the collection together. This is achieved through the use of an editorial introduction to each chapter that links it with the previous one, and through the tone of the book – the predominant shade of which is a real burning sense of anger at the persistence of the injustices it documents. I am slightly ambivalent about this last point because, although I think this makes it an invigorating and stimulating read, there are some places within the book where this anger tips closer to polemic than argument. This, however, is only a relatively moderate criticism of a very good book.

As a lecturer in this field, I would recommend *The Working Class* as a perfect text for any course in education studies or in related areas such as sociology.

**Andrew Morrison, Principal Lecturer in Education Studies,  
Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University**

Packed with insightful and expert knowledge, *The Working Class* may be one of the most important books in education for many years. It is especially welcomed by those of us who still believe that ‘experts’ have a role to play in society, despite their tendency to offer such annoyances as carefully researched facts and years of experience in their fields.

But that is not what makes it great. What makes it great is love. The love this group of writers share for the importance of education and the aspiration for every child – irrespective of social, cultural or economic wealth – to have the best possible chance in life.

Many of these writers are fighting that battle from the front line, and they are fighting with a mighty heart. Because that’s what this battle needs.

**Ben Walden, Founding Director, Contender Charlie**

Passionate, lyrical and compelling, *The Working Class* provides a rich variety of perspectives that collectively challenge contemporary neoliberal orthodoxies. Its chapters are both moving and inspirational, combining sociological imagination with heartfelt narratives. But most importantly the contributors provide a different vision of social class in education – one that prioritises inclusion, value and respect for all.

*The Working Class* is essential reading for all those concerned with inequalities in education.

**Diane Reay, Visiting Professor, the London School of Economics and Political Science**

This book about education and class pays homage to working class life not only through academic research, but also through an eclectic ensemble of styles ranging from conventional academic writing through to raw, personal narratives expressing the pain of marginalisation.

Reading *The Working Class* is a visceral experience. The senses and the intellect are awakened and at times assaulted by the passion expressed by the contributors, whether teachers, academics, writers or poets. It is a journey with pit stops mentioning classic theorists on social inequality and education such as Erving Goffman, Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, Ruth Levitas, Diane Reay and Bell Hooks. The many chapters, a staggering forty-six, cover as many topics – starting with failure and activism, and getting to dreams, destiny and diet towards the end. The chapters are interspersed by short interludes or provocations around the topic and are energised by anecdotes from diverse literary and media sources.

Although long, the book is not plodding. It is a romp peppered with statistical data and clips from newspapers, as well as extracts from classic tales – from authors such as Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens and Alan Sillitoe – depicting working class misery. Passages written in more conventional, academic styles are offset by gritty and deeply moving first person accounts of life in austerity-worn Britain – such as that of Jaz Ampaw-Farr, whose contribution rebukes her uncaring, prejudiced, middle class teachers. Most contributions are relatively short, yet there are exceptions, such as Phil Beadle's – entitled 'Working Class Pleasures'. Beadle's contribution is a chilling first person account of living and growing up in abject poverty that focuses a razor-sharp, critical lens on upper class Tory rule, which saturates lives with capitalism, nationalism, tobacco, alcohol, pornography, gambling, addiction, right wing tabloid newspapers and TV programmes promising instant fame. Folded into its primary narrative is a series of footnotes which provides ten 'factors' affecting working class engagement in education and which exposes the double bind of a working class male position in which pride and identity meets an almost compulsory culture of tough, anti-academic machismo.

There are many moving first-hand accounts of growing up, written with rage and passion, exposing what is really happening in the UK. The seemingly intuitive, untethered accounts manage not to rant, however. Some depict pain and achieve poetic profundity, and their language appeals to the senses, depicts contexts and provides attention to detail.

As a collective diffraction of voices, styles and historical lenses, *The Working Class* does not shirk from complexity and admits of no easy answers – indeed, it leaves any final message open, although darkly ominous. Yet, as a rush of sheer, unadulterated, no-holds-barred passion, it reminds us that we are human and that class is a living, willing, desiring disharmony of divergent as well as collective forces that will not be stilled. It is this passion, manifested through a multiplicity of styles – from sprawling, raw biographical prose to the contained rationality of academic critique, and via anecdotes, quotes and remembrances inflected with humour, irony and pain – that is the book's ultimate message. This brimming, unfettered multiplicity of forms is an antidote to the bleak, sterile, smooth diktats of neoliberal rhetoric.

Read this book if you are a new teacher and want to find your moral compass; read it if you are an experienced teacher and feel that you are losing your way, to know that you are not alone and that the madness is not in your head alone. It's the madness of late capitalism that remorselessly creates and recreates working class inequality.

Gabrielle Ivinson, Professor of Education and Community, Education and Social  
Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University

We are often told that ‘poverty is no excuse for underachievement’. Poverty is not an excuse – it is an explanation, and the contributors to this edited collection powerfully remind us that poverty matters. There can be no understanding the ‘achievement gaps’ in schools without shining the spotlight on poverty and class in society today. This book does just that, and forces us to reject the lazy stereotypes of bad teachers and feckless children. The contributors remind us that if we mean what we say about inequality in education then we must take bold action to support working class children and their teachers, and at the same time confront the wider inequalities in society that blight the lives of children who live with poverty.

These contributors do not offer excuses. On the contrary, *The Working Class* is a manifesto of hope and humanity. It deserves to be widely read.

**Professor Howard Stevenson, Director of Research,  
School of Education, University of Nottingham**

This wide-ranging collection of essays and articles should be compulsory reading for those teachers, parents and children who feel worn down and worn out by the meagre diet of coaching, cramming and rehearsal that constitutes so much of young people’s daily experience of formal education.

*The Working Class* shows that it doesn’t have to be like this, however. We have brilliant educators who want to put the child at the centre of educational policy, and we have equally brilliant children with a whole range of varied talents that need to be discovered and developed.

The contributors know what the problem is – a neoliberal, marketised view of education as a commodity to be pre-packaged and delivered – and, by contesting the politics behind this view and promoting practice that challenges it, demonstrate that another world of genuine learning, informed by thoughtful pedagogy, can benefit us all.

**Dr Jon Berry, Programme Director for the Professional Doctorate  
in Education, University of Hertfordshire**

Educational inequality is a blight on our society which leads to intractable and persistent disadvantage across generations. Teachers and schools cannot fix, and must not be held responsible for, society’s failure to provide equal opportunities for all of our children, but teachers who actively engage with *The Working Class* will stock up the armoury of knowledge they need in order to help them transform young lives and campaign for change.

A must-read for all concerned educators.

**Kate E. Pickett, Research Champion for Justice and Equality,  
University of York and co-author of *The Spirit Level***

Love them or hate them, Michael Gove’s so-called ‘enemies of promise’ are fighting back – and they’re angry.

**Loic Menzies, Director, LKMco CIC**

Empathy is a revolutionary emotion. This collection of essays, insights and stories is full of empathy.

If we are going to talk about revolutionising education – which we must – *The Working Class* is a brilliant place to start.

**Ross Ashcroft, broadcaster and co-founder, Renegade Inc.**

Showcasing a range of diverse voices and experiences, *The Working Class* shows that we urgently need fundamental social and economic reforms in order to transform the lives of the majority of our children. It demonstrates that ability and talent are subjective measurements which reinforce and justify the subordination of the majority, and reveals that aspiration alone – whether of children or of teachers – cannot overcome the obstacle of economic inequality.

**Selina Todd, Professor of Modern History, University of Oxford**

*The Working Class* is a book of commentary, ideas and reflections on what it is to be working class and on how educators and policy makers have responded – some successfully, others less so – to the challenges faced.

I recommend *The Working Class* for its rich description of generations of experience and of the consequences of not acting upon the depth of concern regarding what is needed in order to change thinking, policy and practice. Several chapters focus on the plight of the working class when faced with teachers, leaders and employers who have misunderstood them; many provide detailed accounts of how access to education has enabled, supported and developed those who are perceived to lack opportunity; and various others imply that the purpose of education and learning is to enable and give choices to those who would otherwise face the relentlessness of unfulfilling employment.

To this end, *The Working Class* will enable readers to begin to understand why change is needed.

**Professor Sonia Blandford, founder and CEO, Achievement for All  
and author of *Born to Fail? A Working Class View***

*The Working Class* is an important, powerful and wide-ranging book. The contributors deal with a complex and multifaceted subject from a range of perspectives and with an understanding that is frequently borne out of lived experience.

Among its many and varied delights are chapters on the importance of the arts, the unique value of a library, the importance of being brave enough to go on trips, what it is really like to grow up in poverty, and a beautiful multisensory rhapsody about nature tables. I also love the way the contributions range in form – here you will find poetry, stories, anecdotes and analysis all sitting side by side and helping to communicate the key messages of the book. We hear from voices within the working class community and from those who have dedicated their working lives to helping children and families in these communities, and we hear stories of poverty, of politics, of teachers, of children, of dreams and of the awe and wonder that learning can inspire.

I find myself energised, inspired and fired up reading this book. It challenges the political narrative of the ‘undeserving poor’ and acts as a call to action for educators everywhere.

**Sue Cowley, teacher, presenter and author of *The Artful Educator***

# **THE WORKING CLASS**

**POVERTY, EDUCATION AND ALTERNATIVE VOICES**

**IAN GILBERT**

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Not all working class children are poor.

Not all poor children are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Not all children from disadvantaged backgrounds are in poverty.

Not all children in poverty are in absolute poverty.

Not all children in absolute poverty are vulnerable children.

Not all vulnerable children are at-risk, looked-after, free school meal or pupil premium children.

But, despite the best efforts of many, the education system is failing most of them.

This book is for all of them.





# Foreword

## ON WHY I AM NOT CONTRIBUTING TO THIS BOOK

Let's get some things straight:

1. I was the first child in my working class family to go to university.
2. I have worked in schools serving areas of high deprivation for over thirty years.
3. I fundamentally believe that the education system is unfair, dysfunctional and penalises the 'have nots'.
4. I refuse to contribute to this book, even though it is one of the most important publications that we at Independent Thinking have been involved in.

So, let me explain.

It is not what the book is about that I take offence at, far from it. Nor is it that I don't want to be associated with what is a very impressive and wide-ranging list of contributors covering so many important aspects of what we can all do to help young people from our poorer socio-economic backgrounds. The more we open up the debate and offer alternative perspectives and narratives, the better. No, what I take umbrage at is the title. Quite simply, by referring to the issues covered in this book as being linked to 'class', working or otherwise, I feel we are moving backwards, not forwards; looking at labels, not truths, closing the debate down and not opening it up in the way it so desperately needs.

I, like so many of the contributors in this book, am fiercely proud of my working class roots. In my father's youth, the term was a rallying cry for those facing disadvantage and prejudice. Communities used their working class identity to galvanise political and social change, and some of society's greatest developments owe their existence to this movement – individuals united by the trials and tribulations of their shared circumstances and doubly united by that label.

But *now* is not *then*.

It was not just the news footage that was black and white during the emergence of some of this country's most progressive social movements. Things were simpler back then, but we are no longer in a world of such clarity. Now the identity of an individual is much more diverse, grey and subjective than ever before. People identify themselves by religion, ethnicity, sexuality, shopping (the new 'opium of the people'), pastimes, clothing, TV programmes (another 'opium'), which football team they support or *Big Brother*

contestant they don't. We are no longer in a world where people in poverty live side by side with others who identify themselves in the same group as their neighbour. We live in a world where difference has become the focus and homogeneity the apparent goal of our education system.

Most young people I meet in the course of my work have no concept of the term 'working class', no ownership of it, no understanding of it and certainly no pride in it. Too many look to their 'gang' (often identified by a postcode area – check out the inner-city graffiti) for support, brotherhood/sisterhood and guidance. Many see the world divided in two – 'in the gang' and 'not in the gang'. The concept of traditions based on generational wisdom is meaningless, and many of these young people will tell you that no one understands the demands of modern Britain – the demands *they* are making – regardless of their political persuasion or class.

Rather than trying to rally opinion around an outdated term, I feel the issue is much more straightforward. It is about disadvantage, pure and simple: economic disadvantage, social disadvantage, emotional disadvantage, aspirational disadvantage.

These disadvantages are not located in one group of people, in one street, in one area or even in one type of community. They are in all areas of our country and of every country.

Rather than losing sight of the real issues, hidden behind the nuances of language and labels, we need to be better at holding our politicians and educational leaders to account, and not simply for failing the working class – but for failing so many children.

I am not contributing to a book called *The Working Class*. This is not because I think it is unimportant, but because I believe it is *too* important. My experience in schools across the UK and further afield proves to me that our education system is broken. Labels from the past run the risk of obscuring what needs to be done to put things right today, to create a system much better suited to the challenging world ahead, an education system that is genuinely world class.

Read the book and see what you think.

Dave Harris, Nottinghamshire

# Preface

This book was written to offer an alternative perspective on three worrying ‘truths’ that have been peddled regarding school and the education of young people from challenging backgrounds:

1. If an individual from a disadvantaged background does not do well at school then this is a result of the child not trying hard enough. He or she deserves all they get.
2. If a group of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not do well at school then this is a result of the school not trying hard enough. The school deserves to be punished.
3. If an individual from a disadvantaged background does do well at school, we know this is the case because they will have become like us. Let’s call this the ‘middle classification’ of the working classes.

Through its many voices and perspectives, this book is designed to challenge these dangerous and damaging narratives and transform the way we work with *all* young people in order to help make our schools more diverse, inclusive and egalitarian communities where everyone has something of merit to bring and of value to take away.

It is not a book of answers. We are not telling you how to run your school, your classroom or your relationships. The field is too massive, too complex, too open to debate and to discussion to propose ‘off-the-shelf’ solutions. In fact, when anyone talks to you about ‘what works’ in education, what they are really referring to is ‘what worked’. Complexity lies at the heart of education and there are too many variables to be able to dictate your future from someone else’s past. Your classroom is what is called a ‘complex adaptive system’ where everything changes everything else, constantly. And a school is a complex web of complex webs. The research we refer to in this book is not presented in order to tell you what to think but to inform your own thinking, to help readjust your ‘mental model’ with regard to the three ‘truths’ above and, in this way, to challenge some of the dominant narratives about educating the ‘feckless poor’.

Besides, the way we tend to work at Independent Thinking is to do what our name suggests – to encourage, stimulate and provoke you to think for yourself, to draw your own conclusions, to come up with your own answers. This book is not about giving you all the answers – or indeed any. It is about helping you to ask the right questions. And the starting question for this book is quite simple: how can we approach

‘Mental models are personal, internal representations of external reality that people use to interact with the world around them. They are constructed by individuals based on their unique life experiences, perceptions, and understandings of the world. Mental models are used to reason and make decisions and can be the basis of individual behaviors ... People’s ability to represent the world accurately, however, is always limited and unique to each individual. Mental models are therefore characterized as incomplete representations of reality.’

Natalie Jones, Helen Ross, Timothy Lynam, Pascal Perez and Anne Leitch, *Mental models: an interdisciplinary synthesis of theory and methods*<sup>1</sup>

‘The fact some give food to food banks, merely enables people who can’t budget ... or don’t want to, to have more money to spend on alcohol, cigarettes etc.’

York councillor  
Chris Steward<sup>2</sup>

Feckless – feckless  
(adj.) 1590s, from feck,  
'effect, value, vigor'  
(late 15c.), Scottish  
shortened form  
of effect (n.), + -less.<sup>3</sup>

'... a feckless arrogant  
conceit of their great-  
ness and power.'

James I of England on  
the Scottish nobility,  
*Basilikon Doron*<sup>4</sup>

the education of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in a way that actually makes a difference for all concerned?

## NOTES

1. N. Jones, H. Ross, T. Lynam, P. Perez and A. Leitch, Mental models: an interdisciplinary synthesis of theory and methods, *Ecology and Society*, 16(1) (2011): 46. Available at: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art46/>.
2. Quoted in G. Aitchinson, Councillor in attack on food bank, *The Press* (3 January 2013). Available at: [http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/10138097.Councillor\\_in\\_attack\\_on\\_food\\_bank/](http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/10138097.Councillor_in_attack_on_food_bank/).
3. See [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=feckless&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=feckless&allowed_in_frame=0).
4. James I, *Basilikon Doron or His Majesties Instructions to His Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince* (Edinburgh, 1599).

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For ye have the poor always with you.

**Matthew 26:11 – King James Bible (Gove Edition)**

It may be true that 'the poor always ye have with you' but that doesn't mean that there has to be so many, or that they should suffer so much.

**Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality***

Chapter 1

# *Failure*

“ Dear Miss

You won't remember me or my name. You have failed so many of us.

On the other hand I have often had thoughts about you, and the other teachers, and about that institution which you call 'school' and about the boys that you fail.

You fail us right out into the fields and factories and there you forget us.

School of Barbiana, *Letter to a Teacher*<sup>1</sup> ”

The lines above are the opening to a letter written by a group of boys living in rural poverty attending a school in Italy in 1967. It is a clear, balanced, well-reasoned and well-argued case for why and how their school teacher – indeed the whole system – had failed children like them and how such a system was set up to ensure the success, both in school and beyond, of the young people *not* like them. It became a bestseller, was translated into several languages and still resonates with our education system today – an education system that still seems to be intent on prioritising the world and the opportunities of the 'have everthings' over the lives of the 'have littles'.

In every category you care to name in our increasingly data-driven education system, children who were born into little have the hardest time at school and take the least from it. Of course, that is a broad generalisation and the picture is complicated further by issues around gender (24% of working class boys acquire five GCSEs grade A–C – in old money – compared to 32% of girls<sup>2</sup>), ethnicity (disadvantaged children from Chinese backgrounds significantly outperform white working class children<sup>3</sup>), geography (children in the north of England tend to do less well than their counterparts in the south<sup>4</sup>), town or country (bucking OECD trends, children living in the UK do better in rural areas and small towns than in cities, unless you are from a disadvantaged

background, in which case you do worse<sup>5</sup>) and, as we'll see, so many more factors besides, from the level of body fat a child's mother carries during pregnancy to what their grandfather did for a living. Despite the best claims by anyone with a solution to closing the gap, the two phrases we keep coming back to (and they apply to the whole world of education) are: (1) it is more complex than that and (2) there is always another way.

What's more, despite action, policy, spending and hot air from across the political spectrum claiming to address this 'attainment gap', any gap closing is taking place at a shockingly slow pace. Indeed, according to a 2017 report from the Education Policy Institute: 'At current trends, we estimate that it would take around 50 years for the disadvantage gap to close completely by the time pupils take their GCSEs.'<sup>6</sup>

With this book we are opening up the debate about why this gap persists and what can be done, both nationally and in your classroom, to speed up the process of closing it. What comes through is that we need to be more creative, more courageous, broader in our understanding of the issues, more intelligent in how we observe its many complexities, grander in our ambitions, and a great deal more empathetic to the young people and their families who are directly involved in our failure to address their failings. You can't change government policy in your classroom but you can continue to change lives – one at a time. It is a frustrating business, though, as political policies and social changes appear to me to make this task harder, not easier, and the message seems to be that, regardless of what is going on outside of schools, schools can sort the problem. Which, of course, they can't.

Each chapter has been written by someone who has expertise and experience in this field, from university researchers to spoken word poets and, of course, teachers and school leaders, many of whom, it turns out, also grew up in working class homes. They answered the call, put out via Twitter and the Independent Thinking blog pages<sup>8</sup> in November 2016, because they felt they had something important to contribute, that their insightful, alternative voices needed hearing too. We hope you will agree.

With an eye on just how we miss the point for 'kids like that', let's start with a contribution by teacher and trainer Tim Taylor, which highlights a system that increasingly has nothing to offer 'kids like Jim', through no fault of his own. But surely, the 'no excuses' brigade cry, 'through no fault of his own' is an example of us excusing poor behaviour, of exercising 'the soft bigotry of low expectations' as Michael Gove liked to describe it,<sup>9</sup> borrowing a phrase from George W. Bush's speechwriter, Michael Gerson, the man who supposedly coined the

'... you can't separate school from society. You have to change one to be able to improve the other. But don't let that put you off.'

Søren Hansen and Jesper Jensen, *The Little Red Schoolbook*<sup>7</sup>

phrase ‘axis of evil’ because apparently ‘axis of hatred’ wasn’t feisty enough.

In Tim’s contribution, Jim is a young boy from a disadvantaged background, turning up for primary school on his first day. Any claims that education is a ‘level playing field’ where any child can do well, if only they apply themselves and embrace the opportunities on offer, started to fall apart several years before Jim’s arrival though. Consider the following research about the effects of poverty on the very grey matter of the brain:

“Poverty is tied to structural differences in several areas of the brain associated with school readiness skills, with the largest influence observed among children from the poorest households ... On average, children from low-income households scored 4 to 7 points lower on standardized tests.<sup>11</sup>”

The researchers go on to point out that up to a fifth of the difference in test scores could be put down to maturation lags in the all-important frontal and temporal lobes. So, the idea that all children need to do is display enough grit and determination and then each and every one of them can make it is contradicted by this and much other neurological research. The poverty into which children are born has a direct, meaningful and lasting (but not irrevocable) impact on their brains in such a way that it can, without specialist mediation, impair their ability to succeed academically.

Or, put more simply, level playing field my arse.

‘Injustice begins with education, its denial, its mutation, its mutilation.’

Danny Dorling, *Injustice*<sup>10</sup>

‘These new tests are a way of getting primaries to make sure all their pupils have mastered the basics, so rich and poor can compete on a level playing field.’

Toby Young on the Key Stage 2 grammar tests, *The Telegraph*<sup>12</sup>

# Kids Like Jim

**TIM TAYLOR**

**T**here was once a boy in my class, let's call him Jim, who nearly made me give up teaching. He was the most irritating, disruptive, combustible and exacerbating child I had ever met. He could make you bite down on your knuckles in frustration, scream in the darkness of your cupboard and sob in the staffroom in front of your colleagues. I remember walking out of the school one lunchtime, ramming a cigarette in my mouth and heading straight for the pub with no intention of coming back. It took two pints of strong lager and the intervention of a supportive deputy head to make me change my mind.

Why was he so terrible? Because his life was in ruins. He was seven years old and already more awful, life-changing catastrophes had happened to him than I hope will ever happen to you or me in a lifetime.

By the age of three his father had been taken away and locked up without much hope of parole. I'll leave it to you to imagine what he had done to deserve such a sentence, suffice to say toddler Jim didn't go unscarred. His mother blamed him for losing her husband, and got pregnant again almost immediately.

If things had been bad for Jim before his brother was born, they got a whole lot worse after he arrived. His mother, now self-medicating with whatever she could lay her hands on from the local dealers, started to blame Jim for every misfortune that befell her. Starting with losing her partner, then her flat (after the neighbours complained) and then his brother's father, who left quickly after the birth taking her dole money and drug supply with him.

Never what you might call a loving mother, she took to giving him scraps of food from her plate and locking him away for hours in his bedroom until he screamed himself into an exhausted sleep. One police report described a filthy flat with dirty nappies piled in a corner, broken windows covered in cardboard and discarded bottles and cigarette ends everywhere.

Respite from this hellhole came when Jim was six and a social worker asked why he wasn't at school. His mum, it turned out, had forgotten his age and hadn't realised he had already missed more than a year. Delighted, she packed him off to the local primary.

Which is when he turned up in my class.

From the start he was almost unmanageable. He walked into the room like a caged animal, his eyes flitting from one potential enemy to another, and refused to join the rest of the children on the carpet. I carried on while a kindly teaching assistant talked to him about what was going on and explained that he had no need to worry. Thinking it might help she brought

him a cup of water. Jim panicked (I've no idea why), threw the cup onto the floor, spraying the other children with water, and ran out of the room and down the corridor. If the front door of the school hadn't recently been fitted with a childproof lock I'm sure he would have been out, across the street and gone before anyone could catch him. The teaching assistant caught up with him in the front lobby as he was desperately pulling on the handle and screaming. She took his hand with the intention of gently guiding him back inside and received a sharp kick in the shin for her troubles. Despite his years of impoverishment, Jim was a big unit and when he used violence, which was often, he didn't hold back. Consequently the poor teaching assistant, caught off guard, felt the full force of the blow and crumpled to the floor.

Luckily the head teacher, who had heard the commotion from her office and had come out to investigate, saw the whole thing unfold and was quick to intervene. Manoeuvring herself between Jim and the unfortunate teaching assistant, she engulfed him in a warm (and completely incapacitating) hug. Jim's anger continued for a minute or more, his screams muffled by the head's pink woolly jumper, until he eventually began to calm down. At this point his body went completely limp, his knees buckled and he began to sob. The head, noticing the change, gently lowered him down to the floor, where Jim spent the next ten minutes, head buried, weeping uncontrollably.

I'm telling you this story because there is a narrative becoming popular in education (especially among politicians) that society's ills and inequalities can be solved, not by something substantial such as a redistribution of wealth, but by giving children a solid dose of traditional education.

This education will provide them with the cultural capital they need to rise up out of deprivation and transcend the many barriers and disadvantages that block their path to financial security and a happy and successful life.

This narrative is particularly popular among those who wish to maintain the status quo, those who are quite comfortable as things are (thank you very much) and who wish, at all costs, to avoid sharing their wealth.

It works particularly well for these people because it puts the emphasis on schools to make the difference and on students to work hard and take advantage of the wonderful legacy of the best that has been thought and said.<sup>13</sup> All they need to do is study and all teachers need to do is put them in an environment where it can happen. This is one that avoids distractions, controls their natural urges to be lazy, cruel and disobedient, and delivers content in an efficient and effective way. In order to succeed all students need to do is memorise and practise the knowledge required to pass exams (their 'passports' to future success) and to do exactly as they are told. The path is clear, well lit, and easy to follow.

It has the added advantage of being relatively cheap (always popular among politicians), since the teaching part of this process can be done by almost anyone who knows more than the students.

There is little skill involved in transmitting information and overseeing children working silently in their copybooks. The deep thinking is done by specialists outside the classroom, writing textbooks and generic lesson plans, which almost anyone with a week or two of training can follow and deliver to a class of obedient children.<sup>14</sup> Behaviour management is also outsourced by schools employing ‘directors of detention,’ who can work as overseers of organised systems of punishment, freeing up teachers from the responsibility of working with children on any genuine human level and again sidestepping the need for professional training or professional pay.

In such a system the parts become interchangeable – after all, one transmitter of knowledge is as good as another – and replicable across multiple settings. So long as those in management maintain the quality of the curriculum and the efficiency of the routines everything should run well. This is where the money is spent. The leaders of these systems are the captains of industry, the ‘superheads,’ the inspirational directors of change. They command six figure salaries,<sup>15</sup> which only a few years ago would have been impossible to imagine in education, and they are close friends and confidants of politicians and businessmen. Those at the very top become knights and dames and (it is rumoured) have helicopters and chauffeur-driven cars to ferry them about from one part of their empire to another.

The children are essentially resources. They come into the system at one end and as long as they work hard, obey the rules and dress smartly, they should come out the other with good exam results – if they get that far. Good exam results are what the system is all about. They ensure the school stays at the upper end of the league table, they ensure flattering headlines in the local press and they keep the captain’s helicopter in the air. In such a system conformity is a valuable commodity. There is no time for children who don’t comply with the rules – they are a distraction to others and quickly pounced on. These places are bastions of ‘no excuses.’<sup>16</sup> Any misdemeanours, however small, are punished ruthlessly. Obedience is the watchword; students are trained (some in ‘boot camps’<sup>17</sup>) in how to line up, how to walk silently from one room to another, how to put up their hands quickly and efficiently, how to talk to adults, how to dress. Those who don’t comply lose out. It was their choice. The system is the same for everyone: everyone has the same opportunities, the same curriculum and the same chances. If they don’t want to take advantage – if they are too lazy, too selfish or too easily distracted – then there are plenty of other schools that will have them. (‘It is probably best for him to leave now, Mrs Smith, before he is excluded. No one, least of all you, wants that on Ryan’s school record.’<sup>18</sup>)

There are no official numbers of children who leave the system ‘voluntarily.’<sup>19</sup> We simply don’t know how many walk out the door one day and don’t come back, how many are encouraged to ‘find somewhere else more suitable’ or how many leave officially and can’t find a suitable place. Where do they go? Back in the days before computer consoles and all day television they would



be hanging around on street corners, down the 'rec' or in the arcade. But now they are largely invisible. They stay in their homes, communicate online and are fundamentally, and disastrously, disconnected from the rest of society.

You might think I'm exaggerating but this is a real phenomenon. Over the last two years I've been working with an organisation called Red Balloon which runs several centres around the country for young people who don't go to school (they call them 'self-excluders').<sup>20</sup> One of these centres, based in Cambridge, is an online school where teachers communicate with students through email, Mumble and other Internet platforms. The sessions typically last for fifty minutes and involve the usual curriculum subjects (maths, English, etc.) as well as therapy and social and emotional support. Since this online centre, called Red Balloon of the Air,<sup>21</sup> was founded in 2011 it has seen a five-fold increase in the numbers of students it serves and is constantly oversubscribed. Parents are desperate to get access to this service for their children and often see it as the last chance for them to get an education before they reach 16.

But Red Balloon can only help a tiny number. It can only help those who hear of the service, who have the wherewithal to make an application and who have at least one adult in their life who cares enough to worry about them. How many others, all over the country, don't have this kind of support, don't have parents who care or don't have parents who are capable – either through illness, lack of education or self-confidence – of contacting Red Balloon? We simply don't know. No one does, least of all the government. These children are out of sight and out of mind. They are the detritus of a system that puts efficiency above human need, that ranks schools by their test results and not by the amount they care.

Such a system would find no place for Jim. He would have been 'managed' out of the door, but not straight away – they would have punished him first. They would have attempted to reprogramme him, to teach him about the rules and what happens if he chooses not to obey them. They might even have told themselves that it was in his best interest, that they were exercising 'tough love', but eventually, probably sooner rather than later, Jim would have been on his way. From one school to the next, on managed moves, until eventually he'd stop going. The social worker might come round a couple of times and his mum would promise to send him in the next day, but wouldn't or couldn't, and he'd disappear. Maybe he'd turn to crime and end up in trouble with the police, or maybe he wouldn't. Whatever the outcome, it wouldn't be the system's fault. He'd had his chance, the curriculum was there for him, beautifully written and full of wonderful literature and history. If he didn't take his chance then that was his fault. Perhaps he didn't have the grit. Perhaps he was too lazy or too easily distracted. Perhaps he was just a bad 'un, not evil as such, but beyond the scope of teachers – after all, we're not psychiatrists or social workers.

So what? The country is full of kids like Jim; we can't help them all. We have to work with the ones who can control themselves, who want to learn, who want to hear about all this wonderful culture. Schools can't cope with kids like him; they're too difficult, too damaged. They should go to the special schools, the schools that are trained for this sort of thing, ones that have specialist teachers and specialist environments. That's the right environment for kids like Jim.

Except these kinds of schools are full up.<sup>22</sup> Their numbers were always restricted, they were always oversubscribed and they were always underfunded. Now the problem is worse, much worse. Kids like Jim are the victims of a double whammy. On the one hand the system is becoming less tolerable, less focused on their specific needs, and on the other, places that once could have helped him are becoming more and more difficult to find.

Back in the mid-1990s, when Jim first wandered into my class and flipped out, there was a safety net. It wasn't wide or without faults, but it was there to help the children who struggled to balance the chaotic reality of their lives with the demands of school. It put their needs first, made allowances, consulted with specialists, employed one-to-one support and gave teachers help and guidance: in short, it was child centred. Much of that is going or has already gone. There are still some bastions of hope – some schools that still put the needs of their students above the needs of politicians, who believe that nurturing and protecting children is more important than moving up the league table – GCSE or PISA. But their jobs are becoming harder and harder, their finances are being squeezed and they are having to make terrible choices that leave children like Jim without support.

It is difficult to overstate how desperate the situation has become. More and more teachers and head teachers are walking away from their profession,<sup>23</sup> exhausted and unable to carry on in the face of such relentless indifference from a system that puts the needs of political and economic expediency above those of the most vulnerable in society.

Yet, we shouldn't give up hope. It's easy to come to the conclusion that the future is inevitable, that things will only continue along the same path, getting worse and worse, that our politicians will always be selfish and unprincipled, and things will never change for the better. But that's not how history works. Every action has a reaction, and out of this terrible, inhuman system will come a wave of opposition. British education has a long and proud history of non-conformity – teachers and schools who have strived to develop more humane ways to work with children, not as fodder, but as individuals with interests and motivations of their own.<sup>24</sup> Not all of these experiments worked, some failed dramatically, but they were based on a moral conviction that education is about developing people, not about numbers on a ledger.

Over the past few years there has been a concerted, and well-financed, campaign to frame our educational woes as the consequence of a flawed and wrongheaded ideology – progressivism.<sup>25</sup> Progressivism, so the story goes, is

an ideology that declares children to be natural learners who should be left to discover education for themselves, without the impediment of adult interventions and control. This narrative is a caricature, yet it has considerable power, casting the progressives as ‘the enemies of promise,’<sup>26</sup> and those who oppose progressivism as the champions of ‘the best that has been thought and said.’

In this dichotomy, you’re either with us or you’re against us. But it’s a lie. Education is not a dichotomy and it is perfectly possible to take a middle path, one which recognises that adults play an important role in the education of children, which understands that some aspects of learning are best learned systematically and yet strives to make this process meaningful and engaging. Schools don’t have to be places of universal conformity, where everyone teaches in the same fashion. There are other ways of working – ways that build on the existing knowledge of children, that respect their ideas, their culture and what they bring to the classroom, and that work collaboratively with them through inquiry. Most teachers are pragmatists and are not overly bothered by ideology or driven by a single theory of education; they know that not all classes are the same and that they need to be adaptable.

This is why they are always on the lookout for new ideas and new ways of working. It’s why as a profession we experimented with learning styles and multiple intelligences in the past and why we are so enamoured with the cognitive sciences now.<sup>27</sup> We want to find answers, we want to be better, we want to help our students. But the truth is, there are no answers. Not definitive ones anyway. Not ones that say, ‘this is the best way’. Education isn’t like that; it’s messy, complex, contingent, ever changing, ever shifting. And we have to be adaptable, prepared to make allowances, prepared to use whatever works. Which is why we shouldn’t restrict what we do – systemising and trying to control every variable – but look constantly to develop our repertoire, to expand the palette of different methods we have available to us, and to look for ways of combining and blending different approaches. This is what professionals do in our field. It’s why we aren’t technicians working from a pre-written script, it’s why we don’t want to be told what a ‘good’ lesson *must* involve, and it’s why we want the freedom and independence to make the choices we believe are in the best interests of our students.

And what is best for our students goes beyond routines, strict rules and a ‘delivered’ curriculum. Being interested in learning, wanting to find out more and feeling a sense of ownership don’t come from a bland diet of facts, revision and tests. They come from being a part of the process – a process that makes education something you do, rather than have done to you. Direct instruction has its part to play – in the right circumstances, for the right kind of learning – but it is not everything. It doesn’t develop collaboration, it doesn’t involve the children’s own interests, ideas or imagination. It is a single tool, not the whole box. As teachers we need to expand our range and study a

wide number of different strategies – strategies that we can use and apply in the right circumstances. This is what it is to be a professional.

Inflexibility and ideological fixations are corrosive to an education that aims to meet the needs of all students and not just those who comply. If we set up inflexible boundaries and unbending rules then we are bound to leave some who can't meet them on the outside. Children like Jim often struggle to come to terms with school communities and need understanding and flexibility. Applying a strict, unbending approach to behaviour management to a child like Jim will only fail him, just as giving him a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* will fail to help him read. Schools are for learning and different children learn in different ways; some need extra help and support and more time than others. Just as some struggle with numbers, some struggle with adapting their behaviour and controlling their emotions. It is the job of schools to help with these challenges, and having a wide range of teaching strategies and a willingness to be adaptable and make allowances is essential to this process.

To ignore that many of the children who struggle most in education come from working class backgrounds is to ignore the fundamental inequality that lies at the heart of our education system. It is an inequality that infects every layer and every element, like a malevolent nucleotide in the system's DNA. Children like Jim from working class backgrounds are hobbled from the start. They find it hardest to make sense of school and hardest to fit in with its rules and expectations. For many of these children, school is a place where they don't belong, where their voices aren't heard and where their interests are ignored. To blame their failure on a character fault or a lack of grit is to divert attention from the real cause. The abnormality is not with them but with the system. If we are genuinely committed to helping all children, including the most difficult to teach, whatever their backgrounds, then we have to accept that the system is at fault and it is the system that needs to change.

Too much of what happens in school is meaningless to children in the sense that they cannot see the purpose or the need for it beyond passing exams. Qualifications are, of course, important, and having a good set is better than not. But the truth is that many students will leave school without good exam results, and they know it. They look around at their classmates and they know who the clever ones are, the ones who do well in tests and the ones who will get the best results. They know school is a game they can't win and so many of them choose not to play. By turning our education system into one that only suits the academically accomplished we are denying many children the opportunity to find out what they are good at and to flourish. As Dorothy Heathcote observed, many schools have become 'a waiting room, where children are culturally disenfranchised and made to feel useless ... a system that requires children over many years to be content with an absence of status, to feel useless, to exist in a limbo of learning which relies solely on the de-functioning maxim that "one day, you'll be good enough to really do it" but never today'.<sup>28</sup>

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