

The worst behaved pupils in the world? You'd better believe it: As a study says schools are even more anarchic than we thought, the shocking testimony of a once idealistic young teacher

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At the inner-city secondary school where I taught for two years, one object neatly summed up its failings: the skip. Hidden at the back of the school, this skip was kept full with furniture broken by out-of-control pupils, scraps of coloured paper scrawled across during endless 'group work' lessons, and bin bags containing cola bottles and wrappers from sweets consumed during class.

At the end of each academic year, teachers would queue up beside it to discard box after box of pupils' exercise books — as scrappy and disorderly as the lessons in which they had been used.

Looking at the school skip, I drew an inevitable, depressing conclusion: modern education was rubbish.



It was not material deprivation causing the school to fail, but a deprivation of ideas.

'Discipline' was treated as a dirty word. Instead, staff were encouraged to use the trendy euphemism 'behaviour for learning', modishly abbreviated to B4L. 'Yeah, right,' pupils would reply when you told them they had a detention.

The results were catastrophic.

I vividly recall one of my worst lessons descending into pandemonium: milkshake was spilt over a desk, pupils listened to music through their headphones and one girl attacked another with her umbrella.

Worse, bad behaviour was actually rewarded. One boy was notorious. He came to lessons only as he pleased, swore at teachers and was an accomplished playground bully. At the end-of-year prize-giving, I was surprised to hear his name announced.

He had collected one of the largest number of 'reward stickers' in his year. Many teachers, it turned out, had taken to bribing him with stickers in a desperate attempt to calm his unruliness. As the school applauded his name, I thought of the dozens of his classmates who'd had a year of learning ruined by this one boy.

Some pupils would set their minds to bullying teachers in the hope that they would leave the school. They even had a word for it: 'terroring'. It is hard to explain the anger and indignity of being 'terrored' by one 12-year-old girl. Though no longer teaching at the school, I still have nightmares about her.

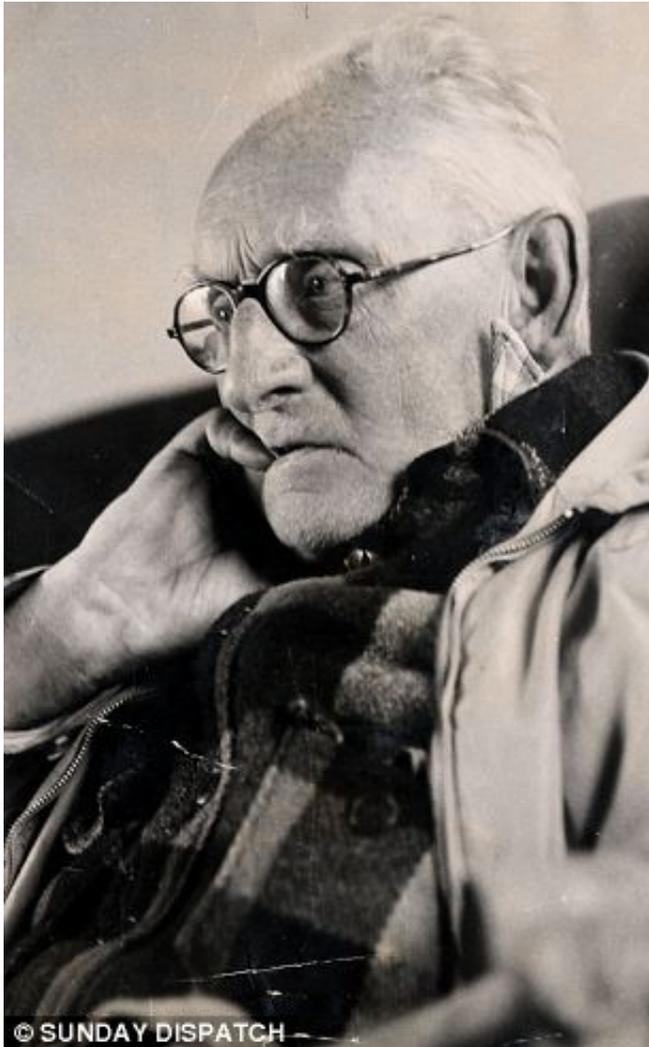
I was not the least surprised to read in a report published last week by the University of East Anglia that English pupils are rated among the worst-behaved in the developed world.

Even in those classes where behaviour was sufficiently calm to teach, the curriculum was uninspiring. My subject, history, had been emptied of content and replaced with a series of bogus 'skills' such as 'detecting bias' or 'identifying change'.

I was criticised for standing at the front of the room and addressing the whole class. Traditional 'chalk-and-talk' teaching methods were highly discouraged. After one lesson observation, I was told I would be well suited to teaching at the boys' grammar school down the road. I took this as a compliment, but it was not meant as one.

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freedom.

Children could wake and go to bed when they pleased, and lessons were entirely optional.

Neill's lessons began with him offering pupils a cigarette to 'break the ice'. Nude swimming in the school duck pond was encouraged for both staff and pupils.

'We set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves,' he wrote. 'In order to do this, we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction.'

Neill's 'do-as-you-please school' failed on any normal measure of educational success, yet despite its manifest failures, Summerhill was wildly successful in influencing a generation of teachers during the Sixties and Seventies. Its rejection of adult authority and its romantic view of the innate goodness of the child, chimed with the spirit of the age.

Any teacher trained since the Sixties will have been influenced by the ideas of A.S. Neill, whose philosophy came to be known, with deep inappropriateness, as 'progressive education'.

At first, its principles were applied to primary schools and the teaching of reading. Instead of old-fashioned phonics schemes, where individual letter sounds were learned and then built into longer words, teachers encouraged 'look-say' methods which taught pupils to recognise complete words.

When one despondent primary school teacher, trained in the early Fifties, challenged a teacher-trainer on these new methods she was told 'one must never "teach" reading. If one's classroom was sufficiently interesting, reading would "emerge".'

Sadly, the ability to read does not just 'emerge'. In my own secondary school classes, I would stare in disbelief at the work produced by some 11-year-old pupils. After six years of schooling, they were almost illiterate — victims of a fatal idealism.



A pupil at Summerhill: Neill's 'do-as-you-please school' failed on any normal measure of educational success, yet despite its manifest failures, Summerhill was wildly successful in influencing a generation of teachers

In maths, meanwhile, in the Sixties, the memorisation of times-tables and basic calculations was abandoned in favour of real world problems, such as making models or 'playing shop'.

These methods were given official endorsement by the 1967 Plowden Report, an immensely influential document which became the unofficial core text of teacher-training.

It dismissed the benefit of memorisation, discipline for bad behaviour, divisions between different subjects, correcting pupils' work and reading schemes.

By the end of the Sixties, primary school education had been transformed — and very much for the worse. Over the following decade, it would be secondary education's turn.

After being appointed Labour Education Secretary in 1965, Anthony Crosland confided in his wife: 'If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to destroy every f***ing grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland.'

Crosland's intention was to 'preserve all that is valuable in grammar-school education for the children who now receive it and make it available for more children'.

Nothing of the sort happened.

Most comprehensive schools were designed in deliberate opposition to the grammar-school tradition. House systems, school uniform, prize-giving, academic streaming and competitive sport were largely abandoned. Mixed-ability classes, dumbed-down curriculums and child-centred teaching methods were all the rage.

In 1976, the BBC was allowed inside one of these brave new schools. Panorama recorded a fly-on-the-wall documentary in what was, according to the presenter David Dimbleby, an 'ordinary comprehensive school in outer London'.

Watching footage of Faraday Comprehensive today, it is striking how similar the scenes are to my own experience: pupils openly swearing in lessons, eating sweets, wandering out of their seats, shouting at teachers and refusing to work.

One despairing PE teacher bellows at a class: 'Talk, talk, talk. No wonder we have so many rubbish lessons!'

The age of the 'bog-standard' comprehensive was upon us.

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In 1974, this newspaper profiled an experimental school under the headline: 'Stop these trendies before they ruin ALL our children.' But the rot had already set in — and has endured.

During my time as a trainee teacher, it was suggested that to study the Norman Conquest, pupils could re-enact the Battle of Hastings in the playground and make castles out of cereal boxes; to understand the Industrial Revolution, they could pitch inventions to a Dragons' Den-style panel. An unfortunate side-effect was that pupils were confused by the inevitable anachronisms involved in making history 'relevant'.

'Sir, how many Victorians would have had a TV?' I was asked.

In October 1996, Tony Blair told the Labour Party Conference that his three main priorities for government were 'education, education, education'. However, once in office, Labour's resolve to combat progressive education quickly faded.

Education spending increased from £39 billion in 1997 to £89 billion in 2009 — much of this on a series of quangos staffed by stalwarts of the education establishment.

Fads and psychobabble such as 'independent learning' and '21st-century skills' invaded the classroom. Ofsted repeatedly gave schools bad reports if they did not conform to the progressive orthodoxy.

In 2004, the New Labour schools minister David Miliband declared that the children of the Blair years would be 'the best educated generation in our nation's history'.

This promise was flatly contradicted nine years later when a survey by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed England and Northern Ireland to be the only countries in the developed world where literary and numeracy levels among 16 to 24-year-olds were no better than among 55 to 65-year-olds.

This was the dismal picture which greeted me when I arrived in Birmingham in 2011. Many of my 11-year-old pupils arriving from primary school could barely read and their handwriting was illegible.

The school library prominently displayed a raft of ghost-written memoirs of various footballers and reality TV stars, while tucked away on the fiction shelves I found a spine that was notably lacking in lurid colours. It was an old copy of the complete works of Shakespeare, a lonely reminder of the days when the school had intellectual aspirations for its pupils.

While most classrooms had their desks in islands to promote group work, I resolutely kept mine in rows.

When I left the school, I received a card signed by all the pupils in one of my classes.

'You are the reason for my interest in history,' read one of the comments.

'I'm gonna miss your history lessons because I actually learned,' read another. These pupils were crying out for orderly, well-structured and information-filled lessons.

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University education faculties are shrinking, local authorities have lost much of their clout thanks to schools converting to academies and, by his own count, Gove has scrapped nine education quangos.

Had I gone into state education five years ago, I would have found the outlook for our schools too bleak to continue. However, this landscape is being transformed.

In September, I am returning to the classroom to teach history at a free school.

Thanks to the impact of current government reforms, I cannot think of a more exciting prospect.

- *PROGRESSIVELY WORSE: The Burden Of Bad Ideas In British Schools by Robert Peal is published on Monday by Civitas at £14. To order a copy at £12.50 (p&p free), call 0844 472 4157.*