



## The Failures of Education in the West

### PART 3

#### Britain's Education Crisis

*'Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this: "You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself — educating your own judgements. Those that stay must remember, always, and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society.'* (Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*)

Having looked at the different education systems and their respective challenges, the final article in the series *The Failures of Education in the West*, will provide a brief overview of some critical issues facing the education sector in the U.K. Before embarking on a quest to understand what the multitude of issues in education are, it must be noted that the answers are shaped by individual experiences and understandings. Educators, Journalists, Politicians, and all writers on the topic of education vary in their political stance which contributes to their perspective on education and pedagogy. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that what makes up various listed challenges in education is often based on one's individual standing.

#### **Inequality**

When coming across the various problems associated with the British education system, the most notable always stands to be the dual system of education which has long reinforced inequality. Though in 1998 there was a step in the right direction by placing a ban on the creation of new Grammar Schools, the division caused by selective and private schooling remains rampant as Theresa May seeks to overturn the ban. Of the many issues associated with private and grammars, the few that are blindingly obvious are as follows;

#### ***Reinforcement of Class Bias***

Opposers of the Tripartite system have argued that grammar schools do not aid in social levelling and the public is misled to believe that they assist with raising social mobility. Their further arguments are based on statistics, which indicate that the intake of grammar schools remain primarily middle class. This is evidenced through the percentage of students on free school meals in attendance at grammars as being less than 3%. Research also highlights the 66% to 40% ratio of children who are not eligible for FSM attending a grammar school as opposed to high achieving students who are eligible not being able to attend.

Through viewing grammar schools in isolation, we can note how the prevalence of institutions that are derived from policy aiming to uphold and preserve the status quo will not doubt perpetuate the already rampant degree of inequality, and will further reinforce the divide within the socio-economic strata. The most unfortunate outcome of this will be that the disadvantaged and underprivileged children will be the ones left to deal with the brunt of the disparity.

## ***The Starving of Resources***

According to research carried out by Professor David Jesson of York University, the overall average GCSE performance of students who attended comprehensive schools was as good as those of grammar schools. He further highlighted how the existence of grammars was depressing the performance in Local Education Authorities and eating away at the resources.

### ***Increased Pressure on Primary School Children***

There has been a record number of primary students who have begun to suffer from depression and anxiety as a result of strict and pressurised environments faced in order to prepare for 11-plus examinations. Parents have started to question whether the education system is failing their children and what it is that they're subjecting their children to.

The issues listed above pertain to grammar schools, however Public Schools (better known as private schools) reflect these same problems; the favouring of an educational elite, the availability to upper middle class factions of society, the preservation of exclusive tradition and archaic hierarchy (educational privilege and social prestige), and isolation of students from the 'gentry' so as not to handicap their later career chances.

The current reality within British universities also mirrors the same financial issues and divisive outcomes due to the consistent rise in tuition fees. First introduced under the Labour government in 1998, tuition fees were marked at £1,000 per year. By 2004 with the Higher Education Act, fees rose to £3,000 per year and in 2010 were tripled to £9,000. From September 2017, the fee cap will rise with inflation and most universities have begun listing courses at £9,250. This comes hand in hand with the scrapping of maintenance grants which are now to be paid back alongside tuition loans. The return payments start when graduates begin earning – if earning £21,000 or less, repayment interest is the rate of inflation, above £21,000 is inflation + up to 3%, and over £41,000 is inflation + 3%.

A basic glance at the current financial issues within the education sector tell us that the existence of these varying measures seeks to preserve and perpetuate the class distinction in Britain, and that most certainly does not echo the idea of equal opportunities.

## **Cuts and Budgeting**

In 2011, Britain saw 'savage' coalition cuts to youth and education services. It was feared that the decimation of organisations such as the Connexions career service, and the scrapping of educational grants such Educational Maintenance Allowance would see a rise in crime; Sir Al Aynsley Green said in an interview, *"Witnessing the destruction of many of the building bricks of support for children and young people to achieve their full potential in life is desperately worrying. I see little in their place to inspire confidence that this generation will be looked after by government. It could spell the end of hope and expectation for many of them."*

Reported in the Guardian, the following helpfully sheds some light on the current cuts; 'Add to this the fact that real-term cuts in education spending and "top slicing" of local authority budgets have shifted resources from local schools to the new academies, most of which are in more advantaged areas. According to former headteacher and Liberal Democrat councilor Peter Downes, a fierce critic of the coalition's education policy, *"This is directing resources to the most privileged. In this way, life gets harder for schools at the bottom of the heap."*

Downes has found significant reductions in services to the poor, the vulnerable and ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, the government is spending millions on the new free schools, although exact figures, on national and local schemes, are hard to get hold of.

The government figures for funding cuts in further education in England that were announced in February 2015 would reach up to an appalling 24%, - a 35% reduction since 2009. Northern Ireland's budget reduction for further and higher education was also placed at a devastating £48m, which was a 6.4% cut from the previous year. The impact that these changes were foreseen to have were listed by the University and College Union as follows: 4,500 staff jobs at risk, reduction in the number of adults returning to education, pressures leading to course cuts and institutional closures, and inaccessibility for those students who need to undertake certain courses in order to get onto high level programmes. They further noted that 'in 2013/14 around 2.93m adults participated in government-funded further education. UCU estimates that the 24% cut in funding could mean the loss of at least 400,000 students in 2015/16.'

The figures for schools, however, is even more devastating according to the National Audit Office, who warned that 'schools were facing an 8% real-terms cut in funding per-pupil by 2019-20.' This figure is a result of the £3bn worth of cuts to the education sector, and still does not take into account the new funding formula. The Fair Funding Formula unveiled by education secretary Justine Greening will result in more cuts for some schools, as it will see to money being moved from well-funded schools to those in more disadvantaged areas with less financial support. The General Secretary at the National Union of Teachers, Kevin Courtney, believes however, that *"far from being the levelling up that some councils and heads have demanded, this is a levelling down. Even the schools currently worst funded will see real-terms cuts in this parliament."*

Though there is not an exact figure agreed upon when it comes to the financial aid needed to help the education sector prosper, what can be accepted is that cutting funds is not helping. Professor Bruce Baker adequately sums up the need for consistent funding, 'sustained improvements to the level and distribution of funding across local public school districts can lead to improvements in the level and distribution of student outcomes'.

## **Competition and Depression**

As mentioned in previous articles, competition characterizes most educational systems, and the U.K. is no different. Though it does not compare to competition in countries such as South-Korea, the GCSE and A-Level standardized testing's grade boundaries are gradually heightened dependent on the number of students achieving above average. The impact on SEN students and EAL students is unprecedented when pitted against such competitors. Students also ardently seek their university places, oblivious to the £40,000 debt awaiting them once they graduate.

These realities most certainly impact students across the board, as 'one in ten between the ages of five and sixteen suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder, and many thousands of children and young people suffer from severe depression.' Many teenagers have found themselves attributing their issues to feeling inadequate as fellow students surpass them in results and general academic achievement.

## **Teachers**

It is understood that there is a lack of respect for the arts and humanities subjects generally in Britain, with a new and refreshed focus on STEM subjects. However, what often goes amiss is the impact that this has on those whose passion lay with History, Art, Literature etc., as they face having to teach multiple classes in which they are not qualified. The repetitive curriculums, harsh standards imposed on producing results and meeting targets, and the narrow teaching scope will see a mighty decline in 'good-will teaching', and the inevitable failure of the education system.

A study carried out by the OECD found that two thirds of teachers also felt undervalued, with 74% saying they were underpaid in comparison to other professionals. According to the Guardian Teacher Network and Guardian Jobs survey about teacher lives, 82% of teachers described their workload as unmanageable, 73% stated that it was affecting their physical health, and 76% said it was affecting their mental health. A third of teachers also reported working more than 60 hours a week, with one in five leaving due to the workload itself. The teacher drop-out remains abysmal with four in ten newly qualified teachers quitting within a year, and a third of teachers leaving the state sector within five years. Teacher pay has stagnated, class sizes are colossal, and the lack of incentive for working in schools has left the country with a teacher deficit. Golden Hello's were offered, and handsome bursaries are on the increase in a bid to recruit more potential graduates to the profession, yet the dropout rate remains high as trainees find themselves battling with non-fulfillment and a sense of guilt at not being able to individually cater to their students.

### **A Questionable System to Emulate**

The issues listed above merely scratch the surface of a system embroiled in disarray. Nevertheless, there remain a range of issues spanning from violence (17,680 physical assaults between 2012-2013, and 93 assaults per day on staff by pupils in England in 2014), to truancy, general discipline, suicides, etc. Unfortunately, these problems tend to slip under the radar within the U.K. as statistics from other countries bypass them exponentially. Nonetheless, after a sound review of the above, we find ourselves facing a host of questions pertaining to the supposed brilliance of these systems, boasting academic success and excellent, and well qualified students.

The Western Educational Tradition finds itself at loggerheads with the natural state of man. Mental health inflicts thousands, a moral vacuum grows, students and teachers remain dissatisfied, and socio-economic realities continue to cripple people. Nations looking to resemble these models must ask themselves whether the meritocratic myth pervading their objectives and deluding them is a reality, and based on context, whether these systems will allow for their respective societies to flourish.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by  
Reem Ahmed**

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