

Progressively Worse: The burden of bad ideas in British schools



Author:	Robert Peal
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Since 1953, education spending in Britain has increased by nine times in real terms but levels of numeracy and literacy among school leavers have hardly changed. Today, Britain is the only country in the developed world where 16–24 year olds have lower literacy levels than 55–65 year olds. This abject record in educating our children cannot be detached from a movement which took hold in British state schools from the 1960s onwards and has been called, with deep inappropriateness, ‘progressive education’. This movement is based upon a romantic view of the child. It believes that children are both innately good and natural learners, who should be freed from the guidance and direct instruction of the teacher. Teacher training, local authorities and schools inspectors all signed up to this idealistic, but damaging, belief. Relevance, freedom, active learning, skills and self-esteem became the unquestionable pillars of this education orthodoxy. Rigour, hard work, knowledge, discipline and competition were deemed pejorative terms. Half-a-century on from its arrival, progressive education is under attack on multiple fronts. Empirical data is laying bare its lack of success and cognitive science is demonstrating its fundamental misconception about how children learn. At long last, government reforms are freeing schools to break away from the thoughtworld of the education establishment. Progressive education has plunged British schools into a decades long crisis, leaving generations of pupils illiterate and under-educated.

If Britain is to have a world class education system in the twenty-first century, abandoning the burden of bad ideas it has inherited from the twentieth is the surest route to success.