

THE TAIL

HOW ENGLAND'S SCHOOLS
FAIL ONE CHILD IN FIVE -
AND WHAT CAN BE DONE

Edited by Paul Marshall

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1

Introduction

Paul Marshall

‘What a wise parent would desire for his own children, that a nation, in so far as it is wise, must desire for all children.’

R.H. Tawney

In 2003, the trustees of ARK¹ decided to pool our resources to develop a chain of academies in the UK. We were convinced that many children in Britain did not get the schooling they deserved, nor achieve their potential. And in Andrew Adonis’s academies programme we saw an opportunity to do something about it.

One of our number, Ron Beller, had first-hand experience working in Michael Bloomberg’s Education Department in New York. He told us how new ‘charter schools’, springing up in inner-city areas, were transforming children’s lives. We founded ARK Schools to do the same for children in Britain.

Today, ARK operates 18 schools (a mix of primary and secondary) and we have plans to grow to 50.

ARK’s schools operate in areas where children are predominantly poor. More than two in five of our children are on Free School Meals (FSM), a standard measure of whether a child comes from a poor family.² Transforming their lives by providing a good education has

transformed our lives as well. Seeing children grow up able to aspire to and achieve things they could not have dreamt of beforehand has been one of the most rewarding experiences for everyone involved in ARK – sponsors, heads and teachers alike.

ARK is not alone. Britain is in the middle of a truly exciting revolution in education. Around the country, beacon schools are showing rapidly improving results. Yet some schools, local authorities and even regions are still trapped in a rut of low ambition and poor performance; and even some of the best schools are still not meaningfully changing outcomes for the bottom 20% or 30% of pupils.

This book is for the people who are still being failed by our education system. It is a collection of essays by some of Britain's leading educational practitioners and specialists, who have sought to explain why attainment remains so persistently poor for such a large 'tail' of pupils and to suggest what needs to be done. Our proposals are summarised in the 'manifesto for the tail' in the concluding chapter.

The tail

One child in five leaves school in England without basic skills in literacy and numeracy.

It has become increasingly common to refer to these children as the 'tail'. As a statistical term this captures none of the personal tragedy of unfulfilled potential which has blighted the lives of successive generations. But it does help to distil the argument.

As Chapter 2 shows, England's tail is fatter and longer than that of the majority of our international peers. The problem is just as great in numeracy as in literacy. But it does not have to be this way. Countries like Finland, Korea and Canada show us that the tail could be half its present size.

The working definition of the tail used in this book is those students who achieve below level 2 (considered baseline proficiency) in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment of the

OECD) tests of literacy and numeracy. These are the children who will find it hard to progress to the qualifications they need to get good jobs, and who are least likely to find secure employment during their lives. This equates broadly to the lowest quintile of achievers at age 16. The bottom quintile at GCSE level currently comprises all those children who achieve 168 GCSE points (the equivalent of five D grades) or less.

The ambition which this book sets out is simple: instead of languishing in the bottom half of the OECD's education league tables, Britain should aim to be a top-tier country, alongside the likes of Canada, a country with comparable demographics (incomes per capita and relative inequality) to the UK, but with a tail half the size. Over the next decade we must halve the size of the tail in this country, so that no more than one in ten of pupils leave school below PISA's or any similar baseline levels of literacy and numeracy.

Why the tail matters

Each member of the tail is an individual, and as long as the education system continues to fail any individual in the fulfilment of their potential, we, as a society, are letting them down.

The path which awaits a young person who leaves school without the minimum attainment is at best confusing and at worst grim, with a significant minority immediately entering the ranks of the jobless and probably destined for long-term unemployment.

Existing Labour Force surveys do not enable us to follow the path of the tail, as narrowly defined. However, we do have a good idea of what happens to the 40% who do not achieve five good GCSEs. If you are part of this group then there is a greater than one in four chance that two years later you will be NEET, that is, *not* in any kind of employment, education or training.³ If you were one of those (nearly 4%) who had gained no GCSEs at all, there was a greater than one in two chance that you would be NEET.

Poor literacy and numeracy may also lead to crime. One in two of the prison population has literacy skills below that of an 11-year-old; 65% cannot count to the standard expected of an 11-year-old.⁴ Of those who rioted in 2011 and had taken GCSEs, only one in ten had achieved five good grades.⁵

Britain also does a poor job of retrieving the learning deficit once children leave school. In 2009, more than one in four 25–64-year-olds were below what the OECD defines as minimum levels of literacy and numeracy (i.e. below level 2), compared with just 14% in Sweden, 12% in Canada and 11% in the USA.⁶

The tail of poor literacy and poor numeracy extends throughout society.

The tail and the labour market

Reducing the size of the tail is becoming more, rather than less, urgent due to the changes taking place in global labour markets.

In 1965, the year CSEs were first introduced, just one-fifth of pupils attained the equivalent of today's five good GCSEs.⁷ Over 50 years, that proportion has tripled. Undoubtedly, the improvement has been flattered by persistent grade inflation, but even allowing for this, there appears to have been a significant improvement in attainment levels. Yet Britain has consistently fallen into the bottom half of international education attainment tables, and employers, like a Greek chorus, have offered a constant and mounting refrain, to the effect that young people are inadequately skilled.⁸

In essence, the pace of change in the global labour market is continually outstripping improvements in British educational attainment. We are not alone. The OECD note that 'in the high wage countries of the OECD, demand for highly-skilled people is increasing faster than supply and demand for low-skilled workers is decreasing faster than supply'. The result, they argue, is rising inequality, with rising wage premiums for highly skilled individuals and growing unemployment

or declining wages for low-skilled individuals. 'Jobs are moving rapidly to countries that can provide the skills needed for any particular operation at the best rates.'⁹

There are two dynamics at work here. At the top end of the labour market, technological change is increasing the demand for more educated workers. At the bottom end the globalisation of labour markets has hollowed out low-skilled markets to a degree and at a speed that has never been seen before.

The recession has not altered this long-term dynamic. Between 2008 and 2010 employment rates rose for the university-educated, but fell for those without good GCSEs. This was mirrored by a further increase in the wage inequality between these two groups.¹⁰

It does not have to be like this. In their 2008 study of the US labour market,¹¹ Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz show that in the first half of the twentieth century, the American schooling system kept ahead of the demand for skilled workers. As a result, the premium paid for a high school or college education consistently fell between 1915 and 1950. However, more recently educational attainment in the USA has started to lag the speed of technological change, resulting in a steady widening of the wage premium from 45% in the 1950s to the current level of over 80%.

Britain needs to replicate the educational success of early twentieth-century America, and create skilled workers at least as fast as the economy demands them. Then we will have higher rates of employment, higher rates of growth, and lower inequality. If we fail to do this the principal victims will remain those who leave school without basic skills – children in the tail.

The wealth of the nation

Of course the implications of the skills race go well beyond the ledger of wages and employment. A more highly skilled economy feeds through into higher levels of value added, higher levels of

competitiveness, attracting higher levels of inward investment, generating higher levels of tax receipts.

This is primarily an economic argument, but at stake is the prosperity and competitiveness of our society, and therefore it matters to all of us. It is an argument for our nation's prosperity.

The consultancy firm McKinsey has estimated the economic impact of what it calls the Achievement Gap as it applies to the United States, combining the direct social costs of low attainment (including crime, unemployment, welfare dependency and poor health) with the opportunity costs for the wider economy.¹² McKinsey estimated that the cost of the educational achievement gap to the USA was equivalent to a 'permanent national recession' and calculated that if the USA had closed the gap between its educational achievement levels and those of better-performing nations such as Finland and Korea (which is primarily about raising the performance of the tail rather than the median pupil), GDP in 2008 could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher.

In a comparable study for the UK, the consulting firm BCG found that matching Finnish levels of social mobility (in terms of raising the educational outcomes of poor children) would add £6 billion a year to GDP by 2030 and £56 billion a year by 2050. Bringing below-average students in the UK to the national average would add £14 billion a year to GDP by 2030 and £140 billion by 2050.¹³

Educational reform and the tail – a brief history

The British education system has always been elitist – in both the best and worst senses.

Until 1965 there were no national examinations at all for four in five children. The focus of our education system was on training up a small elite, whose school attainment was recognised first through the School Certificate (from 1918 to 1951) and then through GCE O levels (from 1951).

From 1965 onwards, lower achievers could take the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). However, this was part of a two-tier framework, with CSE aimed mainly at Secondary Modern pupils, and O and A levels aimed mainly at grammar and independent schools. In 1988 GCSEs were introduced, creating the single national framework we are familiar with today, but the focus was still on high and average attainers. According to the Department of Education and Science's 1987 consultation document, 'the range of attainment targets should cater for the full ability range and be sufficiently challenging at all levels to raise expectations, *particularly of pupils of middling achievement, who are frequently not challenged enough, as well as stretching and stimulating the most able.*'¹⁴

The focus on middle attainers became more pronounced with the introduction of school league tables based on GCSE outcomes. Introduced in 1992, school league tables have become an increasingly strong driver of school behaviour. Although there are positive aspects to this, one side-effect has been to focus school efforts (including the best teachers and the most time) disproportionately on borderline (i.e. C/D) pupils¹⁵ at the expense of their weaker peers who can often spend their last two years at secondary school as part of a neglected rump. The focus on borderline C/D pupils has slightly diminished with the broadening of performance tables to include progress in English and maths and also Best 8 value added, but nonetheless remains pronounced, especially in schools with low inherited pupil attainment.

After the 1997 general election the pace of educational reform accelerated. As well as building on the framework of standards and targets, the Blair government began a new era of structural reform, granting a small number of schools independence from their local authorities, through the academies programme. The brainchild of Andrew Adonis, the original academies programme targeted disadvantaged pupils and failing schools. The programme has been expanded under Michael Gove to encompass most schools, creating a structural revolution in the nation's schooling, but losing some of the focus on disadvantaged pupils.

Greater school autonomy and the increased ‘contestability’ which comes from a rich diversity of school providers should supply a lasting catalyst for improvement. And analysis of the performance of UK academies, like US charter schools, does show improved outcomes for these schools.¹⁶ Academies which opened in 2002 have more than trebled their GCSE scores, with those that opened in the following three years mostly doubling their scores.¹⁷

However, the achievements of the first wave of academies do not yet prove that structural reform is helping the tail. Analysis done for this book demonstrates that while academies generate significant improvements in pupil performance overall, this is concentrated in the 50–75th and top 25 percentiles. The effects of academy conversion for the bottom quartile of pupils are ‘*insignificantly different from zero*’.¹⁸

The other important strand of recent educational reform which is highly relevant to the tail has been the introduction of early intervention strategies targeted at children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This approach is supported by a variety of academic studies¹⁹ into the cognitive development of young British children from different backgrounds, and enjoys strong cross-party support.

Among such interventions is the literacy programme Every Child a Reader (ECAR). In ECAR’s first annual programme (2005/6), the average child gained 21 months in reading age over a period of 4–5 months – well over four times the normal rate of progress. ECAR has been rolled out nationally with government funding and there are also a number of competing catch-up reading programmes.

The other main targeted (although not specifically ‘early’) intervention is the Pupil Premium, introduced by the Coalition government in 2011, and which provides schools with extra funding for every child on Free School Meals. The pupil premium has not been in place for long enough for there to be a reliable assessment of its effectiveness. However, there is anecdotal evidence that the money has sometimes been used to mend holes in school budgets rather than specifically target intervention strategies for children who will benefit. Moreover, the funding is not accountable or tied to specific outcomes. For this

reason, Chris Paterson proposes a reform of the system, tying it much more closely to outcomes through what is effectively a payment-by-results system.²⁰

If there is to be criticism of the existing early intervention strategies, it is that they are too concerned with poverty, as opposed to attainment more broadly. The importance of intervening early is supported by a wealth of evidence showing how the gap between low and high attainers increases as children progress through school, and especially from age 11.²¹ However, the right conclusion to draw from this is that efforts to reduce the tail must be even more focused on the primary and foundation stages where impact is greatest; and interventions should be targeted at all children in need of support, without an undue bias towards the poor.

Overall, while the school reforms of the past 15 years have produced demonstrable improvements in average and median attainment, there has been much less progress with the bottom tier of attainers. Dale Bassett, in a telling phrase, even goes so far as to call it ‘success of the many at the expense of the few’.²²

Perhaps we should not be surprised. If we categorise the three broad waves of reform as first, a national accountability framework (national standards and targets), second, structural liberalisation of schools and third, early intervention strategies, only the third had any specific or enduring focus on the needs of the lowest attainers.

The children in the tail

In Chapter 2, we examine the characteristics of the children who make up the tail. Three findings in particular stand out and are worthy of comment here:

First, while poverty is an important explanatory factor in pupil attainment, most children in the tail are not poor. Children on Free School Meals make up only 25% of the pupils who leave school below the benchmark of 168 GCSE points and 23% of the tail of pupils who

leave school without five good GCSEs. Over three-quarters of the tail are not poor.

This is an important finding in the light of the overriding pre-occupation of educational reformers (of all parties) with economic disadvantage.

Secondly, local neighbourhood disadvantage has as much effect on a child's attainment at school as family poverty. A non-poor child in a poor area is as disadvantaged as a poor child living in a non-poor area.

Neighbourhoods are not just a symptom of disadvantage, but also one of its causes. Concentrations of people on low income tend to suffer from poor-quality housing, environments and public services, as well as exposure to crime and anti-social behaviour. The consequent breakdown of traditional social norms not only drags down aspiration but also creates huge challenges for schools to re-establish acceptable norms of behaviour before they can deliver effective teaching and learning.

Such neighbourhood effects amount to a form of 'educational blight' – and the phenomenon is apparent not just in small neighbourhoods, but in larger towns or even regions, typically those which are in economic decline, or where communities have lost confidence in their traditional livelihoods, such as old industrial towns or coastal towns. Quite often these are communities which have not so much lost confidence in the value of school education as never had it in the first place.

The phenomenon is strikingly captured in comments made to former education minister Andrew Adonis on a visit to a comprehensive school in Sunderland in the 1990s. 'Twenty years ago, when the boys left here, they walked down the hill and turned left to get a job in the shipyard or right to go down to the mines. All those jobs have gone. They might as well walk straight on to the sea.'²³

Thirdly, and contrary to popular perception, the proportion of children with English as an Alternative Language (EAL) in the tail is virtually identical to that in the population at large: poor white children