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MailOnline

'Orwellian language' in schools turns pupils into 'customers', finds damning report

By [Laura Clark](#)

Last updated at 12:21 PM on 09th June 2009



In George Orwell's book 1984 language is manipulated by the state for its own ends

Schools using the 'Orwellian language of performance management' are undermining teenagers' education by turning them into 'customers' rather than students, a landmark report says today.

Teachers who are forced to use phrases such as 'performance indicator' and 'curriculum delivery' lack enthusiasm for the job, the six-year investigation found.

The Oxford-based Nuffield Review, the most comprehensive study of secondary education in 50 years, said that 'the words we use shape our thinking'.

It notes: 'As the language of performance and management has advanced, so we have proportionately lost a language of education which recognises the intrinsic value of pursuing certain sorts of question ... of seeking understanding [and] of exploring through literature and the arts what it means to be human.'

Teachers are inundated with the language of measurable 'inputs' and 'outputs', 'performance indicators' and 'audits', 'targets', 'customers', 'deliverers', 'efficiency gains' and 'bottom lines', the report continues.

In a damning indictment, the report said that a culture of hitting targets, where 'cuts in resources are euphemistically called 'efficiency gains', has led to 'the consumer or client' replacing 'the learner'.

Among the jargon were such baffling phrases as 'performativity' (the emphasis that government monitoring has on achieving targets) and 'level descriptor' (the outcomes that a learner should reach).

'Dialogic teaching' (an emphasis on speaking and listening between teachers and pupils) and 'articulated progression' (allowing pupils options for their next step in the qualification system) were also singled out in the report for censure.

And the report's authors accused the 'micro management' of education by ministers for forcing schools 'to teach to the test' and called for 'a return to an educational language'.



Hands-on: The review said practical skills go unrecognised by the secondary system

The report also said that hundreds of thousands of youngsters better suited to practical work leave with poor qualifications because their skills go unrecognised.

Woodwork, metalwork and home economics have all but disappeared while geography field-work and science experiments are in decline.

Instead, a culture of testing has brought about a narrow focus on written exams at GCSE and A-level. This has consigned a generation of pupils to an 'impoverished' education.

The study said school attainment remained 'low' despite unprecedented investment in education.

The Government's school diplomas covering 14 industry areas do little to improve matters, because they put greater emphasis on 'learning about the world of work' than on practical learning, the review warns.

It says the entire system needs to be overhauled because it has suffered years of tinkering and piecemeal changes.

Universities now have so little confidence in A-levels that 45 are setting their own admissions tests to help them distinguish between the most able candidates.

Professor Richard Pring, who led the review team of academics from Oxford, London's Institute of Education and Cardiff University, said concern about the achievement of young people was 'not new'.

'That bottom half is still a cause for concern,' he said. 'So many young people leave school inadequately prepared for further study or training.'

He pointed out that around half of 16-year-olds fail to achieve five good GCSEs, including English and maths - the Government's yardstick of secondary school achievement.

Around one in ten ended up classified as 'Neets' - not in education, employment or training. 'A lot of those have been told they are failures for about ten years,' Professor Pring said.

A generation ago, hands-on lessons were 'very much part of the learning experience at school', he said. But the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988 had hastened the 'demise' of practical learning.

'We now have a rather narrow view of success in learning,' he said.

'A great many young people achieve quite a lot in other areas which are equally valid and don't get recognised.'

Many might benefit from practical training in crafts, engineering, hairdressing, mechanics and catering.

Apprenticeships should also be promoted more widely as an alternative to university, he added.

His review concludes: 'There is not the progress which one might expect from so much effort and investment.'

'The review believed that a tradition of learning based on practical engagement has been lost in schools, reflected in the near demise of woodwork, metalwork and home economics, in the decline of field-work in geography, in less experimental approaches to science (caused partly by assessment almost exclusively through written examination), and in the decline of work-based learning and employer-related apprenticeships.'

Extra tests

Sixth-formers face extra tests on top of A-levels to get into 45 universities, today's review reveals.

These include aptitude tests for medicine and law, and thinking skills tests and SATs.

'The growth of independent entrance tests by universities needs to be curbed,' the review says.

It suggests bolstering national qualifications so that universities do not need to resort to other tests to identify the brightest students.

Moral values

Schools should teach moral values to educate pupils for life as well as work.

They should encourage youngsters to take responsibility for themselves, treat others with respect and care for the environment.

Academics on the review team had seen youngsters 'transformed' in schools which promote justice and respect.

The review said teachers should also foster intellectual virtues, encouraging children to be open to evidence, argument and criticism.

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In 1952 there were two types of grammar schools, practical and academic, the practical taught engineering as well as the three r's. My engineering skills enabled me to further my studies at Uni and become a Chartered Engineer, I was useless at languages, history etc so the system then covered most aspects of the workplace, along with a good apprenticeship I did very well. Today we seem to have many with dodgy degrees and no one to do the practical work, which is a shame.

- MCB, Tenerife, 09/6/2009 08:26

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A generation of young people has been sacrificed to the mistaken belief that education only exists if it is spelled with a capital E and it is administered by the "Educators".
I was apprenticed to a firm who taught me my trade well, ensured that I was tested and qualified to practise my craft and all this on the shop floor. I retired having worked my way up through the ranks to a managerial position from a career that I loved. I was a 1950's student nurse!

- Pat, Limassol, Cyprus, 09/6/2009 08:21

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Nothing wrong with woodwork. Look at Chippendale furniture. Still popular hundreds of years later.

People will always need furniture - a beautiful dining table and chairs, a lovely cabinet. And if not that, there will still be demand for carpenters - wooden floors, doors, windows, shelving. These are the basic framework of our lives.

And home economics is more important than ever in these days of obesity.

I have always said that the idea of pushing everybody into university was a shot in the foot. We can't all be teachers and scientists. We need plumbers, carpenters, technicians, cooks and the like.

Personally, I've always thought that the most important people in our day-to-day life are the binmen and sewage workers. Can you imagine our world without them?

- Jones, Dusseldorf, Germany, 09/6/2009 08:19

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What - two bits of reality in one week!

Peter Fahy, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, condemning the targets culture (6 June), and now this!

The Blair attempt to get every school-leaver into university has resulted in the dumbing-down of standards, so that more and more pupils "qualify" for university, degrees have become almost an irrelevance in the big outside working world, and far from improving the overall standard of education in the country, the reverse has been true.

Is reality coming off TV and into everyday life? Let's hope so!

- Richard Noel Jones, Leatherhead UK, 09/6/2009 08:12

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That's one the greatest failings(and there are very many) of this government, they think every pupil should go to university, so now we have an accute shortage of skilled craftsmen, and immigrant labour stealing the work from our own young peolpe by the government's invitation! BETRAYAL is the only word for it.

- robert morgan, Houghton-le-Spring, 09/6/2009 08:09

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I've said this for years.

I'm highly academic, remember facts with no problem and can discourse on historical/philosophical issues - my husband can put a computer together from nothing but bits of metal & a tangle of wires (my opinion).

Who is to say which one of us is the more talented? I can't strip a car engine apart or rewire an house - I can write a doozy of a dissertation.

I do not regard myself as being more intelligent than my husband.

We're letting our children down by making them think that university is the only option and anyone not going there is a failure.

The Govt needs to go back to the idea of 2% of the population going to University & the rest doing other things - things that mirror their skills. That's all university is - an apprenticeship for those who have a skill with their mind.

It CERTAINLY doesn't make them better than those who have manual skills. We need both - we depend on both. It's only Govt that makes one inferior to the other.

- Freya, No longer Great, Britain, 09/6/2009 08:08

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