Authors, teachers and parents launch revolt over 'exam factory' schools

Exclusive: Pressure of exams leads to 'children crying on the way to school', say authors of letter

Richard Garner

Friday 03 October 2014

More than 400 children’s writers, parents and teachers have signed a letter to The Independent expressing concern over the anxiety caused to children by the ever-higher stakes of so-called “exam factories”.

The signatories – who include the author and former Children’s Laureate Michael Rosen, as well as child development expert Sue Palmer and parenting writer Sue Cowley – say they are “increasingly concerned at the pressure that is being placed on our children”, especially by the testing regime.

The concerns have tapped into a storm of debate about the nature of schooling, after the CBI’s director general, John Cridland, recently called for a move away from the “exam
factory” model of education towards pupils getting a more “rounded and grounded education” for their own sakes and for that of the economy.

At the heart of the letter’s complaint are the effects on children and teachers alike of the slew of exams crammed into school time, causing anxiety for pupils and leaving headteachers fearing dismissal if they fail to meet minimum government targets.

The letter states: “We are concerned to hear of children crying on their way to school, upset that they will not be able to keep up: of parents worried that their four-year-olds are ‘falling behind’ or of six-year-olds scared that ‘they might not get a good job’ ... And we wonder what has happened to that short period in our lives known as ‘childhood’.”

The concerns have tapped into a storm of debate about the nature of schooling (Getty Images)

Already, children take a compulsory reading test at the end of their first year in compulsory education – the phonics check for all six-year-olds. But from next September they will also have a “baseline assessment” upon arrival at school, aged four or five, in counting and letter and picture recognition amongst other skills. These tests are aimed at helping show how much primary schools have improved individual pupils’ performance by the age of 11.

This leads into a later childhood full of national curriculum tests in English and maths followed by three consecutive years of exams – GCSE, AS-levels and A-levels.
Sue Cowley, who collated the 428 signatures to the letter within 12 days, said: “It originally started with conversations with several of us making observations about children we knew and felt were under extreme pressure from the testing regime. We began to think what we could do about it and had the idea of the letter. We were really surprised at the level of response we got. Obviously there is a feeling out there that it is too much.”

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-School Learning Alliance, who also signed the letter, said: “We are deeply concerned about the direction of early years policy in this country. The current focus on formal testing and measurable outcomes risks encouraging a ‘tick-box’ approach to early education, a shift that would undoubtedly have a detrimental impact on children’s early learning experiences.”

Since Nicky Morgan took over as Education Secretary there have been signs of change (Getty Images)
The calls from Mr Cridland and others in the business world have been taken up by Labour’s shadow Education Secretary, Tristram Hunt, who has promised his party would place more emphasis on developing attributes like “character” and “resilience”.

In a recent interview with The Independent, Michael Rosen warned: “You can sit in a bookshop and see people buying books full of mock tests and blank pages to fill in – and ignoring the real books.”

But those in favour of the approach say they have detected signs of a change since Nicky Morgan took over as Education Secretary from Michael Gove.
In her speech to the Conservative conference, she said that for too long there had been a false choice between academic standards and activities “that build character and resilience”. The two, she argued, should go hand in hand.

A spokeswoman for the Department for Education said: “The Coalition Government has actually ended the treadmill of assessment and resits by returning to end-of-course exams. We are also spending £340m on music and cultural education to help develop children’s creativity and are giving schools more than £150m a year through the PE and Sport Premium.”