

Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture 2011



Is the British education system broken?

Katharine Birbalsingh



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Contents

Foreword by Kevin Everett, Treasurer and Chairman, Cass Foundation	5
Is the British Education system broken? by Katharine Birbalsingh	7
Sir John Cass's Foundation	16

Foreword

Sir John Cass's Foundation is a leading City of London based independent educational charity, which promotes participation and achievement in education. It takes its name from Sir John Cass (1661–1718) who was a City of London politician and philanthropist.

The Foundation not only supports seven educational institutions in the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, which bear the name of the Founder, but has also provided substantial assistance to a large number of major educational initiatives in London, including educational action zones, specialist schools, parent promoted schools, theatres, the state school alumni initiative, academies and universities.

The Sir John Cass Foundation Lecture is given annually by a high profile policy maker or commentator at the Cass Business School in London and seeks to advance debate about the future of the provision of education in our country.

The inaugural lecture took place in 2007 and given the success of this, and subsequent lectures, has now become an annual event. The Lecture is now published and widely disseminated to educationalists, politicians and other interested parties across the country.

Addresses have been given by Lord Andrew Adonis , the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools in 2007; Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in 2008; Michael Gove, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in 2009; and Dr Anthony Seldon, the Master of Wellington College in 2010.

This year the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture was delivered by Katharine Birbalsingh, the former Deputy Head of St Michael and All Angels Church of England Academy in London, who later went on to speak at the Conservative Party Conference in 2010. It was entitled 'Is the British education system broken?' and the Foundation is very grateful indeed that it has been given permission to film and to publish the transcript of this year's lecture.

The Foundation is indebted to all five speakers and has been delighted by both the quality and content of each of the five lectures that have taken place to date. It is keen to enter into a debate with those in the field of education and to exploring meaningful and well thought out programmes that improve the life chances of pupils and students living in London.

These are interesting times in education and Sir John Cass's Foundation will look sympathetically on new projects and ideas for the years ahead and is keen to engage with other high profile speakers so that the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture continues to be such a success.

Kevin Everett
Treasurer and Chairman
Sir John Cass's Foundation



Is the British Education system broken?

'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,' so the saying goes. If the British education system is not broken, as so many would have us believe, then, indeed, we should continue to pump £80 billion pounds a year into an education system that supposedly stimulates social mobility and enables children to change their stars. There are those with significant power who continually argue that our current education system gets more children into university than ever before, who point to the never-ending 'improvement' at GCSE and 'A' level as proof of their claim that our school system is better than it has ever been.

These people get very angry when anyone suggests otherwise, and rather than engage with well-meaning attempts to show them what is wrong with our school system, they pull the shutters down and simply deny, deny, deny. I wrote a book called *To Miss with Love*, detailing ordinary events in a very ordinary comprehensive in London, and was told that I had simply invented them. If only I were blessed with such a talented imagination! Somehow these very powerful people are convinced that the only way to support our state education system is to give it a gold star, no matter whether it is good or bad. Incidentally, they do the same to children within the system.

Often these so-called "progressives" want to know why I don't criticise the independent sector, which educates 7% of our children. My answer is always that I'm not that interested in our private sector. They seem to be doing well enough without our help. But our state sector is in desperate need of reform, and it is precisely because I care so much about it that I dare to stand up, face seriously antagonistic vitriol, and say out loud what so many of us know to be true.

The 2000 PISA report ranked British children as 4th in the world for science, 7th for reading and 8th for maths. Yet the 2009 PISA report showed that British children are now rated 16th in the world for science, 25th for reading and 28th for maths. Is our system really worthy of a gold star?

But "the progressives" will deny the validity of these international rankings and claim they don't mean anything. All that matters is what is happening within our own borders. OK. So one then points to the fact that 17% of our 15-year-olds are functionally illiterate. This

means that nearly one-fifth of our children are unable to look a word up in a dictionary or write their own CV. People say the reason the recent riots happened is because there are no jobs, but if one isn't even equipped with basic skills that would allow one to apply for a job, how is one meant to get one? Of course, what breaks my heart is that while all of us in this room are literate in ways that so many of our young people could only ever dream about, the illiterate 17% of our 15-year-olds come from our poorest and most disadvantaged families. They are precisely the children that the education system is meant to equip with the necessary knowledge and skills that would allow them to change their stars.

But “the progressives” will claim that I am focusing on the negative. It is only 17% after all. And, frankly, with the backgrounds those children have, coming from single-parent homes, or living on estates, how can we possibly expect them to learn how to read and write? “The progressives” get very angry and point to the rest of our children who are all doing so well.

But how well are these children doing? Nearly half of our children do not manage to get 5 grade Cs at GCSE including English and Maths. Nearly HALF! The recent introduction of the EBAC judgement tool was very telling. The EBAC consists of English, Maths, Science, a language and either History or Geography. These are ordinary subjects that most families would assume their children are studying when they pack them off to school in the morning. Yet it was shown that 84% of our country's children – 84% – do not get 5 grade Cs in these subjects. So either they are not managing to meet the C benchmark or they simply aren't studying these subjects at all.

It is clear that in our more deprived schools, in an effort to climb league tables and to let the children do what is easier, BTECs were being taken instead of GCSEs. BTECs are more vocational. So instead of Geography GCSE, for instance, one takes Travel & Tourism BTEC if one isn't academically inclined. This would be fine and, before 2004, was indeed the case. But in 2004, vocational qualifications were made ‘equivalent’ to academic ones. Sometimes, they were worth even more than their academic counterparts. So the Travel and Tourism BTEC was made equivalent to 2 GCSEs, whereas the Geography GCSE is worth only one. If one doesn't have a mother or father who understands instinctively that Geography is the better qualification, irrespective of its ‘worth’ on the GCSE scale, then

clearly one will opt for the subjects that hand over more qualifications. Schools too, under pressure to perform, abandon teaching academic subjects altogether in order to play the game of maximising the number of qualifications children can achieve. This is why, in 2004, 15,000 vocational qualifications were taken. In 2010, this was multiplied 39 times to 585,000. And you can bet it isn't the middle-class children, nor children of "the progressives", who were responsible for this meteoric rise in vocational subject interest.

Having been encouraged by their school to take the easier subjects, or even simply left alone to have the privilege of 'choice', children from more disadvantaged backgrounds end up taking subjects that don't properly equip them for the world of work or later study. When these choices ensure they are no longer in the running for top universities because of their unguided choice at age 14, out comes the excuse held by "the progressives" that children who are poor or from ethnic minorities would never have achieved that well anyway.

State schools ought to promote social mobility. They should not simply perpetuate a class system that ensures that only those who go to private schools are taught well or that only those taught in leafy, suburban, middle-class state schools stand a chance of a half-decent education. Unfortunately, a number of people with power believe that the way to improve education for our children is to ban tradition from our classrooms: stop being so 'fuddy duddy' and appeal to children by making things more 'fun' in school.

The tradition of competition, which we celebrate in the world of sport, has become unfashionable in the academic classroom. Now innovation requires that children never be given grades and never be allowed to know where they stand in comparison to their peers. We understand that in a race, someone will come first, second and third, and we rightly praise those who do. But, academically, we feel that everyone deserves a certificate, everyone deserves the teacher's praise, no matter how good or bad they are. Similarly, when "the progressives" judge the school system, they give it a gold star, irrespective of the evidence.

The fact that reducing everything to the lowest common denominator stifles motivation and kills aspiration is irrelevant to these people. The truth is that allowing children to win and lose naturally stimulates their desire to succeed and motivates them to

try harder. A child from an impoverished background has nothing but his motivation to earn him a good standing in life, and yet this is something that “the progressives” want to see obliterated by insisting that all that is traditional is bad. Killing motivation and aspiration encourages bad behaviour in children, and this is why we have constant chaos in some of our classrooms.

The irony is that the rejection of all that is traditional comes from people who were themselves beneficiaries of a very traditional education. But they remember that some of their classes at school were boring, and so they are trying to reform the education system to make it more interesting. Some of these people are very well meaning. Richard Branson, who famously dropped out of school at 15, thinks schools overeducate children and stunt the early sparks of entrepreneurship. What Branson forgets is that he had the most traditional of educations – at one of Britain’s top private schools – and yet he is the most extraordinary entrepreneur. Branson underestimates just how much his education has contributed to his success. What he took away from school at age 15 far outstrips the standard of education that some of our youngsters are currently accessing even at university level. Some of our university degrees are equivalent in standard to what children used to achieve at age 15 in school in the 1970s. Branson would probably find degrees today ludicrously easy.

The idea of school being boring makes it possible for us to have reached a stage where teachers are no longer expected to teach and instead become ‘facilitators of learning’ with constant group work going on. We believe it is unfashionable to have desks in rows, and some schools actually ban traditional rows in favour of having desks in groups. Teachers are not meant to stand in front of the class but instead move amongst children who are all busy doing something. The idea here is that ‘doing’ is more interesting than ‘listening’. That might very well be true. But the problem comes when we think that ‘doing’ needs to happen most of the time. This means that the teacher, traditionally a source of knowledge, almost becomes redundant as a fountain of knowledge and instead becomes something of a referee. We no longer value the importance of teaching knowledge for children to do something *with*.

The problem is that we underestimate the knowledge that we have and use every day. Try to read any article in the newspaper and you’ll

find that there is an assumption of background knowledge.

Recently, I read an article about Carla Bruni. To understand just the title and subtitle, one would have to know who she is: that she is married to Nicholas Sarkozy, that he is the president of France, and what being a president means. Indeed you would have to know what France is. Is it a city? Is it a country? Is it in Europe? You may laugh, but I have, as a teacher, had conversations with 14-year-olds who simply don't understand the difference between France and Paris. For them, it is all the same! I can't tell you the number of times I've had conversations with kids about Winston Churchill where they think he's 'that dog' off the insurance advert from TV.

Ordinary people don't realise just how little some of our kids know. What we also forget is that the very thing that got us to where we are now is the kind of education that we had: our teachers teaching us knowledge so that we know the difference between Paris and France even if it sometimes meant being bored in lessons and learning how to struggle through. How many people in business clinch a deal because they know the soft skills of being polite or know how to sit through a boring lecture and concentrate enough to still pick up what is necessary to impress the client? Soft skills cannot be taught in a vacuum, independent of content or knowledge. Paradoxically, it is the rigorous and traditional education that is better at equipping people with soft skills, not the education currently found in our classrooms that focuses on the soft skills. Traditional educations are not bad. And most of "the progressives" encouraging this nonsense in our schools have benefited from one themselves. In other words, they climb the ladder to the top and then unwittingly pull the ladder up from under them.

In the last 30 years, the concept of teaching knowledge in our classrooms has nearly disappeared altogether. Teaching historical facts or lists of vocab that rely on memory skills is considered old-fashioned. Instead, we think it better to inspire children to be creative through group discussion and project work. But background knowledge is absolutely essential to enable children to absorb new ideas. For instance, when cars were first invented, they were called horseless carriages. At the time, to understand the new concept of a car, one had to have knowledge of horses and carriages, and the idea of something being 'less' than something else. In fact, modern neuroscience has shown that in order to grasp new concepts, pupils require a great deal of background knowledge.

As background knowledge is provided unequally in different homes, it is our duty in schools to level out the playing field. In some homes children are lucky enough to have tutors employed, conversations over dinner about the day's news events, and, as such, they can pick up facts about history, geography and much more as they go. But instead of ensuring that ALL of our children should have access to that knowledge in school, we turn away from knowledge acquisition, which is considered boring, and teach skills like being empathetic or forming a point of view through what looks like a seductive and seemingly better way of teaching. It seems more 'fun', and "the progressives" like the idea of finally breaking free from what they remember as the restriction of their own educational backgrounds.

So putting desks in rows is considered archaic, rote-learning is abandoned completely, even the idea of classrooms having walls is rejected, encouraging chaos all around, and our children are leaving school, literally, without basic knowledge in subjects like English, Maths, and History. Schools need classrooms. And classrooms require walls. When I first told my father that we were spending billions of pounds on schools building wall-less classrooms, he was baffled. You see, he grew up in poverty-stricken Guyana where he went to a school that had no walls because they couldn't afford them! So for us to have spent billions recreating what the developing world is trying to move away from seems like lunacy. But that's exactly what we're doing!

If we want to equip our children with the power to change the world, they must first have knowledge of it and understand it. Unfortunately, "the progressives" think that somehow knowledge is right wing and boring. This is simply not true. What makes Tony Benn, who has campaigned against injustice all over the world, such a great speaker? What gave Ian Fleming the creative mind to invent James Bond? What ensured that Winston Churchill would be an inspirational leader even though he was in the bottom set at Harrow? What ensured that Obama would be the first black American president? Their very traditional educations! Thomas Jefferson too had a classical education but was so progressive that he signed the American Declaration of Independence. And Mark Zuckerberg, who is obsessed with Latin, founded the transformational and innovative Facebook! What made these people into successes was the traditional education that they had,

the inspirational teachers who taught them, and the love of learning that they picked up with their walled classrooms, desks in rows, and their teacher standing at the front.

Traditional education in Britain these days is reserved only for the rich. Yet tradition is what has given us our most successful revolutionaries. Stokely Carmichael who led the Black Panthers and was a major player in the Civil Rights movement in America dropped gang life so inspired was he by his Science specialist school and so busy was he reading Darwin and Marx. Mandela went to an élite Methodist mission school. Revolutions are created with traditional thinking. That doesn't mean you can't ever do any type of group work or use a computer. But it should not be a fight to have a school system where our poorest children should have access to an education that includes knowledge acquisition, competition, a non-prizes-for-all culture, and high standards of behaviour in an environment where everyone reaches for the very best.

This is where I believe there could be a real role for free schools in our inner cities in Britain. This September our first batch of free schools opened; there were 24 of them. As free schools are free to do what is best for their children, without having their hands tied behind their backs, they are able to reject the cultural pressure that is felt in some of our ordinary state schools and do something different. They are free to provide children with the tradition that is found in our better private schools. They can offer an extended day, lessons that are about knowledge acquisition, and competition to drive up standards. They can provide classrooms with desks in rows and they can offer the more traditional subjects, and by this I don't mean Latin necessarily: I simply mean the opportunity to do Spanish or History or the chance to study Biology, Chemistry and Physics as separate subjects. The tradition of benchmarking children can be upheld, and standing at assembly and holding high standards for uniform and behaviour can simply become part of the norm. Paradoxically, bringing traditional thinking of this kind is to trailblaze and innovate. How wonderful it is that the free school movement should allow individuals in any community to take responsibility, to know what issues face their particular community, and to set up a school that meets their own needs!

Some members of my steering group have joined me here today. We want to set up a free school in Lambeth to teach in such a way that

will enable disadvantaged children to change their stars. The ordinary people of South London – the poor, the single-parent families – are desperate for another choice of school in the area because there aren't enough school places. Four hundred and thirty-three Year 6 children have applied this year for a Lambeth secondary school and did not get one. Our school's 120 places would only make a small dent in this shortage. Yet there are those from Lambeth Council, the National Union of Teachers and the Socialist Workers Party who oppose us. There are those – and it has to be said: they are from the ordinary middle classes – people who can afford to make up for their state school's deficiencies by employing tutors at home. These are the ones who want to stop free schools from opening because they hate the idea of individuals taking away responsibilities and power from the state. People have actually picketed our information evenings and shouted insults and abuse at us.

The only way our poorest children can succeed is for them to receive the same quality of education as our richest. They need the privilege of a traditional education, the type of education that all of us in this room have been lucky enough to have had. There is a quote that I love that sums up what I am saying: 'The education that is best for the best is the education that is best for all.'

The way to ensure this is to reform the state education system so that it can more resemble the education our richest children receive. If walled classrooms are good enough for Eton, then they should be good enough for us. Abolishing the BSF programme was a step in the right direction. Giving teachers more powers in the classroom has increased their authority. Encouraging competition between children, amongst year groups and indeed between schools is precisely what is needed and what the present government is trying to do. Valuing those subjects that the rich have always valued and benefited from and encouraging schools to ensure that all children should have access to a basic academic education is again a step in the right direction. The current government is doing all of the right things to reform our broken education system. What is worrying, however, is that the opposition is tough. The irony is that the "progressives" do not want progress. This stifling prizes-for-all no-knowledge culture in our schools hinders reform and allows schools like Eton to continue being miles ahead of the rest of us.

'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' That is precisely why we need to first admit there is a problem before we can address it. But if we keep digging our head in the sand, the 50% of Parliament that is currently privately educated will simply grow. The trend that ensured that the 75% of Oxbridge that was state-schooled in the 1970s should have trickled down to a measly 55% today will keep eating away at our children, bolstering the class system, and ensuring that Etonians and others like them will be the only ones skilled enough to run our country in the future. Indeed, last year, the number of children getting into Oxbridge from four private schools – Eton, Westminster, St Paul's Boys and St Paul's Girls – outnumbered the children getting in from our worst 2000 state schools. We only have just over 3000 secondary schools in total!

Seventeen per cent of our 15-year-olds are illiterate. Owners of small businesses regularly admit that they would rather employ a Polish person because the standard of their English is higher, and their work ethic simply outstrips that of their British counterparts. Employers are in despair. Even McDonalds has to run a literacy and numeracy programme to help support its workers because they cannot cope with the demands of the job.

If we admit the system is broken, then, and only then, can we begin to fix it.

Sir John Cass's Foundation

Established in 1748, and now a major independent educational charity benefiting the whole of London, the Foundation takes its name from its founder, Sir John Cass. Born in 1661, he served as Alderman, Sheriff and MP for the City of London and was knighted in 1712.

Today the Foundation has links in the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of education, supporting its primary and secondary schools in London, as well as the Cass Department of Art, Media and Design within London Metropolitan University and the Cass Student Halls of Residence in Hackney.

In 2001, the Foundation made a multi-million pound grant to City University's Business School, which was subsequently re-named the Cass Business School, and continues to provide on going support, to this and seven establishments bearing the name of the founder.

In 2008, the Foundation awarded a substantial grant to the University of East London towards a new state-of-the-art teaching and research centre which has been named the Sir John Cass School of Education and Communities. This is already one of London's foremost centres for teacher training, and importantly in terms of outcomes, many of its alumni are working in local schools.

More recently the Foundation agreed to boost its support to needy individuals and announced a new five year £1.5m programme entitled the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lord Mayor's Scholarships Programme. This is a new initiative with the Office of the Lord Mayor of the City of London and will commence in the 2011/12 academic year.

The Foundation is currently endeavouring to establish a "Learning Village" in Newham in collaboration with the Prince's Trust and the University of East London. This ground breaking initiative aims to provide a seamless education service to nursery, primary and secondary age pupils, as well as provide for looked after children all on one site. Plans are also advanced in establishing a new national school alumni service, which would encourage charitable giving in accordance with Government's White Paper and the Big Society doctrine.

For further information please visit: www.sirjohncass.org