

## How did education mandates and reforms in England in the late 19th century help poor children and remedy other social ills?

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*“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself,”* John Dewey, a leader of the American educational reforms movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, proclaimed in 1916. We sometimes disregard public education’s revolutionary impact on progress, but its value underscores nearly all societal advances. Vast reforms in the United Kingdom, centralized in the mid to late 19th century, transformed the British education system into an accessible option for students from all walks of life. Government-funded primary schools enjoyed bipartisan support during the Victorian era. Two main acts served to get the ball rolling: the Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1876. The National Education League campaigned for these acts in 1869, and the reforms did not limit their impact to the schoolhouse gates. Placing children aged five to twelve into schoolhouses gifted disadvantaged youth an opportunity to learn and granted those young laborers a much-needed reprieve from the grueling factories which defined the Industrial Revolution. Although Victorian educational reforms fell short in completely compensating for wealth inequalities in schools, the reforms initiated in the late 19th century ameliorated more than just schooling deficiencies by safely leading children from dangerous factory jobs to classroom environments, promising greater social mobility, and sparking global movements to implement free, compulsory education.

Schools in the Victorian era taught practical life skills, the equivalent of today’s vocational schools, which helped students prepare to enter the workforce; these teachings advanced the children and their communities. The Industrial Revolution created bountiful jobs and urban opportunities, but, due to their newfangledness, these new positions lacked experienced workers, which bred inefficiency. The British Parliament recognized employers’ need for job training and set to work funding a free, compulsory education system to educate the nation’s youth for future employment in factories and workhouses. The state’s investment in public education in the mid 19th century rose from a measly £30,000 to £125,000 in 10 years, reflecting the government’s emphasized commitment to education.<sup>1</sup> Charities also aided the fight for accessible education: the Ragged School Shoeblack Society employed young boys as shoe shiners across London and provided them with an education.<sup>2</sup> These young laborers kept a third of their salary while the Society collected a third and designated the final portion to a savings fund for the child. After a hard day’s work, the Ragged School provided the young worker with supper, evening classes, and a dormitory; the boy had to show his stamped school attendance card to his supervisor to work the following morning.<sup>3</sup> Not all children qualified, only boys that could meet the Society’s daily income quota, but charities helping educate children signified a social shift to focus on children’s wellbeing and future prospects. While children still worked long hours, gradual

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. Paz, *Journal of British Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 1976), 16:[Page 1], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/175287>.

<sup>2</sup> "Letters on the Charities of England," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), December 2, 1854, [Page 2], <https://www.proquest.com/news/docview/95846311/D2A38C885B814602PQ/7?accountid=40848>.

<sup>3</sup> Paz, *Journal of British*, 16:[Page 1].

changes shifted a child's existence from simply mimicking adult life to having the chance to learn and experience their childhood. The Enlightenment played a significant role in this advancement; Enlightenment values advised Europe on education's benefits and escorted children from factories to schools. In the Victorian era, primary schools mimicked modern-day vocational schools' specialized instruction. An illustration depicts young female students learning needlework in 1883.<sup>4</sup> Needlework prepared girls for their future roles as caretakers for their husbands and children, and while this may seem problematic through our modern lens, these gender-based skills benefitted 19th-century families by tailoring classes to suit future marital endeavors. Across the board, schools aimed to impart practical, future-focused skills to their students because taxpayers demanded clear reasoning to take such a large percentage of the workforce out of factories and place them into schools.

Victorian educational reforms promoted literacy and launched British industrial capacity and safety practices into the 19th century. Absolutist monarchs and leaders desired total control over their people, as seen with slave owners in the United States prohibiting their enslaved people from reading, so they would not rebel. Encouraging and facilitating reading education demonstrated Queen Victoria's enlightened stance, which bred efficiency and decreased machine accidents in her domain. In 1820, a decade before Queen Victoria's reign, the United Kingdom's literacy rate hovered at 53 percent. Though relatively high for the continent, for reference, France sat at just 38 percent the same year, the industrial powerhouse of the world needed literate workers to operate machines and produce textiles. Just over three decades into Queen Victoria's rule, the literacy rate jumped to 76 percent.<sup>5</sup> This estimate reflects British citizens over the age of 14 that can read and write. Free, compulsory education sparked a 24 percent literacy increase in only three decades. In the same timeframe, the world average only rose from 12 percent to 19 percent, proving that England's educational reforms directly correlated to tangible results.<sup>6</sup> Along with a government-backed literacy push, urbanization moved families into cities where jobs necessitated basic literacy skills. Farmers and rural laborers worked hard but simply did not need to read and write to make their living; industrialization forced a rewrite in educational standards. The ability to read abated machinery accidents plaguing the Industrial Revolution because workers could now read safety instructions and labels. Not only did reading capacity protect the individual worker and afford them more job opportunities, but the literacy initiative also raised Britain's status as an industrial superpower because the island possessed the best-educated workers on the continent, and arguably in the world.

Along with practical skills, the literacy push bled into music literacy. Some taxpayers resisted any teaching outside the absolutely imperative because more classes meant more public funding. However, music classes ultimately molded well-rounded students who were better equipped to tackle 19th-century problems because alumni could apply teachings from a wealth of subject areas to access higher social spheres and job opportunities. The year Queen Victoria rose to power, Thomas Wyse, a dogged educational reform activist in the House of Commons, declared, "No effort is made in any of our schools; and then we complain that there is no music amongst

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<sup>4</sup> Liszt Collection and Universal Images Group, *Child Education, Teaching Needlework in 1883*, 1883, illustration, [https://quest-ebs-com.menloschool.idm.oclc.org/search/victorian-education/2/300\\_215056/Child-Education-Teaching-Needlework-In-1883](https://quest-ebs-com.menloschool.idm.oclc.org/search/victorian-education/2/300_215056/Child-Education-Teaching-Needlework-In-1883).

<sup>5</sup> Eltjo Buringh and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "When Did Literacy Start Increasing in Europe?," chart, Our World in Data, 2009, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>.

<sup>6</sup> Buringh and van Zanden, "When Did Literacy," chart.

our scholars. It would be as reasonable to exclude grammar and then complain that we had no grammarians.”<sup>7</sup> Wyse inspired educational expansion past the basic skills and crafted students reminiscent of the Renaissance man, all of which improved British culture and respectability. Though music literacy initiatives graced fee-paying classrooms for centuries prior, these courses finally expanded to tax-funded institutions under Queen Victoria’s reign. Now, working-class students could learn high society skills which could help them climb the social ladder, but also attempted to even the playing field in England for the first time.

19th-century reforms promised an entirely new status quo, but ameliorations were slow coming and were a Pyrrhic victory in the introductory years. The aforementioned Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1876 compelled young workers to hang up their tools and pick up a pencil, but at what cost? Working-class parents did not resent education opportunities, but poor households were often barely scraping by, and needed every penny, including those from their children’s labor, to survive.<sup>8</sup> The ragged schools the government stuffed working-class children into were not the regulated schools with watchful Parent Teacher Associations from the 21st century. As seen in George Cruikshank’s “The Ragged School” illustration from 1843-44, schools often only consisted of one room for dozens of children and boasted abysmal student to teacher ratios.<sup>9</sup> In these overcrowded environments, teachers accomplished little schooling because there were simply not enough educators to go around and children of all ages were attempting to learn similar material. The few teachers in these schools were strict, scary, and offered little to no room for error. Women made up the majority of the teaching staff, but were underpaid and had to remain unmarried. As such, many higher-class, better-educated women turned to other callings and left poorly-educated, bitter teachers to tend to the schoolhouses. Also, classroom material focused on memorizing and reciting material, which often meant that students sometimes did not retain many concepts at all. Along with day schools, the government set up boarding schools to educate children after the 1870 and 1876 mandates. Over time, Britain remedied some of the aforementioned issues. The “Board School Dinner” image captured mealtime for the children in 1900.<sup>10</sup> A few decades after “The Ragged School,” these state schools improved their image and services, including offering boarding schools, a phenomenon previously only found in independent schools.<sup>11</sup> Not only did schools educate students, but tax dollars also funded meals and housing for these children. At first, these schools may have been a burden for the poorest attending families, but the institutions evolved to aid children with government money. These social programs laid the foundation for Europe’s liberal safety net programs in the 21st century, including subsidized education and healthcare.

Although Victorian reforms may have seemed noble in intent, discrepancies in the quality of education for affluent students versus the poor only exacerbated wealth inequities in Britain by

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<sup>7</sup> Bernarr Rainbow, *Music in Victorian Society and Culture*, vol. 30, *Victorian Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), [Page 1], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3828198>.

<sup>8</sup> “Child Labour,” The National Archives, accessed May 16, 2022, [https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle\\_democracy/childlabour.htm](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/childlabour.htm).

<sup>9</sup> George Cruikshank, *The Ragged School*, 1844, illustration, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://victorianweb.org/victorian/history/education/raggedschools/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Hulton Archive and Getty Images, *Board School Dinner*, photograph, 1900, [https://quest-eb-com.menloschool.idm.oclc.org/search/victorian-education/1/115\\_2674870/Board-School-Dinner](https://quest-eb-com.menloschool.idm.oclc.org/search/victorian-education/1/115_2674870/Board-School-Dinner).

<sup>11</sup> Cruikshank, *The Ragged*.

only granting those who could afford the fee a one-way ticket to success. Independent schools with all their grandeur fast-tracked wealthy children to British society's premier callings: Parliament, law, estate managers, and other decision-making positions among them. State school alumni representation in these high-society realms paled in comparison. Fee-paying institutions educated "the sons of the nobility, gentry and professional industry" and "sons of the leaders of industry."<sup>12</sup> No respectable, wealthy man sent their son to a state school, and this disinterest in public education permeates British and world society today with wealthy parents opting for private schools for their educational prowess, but also to mark their reputable social status. So, while state school students learned to read, write, and work on their needle skills, private school students received a far superior education such that, "The Christian gentlemen (whatever else he might be) was the product."<sup>13</sup> Schools like Rugby and Eton wove in Humanist values, harkening back to the Renaissance with music, Greek, Latin, and French lessons on top of the usual curriculum. These teachings prepared wealthy students for their future sophisticated spheres. While Victorian era reforms benefited poor students with a rudimentary education, which were previously unattainable, so long as private schools exist, wealthy students will intertwine with the elite and continue this off-balance cycle. Even today, fee-paying graduates are over five times more likely to inhabit Britain's most powerful positions.<sup>14</sup> Only seven percent of British children attend independent schools, but represent 39 percent of individuals in these top positions. These incongruities become ever more staggering with high-ranking government positions: 65 percent of senior judges, 59 percent of Civil Service permanent secretaries, 57 percent of the House of Lords, and 52 percent of Foreign and Commonwealth Office diplomats attended fee-paying institutions.<sup>15</sup> Elitism still penetrates British education, so while Victorian reforms remedied the utter lack of education for poor children, more needs to be done to produce similar results from fee and government schools.

Current public education measures trace back to the Victorian era's groundbreaking reforms; the first of their kind, British policy changes spread throughout the world and still influence education mandates to this day. Word spread quickly around the continent and across the Atlantic Ocean about the Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1876; in 1882 France enacted a similar nationwide, free compulsory education mandate — coined the Jules Ferry Laws — and the United States followed suit in 1918 with their Compulsory Education Laws.<sup>16</sup> Britain emphasized universal education's immense value, bringing Enlightenment values back to the forefront in the 19th century. The 19th and 20th centuries sparked waves of universal education policies and liberal outlooks about supporting your fellow constituents with taxpayer initiatives to create a broader safety net. Now, with conservatism on the rise around the globe, these pro-education policies are under attack. In the United States, school boards across the South have banned books deemed "inappropriate" for children, limited discussion surrounding sexuality with Florida's

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<sup>12</sup> Edward A. Allen, "Public School Elites in Early-Victorian England: The Boys at Harrow and Merchant Taylors' Schools from 1825 to 1850," *Journal of British Studies* 21, no. 2 (1982): [Page 87], <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175535>.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, "Public School," [Page 88].

<sup>14</sup> Social Mobility Commission, "Elitism in Britain, 2019," news release, June 24, 2019, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/elitism-in-britain-2019>.

<sup>15</sup> Social Mobility Commission, "Elitism in Britain."

<sup>16</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Jules Ferry," *Britannica*, last modified April 1, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jules-Francois-Camille-Ferry>.

so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill, and used children’s safety as a political pawn in the growing debate surrounding masks in schools.<sup>17</sup> In response, the Democratic Governors Association stated, “We need to retake education as a winning issue.”<sup>18</sup> The United States is not the only country tightening the reins on education. Globalization spurred immigration as people from the subcontinent and poorer, war-ridden regions flocked to wealthier European nations for job opportunities and safety from conflicts plaguing their home countries. The European safety net philosophy only stretches so far, though, because some taxpayers do not wish to fund welfare programs for immigrants. Victorian England taught the world the power of education, whether the child be poor or wealthy, and centuries later we seem to be regressing. Lawmakers should turn to the Victorian era as living proof that investing in education benefits not only the individual but the entire nation with an intelligent workforce and future problem solvers.

Modern-day education prides itself on producing well-rounded students; top providers of higher education such as Columbia University and the University of Chicago still utilize the Core Curriculum, which mandates student enrollment in classes like Literature Humanities to graduate well-rounded students prepared to engage in intellectual conversations.<sup>19</sup> Victorian schools were not so modern; classes centered around practical life skills that would develop future members of the working class, but the Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1870 were groundbreaking nonetheless. The Victorian era’s compulsory schooling policies educated the common man and vastly improved literacy rates, machine safety, and social mobility, all of which aided Britain in its climb to the top of the industrial ladder and helped the nation maintain its global status into the present day. Although Victorian England had a long way to go because school inequities and subpar classroom environments still plagued the nation, the era’s reforms addressed more than just educational deficiencies but also helped raise Britain’s youngest laborers and workforce to a higher, safer standard.

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer C. Berkshire and Jack Schneider, "If You Think Republicans Are Overplaying Schools, You Aren't Paying Attention," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), March 21, 2022, accessed May 15, 2022,

<sup>18</sup> Berkshire and Schneider, "If You Think."

<sup>19</sup> "Core Curriculum," Columbia College, accessed May 17, 2022, <https://bulletin.columbia.edu/columbia-college/core-curriculum/>.

Appendix



**THE RAGGED SCHOOL.**  
*In West Street (late Chick Lane) Smithfield.*  
 Drawn by George Cruikshank about 1843-4.

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