

# RENEWING PUBLIC EDUCATION:

Proposals for an inclusive,  
democratic and joyful system



**A Forum ebook**

# Renewing public education: proposals for an inclusive, democratic and joyful system

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# Foreword

*Patrick Yarker*

This year's general election may see the Conservatives defeated and the Labour Party returned to power. Such a prospect raises the possibility – and the hope – that education policy in England could take a better direction. It's a pivotal moment. And yet something is missing from the debate: a call for a fully-comprehensive education service which is democratic and life-enhancing.

The *FORUM* Board has compiled this ebook in order to raise that call. Our ebook diagnoses the sickly state of the education system. It also sets out considered and well-grounded proposals for progress towards a healthier educational dispensation. Concise, pointed and fluent contributions address the purposes of education, so long neglected under this government, as well as fundamental matters of curriculum, assessment and inclusion, the image of the child, the work of the teacher, and the need to move beyond 'ability' thinking. Contributors also engage with policy relating to the structure, governance and inspection of England's schools, as well as to the early years sector.

The lineaments of a comprehensive future for English education come clear in the light of these contributions, to refresh debate and prompt further discussion.

# Contributors

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**Melanie Griffiths** taught mathematics in Ealing from 1985-99 and was then a special educational needs (SEN) teacher in Kirklees until 2018. She has been a workplace representative and local officer for the NEU/NUT. She was active in the Labour Party, particularly in attempting to influence education policy, from 2015-20 and was chair of the Socialist Educational Association from 2018-20.

**Peter Moss** is Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Provision at the Institute of Education, University College London and a member of *FORUM's* editorial board. He has researched and written about early childhood services for 50 years, including much international work. Recent books include *Transforming Early Childhood in England*, which he co-edited with Claire Cameron (UCL Press, 2020), and *Neoliberalism and Early*

*Childhood Education*, co-authored with Guy Roberts-Holmes (Taylor and Francis, 2021).

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**Diane Reay** grew up as a free school meal pupil on a large council estate in England and was the first in her family to go to university. She became an inner city primary school teacher for 20 years before becoming a researcher and researching educational inequalities at all stages of education over a period of 30 years. She is now Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge and President of the Socialist Educational Association. The second edition of her book *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes* will be published by Policy Press in 2024.

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**David Wolfe** has been a school and college governor, a local councillor (and member of the education committee) and a special educational needs tribunal judge. As a lawyer working at Matrix in London, he has acted for NGOs, parents and campaigners in challenges relating to school governance, Ofsted, academies, the curriculum (including the RE curriculum and local authority Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education), exclusions, admissions, safeguarding, and more. He has written extensively on education law, including in relation to academies and SEN (including producing the *Noddy Guide to SEN Law*).

**Patrick Yarker** taught English in comprehensive schools in London and Norfolk and has worked in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. He is the editor of *FORUM*.

# PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

## Education in England: an ailing system, historical amnesia and hope for the future

*Peter Moss*

### **An ailing system**

Public education in England today is in poor health. It suffers the effects of 40 years' affliction by GERM, the 'global education reform movement', a condition diagnosed by Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg as emerging 'since the 1980s and ... adopted as an educational reform orthodoxy within many education systems throughout the world'.<sup>1</sup> Sahlberg identifies five main symptoms of GERM, symptoms readily observed in the English outbreak: test-based accountability, with its obsessive desire for measurement; standardisation of performance for pupils and schools; focusing down on a few core subjects, with a consequent narrowing of curriculum and education; corporate and business management models; and a market logic with individual and institutional competition at its core.

GERM has been a global pandemic, the educational manifestation of the deeper malaise of neoliberal capitalism, an economic theory and political movement which has dominated much of the world since the 1980s, 'when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan teamed up to bring the neoliberal script to the international stage'.<sup>2</sup> Driven by values of competition, individual choice and calculation, by disdain for the public domain, and by a desire to extend private enterprise, commodification and the profit motive into more and more areas of life, neoliberalism has sought to economise existence, converting 'non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones ... [extending] market metrics and practices to every dimension of human life; political, cultural, personal, vocational, educational'.<sup>3</sup> In the view of Stephen Ball, one of the foremost analysts of neoliberalism, it now 'configures great swathes of our daily lives and structures our experience of the world – how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and others, and how we relate to ourselves and others'.<sup>4</sup>

Neoliberalism has left its mark on today's education, not only through GERM. The neoliberal world has created an increasingly unequal, insecure and unsupportive environment for children and families; it has eroded democracy, solidarity and cooperation; it has both economised the social and depoliticised the political, reducing education to a technical practice. It has insisted on the most limited of purposes for today's education, redefining education in terms of human capital development and

meeting the needs of a highly competitive economy. In the economised and technical world of neoliberal education, children have been reduced to units of future human capital, teachers to technicians delivering prescribed recipes for predefined outcomes, schools to exam factories readying children to be flexible and market-ready workers, and parents to consumers of a commodified education.

GERM and neoliberalism have been global phenomena. But they have been felt most keenly in the Anglophone world, and in particular in England and its education. A centralised state, made more so by the undermining since the 1980s of other centres of influence such as trade unions and local authorities, and an electoral system that awards a monopoly of power to a single, minority party, have provided ideal conditions for the inexorable spread of GERM. Where resistance has been encountered – challenges, for example, to yet more testing or forced academisation – it has been dismissively swept aside; vociferous criticism has been boorishly dismissed as the ravings of the ‘Blob’.

The result has been a new educational dispensation: the growth of educational markets (from early years to higher education) with an increasing number and diversity of providers in competition with one another, combined with increasingly strong management of this diversity by a powerful central government and its agents. In the process, any vestige of local democratic control or accountability has become vanishingly rare – ‘thin democratic gruel’, indeed, as Melissa Benn characterised England’s education in the 2023 Fred Jarvis Memorial lecture.<sup>5</sup> Public education has truly become ‘state’ education, with schools increasingly accountable only to the minister in Whitehall.

At the same time that public education has gone down with GERM, its health has continued to be debilitated by a chronic condition: the presence of private education. Accounting for seven per cent of compulsory school-age pupils, through highly selective intakes and vastly more resources than public education,<sup>6</sup> private education reproduces inequality, privilege and social division; it leeches off the public sector, the main source of teacher education and of new teachers in the private sector; and, to add insult to injury, its elite schools misleadingly claim the name ‘public school’ for what are anything but public. Moreover, as a result of government policy, since the 1980s the private sector has gained a dominant position in an expanding early childhood sector, with private services, most run as businesses for profit, providing the largest number of places: early childhood education is in large measure private education.

The GERM-induced attack on the education system in England has had serious consequences. Stress, fear and anxiety are rife, consequences for children and teachers of what Stephen Ball has called the ‘terrors of performativity’ and for parents of the exercise of ‘high stakes’ consumer choice. Conformity, obedience and lack of agency are now routinely expected of children and teachers alike. The obsessive pursuit of standardisation and measurement, with frequent national assessments of children

starting as early as four years of age, what the Italian educator Loris Malaguzzi disparagingly referred to as ‘Anglo-Saxon testology’, has resulted in ‘a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories.’<sup>7</sup> It has also contributed to a stultifying of teaching, with ‘ability grouping’ of young children, from as young as three-years-old, now common and the ‘ability’ discourse pervasive; as Malaguzzi put it, school and culture rob children of most of the ‘hundred languages’ with which they are born by clinging to the myth of fixed innate ‘ability’ or ‘potential’ and so denying an optimistic view of human educability. As workloads, pressures and control of school teachers have all intensified, and pay has failed to keep pace with inflation, a workforce crisis is building: recruitment has faltered and retention plummeted. The situation is particularly acute in early childhood education, with its low levels of qualification and scandalously poor pay.

And all the time, education has become increasingly irrelevant to the world we find ourselves in today. Driven by neoliberalism’s compulsive quest for economic performance, the production of workers for the ever-changing demands of a predatory capitalism and of *homo economicus* to the fore, alternative and more pressing purposes of education have been sidelined or totally ignored. The need, for example, to recognise the crucial contribution education can make to a range of urgent social, political and environmental goals: rebuilding solidarity and cooperation; renewing democratic culture and a capacity for critical thinking; enabling environmental, social and economic sustainability (and yes, the economic is important, but as one among many purposes of education); nurturing children’s untold potentiality and their creative capabilities (Malaguzzi’s ‘hundred languages’ of childhood); developing respect for diversity and a capacity for caring, etc. etc.

## Historical amnesia

In 2011, Michael Fielding and Peter Moss wrote that ‘[h]istorical amnesia is the contemporary educational condition, as we are urged to focus our attentions on an education that will conform to market principles and deliver subjects for the market, individualistic consumers and flexible workers’.<sup>8</sup> Since then, memory loss has got worse.

This has had two serious consequences. First, it has enabled the spreaders of GERM to get away with proffering false narratives about the past, what Melissa Benn has described as ‘cartoon-style representations of a complex tradition, particularly a set of differing practices that have largely involved decades of honourable and innovative intellectual and classroom work’.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of history, for these spreaders, has been as a warning of past (and imagined) horrors, as a validation of the escape from such horrors offered by the current regime, and as a further warning that there is no alternative. We should beware: when what really happened in the past is forgotten,

imagined events can be invoked to maintain compliance with the current regime.

Second, historical amnesia risks the creation of silences about what has actually happened, certainly some of it bad and ugly, but a lot that is good and worthy of remembrance. With memory restored, it turns out there is much to celebrate, to inspire and to seek to emulate. We can stand on the shoulders of giants, from home and abroad, educators such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Susan Isaacs, Winifred Mercier, Alex Bloom, Paolo Freire, Bridget Plowden, Loris Malaguzzi and many, many more. These have been the proponents, practitioners and standard-bearers for an education totally at odds with today's ideas and practices, so readily and disdainfully dismissed as 'progressives', but in reality bearing witness to a subversive and exciting reality: there are alternatives. Remembering brings with it an antidote to GERM.

With memory restored, we can also 'develop a clear and well-informed narrative about the history of our state education system', as Melissa Benn says,<sup>10</sup> reclaiming a pride in what has been achieved when principled purpose has been deployed with political courage. This is a narrative that includes: the phasing out of selection in most parts of the country, and the introduction of comprehensive reform, in the post-war period; internationally acclaimed primary education of the same period; the work over many years of the Inner London Education Authority and other local education authorities; the children's centres and extended schools of the 2000s, important elements of the Labour government's ambitious 'every child matters' policy; and more besides.

All are part of a proud 'progressive' tradition that has understood education, schools and teachers in richer, more complex and more exhilarating ways than the impoverished, simplistic and enervating product of GERM and its spreaders. We might call it 'education in its broadest sense', standing in marked contrast to today's 'education in its narrowest sense'.

### **Hope for the future**

As we suggested above, historical amnesia plays an important part in supporting neoliberalism's belief and mantra – that there is no alternative. There is no alternative because neoliberalism, and GERM, offer a theory of everything – and nothing must disturb that belief, including a thoughtful and measured view of the past. To assert there is no alternative contributes to the fervour of true believers, including those belonging to what Melissa Benn calls the 'New Educational Establishment that now runs, and rules, our system';<sup>11</sup> while at the same time it adds to the sense of hopelessness of the majority, including the many who have grown up knowing nothing different, being constantly reminded 'that's just the way life is'. Hopelessness breeds apathy, and an understandable tendency to turn inwards and focus exclusively on the individual, despairing of any prospect of decisive change through collective action. For if this is just the way life is, so

this is how life must be, for if there is no alternative, why bother trying to change anything?

But there have been and always will be alternatives. There are other education narratives to be told, narratives that contain encouraging and exhilarating stories, narratives that remind us of the exciting possibilities of education, of what children, teachers and schools are capable of given the right conditions. Narratives that can give us hope for the future, not least because they have brought past changes for the better, sometimes big changes. Narratives that can feed the conviction that a better future is possible – but also necessary.

Necessary because of the converging crises – economic, political, social, environmental – confronting humankind, and the part that education and schools must surely play in helping humankind survive them. Necessary because neoliberalism itself is a busted flush, its era passing away as it loses credibility and as the disastrous consequences it has brought about become ever more visible. As Jens Beckert, director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, concludes: '[Neoliberalism's] promises did not survive the test of the real world. Today, they are largely exhausted'<sup>12</sup> – and we could say the same of GERM, that variant of the neoliberal virus, despite the vast amounts of treasure and human resources expended on trying to make it work.

Confronted by this necessity, creating and broadcasting politically strong narratives offering alternatives to neoliberalism is the task before us today, a challenge that must include education. Narratives that draw on the past and present to offer hope for and provoke reflection about the future. That is the purpose of this *FORUM* publication: not only to offer more analysis of the damage wrought by 40 years of GERM and neoliberalism, but also to open up to alternatives, to how the damage can be repaired and to how education can contribute to a healthy and caring society in which citizens can live flourishing, dignified and fulfilled lives in a democratic, just and sustainable environment.

In what follows, the reader will find concise and cogent analyses of much of the damage caused by GERM, of what has gone wrong in important parts of England's education in recent years. Not a comprehensive reckoning, but sufficient, we think, to make the case for changing the education debate from yet more of the same to a deeper, more democratic questioning of purposes, provision and practice leading to a transformative renewal of public education and a reclaiming of the public school. In short, an attempt to return a system sick with GERM to the good health that is so important for children, families, communities and English society.

## Notes

1. Pasi Sahlberg, 'Global educational reform movement is here!', 2012 blog. See: <https://pasisahlberg.com/global-educational-reform-movement-is-here/>
2. Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*, London, Random House Business Books, 2017, p67.

3. Wendy Brown, 'Sacrificial citizenship: neoliberalism, human capital and austerity politics', *Constellations*, 23 (1), 3-14, 2016, p3.
4. Stephen J. Ball, 'Preface', in Guy Roberts-Holmes and Peter Moss, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020.
5. Melissa Benn, 'The Fred Jarvis Memorial Lecture 2023', available as a video and transcript here: New Visions For Education Group
6. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, 'in 2022–23, average private school fees across the UK were £15,200 in today's prices (net of bursaries and scholarships). This is £7,200, or nearly 90% higher than state school spending per pupil, which was £8,000 in 2022–23 (including day-to-day and capital spending). The gap between private school fees and state school spending per pupil has more than doubled since 2010, when the gap was about 40% or £3,500'. See: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/tax-private-school-fees-and-state-school-spending>
7. Paolo Cagliari, Marina Castagnetti, Claudia Giudici, Carlina Rinaldi, Vea Vecchi and Peter Moss, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: selected writings and speeches 1945-1993*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p331.
8. Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, p66.
9. Benn, 2023, *op. cit.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.* See also Melissa Benn, 'Inside "the new educational establishment" in England', in Viv Ellis (ed.), *Teacher Education in Crisis: the state, the market and the universities in England*, London, Bloomsbury, 2023.
12. Jens Beckert, 'The exhausted futures of neoliberalism: from promissory legitimacy to social anomy', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13(3), 2020, p322.

# PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

## For survival, caring and flourishing: purposes of education

*The FORUM Board*

Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realisation of humanity as humanity.

**John Dewey**

People have purposes, John Dewey reminds us; abstractions do not. Our society's formal education system is the historical product of political choices made by individuals enacting policy expressive of the will of many people, though particularly the powerful. To secure mass formal education in the 19th century was a victory for the mass, and principally for the organised working class. To what end this formal education should be directed – what it should be for – remains a matter of political struggle.

Yet under recent government there has been very little public discussion of what education should be for, in marked contrast to the obsessive interest taken by the Department for Education (DfE) in educational methods and the governance of schools. Ministers and advisers are content to regard compulsory education in England as little more than the mechanism which provides sanctioned knowledge to future workers in the market economy and inculcates appropriate dispositions in them. Early childhood education is seen as a preparation for this shallow and narrow conception of education's fundamental purpose. In his contribution to this ebook, John White criticises the vapidness of the government's approach to matters of educational purpose, and signals where better approaches may be found. They are demonstrably better because they engage with the personal, moral, civic, critical and emancipatory dimensions of education which the Conservative government avoids, as well as with the economic and communal ones it purports to be concerned about. That is, these approaches promote, in Dewey's words, the best possible realisation of humanity as humanity.

Institutionalised formal education is a public and not solely a private good, and its purposes are of collective as well as individual concern. It is a public good because it is powerfully implicated in the reproduction, development and wellbeing of society, as well as the development and flourishing of the individual citizen. Education is emancipatory. It affords a way of being free: that is, a way of bestowing meaning on existence. But

true emancipation must also be realised materially, which is to say socially, through the attainment of a just polity. This, too, formal education must reckon with.

Not everyone concurs with the idea of mass formal education as a public good. De-schoolers, un-schoolers and anti-schoolers reject the institution of formal public education *tout court*. They argue that to regard schools as sites of opportunity and possibility is a catastrophic misreading. School is the agent of normalisation and hence control. All that matters for formal schooling is outcomes, predefined and externally imposed. The institution is unredeemable and any attempted reform futile. The only way forward, in their eyes, is to consider ‘other possibilities for educating that do not begin with school; other ways of ‘socialising’ children, and indeed other ways of being human’.<sup>1</sup>

Those who hold such views make proper and powerful criticisms of the many failings of the formal school system, and it is important to acknowledge that education is not synonymous with schooling: it can and does occur in many contexts. But the de-schoolers and their ilk cede the field too readily. School, we believe, is not unredeemable. It is not inevitably a repressive institution nor necessarily beyond all hope of betterment. For many who attend it, school is tolerable, even at times enjoyable, and for the most part about broadening horizons, growing in character, seizing opportunities, enjoying friendship and coming into one’s own through learning. It can play a major role in the education of individuals and, therefore, in the betterment of society.

That said, the school remains a site of struggle and contestation. As does the question, what is education for? This question must be continually returned to if formal public education is to realise its beneficial and emancipatory possibilities. A starting-point is to recognise that education has many purposes – for the individual, society and the wider environment.

## Individual

At the individual level, we would argue (along with Michael Reiss and John White) that the purpose of education is to enable the individual to lead a life that is personally flourishing and to help others to do so too.<sup>2</sup> The German concept of *Bildung* is useful here – a process by which the individual, in relation with others, ‘constructs her/himself into something not decided beforehand. *Bildung* is, hence, an active undertaking, which implies an increase in the individual’s possibilities for freedom’.<sup>3</sup> *Bildung* is holistic in scope, concerned with all aspects of the individual: ‘humans are viewed as bio-psycho-social-spiritual organisms ... [and] the bio-psycho-social-spiritual process [lies] at the heart of *Bildung*’.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, education’s end is always ethical: to enable the self to be seen as not just an end-in-itself. To be not for itself solely but for others. *Bildung* is about the individual and others, self and society, entailing ‘a dynamic

world view that values independence of mind and spirit grounded in ecological and social interdependence.’<sup>5</sup>

Formal education is also about enculturation, a deliberate – albeit selective – induction into the culture of a society (where ‘culture’ is understood to encompass all aspects of a way of life, not only its elite or canonical productions) and by implication the culture(s) of humankind, importantly its arts, crafts, science and philosophical traditions of thought. Simultaneously, education opens the door for individuals to be cultural agents: makers of culture and not only imbibers or spectators of it. This is a matter of acquiring skills but also of nurturing dispositions. It pertains to the aesthetic as well as the practical, and involves educating the faculty of judgement.

Encountering a society’s cultural wealth means meeting and acknowledging the history of relations that society has had, and continues to have, with other societies. As Walter Benjamin put it: ‘There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.’<sup>6</sup> Formal education is an arena in which to address the tensions which arise from this insight.

## **Societal**

Dewey says:

Without ... formal education, it is not possible to transmit all the resources and achievements of a complex society. It also opens a way to a kind of experience which would not be accessible to the young if they were left to pick up their training in informal association with others, since books and the symbols of knowledge are mastered.<sup>7</sup>

These resources and achievements are everyone’s birthright and as such are a justification for mass formal education, one of whose purposes is not only their transmission, but their reconstruction, re-interpretation and re-purposing.

At the societal level, another purpose of education is to enable society to reproduce the conditions for its continuance and its further flourishing, through fostering and evolving qualities and values such as caring, solidarity, cooperation, inter-connectedness, equality, justice, respect for diversity, critical thinking and democracy.

It is worth focusing particularly on democracy given the parlous state of the world today. The ‘Democracy report 2023’ from the V-Dem Institute in Sweden concludes that ‘advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out’ with 72 per cent of the world’s population – 5.7 billion people – living in autocracies by 2022, up from 46 per cent 10 years earlier; the ‘level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 is down to 1986 levels’.<sup>8</sup> Even where democracies survive, they are often in poor health. In this context, one vital social

purpose of education must be to renew and strengthen democracy, readying the rising generation to participate actively and in a wide range of ways in the democratic dynamic of society. As Dewey writes:

A society which makes provision for participation in its goods of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social change without disorder.<sup>9</sup>

The struggle to secure equal participation has evolved since Dewey's day, but his conception of formal education as having a vital role in the continual reconstruction and maintenance of democracy, and his contention that a school is an embryonic society, are an advance on dominant contemporary perspectives. These see education as entirely in the service of the capitalist economy and of *homo economicus*, and are wholly at ease with structures of top-down decision-making. Questions of democracy are in the main corralled in the curriculum as issues of citizenship and do not impinge on the day-to-day operation of the school. Academisation policy actively retards democratic approaches to school governance and affords minimal space for democratic daily functioning. A democratic school would work to change the conditions which inhibit equal participation in, and fair access to, everything on offer, as well as directing attention to the existence of such inequalities and to considering why they are produced in society.

Closely related to this democratic responsibility, another important social purpose for education is to hone the ability to think critically, ethically and politically – to 'nurture and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves'.<sup>10</sup> These words were spoken by the mayor of the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, reflecting on why that city decided in the 1960s to build a system of schools for its young children and a democratic education. Reggio Emilia was motivated by 'the fascist experience [that] had taught them that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous'.<sup>11</sup> But the importance of such a purpose can be applied to contemporary conditions.

Education today ought to raise consciousness of the exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism, the social system which characterises our society. Without this consciousness, inequality becomes naturalised. It is seen as an inherent element of the human condition rather than the product and consequence of a particular ideology. Consciousness is a precondition for the possibility to act for change. Mass formal education has the potential to maintain and reproduce the status quo and so continue the entropy that we observe in modern human societies, or to work against this and enable people to flourish. Full flourishing involves moving beyond the equation of

‘citizen’ with ‘consumer’ and its obverse, ‘labour power’.

Consciousness is intentional: to think is to think of something. ‘The very contact with things is their intellection’.<sup>12</sup> Formal education has centrally to do with making meaning or making sense. One purpose of education is to support, enable, encourage and develop everyone’s meaning-making, such that we are enabled to do more of it for ourselves and with others, and want to do more of it.

For the conservative, formal education is importantly a means of social control and of fostering social quiescence. The mass of people are to be educated to know their station in what is presented as a meritocratic social hierarchy, and to be content with their station or at least reconciled to it. Interminable arguments about social mobility within the given order distract from the need to reshape the order along more just and equitable lines. Such reshaping would have profound implications for the nature of public education.

## Environmental

We would argue that a general purpose of education is to nurture more caring individuals by practising and supporting an ethics of care among children, young people and adults alike – an ethics of care involving both particular acts of caring and a general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life and which includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness.<sup>13</sup> Care, so understood as a relational ethics, involves care of the self, care of others – and care for the environment. So at an environmental level, the purpose of education is to enable individuals and societies to take care of the world by living in it respectfully and sustainably. It would entail what Richard Aldrich termed an ‘education for survival’, to prevent or reduce the incidence of major catastrophes that threaten human and other species and the Earth itself.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, given the extreme peril our species faces, arguably the prime purpose of education today is to develop in everyone the capacity and enhanced sense of responsibility to care for the environment.

Education’s purposes encompass the economic. But this dimension should not predominate. Furthermore, the meaning of ‘economic’ should not be taken for granted. Education needs to support economies that enable human flourishing, solidarity and sustainability. Current economies hardly fit the bill.

We could sum up the purposes of education as being ‘for survival, caring and flourishing’.

## Notes

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# THE EARLY YEARS

## Towards universal early childhood education: high time for rethinking a dysfunctional system

*Peter Moss*

### **Confused, fragmented and dysfunctional**

Hardly a week goes by without some complaint made about the inadequacies of ‘childcare’ in England – whether from campaigning groups, think tanks, public bodies or political parties. There are not enough ‘childcare’ places, those that exist are too expensive, services are closing down, there are staff shortages, and so on. And almost every week we are offered remedies or promises to fix the inadequacies. What we don’t get is proper analysis of the basic flaws in the system of early childhood services, flaws due to decades of post-war neglect, followed by a failure to think critically when at long last early years got government’s attention after Labour came to power in 1997. With two exceptions, what post-1997 governments have opted for is more of the same, taking the system from bad to worse.

The system’s basic flaws can be summed up in three words – splits, childcare and marketisation. Early childhood (EC) systems in all countries start out split between ‘childcare’ services (mainly for children of working parents) and school or kindergarten services (for all children over a certain age). A few countries, mostly Nordic, have fixed the problem, moving to fully integrated EC systems that are education-centred and universal, and in the process saying farewell to separate childcare services (though responding to the needs of employed parents by offering long opening hours in their integrated services).

But most countries have not: systems remain split. In many countries, school-based services predominate; in France, for example, childcare services take some children up to three years of age, then nearly all children go to full-time nursery school for three years. In fewer countries childcare services predominate, providing a majority of places and taking children under and over three years of age, while only a minority go to school-based (or kindergarten) services, which typically offer one or two years of often part-time attendance.<sup>1</sup>

England, with other Anglophone countries, is in the latter camp: its split system is childcare-dominated. Childcare services, mainly ‘nurseries’ alongside falling numbers of ‘childminders’, take children from a few months old right up to primary school age.

They are mainly private, mostly for-profit, with (as in elder care) a growing presence of large companies and what is called financialisation. In other words, ‘childcare’ is predominantly a business selling a commodity – ‘childcare’ – to working parents, who pay fees, though receiving some public subsidy. ‘Childcare workers’ and ‘childminders’ mostly have low qualifications and low pay, making for a ‘chronically underpaid and undervalued workforce’.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, school services, mainly nursery and reception classes in primary schools but also a diminishing group of nursery schools, mostly serve three- and four-year-olds.<sup>3</sup> They are mainly public services and publicly funded with no cost to parents. They have a workforce of teachers and teaching assistants that is well qualified and (relatively) well paid.

In 2023, a government survey counted just over one million ‘childcare’ places in nurseries and other centres, 165,000 ‘childcare’ places with childminders – and just 350,000 school-based places (in nursery classes and nursery schools).<sup>4</sup> But services are not just split two-ways. They are fragmented with at least seven different types of provision, each with a different offer. A recent report from the Nuffield Foundation described the EC system as ‘confused and fragmented ... compris[ing] a diverse patchwork of different services and complex funding arrangements’.<sup>5</sup> This ‘diverse patchwork’ of services jostle and compete with each other in a marketplace, deliberately encouraged by successive governments since 1997.

The Nuffield Foundation rightly described this system as ‘dysfunctional and in need of a radical re-think’. The dysfunctionality goes well beyond confusion, fragmentation and (pointless) complexity. The system is riven by inequalities and incoherence, stemming from the split and the dominance of ‘childcare’. For example, the mainly private ‘childcare’ sector is based on a ‘low cost’ employment model and high cost for parents, while the mainly public school services are based on a professional workforce and no cost to parents; or, to take another example, the government’s planned extension of free 30 hours of ‘childcare’ to children from nine months old is confined to children with employed parents, while free provision of early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds was introduced as a universal entitlement for children.

The system is also socially divisive: ‘childcare’ services are mostly used by more advantaged children with higher income and higher educated employed parents, ‘nurseries’ acting in effect like private schools.<sup>6</sup> It reflects and embeds an artificial distinction between ‘care’ and ‘education’, when all children need care and all children have a ‘right to education during early childhood ... beginning at birth’.<sup>7</sup> It creates unnecessary transitions and discontinuities for children moving to school-based provision at three or four years of age. The ‘low cost’ employment model for ‘childcare’ is not only exploitative, it is also probably unsustainable, a recent report from the University of Leeds concluding that the childcare workforce is ‘in crisis ... Working in

the early years [childcare] sector is becoming unsustainable for its workforce with staff under greater strain, yet barely earning a living'.<sup>8</sup> The system, too, is weakened by most children entering primary school very early, at just age four; this stage of education starts for most children elsewhere in Europe at six years.

These problems are supplemented and compounded by marketisation that does not work well in its own terms. Economist Gillian Paull has commented that '[c]hildcare is not a typical good or service. Its inherent nature contains a number of characteristics which create problems in the functioning of the market and means that the market outcomes may not meet parents' preferences at minimum cost'.<sup>9</sup> While markets, by their very nature, add to the inequalities in the system.

Such flaws in the system were apparent, albeit to a lesser extent, in 1997 when New Labour became the first government since the end of the war to prioritise early childhood. There have, however, been two developments in the system after this date. The first was centralised regulation of the sector, and the marginalisation of local authorities, with the introduction of a national curriculum (the early years foundation stage), national testing (the early years foundation stage profile and the reception baseline assessment) and national inspection (by Ofsted). As with compulsory schooling, the result has been a growing diversity of competing providers along with centralised regulation of standardised content.

The second was a fleeting attempt to introduce a new form of provision. When first piloted in the 1970s, the children's centre was envisaged as a multipurpose EC service that integrated care and education, together with a range of other services and projects, and that would provide a universal and free service to all young children and their families within their local catchment area. These early pilots were ignored by successive governments, only for children's centres to be taken up by the Labour government, which opened 3600 in just seven years – an astonishing feat. Sadly, though, Labour did not see children's centres as a universal public service to replace the flawed system – split, childcare-dominated, marketised and privatised – it had inherited, but as an add-on or supplement, increasing the confusion and fragmentation of provision. Then, after 2010, Tory governments undermined the network of centres through a combination of austerity and disregard.<sup>10</sup> Thus was the one best opportunity for transformative change in the EC system squandered.

## **What is to be done?**

The root of the problem with England's EC system has been a failure to think critically, ever since government belatedly awoke to the need to take early childhood seriously. No attempt has been made to diagnose the flaws in the 'split, childcare-dominated' model, while marketisation and privatised provision as means of delivery have been neither

researched nor evaluated by successive governments. Alternatives have never been considered, assumptions never questioned.

Compare this with Sweden, which today has an exemplary system – universal in coverage, fully integrated, education-centred. Much is owed to a four-year commission established by the government in the late 1960s to consider what direction to take, having recognised that a major expansion of early childhood services was needed; this commission ‘mobilised expertise from every corner of the country to assist them in their work’.<sup>11</sup> This was in the hey-day of Swedish social democracy, which shaped Sweden’s response to the challenge. By contrast, English governments paid no attention to early childhood for decades – then dashed for growth when under the sway of neoliberalism: marketisation and privatisation were taken for granted, as was a constant discourse of ‘childcare’.

Lip service may be paid in England to the importance of early education (though with a narrow focus on ‘readying’ children for education in primary school). But ‘childcare’ always exerts its gravitational pull, defining the way early childhood is thought about, talked about and provided. The tragedy of England’s engagement with early childhood has been this obsession with ‘childcare’ and its consequent failure to recognise that early childhood should get beyond childcare to be first and foremost about education.

England, therefore, has ended up with what Roberto Unger calls ‘reformist tinkering with the established system’, when transformation has been called for. What might such transformation look like? In short, a turn away from a split, childcare-dominated system that ends when children are only four years old, and towards a fully integrated public system of early childhood education (ECE) from birth to six years.

This system would be based on ECE as a public good and an entitlement for *all* children (and their carers) from birth to six years (supplemented by 12 months of well-paid parental leave). The system would be fully integrated, with: integrated provision in multi-purpose, community-based services available to all children from birth to six years and their carers (e.g. in children’s centres); an integrated workforce, based on a graduate early childhood teacher, a specialist in working with children from birth to six years and their families, and having parity of qualification, pay and other conditions with school teachers; integrated funding similar to that for schools (i.e., no more subsidies to parents) and free to attend for a core period. The system would be public, with democratically governed services provided by both local authorities and non-profit organisations having agreements with local authorities.

The system of ECE would be an integral part of the education system, ensuring education was at the heart of the EC system. Education at its centre, but not only about education. The integrated provision would serve many other purposes, including supporting employed parents with its opening hours. As children’s centres have demonstrated so well, it would be a case of education and ... and ... and! And while

there would be no more talk of ‘childcare’, no more separate ‘childcare services’, no more undervalued and underpaid ‘childcare workers’, care would be central to the ECE system, recognised as important for *all* children and *all* adults; ‘care’ understood not as a tradeable commodity but as an ‘ethics of care’.

How might such a transformation come about? Step one would be to do the thinking so lacking until now. The Nuffield Foundation, in its recent report, having concluded that ‘there is no national coherent vision for early childhood education and care’ recommends that a:

Whole-system review of early childhood services is needed, one which articulates a clarity of purpose and which meets the needs of both young children and their families and makes a difference to disadvantaged children in particular. Given the weight of evidence highlighting the complexities and inefficiencies of current programmes, the time is right for a wholesale evaluation of the purpose and provision of early education and care.<sup>12</sup>

I would agree. Following that, and if transformation of the system were the chosen direction, a number of further steps might follow. First, government should commit to building a universal integrated public system of ECE and set a transition period for achieving this, say 10 years. Second, public funding should be used to leverage change, over the course of the transition period shifting existing public funding from private ‘childcare services’ to the emerging public system of ECE. This process of de-privatisation should be matched by de-marketisation, replacing markets with collaborative networks of ECE services, backed by competent support systems. Third, a graduate profession of EC teachers should be developed, having parity with school teachers, and with arrangements made to enable existing ‘childcare’ workers to upgrade their qualifications. And fourth, this process of transformation should be undertaken in dialogue with countries that have followed the same path towards an integrated system of ECE, for example from the Nordic world and New Zealand.

As with so much in contemporary England, blighted by years of a failed neoliberal project and a politics that has proved incapable of addressing so many of our failed systems, leaving many who care battered and bruised, early childhood cries out for the abandonment of yet more ‘reformist tinkering with the established system’, and for a government and sector with the courage and commitment to go for bold and exhilarating transformative action.

## Notes

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12. Archer and Oppenheim 2021, *op.cit.*, p5.

# PUPILS, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

## The image of the child in education

*Diane Reay*

The white Western bourgeois child masquerading as universal child is key to reproducing our current hierarchical order by inciting the violence of continual measurement, evaluation and ranking, thereby legitimizing and depoliticizing the ‘achievement gap’, and condemning Black, brown and poor children.

**Maria Kromidas<sup>1</sup>**

The dominant image of the child in education today is one that views children instrumentally, in need of shaping into competitive, self-responsible, entrepreneurial individuals who slot readily into the capitalist marketplace. Above all, the school child must be fashioned into ‘the desirable neoliberal subject measured against neoliberal political aims’.<sup>2</sup> The prevailing image is one of the child as becoming an adult, rather than the child as they currently are. Too often we look at children and see what we think they should become, rather than focusing on the child in the present. The emphasis is on honing capabilities and competencies for the labour market, in a process through which pupils and students are reduced to objects of educational ‘interventions’ rather than subjects in their own right.<sup>3</sup> As Moss concludes, in contemporary neoliberal education: ‘the young child is an empty vessel to be filled with competencies, a not yet ready adult ... whose end point is to eventually become *homo economicus*, a good investment for the creation of future human capital’.<sup>4</sup>

In place of the child as incomplete we need a recognition of the complete child of the present. Such a child would be seen as a capable social actor, participating in their education, and contributing to the curriculum content and pedagogic approach in collaboration with adults. This would be a child valued in their own right, and respected enough to be afforded the space and time to exercise autonomy over their learning. The tragedy of our current educational system is that this image of the child is much more likely to be found in the private school sector than in state-maintained schools.<sup>5</sup>

## The neglect of wellbeing

Currently, in the state sector, we have a plethora of behaviour programmes, harsh disciplinary sanctions, and instructive mantras that children are expected to chant,

all designed to stamp out disorder and unruliness, but at the same time crushing difference and diversity. Any emphasis on creativity and imagination is swallowed up by the increased emphasis on curriculum control, evaluation and uniformity. The preoccupation with a future ideal means that when we do focus on the child in the present our image is beset with fears, anxieties and the need to be in control. Such concerns are exemplified in popular behaviour programmes such as ‘Getting the buggers to behave’ and ‘Teach like a champion’. The image, particularly in relation to working-class children, is of a child who needs to be dominated in order to be made malleable. This results in a closing down rather than an opening up of the promises childhood presents. Instead, the focus should be on the possibilities and potentials of the child, and the means of realising them.

In the drive to harness education to economic ends, children’s wellbeing has been neglected. Children are less happy and satisfied with their lives than children in a majority of other countries because of the far higher levels of materialism accompanied by intense competitiveness and individualism to be found in contemporary British society.<sup>6</sup> But that hyper-competitiveness has seeped into our schools. While the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) reported that in 78 per cent of education systems students achieved more highly when they cooperated rather than competed with their peers, it also identified the UK as one of four countries where competition in schools was the most prevalent.<sup>7</sup> The consequences of the remorseless focus on honing our children for the labour market are an excessive fear of failure, and a culture of anxiety in English schools.

In research published in 2022, England ranked 24th out of 24 countries for life satisfaction and fear of failure.<sup>8</sup> English children were more unhappy with their schooling than with the other nine aspects of life examined in the survey. This is in large part because when we focus on developing attributes and qualities in school children we concentrate on competition and developing the capacity to be ‘winners’. Instead we should reflect on how we might develop their propensity for care, collaboration and empathy.

It is the values and ethos that underpin the educational system that we have to change. We have allowed a harsh judgemental ethos to infuse our increasingly performative educational system, one that, in its preoccupation with results and league-table position, pays scant attention to the happiness and wellbeing of our children and young people. Too many children experience our education system as one enforcing control and compliance. Under the neoliberal education system we have in England, children are too often reduced to numbers on a spreadsheet or a developmental chart.<sup>9</sup> The *Good Childhood Report* found that of the seven areas children were asked about, they were least happy with how much they were listened to in school.<sup>10</sup>

## Unloved, under-resourced

Yet love, attention and care are essential ingredients in a good education system, as well as being central to enabling children to thrive as learners. The overriding image should be one of the child to be cared for and nurtured, though not to be regarded as fragile or inadequate in any way. Forms of love, of any variety, appear to be in short supply, particularly for working-class children who have always been feared as potentially unruly. The image of ethnically diverse working-class children in education is that of the child as a potential problem for a post-industrial economy. The focus is all about the child as a future employee, and has little to do with human flourishing and personal fulfilment. As a consequence, we seem to have ended up with an educational system that expects the worst of working-class children, rather than nurturing the best.

The English educational system has always been one that emphasises the differences rather than the commonalities between children; whilst upholding an ideal of the successful learner, it has never provided working-class and ethnically diverse children with the resources and support to attain. That is why we still have a highly differentially resourced tripartite system that educates the social classes for very different roles in adult life. In the 2020s, we still have elite private schools for the upper classes, with 90 per cent more income per pupil than the state sector, well-resourced schools for the middle classes, and under-resourced, pressurised, ethnically diverse schools for the working classes. And within those state schools that manage to retain a social mix, we have growing levels of setting and ability grouping that segregate the social classes within classrooms.

This damaging, differential treatment of children is, in part, due to the popular perception that some children are 'bright' and some are not. For many working-class children, education is about coming to realise, through the actions and judgments of more powerful others, that they are stupid or dull. Most parents and teachers believe, to varying degrees, that intelligence is innate and influenced by social class and race, and judge children accordingly. The doctrine of innate intelligence may be powerfully challenged within scientific circles, but it still holds sway in the minds of the majority.<sup>11</sup> The complex pathways of development of different children in different economic circumstances are ignored, buried under the expectation that children should meet the same developmental targets at the same time, but often without the support and resources that would make that possible. It is essential to move beyond narrow class and racial binaries in how intelligence is perceived in children to a recognition that all children, and in particular working-class, ethnically diverse children, can achieve more if we have a system that enables them to flourish.

The conundrum of the contemporary education system is that it promises and promotes the language of social justice, yet replicates wider social and economic

inequalities. Having a state educational system in which the norm is the white middle-class child has had a corrosive effect on those children who fail to fit that. For the most disadvantaged of our school children we increasingly have curriculum as cruelty; they are incessantly taught to the test, bombarded with the basics, subject to harsh disciplinary measures, and even taught that silence is their natural state.<sup>12</sup> Sonu and Benson argue that there has increasingly been a 'dehumanisation' of the child in the classroom, as adults' refusal to recognise the child as co-existing in the world clears the path for the neoliberalisation of education.<sup>13</sup> But the impact has been far more pernicious for those who deviate from the norm. Neoliberalism positions working-class children, and their purported cultural, moral and intellectual deficits, as impediments to economic progress, in a gross distortion that divests the powerful in society of responsibility for their actions. As a consequence, growing gaps in educational achievement are represented as threats to national competitiveness, innovation and economic security, that are then blamed on those with the least resources and power – ethnically diverse, working-class children.

## **Conclusion: paying attention to all**

We need a more humane and less instrumental image of the child in education, an image informed by listening to children and paying attention to the processes of their learning. Schools should be places where children's voices are listened to, not silenced; spaces where the importance of listening to what children say about their own experiences, both within education and more widely, is recognised. We are at risk of 'losing sight of the fact that children and young people are human beings who face the challenge of living their own life, and of trying to live it well'.<sup>14</sup>

We also require a vision that views diversity as richness, recognised as a strength in our society, not a weakness in need of remediation. The current prevailing norm of the competitive, academic, white middle-class child excludes many children within the middle classes. However, it pushes many more working-class children and young people beyond the edge of normality, leaving them to internalise a sense of educational failure and feelings that education is not for them. In contrast, paying attention to all children enables a view of them as 'unique individuals with differing experiences, ways of learning, rates of development, interests, talents and abilities', that defy attempts at standardisation.<sup>15</sup> A vision that pushes back the too-narrow boundaries of our perception of the child, allowing more space for agency, diversity and creative possibilities is urgently required. As Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach to education, argued powerfully in a lecture in 1993: 'Children have the right to imagine. We need to give them full rights of citizenship in life and in society. It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child

that we need to hold'.<sup>16</sup>

Thirty years on, it is more important than ever that we hold this image of the child within our educational system.

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# PUPILS, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

## **‘A time for revolutions, not for patching’: renewing the work of teaching in England**

*Viv Ellis*

Who would be a teacher in England now? As of December 2023, the country is experiencing a precipitous decline in recruitment to initial teacher education (ITE) that independent analysts are urging policymakers to address.<sup>1</sup> This situation is not surprising to those who work in education. Increasingly to members of the public, it is starkly obvious too. The news cycles have been dominated by reporting of the inquest into the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry (that concluded that Ofsted was a contributory factor), as well as Ofsted’s cynical response (a 90-minute training session for inspectors on ‘anxiety’). Even someone who didn’t watch the news might know of Dave McPartlin, the headteacher who led his school choir through a show-stopping performance on *Britain’s Got Talent* and who revealed on X (formerly Twitter) that he took medication to deal with the anxiety and sleep issues that came with the job.<sup>2</sup>

If you don’t watch television or use social media, if you have teachers as family members, friends and neighbours, they will probably have told you about the bad stress it causes; the excess of cortisol running through their systems, always on alert, leading to weight gain, hypertension, poor sleep, declining mental health, breakdowns in personal and family relationships, and so on.<sup>3</sup> It’s a well-known list. Teachers report feelings of loss of control, ever-increasing demands for ‘relentless pace’ to ‘deliver’; made responsible for every aspect of their students’ lives, their ‘social mobility’ and economic success.

When I was a teacher educator in the early years of the Gove era, I would often receive glossy brochures from schools intended to persuade my students to apply for jobs.<sup>4</sup> I will never forget one – from a stand-alone academy in London – that featured a ‘day in the life’ of a teacher at this school. The day started at 5am, ironing shirts that complied with the school’s strict dress code for staff; catching the train from a town outside London (where rent was cheaper) to be in the classroom at 7am; doing final preparations for lessons and then beginning a typically long school day; working on the next day’s lessons in his classroom until around 7pm; continuing to work on the train home and then at home, finishing around 10pm.

The school proudly put this ‘day-in-the-life’ in its brochure to attract idealistic young

teachers. In his message in the brochure, the headteacher went on about the ‘moral purpose’ of the job of teaching and how much pressure they put on themselves and each other and that, if you wanted to work there and ‘change lives’, you had to subject yourself to this regime. It worked. Those idealistic young teachers got jobs there.

Eventually, it turned out that that school was led by people who bullied and harassed their staff to such an extent that the teachers fought back with a campaign that attracted the support of parents. There was a scandal. The leadership had to resign and the school was taken over by an academy trust. But my sense at the time was that the school was not unusual. ‘Relentless’ had become a wholly positive word in the vocabulary of many state-funded schools in England.<sup>5</sup> Hostile relations between school leaders and teachers were common, under the guise of ‘strong leadership’, in the same way that hostility towards children was becoming ritualised in some schools with assemblies designed to ‘flatten the grass’.<sup>6</sup> No, what the headteacher of that school did was in many ways a form of leadership that had become part of a supposedly ‘high-performing’ culture. This headteacher had just gone too noticeably over the line; had shouted one too many obnoxious thing at an exhausted teacher; had bought one piece of art too many for their office.

Since 2010 and the intensification of so many reforms to school organisation and teachers’ work, there has also been a parallel intensification of changes to the way teachers are prepared for the job. ITE has once again become a focus for some of the most radical changes. England is now an outlier in global teacher education policy among liberal democracies, for several reasons. First, for the way it has used market mechanisms in strengthening the power of the state. The last 13 years have settled the ‘free market/strong state’ dynamic of British Conservatism in favour of the strong state and there is nowhere in public policy where this is so clear as in teacher education. Second, England has, progressively over 13 years, dismantled pretty much all of the democratic oversight of teacher education and professional development (bodies such as the Training and Development Agency for Schools) and used its levers of power to establish a uniquely centralised authoritarian state (in its theoretical sense).<sup>7</sup> The great ‘achievement’ of this authoritarian state is that it has brought the English universities to heel and made them surrender their responsibility for the curriculum for prospective teachers, uniquely among all forms of professional higher education. Third, they have established a new cadre of ‘experts’ who they use to provide rhetorical cover for the most ill-informed and ideological changes, while at the same time excluding and silencing individuals and organisations that historically have been regarded as curators of genuine expertise – for example, local education authorities, subject teaching associations, unions and, of course, universities. Melissa Benn refers to this new cadre as the New Education Establishment.<sup>8</sup>

A student joining an ITE course in 2024 will receive a preparation for teaching that is, to put it mildly, odd and, in my view, likely to be both ineffective and unsatisfying. I am qualifying my fairly bleak assessment with ‘likely’ here because I know that the people who work in ITE in England (in schools as well as universities) will do what they can to make the best of the anachronistic nonsense they have been coerced into offering. Nonetheless, some knowledge will be proscribed from universities’ curriculums on pain of losing accreditation. And if they make it into their first year of teaching, they will be expected to endure the ‘early career framework’ – which is the same as the ‘core content framework’ they were exposed to during their ITE programme.<sup>9</sup>

I have worked in Australia since 2020. Beyond the overall impression of England being something of a disaster theme park for the hard right, and while I realise that the luxury of distance and not being subject to this regime is probably part of the explanation, it feels like something needs to change at a much higher level of public policy for the necessary renewal of the work of teaching and what it means to be a teacher in England. Fundamentally, this renewal can only be achieved through the reinvention of the welfare state and its accountable public bodies and then, specifically, the institutions of what, in many other countries, is referred to as public education.

Mass public education in England and Wales was the result of late 19th century reforms that saw trade-offs between government funding for primary education, inspection of schools and payment by results for teachers. So, it is unsurprising if many current responses to the multiple crises of education policy in England depict present arrangements as inevitable and transformative reforms as unimaginable (hence the calls for a mere ‘pause’ in Ofsted inspections). But if the present moment is not the time for transformation of public education and the renewal of what it means to be a teacher in England, then one wonders what would need to happen in England for there to be any kind of positive change. The Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath have revealed a lot about the damage to the welfare state structures over the last 13 years and the impact on everything from child poverty to life expectancy. So surely it is time for a prospective new government to plan for a strategy of national renewal and state investment after the last 13 years?

To renew the work of teaching so that it is attractive, sustainable and engaging over a career, I would suggest that there needs to be a fundamental reinvention of public education within welfare state structures that break free of the 19th century trade-offs and learn from the social, cultural and economic consequences of the post-2010 decline. As the authors of the Beveridge report put it: it ‘is a time for revolutions, not for patching’.<sup>10</sup> And I should also note that every proposal I make that follows has been enacted somewhere in the world in terms of national policies for teachers, schools and teacher education. Indeed, one doesn’t have to look far to see how radical change can be

implemented; Wales, for example, has taken a profoundly different, long-term approach to the challenges, even in the context of being starved of funding by the Westminster government.<sup>11</sup>

First, the role of the state in the provision of public education needs to be both reasserted and renegotiated. Stephen Ball conducted an interview with Margaret Thatcher's education secretary Keith Joseph in which he fulminated about the state having any role in public education.<sup>12</sup> A democratically accountable education service, fully funded from general taxation and overseen by diverse public bodies, *locally* as well as nationally, accountable to parliament, is an aspiration that is familiar in many countries around the world, including, historically, in England. It is an aspiration worth making real again as part of a future-oriented welfare state.

Second, public education needs to be defined and understood beyond the economic benefits (for the state as well as the individual). Successive governments of all hues in England have regarded the 'quality' of teachers' work as one of the primary drivers of economic productivity and global competitiveness. Public education needs to be redefined to focus on the broader benefits for individuals and societies – preparation to participate as active citizens and not only consumers; an introduction and encouragement to a cultural life with a focus on human creativity, personal growth, health and wellbeing; learning to understand and work with difference in terms of both ideas and people; broadly developing a 'collective intelligence' in society. Public education of this kind is not about 'public spending' but about state investment in social infrastructure and the citizenry, as the Nordic countries still understand.

Third, teaching as a profession (and its professionalism needs to be continually reasserted too) must be regarded as one of a number of public-facing professional occupations that should be organised in multidisciplinary services around the child or young person, their families and carers, and their communities. This means resisting the 'saviourism' or manic 'moral purpose' of 'heroic' individuals that have accompanied the 'relentless' nature of much of the official and regurgitated discourse about teaching. It means conceiving of teaching as a *relenting* activity – sensitively adapted to context, child-and-adult-centred, and making education one of a number of welfare services that need to work together to ensure the successful upbringing of each generation, including (minimally) health, housing and social work. It is not teachers' work to organise food banks or counsel parents experiencing mental health difficulties. But it is the responsibility of a reinvented welfare state to do so – and more.

Fourth, fair salaries are important for teachers, but salaries are not determining for either job satisfaction or retention. Conditions for teachers' work are powerful factors, both in terms of the teacher's day-to-day experience in classrooms and their career structures. Burning out successive cohorts of idealistic new recruits into the teaching profession is not good for anyone. Making school leadership a matter of life or death is

truly monstrous. Ofsted certainly has to be abolished. New systems of accountability and school improvement need to be invented as they have been in many, many other countries and as England did in the past. Additionally, a new career structure for classroom teachers to keep them engaged and satisfied as well as contributing to school and system improvement needs to be developed – new opportunities to specialise, not only in leadership but in subjects, inclusion and SEND (special educational needs and disability), and professional learning. New forms of continuing professional development, including sabbaticals. New pathways into teaching – especially for career changers – that make them part of the salaried school workforce at the same time as they are learning to teach.

And finally, trust must be restored in those organisations that have historically curated expertise in education, on the basis of real evidence as well as demonstrable, long-term impact. Teachers' own organisations such as subject associations and unions are examples of repositories of such expertise, as well as the universities. These are not the only experts, of course. But these have been systematically excluded and, indeed, damaged by the efforts of increasingly destructive Conservative governments over the last 13 years. Such organisations also come under the purview of the democratic oversight bodies I have suggested need to be restored.

None of these suggestions is wild or outlandish. Neither are they practically impossible for a country like England. Other countries already have created or are creating such conditions for public education and supportive policy environments for teachers. Some of these jurisdictions even sit at the top end of the league tables many English policymakers tend to prioritise. Changes of this kind are a choice, though; one concerned with political economy as well as education policy. They also convey a vision for society. Given that nostalgia is almost inevitable in England, is there enough courage and hope for the future for changes like these to happen? Enough energy and responsibility to resist 'patching'? And if not now, what else needs to happen, what other failures and tragedies, to make a different future for teaching possible?

## Notes

1. See <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/blogs/dire-teacher-recruitment-data-should-concern-policymakers/>
2. [https://twitter.com/dave\\_mcpartlin/status/1660027867105771526](https://twitter.com/dave_mcpartlin/status/1660027867105771526)
3. Although rates of reported poor mental health have increased across a number of occupational groups – and self-reporting of poor mental health itself has also increased – historically, a number of studies have identified teachers as particularly prone to work-related stress leading to low mood and anxiety. See Judi Kidger,

Rowan Brockman, Kate Tilling, Rona Campbell, Tamsin Ford, Ricardo Araya, Michael King and David Gunnell, 'Teachers' wellbeing and depressive symptoms, and associated risk factors: A large cross sectional study in English secondary schools', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 192, pp76-82, 2016.

4. Michael Gove served as secretary of state for education between May 2010 and July 2014.

5. 'Relentless' has become part of the lexicon of the global education reform movement, simultaneously making teachers and students personally responsible for societal inequities. Thomas and Lefebvre discuss this usage in the context of 'Teach for America'. See Matthew Thomas and Elisabeth Lefebvre, 'The dangers of relentless pursuit: teaching, personal health, and the symbolic/real violence of Teach For America', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(6), pp856-867, 2018.

6. For an explanation of the meaning of 'flattening the grass' in multi-academy trusts, see John Dickens, "'Flattening the Grass": what's really going on at OGAT and Delta?', *Schools Week*, 14 February 2019: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/flattening-the-grass-whats-really-going-on-at-ogat-and-delta/>

7. A succinct explanation of the 'authoritarian state' theory derived from the work of Poulantzas can be found in Panagiotis Sotiris, 'The work of Nicos Poulantzas is vital for understanding the authoritarian right', *Jacobin*, 1 May 2023: <https://jacobin.com/2023/01/poulantzas-capitalism-fascism-democracy-state-socialism>

8. For a longer discussion of the recent ITE reforms in England, including Melissa Benn's overview of the 'New Education Establishment' as policy actors, see Viv Ellis (ed.), *Teacher Education in Crisis: the state, the market and the universities in England*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

9. The early career framework and the core content framework are highly prescriptive and mandatory designs and lists of 'content' for initial teacher education and early career professional development for teachers required by the Department for Education in England as part of its much-vaunted (and often derided) 'golden thread' of teacher development. For a discussion of the emergence of both frameworks see Jan Rowe, 'The "golden thread" and the "TT market review" in England as coercive control: a personal perspective', in Ellis, 2023, *op. cit.*

10. For an overview of Sir William Beveridge's *Social Insurance and Allied Services report*, see: <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/beveridge-report-foundations-welfare-state/>

11. For an overview of the Welsh education policy landscape as it was being developed, see Gareth Evans, 'Back to the future? Reflections on three phases of education policy reform in Wales and their implications for teachers', *Journal of Educational Change*, 23, pp371-396, 2022. Regarding ITE, the Welsh Government has focused its attention on developing high-quality collaborative partnerships between consortia of schools and universities with fully shared responsibilities,

including for the ITE curriculum. This initiative has taken place in the context of the development of a radically different (to England) school curriculum framework, as well as a framework for teachers' entitlements to ongoing professional learning intended to deliver benefits in the medium-to-long-term.

12. For an account of the interview with Keith Joseph, see Stephen Ball, *Politics and policy-making in Education*, London, Routledge, 1990.

# PUPILS, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

## The ‘ability’ discourse, or comprehensive education?

*Patrick Yarker*

It’s an eel of a word, ‘ability’: its meaning slippery, elusive, hard to pin down, in an educational context more than usually context-bound and supple with nuance. Except when it isn’t. Except when it appears precise and definitive, as when a student or a class is termed of high or low ‘ability’ or a year-group described as spanning the ‘ability’ range.

The impulse to frame and make visible pupils and students in this way is part of a deeply rooted discourse. In the formal education system, the notion of ‘ability’ serves to legitimise the classification of individuals and groups in the system and to sanction a corresponding hierarchy. It licenses differences of regard and treatment. It serves to confirm particular expectations which the ‘ability’ discourse itself creates and nurtures. It implies an objective, settled and even scientifically sanctioned basis on which to calibrate children and young people. And it sets no alarm bells ringing, as they surely would ring if a student were formally labelled as ‘of low intelligence’ or a policy promoted for grouping students according to their ‘intelligence’.

Ability remains an eel of a word. But within the ‘ability’ discourse, the English state education system’s common sense, ‘ability’ has a particular set of meanings and energises particular practices. ‘Ability’ serves to designate any individual’s innate or given, relatively stable or fixed, intellectual quantum. The hard version directly equates ‘ability’ with ‘intelligence’ and sees it as mainly conditioned by genes. Softer versions hold that social and cultural factors, especially of class, are more important. This kind of ‘ability’ is generalisable, a typology of minds. It is measurable, confidently to be ascertained by testing. Differences in academic attainment between individuals can be ascribed to differences in this fixed quantum, whose measurability enables future attainment within the system to be more or less firmly predicted. ‘Ability’ is unfortunately but stubbornly beyond the influence of education, or at least beyond the scope of the system to change. As a teacher ruefully put it, reflecting on the system of designated ‘ability’ tables in primary school: once a hedgehog, always a hedgehog. ‘Ability’ justifies a pessimistic or fatalistic view of what the young person may achieve. As such, ‘ability’ is anathema to any optimistic conception of human educability, and any approach to teaching this inspires. It licenses talk of fulfilling potential, but renders unthinkable the idea that you might do better than your potential. That you can rise above your inheritance, whether of genes or environment or their mysterious combining.

## Almost a kindness

Formal state education in England requires that each pupil or student be labelled as of a certain broad ‘ability’ in order that the appropriate curriculum be administered to them. In the current system, an ‘ability’ label is a necessity, almost a kindness. Without it, the pupil risks being confronted with the wrong curriculum: content, material and demands that are too hard or too easy rather than just right. Formal ‘ability’ labelling must therefore occur as soon as possible upon entry to each phase of the system, and certain tests are set in order to reveal ‘ability’. Furthermore, informal ‘ability’ labelling happens at once, based on name and presentation, behaviour and perceived attitude in the school setting. Detonating one’s ‘ability’ label once it has been assigned is no easy thing for a pupil or student to do, and may not make any difference to the way one continues to be regarded and treated.

‘Ability’ in the educational context emerged out of the psychometric or intelligence-testing heyday early in the 20th century and strongly influenced education policy in England immediately before and after World War II. Schooling was structured around the prevailing notion that young people came in kinds. In particular, a minority were academic and a majority were not. The notion of IQ – an antecedent of fixed innate ‘ability’ – licensed the organisation of schools within the system, and of children within the schools. The most obvious evidence of this can be seen in areas of England where the grammar school/secondary modern school divide persists. But the continued flourishing of fixed ability thinking – its being taken-for-granted – and the refinement over time of the ‘ability’ discourse also serve as reminders of just how deeply embedded is a particular way of conceptualising children and young people, the formal education they must undergo and the ways in which they undergo it.

The ‘ability’ discourse legitimises what has been called a ‘prophetic pedagogy’, one which:

Knows everything beforehand ... has no uncertainty ... is absolutely imperturbable ... sees everything to the point that it is capable of giving recipes for the parts of an action, minute by minute, hour by hour, objective by objective ... [and is] a coarse and cowardly thing ... humiliating to teachers’ ingenuity and a complete and visible humiliation of children’s ingenuity and potential.<sup>1</sup>

‘Ability’ setting for particular subjects, and in-class ‘ability’ grouping, is ubiquitous in the English state system, whatever the kind of school. Arguments for ‘ability’ streaming (the segregation according to ‘ability’ of entire cohorts for all teaching) continue to be heard. Such practices hamper the teacher’s attempt to pay proper attention to children and young people and so intervene in their learning in an informed way, because young people are prevented from disclosing or presenting themselves educationally on their

own terms, without prejudice.

All children and young people are mis-recognised by ‘ability’ labels. Malign consequences follow. ‘Ability’ labels are summative, and received as judgements on the whole self. They are enduring, and act to influence our conception of ourselves as learners both within school and long after schooldays are over.<sup>2</sup> The especially detrimental effect on those labelled ‘of low ability’ is well known. Despite this, teachers are expected to know and act on the ‘ability’ levels of their pupils. Accepting fixed ‘ability’ thinking and the ‘ability’ discourse, talking in its terms and mobilising its (ever-changing) vocabulary, is necessary to demonstrate professionalism.

## **Ameliorate and empower**

The discourse of ‘ability’ and its associated practices are antipathetic to a truly comprehensive education system. *FORUM* has always stood against the ‘ability’ labelling in school of children and young people. Ever since the journal’s very first number, which in late 1958 addressed the issue of ‘junior school streaming’, contributors have regularly interrogated and criticised fixed ‘ability’ thinking, ‘ability’ grouping and its associated pedagogical practices, and set out more educationally enabling perspectives. This is hardly a surprise. As Clyde Chitty made clear in his inaugural lecture at Goldsmiths:

[T]he comprehensive reform has no meaning unless it challenges the fallacy of fixed potential in education. It should dismantle structures rooted in this fallacy that act as barriers to learning while, at the same time, facilitating practices that enable everyone to enjoy a full education. It is not concerned merely to offer *opportunities* to learn. It recognises and proclaims the *right* to the full range of learning that is available for each age group in the compulsory period of schooling – with a full choice of learning at the other stages of life.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of great pressure, teachers continue to resist the ‘ability’ discourse and the approaches to education it spawns, mindful perhaps of the injustices they themselves suffered in school because of it or the injustices that were suffered by those they knew: separation from friends; mis-identification as learners; being misunderstood as individuals; being stamped as failures if they found themselves in the bottom set; being stamped differently but no less deeply if they were in the top set. And being treated according to the stamp, as countless studies and autobiographies testify.

Where they have scope to do so, teachers who reject the grim determinism of the ‘ability’ discourse and look to stay true to comprehensive educational values and principles find better ways to work. These are not mere palliatives or tinkering at the level of language or terminology. They seek to ameliorate educational damage but also to empower teachers and students. One way of reconceptualising the student in order to

move beyond ‘ability’ thinking is through the lens of ‘learning capacity’.<sup>4</sup> Where ‘ability’ is seen as fixed, learning capacity is understood to be malleable, changeable, open to being enhanced and not just realised by the process of education, in principal unlimited where conditions are conducive or can be made so.

But there are no blueprints or sure-fire recipes. An anti-determinist pedagogy will be an authentic expression of the teacher, informed by principles as well as by experience, observation, research and reflection. Among the principles that teachers who oppose fixed-ability thinking and practice seem to share and to enact in their teaching are a commitment to co-agency, a willingness to extend trust in the classroom, and a view of inclusion aligned with the ‘ethic of everybody’ (as presented by Paula Ayliffe in this volume). Teachers who develop anti-determinist pedagogies also try to avoid practices which have the effect of reconfirming for students a sense of deficit, failure, inadequacy and inability.

## **Extend educational democracy**

Refusing to see children and young people through the lens of fixed ‘ability’ is the first step, but only the first. At once that refusal must rise to all it implies: the need to rethink education’s aims and practices in a thoroughgoing way. As Annabelle Dixon puts it:

The alternative we propose is one which emphasises universal entitlement rather than differences: everybody counts, everybody’s learning is equally important, everybody contributes to the learning environment. And so it follows that teachers work constantly to create – and if necessary invent – approaches that allow everybody without exception to engage in the activities provided, to have the experience of being excited by learning, to gain something worthwhile, and to feel a sense of safety and belonging.<sup>5</sup>

Scope for teachers to act outwith the ‘ability’ discourse is radically diminished by academisation, high-stakes testing, simplistic ideas about ‘what works’ in any classroom and their enforcement in the name of consistency or even equality. It becomes increasingly hard for practitioners not to label or group by ability, or draw up a seating-plan based on ‘ability’ or avoid implementing fixed ‘ability’ thinking by tailoring the curriculum content to the supposed ‘ability’ of an individual or a group rather than trying to find ways in which curriculum and student can meet. Only an approach to the structuring of the education system which emancipates teachers from the constraints of high-stakes public testing, a coercive and punitive inspection regime and the currently dominant nostrums of ‘deliverology’ can hope to enable the wholesale shift in thinking ultimately required to supersede the ‘ability’ discourse.

Ways can be found. They inevitably require an extension of educational democracy.

The scope for pupils or students to have a meaningful say in what happens in the classroom (and the school) must be widened, and the opportunity for choice significantly broadened in relation not only to curriculum content but to learning-approaches, and to the time allowed for activities and the nature of the task to be accomplished. In other words, students must again be trusted more, and seen as well placed to know how they can best learn. Extended educational democracy also recovers teacher agency. It respects what teachers know about the infinitely complex activity they are engaged in, and enables this to be drawn on for everyone's educational benefit.

Anti-determinist pedagogies, those ways of teaching and learning which have begun to supersede the 'ability' discourse, light a path towards comprehensive education in practice and its distinctive ethical dimension. They recognise each student as always more than the teacher or the system understands her to be, and as bringing to the endeavour of education more than the teacher contains. Rather than someone to be labelled by 'ability' and delivered to accordingly, the student remains uncategorisable, a person, and as such fit to be listened to and responsibly answered as the teacher's judgement deems it best.

## Notes

1. Paola Cagliari, Marina Castagnetti, Claudia Giudici, Carlina Rinaldi, Vea Vecchi and Peter Moss (eds), *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A selection of his writings and speeches, 1945-1993*, Oxford, Routledge, 2016, pp421-2.
2. Jo Boaler, 'The "psychological prisons" from which they never escaped: The role of ability grouping in reproducing social class inequalities,' *FORUM*, 47(2 and 3), pp125-134, 2005.
3. Clyde Chitty, 'The unfinished revolution: challenging the myth of fixed innate ability', inaugural lecture delivered at Goldsmiths, University of London, 27 February 2001, p2.
4. See Susan Hart, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond and Donald McIntyre, *Learning without Limits*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2004.
5. Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Donald McIntyre, 'Developing teaching free from ability labelling: back where we started?', *FORUM*, 44(1), 7-11, 2002, p9.

# CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

## The case for radical curriculum reform

*John White*

What is taught in English schools needs radical change. The national curriculum, introduced 35 years ago, has become a vehicle of segregation more effective than the 11+. An implausible story of innate differences in intelligence, that placed some children in grammar schools while the majority were shunted into secondary moderns, has been replaced by something more subtle. Binary selection has given way to a hierarchy of success and failure, based on test and exam results and league tables. ‘Equality of opportunity’ has become the watchword. No child is held back by heredity: everyone can succeed if they work hard enough. If they fail to get good grades, a university education or a well-paid job, at least they’ve had their chance.

The national curriculum must go. It is based on an inadequate notion of ‘curriculum’ as it equates the term, narrowly, with a collection of mainly traditional school subjects – a notion that has been with us since the 19th century. The curriculum in this sense has been stocked with examinable material and intended to serve people’s ambitions to get on in the world, as well as politicians’ desires to increase economic growth.

Just as the 11+ system was replaced by the comprehensive revolution, 60 years later the national curriculum must give way to something more morally and educationally defensible. Morally, in the sense that it must attend to *every* student’s needs – rather than being geared to those who ‘make it’ while doing little for the rest. Educationally, because it should employ a wider notion of ‘curriculum’.<sup>1</sup> This embraces all the planned learning, academic and otherwise, that a school provides – not only within discrete disciplines, but also via interdisciplinary studies, school ethos, interactions with visiting speakers, outdoor activities and activities within the wider community. None of these should be seen as ‘extracurricular’.

## Worthwhile educational purposes

It goes without saying that this planned learning should be guided by worthwhile purposes. What should these be? It is no use looking for answers in the 40 words that have since 2013 constituted the aims of our present national curriculum for England: ‘The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement’.

Is the second sentence meant to be an elaboration on the first, in which case the sole aim is knowledge? If so, what is this knowledge – what does it include and exclude? How do we go about discovering what constitutes the best that has been thought and said? What is it to appreciate human creativity and achievement? None of this is clear.

As guidance intended to shape the content of learning in thousands of schools, this short statement is an obvious nonstarter. It shows every sign of having been tacked on to the already existing school curriculum in the narrow sense. The latter's *real* aims – to help a minority to get on in the world, to support the economy – have been left unspoken.

The radical change in education policy that I have been calling for has to begin with a well-thought-out account of what the aims of school education should be. This is a big issue, one to which you might expect to find a thousand and one answers. In fact, however, among those leading philosophers of education and educational administrators who have thought a good deal about it, we find a surprising amount of consensus. Philosopher Philip Kitcher's 'self-maintenance, citizenship and moral agency, and personal fulfilment' is close to Harry Brighouse's aims of self-governance (in the sense of leading a personally autonomous way of life), economic participation, personal flourishing, and participation as a citizen in public decision-making and execution.<sup>2</sup> Both writers elaborate at length on what their aims involve and how they can be justified. Educational administrators Harry Brighouse's father Tim and Mick Waters cover most of the same ground in their bullet points on schools' aims, while also urging that students become 'critical and discerning users of media, including social media,' and recognise 'their responsibility to protect the planet and contribute by living sustainably with the aim of preserving biodiversity and limiting global warming'.<sup>3</sup>

Even from this briefest of sketches of candidate aims, one can see how much more substantial they are than the vapid official ones cited above. The first task of the radical new education policy I am proposing will be to shape such aims into a coherent whole based on a carefully thought-through rationale. The second will be to work out how the aims are to be embodied in school curricula in the broad sense of the term.

Who will carry out these two tasks? The first has clearly to be tackled at the national level. Obviously too, schools themselves should have a major role in the second at a more specific level, although there is also a good case for some national prescription. Take, for example, the climate change aim just mentioned. Among other things, one might expect national expectations to cover aspects of chemical, biological and geographical understanding, as well as work in the area of citizenship on the rise of consumer societies, the effects of climate change in different parts of the world, ways of tackling climate problems and implications for personal ways of living.

## Whose aims for schools?

In what follows I focus on the national tasks. Who can be trusted to work out the aims that schools should follow and their embodiment, at a general level, in curricula?

The experience of 13 years of Tory education policy shows that leaving these powers wholly in the hands of secretaries of state and their ministers has been problematic. These have not taken aims seriously, and have skewed even their minimal account of them in idiosyncratic directions – as Michael Gove did in his allusion to Matthew Arnold in his 40-word statement of 2013, quoted above.

Distrust of ministerial power has led to several calls over the last few years for aims and the broad framework of the curriculum to be worked out by an independent body drawn from various sectors of society with interests in these matters. See, for instance, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)'s 'Leading the way: blueprint for a self-improving system'.<sup>4</sup>

The latest of these calls is from Brighouse and Waters in their suggestion of a school framework commission (SFC) comprising representatives from such bodies as teacher unions, HMIs, Chartered College of Teaching, universities, CBI, TUC, governors and multi-academy trust (MAT) boards, Local Government Association, religious organisations, political parties, as well as elected members of the public.<sup>5</sup> The SFC would produce an ongoing 10-year plan for education. Its remit would also embrace assessment, accountability and other matters like teacher supply, but these lie outside the remit of this *FORUM* paper.

The SFC would not have the power to *determine* the aims and the broad framework, as its role would be advisory. As to the recipient(s) of its advice, Brighouse and Waters have seemingly different suggestions in different places. The first is the secretary of state. They propose that its findings would not bind the latter, 'but there could be an agreement that any proposed statutory changes would show how they were consistent with or different from the commission's conclusions'.<sup>6</sup> A little later, they say that national politicians should 'agree on a cross-party basis what the underpinning values, aims and purposes of schools should be' and that the SFC should advise them in this. 'Once agreed, it should be binding on the private sector as well as state-funded schools'.<sup>7</sup>

We are not told in the first of these two statements who is party to the 'agreement' mentioned. It is also unclear from the two statements taken together what powers to determine aims the secretary of state would have as compared with the cross-party group of politicians. Brighouse and Waters are demonstrably unhappy about leaving secretaries of state with the extensive powers they have today, but are less convincing about an alternative. Is the cross-party agreement with binding powers that they call for merely an aspiration with little guarantee of its being realised?

## A curriculum commission to challenge the status quo

Despite this indeterminacy, Brighouse and Waters help us to see a way forward. We know there will be a general election, probably in late 2024, and that Labour is tipped to win it. Once in power, it could have a democratic mandate to reform the school curriculum in the broad sense of the term, basing it on a well-thought-out set of aims and their curricular embodiment. It should set up a curriculum commission on the lines of the SFC, tasked initially with producing an aims-based curriculum within, say, 18 months from the 2024 election. This will then be introduced into all state-funded schools, including academies, as well as the private sector. The curriculum commission will be appointed on a rolling basis for terms of at least five years, and will review its recommended aims and curriculum at perhaps five-yearly intervals.

Not everything can be achieved in a first term, of course. It will take time to turn round a tanker as big as the national curriculum. Teachers will have to be inducted into the aims-based approach; assessment reform will have to ensure that the curriculum is no longer the servant of tests and exams and that these find their place in a new framework; ways will have to be found of monitoring how well schools are responding to the new arrangements and so holding them accountable. A start can be made on all of these in Labour's first term, to be built on in its second.

It goes without saying that there is no guarantee these reforms will survive a change of government: English schools could in principle soon find themselves back in a Gove-Gibb straitjacket.<sup>8</sup> But if an incoming Labour government is able to muster popular support for the proposals just outlined, there is likely to be little interest among the electorate for a return to the past. Once people begin to see the virtues of the new approach, a non-Labour government may find it impossible to rock the new boat. There is a precedent for this in the expansion of comprehensive schools in the 1960s, continued under Margaret Thatcher as education secretary after 1970.

My proposal has the edge, to put it mildly, on the curriculum recommendations of the curriculum and assessment review outlined in Labour's July 2023 mission statement 'Breaking down Barriers to Opportunity'.<sup>9</sup> This, like my proposal, will be expert-led, and its findings will be binding on all state schools, including academies (but not on private schools).<sup>10</sup> But the curriculum principles on which it will be based are *not* built around a set of aims. In fact, there is *no mention*, anywhere in this long document, of the aims or purposes of school education. There is no reference to students' personal fulfilment, to preparation for citizenship, to climate change. The mission statement also understands 'curriculum' in the narrow sense, mainly in terms of discrete subjects: it highlights reading, writing and maths, and, following these, 'subjects such as music, art, sport and drama'. My objection is not, of course, to the importance of these things in a child's schooling, no more than it is to other things the document picks out – like oracy, digital

literacy and preparation for employment. The basic problem is the piecemeal nature of these proposals. There is no overall picture, no set of underlying purposes, just a collection of details. Labour is scarcely challenging the status quo. So far, it is doing little more than taking much of the existing national curriculum as read and suggesting improvements here and there.

There is still time before the general election for Labour to be far bolder – for it to shape its own vision of what a worthwhile school education should be. Its predecessors in the 1960s are remembered for the comprehensive revolution. Its own legacy could be an equally revolutionary approach to the school curriculum.

## Notes

1. Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters, *About Our Schools: improving on previous best*, Carmarthen, Crown House Publishing, 2022.
2. Philip Kitcher, *The Main Enterprise of the World: rethinking education*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p232; Harry Brighouse, *On Education*, London, Routledge, 2005.
3. Brighouse and Waters, 2022, *op. cit.*, pp6-8.
4. ASCL, 'Leading the way: blueprint for a self-improving system', 2015, p12: <https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/ASCL-blueprint-for-a-self-improving-system.pdf>
5. Brighouse and Waters, 2022, *op. cit.*, pp529-30.
6. *Ibid.*, p530.
7. *Ibid.*, p537.
8. Since 2010, Nick Gibb has twice served as minister for schools, including while Michael Gove was education secretary. He oversaw controversial reforms to the curriculum and pedagogy.
9. The Labour Party, 'Breaking down the barriers to opportunity', 2023: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>.
10. Labour Party, 2023, *op. cit.*, p9.

# CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

## What would a genuinely alternative assessment system look like?

*Alistair McConville*

Why assess learning formally at all? Learning is, one might argue, an organic, cumulative, highly individual process that defies accurate labels. Learning is distinctively non-linear, enmeshed in overlapping concepts and language games, made opaque by the need to translate it for external audiences, and so subject to an ‘observer effect’, by which it is distorted. Learning unfolds emergently in the heads of learners. Assessment tries to read their minds.

Difficult though it is, if we believe in education, in the sense that experienced and knowledgeable teachers should pass on their wisdom and skills to young people to prevent them having to reinvent every possible wheel, and to draw out their best selves, then assessment is crucial. Education is a partnership. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s idealistic creation, Emile, a child who is allowed to learn ‘naturally’, and largely without the intervention of teaching, would not get very far in the modern world.

The primary purpose of assessment in education, then, is surely to give learners helpful information about the extent and accuracy of their own journey in a given field of enquiry, and to support them in making further progress to prepare them for the world in which they find themselves. This is the most learner-centric rationale for assessment.

Assessment can have other legitimate and helpful purposes, too. It can be used to select between candidates, to test for competence in a given field of work or to extrapolate lessons about overall institutional performances. These forms of assessment seek to benefit a third party, rather than putting the learner’s experience first.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with undertaking these forms of assessment, but the tension in the current assessment regime comes from the ambitious, perhaps impossible, attempt to make it perform multiple functions simultaneously.

### **More than measurement, and less predictable**

A common critique is that, throughout the school journey, the most significant and highly prized assessments are used primarily for institutional accountability purposes rather than for the direct benefit of the student. And that the former is to the detriment of the latter.

Leading academic Dylan Wiliam frames the issue like this: ‘Educational assessment

has become divorced from learning ... The *predictability* of assessments allows teachers and learners to focus on only what is assessed, and the high stakes attached to the results create an incentive to do so. This creates a vicious spiral in which only those aspects of learning that are easily measured are regarded as important'.<sup>1</sup> Depth and authenticity are sacrificed to packageability and rankability.

High-stakes assessment points have proliferated. There are baseline assessments in reception, phonics screening in year one, 'SATs' (standard assessment tests) at key stage one (year two), times tables checks in year four, more SATs in key stage two (year six) before the hurdles of GCSEs and A levels. These exams make snapshot judgments about a narrow range of competencies, most of which involve the ability to pass timed tests, and lots of them, in a short space of time, by assimilating large bodies of preordained knowledge and making it fit into neat formats.

Marking of these exams is highly variable in its reliability, and many of the skills most prized by the workplace are left out of the equation entirely. This has been the consistent refrain of employers for well over a decade and, in response to the establishment's inaction, they are increasingly developing their own skills-based systems for establishing the desirability of candidates, having concluded that traditional metrics are poor predictors of workplace performance.

There is a similar disjunction at the transition point to higher education, since universities increasingly assess undergraduates through a wide range of methodologies, and the place of the timed exam at HE level is in rapid decline. Only a handful of 'elite' universities rely exclusively on exams to judge degree classifications nowadays, and they are the ones who tend to use their own exams for oversubscribed courses.

So, through our overemphasis on exam skills we neglect the many other ways of presenting understanding which will be required both at university and in the workplace. It is unclear who is served well by the current system.

## **Profiles, portraits, pictures and portfolios**

For a fuller analysis of the woes of the system, see the Rethinking Assessment website.<sup>2</sup> Suffice to say, there is growing consensus that it is not fit for purpose. Lord Baker of Dorking, the inventor of GCSEs, points out that these were designed as a school-leaving certificate and are now redundant, given that all students now carry on in education or training after 16.

It is easy to criticise. What might a solution look like?

At Rethinking Assessment we gathered together thought leaders from across the educational spectrum to think deeply about this.<sup>3</sup> We consulted widely and researched alternative approaches around the world in coming to our conclusions. We wanted to propose something that was not merely a summation of a school career, but rather a

dynamic process that was useful to pupils throughout their development at school and beyond it, as well as being a helpful set of valid and reliable evidence for transition points, such as to university or the workplace.

The central plank of our vision is that each student should, in conjunction with their schools, build a ‘digital learner profile’ over the course of their school career, which is cumulative, holistic, reliable and validated. Without wishing to push the analogy too far, this would have some things in common with the LinkedIn of the adult world: a mechanism to showcase accomplishments, summarise one’s primary strengths, and highlight one’s interests, projects and passions. Another parallel one might draw would be with the old ‘national record of achievement’, though advances in technology mean that a modern version of such a thing can be infinitely more nuanced and expansive.<sup>4</sup>

This is an approach which is taking hold internationally. In the US, the widely used ‘portrait of a graduate’ captures both curricular and extracurricular learning, as well as enabling commentary on character development. The metaphor of a portrait is a helpful one, since portraits strive to do more than replicate the outward appearance of their subject – they look to say something about that person’s inner life and dispositions, too. Tellingly, every state in the US is now engaged in some sort of capturing of ‘competencies’ in a broader way than the old grade average transcripts. Universities in the States increasingly accept the broader evidence base of the Mastery Transcript Consortium, another digital learner profile.

In Australia, it is national policy to develop a learner profile in every state, and many universities there already accept those that exist. The ‘big picture learning credential’ is perhaps the most advanced of these.<sup>5</sup> They include validated assessments in ‘knowing how to learn, empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, social reasoning, communication and personal qualities’, alongside more traditional academic metrics. In Portugal, too, pupils leave with a profile at the end of their diploma, and in New Zealand, their record of achievement is a key part of a young person’s armoury.

Crucially, in all these examples, the forms of assessment used to build a picture of the young person, and to offer them useful feedback, are varied in format. We use the term ‘multi-modal’. Exams have their place in a portfolio of evidence, but so do other media. The French, usually thought of as rather traditional in educational matters, now place significant emphasis on oracy, and a viva, in their reshaped baccalaureate, and there’s a high proportion of teacher assessment included there too. Closer to home, we know that the Scots are marching firmly towards a multi-modal learner profile and the Welsh have their own baccalaureate which goes well beyond England’s mis-named ‘Ebacc’ (for ‘English Baccalaureate’), which is determinedly narrow in what it allows to be included.

Rethinking Assessment’s prototype for a digital learner profile was highlighted favourably in a recent all-party parliamentary group (APPG) report as a promising

model for the future.<sup>6</sup> It is worth outlining the core components proposed in our vision. You can see a visualisation of it on our website.<sup>7</sup>

## **Innovatory freedoms**

We recognise that it is important to have objective data on achievement in core competencies, such as numeracy and literacy. These are strong predictors of future success. So, too, are oracy and digital literacy, and we would have mechanisms for reporting on these as part of the ‘building blocks’ section of the profile. Some kind of exam might be appropriate for some of these measures, though there is certainly scope to reimagine the existing English GCSE, about which no English teacher I have ever met has had a good word to say. (In Canada, students only sit end of school exams in English and maths.) Oracy, which is to say competence in formal speaking, can be measured in a number of ways, and good work has been done on this by the charity Voice 21, who provided evidence-based rubrics for high-quality oral communication.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this core, there should be a section for recording a portfolio of other qualifications. These need not all be GCSEs, and they need not all be assessed solely by exam. Other qualifications are available! In our vision of a future holistic qualification, a combination of long and short courses would be assessed using a mixture of examination, coursework, oral presentation and teacher assessment. These courses could be interdisciplinary or disciplinary, academic or technical. Some units might be compulsory, others optional. Some might be national pathways, others more local. Choice is a great motivator for young people.

There is an emerging trend for schools to develop their own courses and qualifications, too, and there should be a home for these within the digital learner profile. The School Directed Courses Consortium brings together schools who have already embarked on this journey, or who are seeking to do so.<sup>9</sup> Instead of following the traditional route of nine or 10 GCSEs, schools construct experiences which they think bring greater balance to the student experience. At King’s High, Warwick, for example, pupils might take a course in ‘innovation and entrepreneurship’, or pursue their ‘global changemakers’ pathway instead of an additional GCSE. In these, pupils showcase their learning via TED talks, or vivas, or through courtroom simulations. These courses are validated by Eduqual. Or at King Alfred School, pupils might take the global challenges course, in which they design social impact projects, enact them and have them validated through the nationally recognised ‘higher project qualification’ route. St Paul’s Girls’ School has been running a suite of its own school-directed courses, such as creative technology, for years to complement its GCSE programme, and it was newsworthy recently that both Bedales School and Latymer Upper School announced that they were working towards a two GCSE only curriculum (English and maths) with all other key stage four learning

internally devised and assessed. It is currently difficult for state schools to participate in this sort of creative curriculum experiment because of the strictures of ‘Progress 8’ measurements, but a number of multi-academy trusts are represented in the consortium as they seek to find a way to make similar breaks for freedom.

UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) has been extremely helpful in enabling schools to list these courses within their application process. Universities have grown used to seeing this sort of variety of assessment within young people’s transcripts, and have overwhelmingly treated them as equivalent to GCSEs for admissions purposes.

At present, there is a danger that the education freedoms enjoyed and being seized in this way by (mostly) independent schools will exacerbate inequality further, since these courses can better prepare young people for the post-school marketplace. Whilst this is not the intention of independent schools, who simply want the best for their own students, policymakers would be wise to give state schools the freedom to follow their educational instincts. There is plenty of appetite and aptitude for this in state schools, who simply need to be liberated from Progress 8 and the Ebacc.

## **A high-value asset for every pupil**

As well as a variety of courses within a digital learner profile, we would want to see evidence provided, too, of the core skills of creative thinking, collaboration and communication. These are widely recognised as of central importance by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), for example.

The skills demonstrated through high-quality project work are also highly prized, both by universities and employers, and we would advocate for all students having an entitlement to undertake structured projects, and to have those validated as higher or extended project qualifications. Given their high currency and intrinsic educational value, their uptake is dispiritingly low, especially in the state sector. A digital learner profile should enable students to showcase their best project work, by clicking through to a summary of the evidence.

We also like the idea of enabling students to upload other ‘beautiful work’, to use the expression coined by Ron Berger and enacted by pioneering schools like XP School in Doncaster. The notion of portfolio building, so prevalent in creative subjects, can be extended to the full gamut of school work, and indeed can and should include extra-school experiences, too, where young people learn and achieve through other organisations, such as the Scouts.

A digital learner profile would enable a young person to develop a statement about themselves, their interests, their most significant obstacles overcome, their proudest achievements. They could upload a range of digital evidence to support the presentation of themselves and the sense of purpose they want to showcase. Such a tool could not only

be a source of enormous personal pride, and a valuable record of their development, but also a highly practical way of enabling external audiences to make selections about whom they would like to invite to interview, or offer a place on a course to, for example. There is emerging evidence that it is possible to use a methodology called ‘comparative judgement’ to make reliable, holistic comparisons across portfolios.

For us at Rethinking Assessment, many of the issues with assessment in schools could be unlocked by the widespread introduction of this sort of digital learner profile. It would become the high-value asset of every pupil, a mechanism for formative feedback and reflection, as well as a means for judgments to be made about whether a school really was offering a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’. If a holistic learner profile was the prize, this would incentivise schools (and policymakers) to think more broadly, both in their curriculum building, but also in their assessment design.

We are not alone in calling for changes to assessment. At the recent Next Generation Assessment Conference, Mary Curnock Cook and thinktank EDSK outlined some promising directions of thinking: fewer GCSEs alongside other lower-stakes assessments; the ability to take adaptive assessments electronically; the opportunity to take assessments when ready, rather than at a preordained age, as happens in music exams, for example. Advances in artificial intelligence are likely to change the educational landscape in ways we cannot fully anticipate, but assessment will undoubtedly have to change in response, and an optimist might hope it will dramatically enhance the process.

Politicians do not have their head in the sand. At the time of writing, the Conservatives have acknowledged the need for greater breadth through their Advanced British Standard proposal. Labour has mooted an increased emphasis on oracy. An APPG has called for the scrapping of SATs and a House of Lords select committee looks likely to propose a significant rethink. It feels as though reform is coming. At Rethinking Assessment we very much hope to be able to contribute to the enactment of a broader vision of education.

## Notes

1. Dylan Wiliam, ‘Integrating formative and summative functions of assessment’, paper presented at the Ninth International Congress on Mathematics Education in Tokyo 2000 (Wiliam’s italics): [https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fdylanwiliam.org%2FDylan\\_Wiliams\\_website%2FPapers\\_files%2FICME9%2520WGA10%2520paper.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fdylanwiliam.org%2FDylan_Wiliams_website%2FPapers_files%2FICME9%2520WGA10%2520paper.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)
2. <https://rethinkingassessment.com>
3. For a list of our advisory group members see: <https://rethinkingassessment.com/our-advisory-group/>

4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Record\\_of\\_Achievement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Record_of_Achievement)
5. <https://www.bigpicture.org.au/what-international-big-picture-learning-credential>
6. [https://schoolsappg.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/NEU3155\\_APPG\\_report\\_v2\\_compressed.pdf](https://schoolsappg.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/NEU3155_APPG_report_v2_compressed.pdf)
7. <https://rethinkingassessment.com/learner-profile/>
8. <https://voice21.org/>
9. <https://rethinkingassessment.com/school-directed-courses/>

# INCLUSION

## School inclusion and exclusion: some context

*Patrick Yarker*

Questions of inclusion and exclusion are at the heart of any formal education system. Formal education is a sustained relation between teacher and student and so between school and student. It depends on the student being included and staying included. But the relationship can be difficult to establish and may break down, perhaps drastically. Students may act in ways which disrupt the learning of other students or the good order of the school community. Each such breakdown will be an individual and unique case, and will occur in a particular context. In looking to repair the relationship, or to end it definitively, judgement will need to be arrived at, and the balance of rights weighed, as well as the perceived wrongs. Sanctions may follow.

Schools can impose a variety of sanctions, including suspension (temporary exclusion) and permanent exclusion, as well as periods of internal isolation or detention. The potential impact on an individual who is sanctioned (see below) will be one factor taken into account when sanctioning is considered, especially if the sanction involves exclusion of some kind. Government records data about school exclusion, and a school's use of exclusion will feature as part of an inspection judgement. The permanent exclusion of a student may be felt, by staff, as, among other things, an admission of failure on the part of the school.

### Official figures

The school exclusion data collected officially are complicated, signal highly complex contextual conjunctions and are in some ways incomplete. For example, the statistics currently recognise only two genders. Nevertheless, they offer a picture (or a range of pictures) and allow for cross-year comparison, albeit with important provisos which stem from the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the academic year 2021/22, the number of pupils and students permanently excluded from their school increased compared with the previous year. So did the number excluded temporarily ('suspended'). One in 17 secondary school pupils was suspended at some point during the 2021/22 academic year.<sup>1</sup>

Official figures are as follows:

There were 6,500 permanent exclusions in the 2021/22 academic year. This is an increase from 3,900 in 2020/21, however this included a period in the Spring term when schools were only open to key worker and vulnerable children. This is lower than the last full academic year before the pandemic (7,900 in 2018/19). This is the equivalent of 8 permanent exclusions for every 10,000 pupils.

There were 578,300 suspensions in the 2021/22 academic year. This is also an increase from the previous year, when 352,500 suspensions occurred, and is higher than pre-pandemic levels (438,300 in 2018/19). This is the equivalent of 691 suspensions per 10,000 pupils.<sup>2</sup>

As might be expected, the main reason for exclusion and suspension, accounting for around half the numbers, is ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’. The next most common reason for permanent exclusion is physical assault against another pupil (22 per cent) and, for suspension, verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (19 per cent) or physical assault against another pupil (18 per cent).

Boys continue to be permanently excluded three times as much as girls, and temporarily excluded twice as much. Official records may underreport figures, given informal practices which have the effect of covertly excluding, such as off-rolling or ‘managed moves’, practices which, it has been argued, disproportionately affect girls.<sup>3</sup>

The rate of both temporary and permanent exclusion increases with the age of the pupil, the peak age being 14.<sup>4</sup>

Pupils of Gypsy, Roma or Irish Traveller background had the highest permanent exclusion rates in 2020/21, while pupils of Black Caribbean origin, or of mixed Black Caribbean and white heritage, continue to record high rates. Children from African-Caribbean, Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma backgrounds are three to four times more likely to be excluded from school than other groups.<sup>5</sup> That said, exclusion rates for pupils of almost all ethnicities have generally declined over the past two decades, or have remained at a constant very low level.<sup>6</sup>

Pupils eligible for free school meals and/or with identified special educational needs are more likely to be excluded. This remains the case year after year.

The type of school attended also has an impact on the likelihood of exclusion. Particular kinds of academies, for example, may have higher exclusion rates than local authority schools.<sup>7</sup>

## **Consequences and dilemmas**

The disruption to development which permanent exclusion can generate for a child may have very significant consequences. There are well-attested links, revealed not least in the 2019 Timpson Review of School Exclusion, between being excluded from school

and performing poorly in public exams, suffering adult unemployment, enduring poor health and being more exposed to crime.

Speaking about the situation which pertained at the time, Timpson stated: 'While permanent exclusion is a rare event – 0.1% of the 8 million children in schools in England were permanently excluded in 2016/17 – this still means an average of 40 every day. A further average of 2,000 pupils are excluded for a fixed period each day'.<sup>8</sup>

Former children's commissioner Anne Longfield has called on primary schools not to make use of permanent exclusion powers because of the damaging consequences which result from permanent exclusion.<sup>9</sup> Her view was opposed by Tom Bennett, the Department for Education's 'behaviour adviser' and an advocate of more authoritarian approaches. His basic position may be summed up as follows: 'if a child knows what they should do and there is no major obstacle in the way of them doing it, then they should really just do it because it adds to the smooth running of the school community'.<sup>10</sup>

The National Education Union recognises the impact exclusion has on young people and the disproportionalities involved. It notes that 'zero tolerance' approaches of the kind advocated by those such as Mr Bennett can increase exclusions and help entrench student disengagement.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, media interest has been aroused by particular kinds of punishment deployed by schools, most notably the use of so-called 'isolation booths', in which an individual student is denied any contact with others for a lengthy period (perhaps the whole school day) and where external stimulation is deliberately minimised, for example by blank walls, an absence of windows and confinement within a very limited physical space. Findings from Sarah Martin-Denham's extensive research, published in 2020, offered:

'[N]o evidence that isolation booths improve behaviour; in fact, the findings suggest they make it worse and thereby compound learning, mental health and physical health needs. There are reasons why children were unable to cope in classrooms: unidentified disabilities, a lack of teacher training, and large class sizes meaning teachers were limited in the learning support they could provide'.<sup>12</sup>

Some schools apply a tariff of punishments whatever the specific context for the transgression, entirely evading the possibility of judging the situation in its own right.

A school is part of the wider culture, and constrained by the formal education system's official framework, itself characterised by high-stakes competitive public exams, a benign view of competition, and the naming and (to a degree) shaming of schools through published league tables of exam results. These contextual realities will play a part in decisions taken by a school about exclusion. Each decision to exclude, whether permanently or temporarily, offers a snapshot of what the school stands for

and how it regards its pupils and students, how it sees the nature and purpose of education, and how it balances the needs and rights of the community with those of the individual.

## Notes

1. Freddie Whittaker, 'Exclusions up on pandemic lull, as suspensions reach record-high', *Schools Week*, 20 July 2023. Exclusions up on pandemic lull, suspensions at record-high (schoolsweek.co.uk)
2. Explore Education Statistics, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England', November 2023: Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Summer term 2021/22 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)
3. Lucy Boddington, 'Invisible girls: why school exclusions are not gender neutral', *Social Finance*, 22 July 2020: <https://medium.com/social-finance-uk/invisible-girls-why-school-exclusions-are-not-gender-neutral-fa732d64c1a9>
4. Education Conferences UK, 'New data on permanent exclusions and suspensions in England': New data on permanent exclusions and suspensions in England (educationconferencesuk.co.uk)
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# INCLUSION

## Inclusion – the ‘ethic of everybody’

*Paula Ayliffe*

Schools are often described as ‘inclusive’, but on closer inspection is that an accurate term to use? Are some of these ‘inclusive’ schools actually ‘exclusive’? Are some of the children, young people and adults excluded from the activities and opportunities made available to most? How can this be determined? How can schools accurately analyse their practice to see how inclusive they are? Do schools believe in the ‘ethic of everybody’? Do they genuinely and honestly want to be inclusive? Or is it easier to take the middle ground, include most, but exclude those who don’t fit the norm, whose behaviour is ‘difficult’ or whose attainment is ‘too low’?

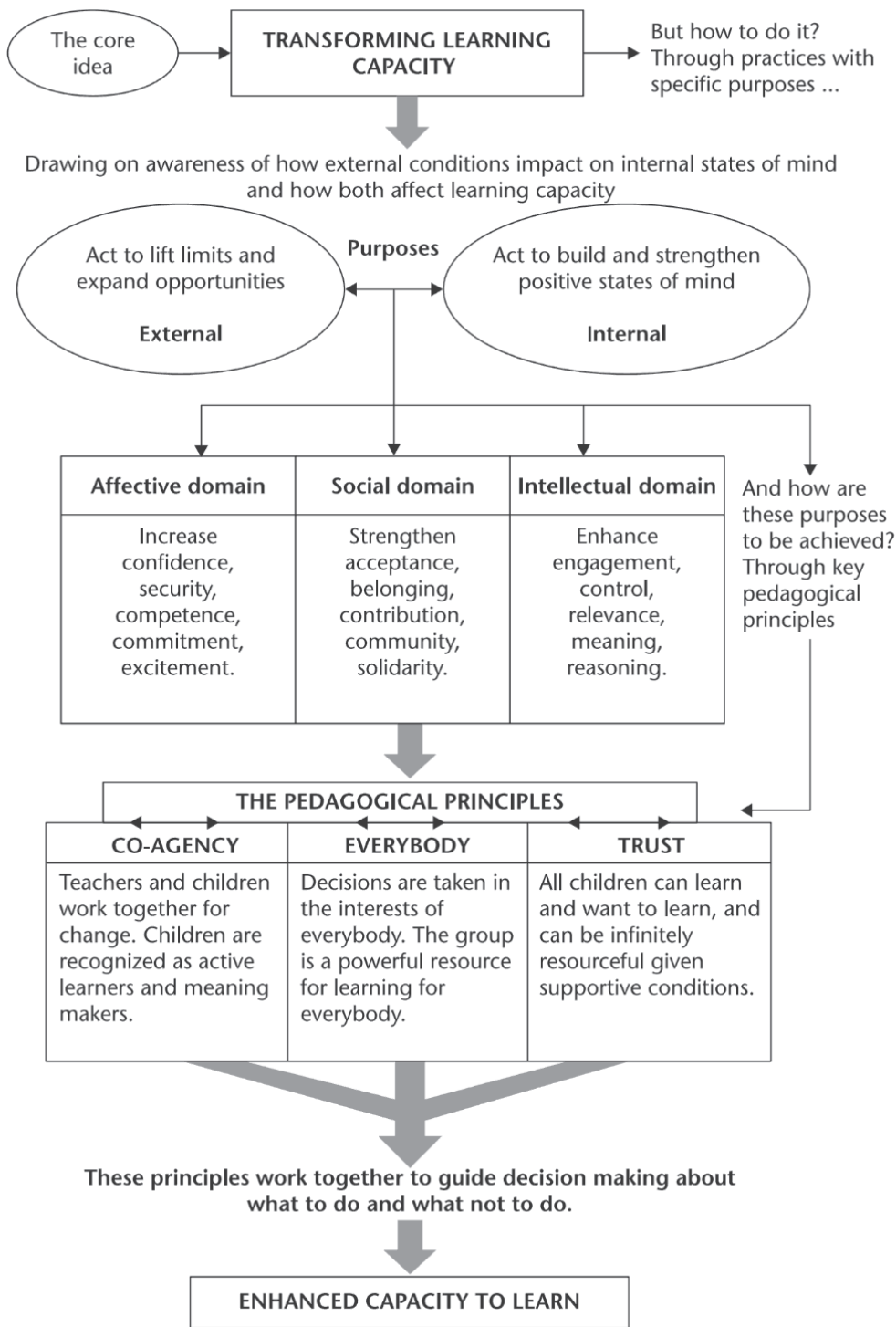
The work of the ‘Learning without limits’ team, based at the University of Cambridge, has focused on this notion of the ‘ethic of everybody’.<sup>1</sup> In the school context, ‘everybody’ means literally everybody who is part of a school. And, ethically speaking, the opposite of ‘everybody’ isn’t ‘nobody’: it is ‘some people’. As in, some people can do X and some people can do Y, or some people receive X while other people receive Y. As Figure 1 indicates, the ethic of ‘everybody’ is a declaration of optimism in everyone’s capacity to learn when conditions are right. Adhering to an ethic of ‘everybody’ helps create those conditions.

This model is described by its authors as a ‘practical, principled and pedagogical model ... which would be recognisable to other teachers who shared similar values and commitments and had themselves developed classroom practices in line with their convictions’.<sup>3</sup> Their hope was to ‘build a convincing body of evidence to show that this alternative approach could lead to the development of practices altogether more humane, equitable and life-enhancing for everybody’.<sup>4</sup>

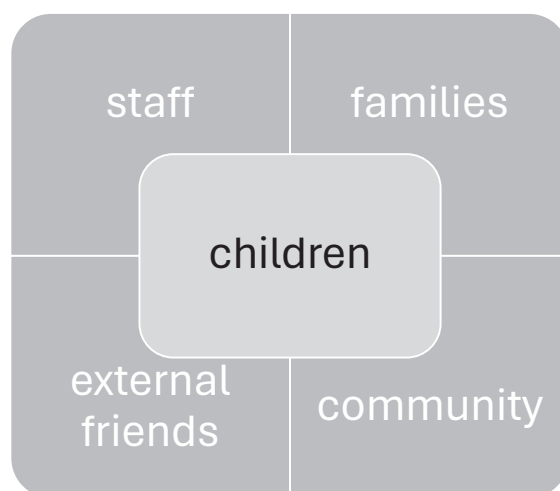
Another ‘tool’ that is proving useful to schools and other educational settings striving to be genuinely ‘inclusive’ is the CollectivEd Award.<sup>5</sup> Although designed to ‘enable educational providers to make coaching, mentoring and professional learning a strategic priority for school development’, the award focuses on the creation of an implementation plan which guides the whole school community through a process of building the skills and knowledge needed to bring about change in whole-school practices.

Inclusion involves every aspect of school, every stakeholder, everyone who contributes to the life of the school (Figure 2).

Figure 1: The ethic of ‘everybody’<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 2: An inclusive school*



The ‘ethic of everybody’ ensures that each stakeholder understands each other’s perspective of ‘school’. Staff understand what school is for families; families understand what school is for staff. The same applies for the local community in which the school is situated and all of those external friends who visit and take part in the life of the school. Each stakeholder can see and understand what school is, and that it is a place where all grow and flourish because they know they are valued members of this nurturing place. In this way the children, the focus, are always kept at the heart of all that happens.

Taking each aspect in turn, inclusive pathways develop, strengthening the whole.

## **Staff**

Staff includes everyone – teachers, teaching assistants, admin staff, site staff, specialist staff, volunteers. All are vital, all have valuable contributions to make, all understand the values and current lines of inquiry the school is researching about themselves, and all are working together to make this possible. Appraisal is a key process in this. Appraisal, when undertaken in an environment where inclusion is the overriding ethos, allows its participants to discuss their progress, aims and needs together with their appointed appraiser in an atmosphere of mutual collaboration and benefit. Appraisal allows staff voices to be heard, listened to and acted upon. Staff clarify their understanding of the current lines of inquiry with their appraiser, who acts as mentor, coach or supervisor depending upon the question being asked.

In addition, staff talk to each other about their role. They actively seek advice and

look to each other for ways to notice and discuss what they observe both in themselves and in others. They work collaboratively to question, try out and improve practice. They do not feel vulnerable as they do this, because their opinion is sought, and suggested lines of inquiry are valued.

All staff are assigned to a different working group as together they take part in investigating the current aims of the school. Each group investigates one of the aims identified from the previous years' collaborations. Each working group carries out their own 'spiral of inquiry' with six key stages: scanning, focusing, developing a hunch, new professional learning, taking action, and checking that a big enough difference has been made.<sup>6</sup> At each stage in the spiral, three questions are asked: What is going on for learners – adults and children? How do we know? Why does this matter? Staff throughout the school contribute to the whole, they are all part of the process, they are not dictated to. They know what their job is and why it looks the way it does.

'Collaborative professionalism' is a phrase that can be applied to this way of working.<sup>7</sup> Andy Hargreaves and Robert O'Connor, in their book of the same name, identify 10 tenets, or principles that occur when collaborative professionalism takes place. Auditing a school using these tenets provides further evidence of the depth inclusion is penetrating a particular school or educational establishment.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 3: The 10 tenets of collaborative professionalism<sup>9</sup>



As a result of working in this way, staff more fully understand the children they are working with. Relationships between staff are strong, as are relationships between staff, the children and their families. Staff regularly ask the children who believes that they will be successful in life and how school can support them with their learning.<sup>10</sup> Teachers ask the children about the hunches they have about their classes, so that together they can make improvements for all.

## **Families**

Families are welcomed into school, and they are informed and confident in their school. They contribute in different ways to the whole – via class representation and through different forums and groups – health and safety, wellbeing, PTA events, the governing body. They know their contributions are welcome and are acted upon. They feel confident to talk to school about anything.

They encourage children's participation on trips, assisting when they can, contributing financially to enable others to participate. They enjoy the facilities available to them – the grounds are open after school to connect with others and make new friends. The library is open too, to read together in a comfortable space and borrow books to take away and enjoy at home. Families support each other, sharing time and resources. Families and staff enjoy mutually beneficial connections.

## **Community**

The community is proud of its school. It is a place where all are welcomed, where diversity is celebrated, and everyone aims to help everyone do their best. The grounds and buildings are used each evening, each weekend and during the holidays. The local community works alongside the school on different projects and initiatives, each one building up the other. Different age groups and representative parts of the community are equally involved in this process. Wellbeing is a high priority and draws in other groups from the locality. Local charities also play their part, enabling and enhancing the work with mutually beneficial outcomes.

## **External friends**

Inclusion makes good use of external friends, again in mutually beneficial ways. External friends include other schools and educational establishments – locally, nationally, internationally. Other friends include those from academia, health, social care, industry and commerce. School is not an island, but an essential part of an integrated whole.

Friends from academia come and learn, school learns from them – bridges are made, and knowledge and trust pass across from one to another. Staff are supported to analyse and reflect upon practice; changes are made because of a deeper understanding

of what is needed. Papers are written, expertise is shared and acknowledged. Others come and learn.

The children have many different and additional needs, which in turn mobilise additional rights. All have access to specialist support, in its many forms, which is welcomed onsite as the children thrive and achieve alongside their peers. Staff work in conjunction with these specialist friends and organisations, increasing their own knowledge and expertise, alongside the specialist support staff increasing their own understanding of what school is. Family life is enhanced because school and other agencies work together for the good and wellbeing of their children.

## **The children**

The children are the focus of inclusion. They are the reason school exists. However, a fully functioning school benefits all who are involved; all are better because of it.

- When staff work in the manner described here, the children benefit.
- When families are included in the manner shown here, the children benefit.
- When the community is involved in supporting family life and wellbeing of staff, the children benefit.
- When external friends are brought into the life of a school, the children benefit.

The arts-in-nature charity ‘Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination’ has worked with several schools on a project called, ‘ArtScapers’.<sup>11</sup> This led one school in Cambridge to transform its approach to outdoor learning, introducing ‘out and about’ time for everyone – with all children spending half a day outside every week throughout the year, being creative, whatever the weather. The project has since expanded further – Eco-Capabilities and Amplifying ArtScapers, with many more schools benefiting.<sup>12</sup> Professor Nicola Walshe, based at the new Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education at University College London (UCL), wrote in 2019 that the Eco-Capabilities project found: ‘Artscaping practice developed the following eco-capabilities in children: autonomy; bodily integrity and safety; individuality; mental and emotional wellbeing; relationality: human/nonhuman relations; senses and imagination; and spirituality. Together, these improved children’s wellbeing’.<sup>13</sup>

The table opposite highlights these different pathways of inclusion and the benefits for the children and young people they engage with.

Inclusion means everybody. Everybody must have their voice heard. Everyone must listen to everyone else. Hierarchical and competitive environments are to be avoided because they inherently bolster exclusionary forces/attitudes/outcomes. People feeling vulnerable is not acceptable. Inclusion needs collaborative practices at its heart with a desire that everyone is to be regarded as a part of the whole.<sup>14</sup>

Table 1: Pathways and benefits of inclusion

| Stakeholder        | Pathways of inclusion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Benefits to children                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Stakeholder</b> | <b>Pathways of inclusion</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Benefits to children</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Staff              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethos and aims of school agreed collaboratively.</li> <li>• All staff understand and work towards current aims of school.</li> <li>• All staff appraised appropriately and improve professionally.</li> <li>• Relationships between staff, families, the community and the children are strong and mutually beneficial.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children attend a school that fully understands what is needed for all to learn.</li> <li>• Children have staff who take their own professional learning very seriously.</li> <li>• Children have staff who work collaboratively together for the good of the whole.</li> <li>• Children attend a school that their family and their local community believes in and is very proud of.</li> </ul>                      |
| Families           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families are fully welcomed.</li> <li>• Families form an integral part of different groups and forums.</li> <li>• Families' opinions are both sought and valued.</li> <li>• Families learn alongside their children.</li> <li>• Families make use of school spaces and make lifelong connections with others.</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because their family is proud of their school, they are proud too and confidently attend.</li> <li>• They learn alongside their family.</li> <li>• They make friends with others and their families, which are often lifelong.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Community          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The community is proud of its school.</li> <li>• The community is fully involved in helping everyone be/do their best.</li> <li>• The community works with others to achieve this.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The children are proud of their school and know this is supported by the community in which they live.</li> <li>• The children know that the community is helping them to achieve in lots of different ways.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| External friends   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion makes use of external friends, in mutually beneficial ways.</li> <li>• External friends involve those from many different areas of life, including academia, health, social care, industry and commerce.</li> <li>• Staff expertise is increased.</li> <li>• Family life is enhanced.</li> </ul>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The children know that friends from elsewhere are also helping them to achieve in lots of different ways as they learn to be members of the world in their own right.</li> <li>• The children can see that these friends are also helping the staff to do their job well and the staff are also helping these friends.</li> <li>• The children can see that these friends are also supporting their family.</li> </ul> |

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# STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

## School structures: confronting the ‘Thing’

*Melanie Griffiths*

### **The good old days?**

The early 19th century radical William Cobbett faced a world of corrupt elites, inadequate policies and deficient institutions, the sort of tangled mess that we see today in the English education system. He called it the ‘Thing’. Reformers like him understood that it was time to sweep away the old ways and create more democratic and accountable forms of local and national government that could take on powerful vested interests. So reform of education and public policy in general was very much about building new structures that answered to the needs of citizens. Over many decades this had resulted in an education system by the 1980s that, while still imperfect, was coming closer to the sorts of ideals supported by the British Left.

Then came the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and all that has followed after, literally reversing progress that had been achieved.<sup>1</sup> Like Cobbett, socialist educational campaigners are faced with a new ‘thing’. So the question is, how can we untangle the mess? To help answer that, it’s necessary to first understand what structures existed before 1988 and why reactionary neoliberals like Thatcher and her successors were so keen to ‘marketise’ it. And to essentially ‘privatise’ what were, in the proper sense of the word, ‘public’ schools.

The 1944 Education Act introduced free secondary education for all. It set out a national system of education which included all state-funded schools. This national system was locally administered through local education authorities and allowed for a high degree of professional teacher autonomy. Although the tripartite selective system dominated at this time, it was not compulsory. Over time, especially after the election of the 1964 Labour government whose manifesto pledge was to reorganise secondary education on ‘comprehensive lines’, more and more local authorities converted schools into comprehensive schools.

So up until the late 1980s, the education system had been evolving towards a more inclusive, comprehensive and democratic model. It was by no means perfect. It had some considerable way to go to be an inclusive national education service, responsive to the needs of all learners and truly accountable to the public. But the pre-1988 structural organisation model of education, with improvements and properly targeted funding,

could have delivered. The baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. The structures that were in place pre-1988 were not the problem. Funding arrangements, standard assessment tests (SATs), league tables, Ofsted and so-called 'parental choice' are now the real impediments.

If we unpick the changes to the education system over the last 40 years, it becomes clear that the structural changes made to the state education system go much deeper than just academisation (the process whereby schools are taken totally out of local authority oversight and handed to unaccountable trusts, responsible only to the secretary of state for education). It was the ERA which began the centralisation of education, taking education away from local control and removing teachers' professional input into the curriculum, teaching methods and examinations.

Before the 1990s, the local education authority (LEA) was the employer of staff in schools and central service staff. But from the late 1980s, many of the powers, funding and responsibilities were transferred from LEAs to headteachers. The justification for this change was 'freedom' for schools to spend money as they saw fit, unshackling headteachers from the bureaucracy of the local authority. This, it was argued, would allow individual schools to better meet the needs of their pupils and target money more efficiently. The funds given to schools were deducted from local authority budgets.

Once headteachers were given control of schools' budgets, and the 'opportunity' to opt out of using local authority-provided services, outsourcing in education began. The business model operated by private companies offering cheaper but often poorer services relied on cutting employee conditions and wages to boost profitability. Local authorities couldn't compete.

This change to the way money was provided for central services had a devastating effect on local authorities. Once a certain tipping point was reached, it was no longer viable to provide many school services. LAs could no longer be sure of finances year to year, as funding only came in from schools who decided to buy services from them and not the cheaper private companies. Inevitably, over time central services diminished, central service staff were made redundant, years of capacity, experience and expertise lost. As LAs were no longer offering the support and services they once had, this made it much easier to convince schools to opt-out entirely, become semi-privatised academies and join unaccountable multi-academy trusts.

Funding changes have had a twofold effect. They have marginalised local authorities and made schools into businesses. The more recent legislation introducing academy trusts into the mix is merely the tip of the iceberg. All schools compete for pupils and funding with other local schools. School structures have been deliberately built around the claim that schools would be forced to improve by introducing competition. Schools were made accountable to 'stakeholders' with the introduction of league tables, Ofsted and 'parental choice'. From 1988, funding to individual schools became based much

more on how many pupils enrolled in that school, rather than actual costs. As the schools with better reputations for academic success are more popular with parents, this has meant that there is now a pressure on schools to tailor the curriculum to maximise exam results and concentrate resources on the students most likely to achieve.

Whatever the faults of the old system – and there were many – it created a precedent and real opportunities to move forward. Education reformers can clearly learn from them and then apply those lessons to recast the system in the interests of the many not the few. So it is puzzling why the current leaders of the Labour Party have clearly set their face against far-reaching structural reform and instead endlessly repeat the ‘standards not structures’ mantra.

### **Standards and structures – a false distinction**

In November 2020, Wes Streeting, who was then briefly shadow schools minister, said: ‘In my constituency I’ve got local authority schools, free schools, academies, I’ve got a grammar school, I’ve got independent schools that aren’t far away – and the interesting thing is, whether I am walking into a local authority school or a free school or an academy, the name above the door matters less than what goes on inside the building.’<sup>2</sup> This sentiment was echoed by Kate Green in her response to the Queen’s speech as shadow education secretary in 2021 where she said ‘most parents don’t care about the structure of their children’s school – and they are right. It’s not structure that determines a school’s performance, but high-quality teaching and excellent school leadership’.<sup>3</sup>

But Wes, Kate and many other politicians who have professed to understand what is needed in education are wrong. The organisational structure of the education system really does matter. That’s why successive neoliberal governments have spent years changing those structures. Structures are fundamental to the establishment of a truly comprehensive education system, and without proper local democratic oversight the public can’t know or influence what does go on inside any school building.

If parents could see what was going on inside school buildings, they would see that by centrally controlling so-called ‘standards’ through Ofsted, innovation, cooperation and teacher professionalism have been stifled. Forcing schools to compete against each other, for example by linking funding to pupil numbers rather than need and by introducing league tables and so-called ‘parental choice’, has meant that the curriculum is often tailored to maximise results rather than actually providing a balanced and satisfying educational experience. They would see that deregulation means that headteachers and CEOs cut costs by employing cheap, inexperienced or unqualified ‘teachers’. Meanwhile, funds meant for frontline educational services are actually wasted on excessive ‘benefits’ for school managers or consultants providing services privately to schools which could easily be provided inhouse through local authority-organised provision.

The fact is, the next Labour government is now committed to following the same basic policies as the Tories, within the same failed structures. They have, therefore, decided to uphold what Terry Wrigley called in his 2007 Caroline Benn memorial lecture, ‘a strange hybrid of centralised control and local market competition’.<sup>4</sup> But it doesn’t have to be this way.

## **Back to the future**

The structural change now needed to realise the vision of an inclusive comprehensive system must learn the lessons from the past and return to the positive features of the English education system that existed before the 1988 Education Act. To do that will require much thought and debate, but here are a few ideas on what needs to be done.

1. Reverse academisation, breaking up all academy trusts.<sup>5</sup> End grammar schools.<sup>6</sup> All state-funded schools need to be brought back into a unified, fully comprehensive system. Schools should be facilitated and overseen by their local council. Democratise the local authority and the workplace. Education workers, especially classroom teachers, have a unique contribution to make to the school decision-making process and school structures should facilitate this. Schools should be facilitated to move away from the CEO and tick-box model and become vibrant, innovative workplaces where teachers’ professionalism is respected and used. Governing bodies should be truly representative of the school community and have genuine oversight of the work going on in individual schools, supported by a well-resourced and expert local education authority.
2. Adequate and needs-based funding should be made available to local councils to provide central services – cleaners, cooks, advisory teachers, caretakers, educational psychologists, supply teachers, extended schools programmes,<sup>7</sup> payroll and personnel services, IT support and so on. These arrangements would encourage fair recruitment practices and ensure that staff are suitably qualified and fairly paid. Headteachers would be freed to concentrate on providing a good educational experience and not balancing books.
3. Councils should have responsibility for school admissions. Abolish league tables, SATs, Ofsted. Re-establish teacher professionalism. Teachers need to be free to use their professional skills to tailor the curriculum and individual lessons to engage pupils in the educational experience, allowing children to develop at their own pace, not to fit some arbitrary target-driven culture. The inspection system should be supportive not punitive.
4. The charitable status awarded to private schools should be withdrawn in addition to introducing VAT on school fees. Policies should be implemented to get rid of

the advantages these schools convey to their pupils. Private schools are totally at odds with any inclusive, comprehensive and democratic model of education, and one of the main means of reproducing inequality. They are businesses that rely on tax privileges to trade profitably. If these privileges are removed, most will become insolvent. That will still leave elite schools such as Eton and Harrow, but the focus at this stage must be on taking state schools into full public ownership and democratic control, and ending the narrow target-driven experience state-school children are subjected to.

It may seem like an impossible task to undo the structural changes which should never have taken place. Like William Cobbett, we face a bewildering ‘thing’ that defies any easy solution. But it has to be done. In 2019, the Socialist Educational Association (SEA) published the document, ‘Restoring a democratically accountable school system’ where it set out the first steps an incoming Labour government could take to reset school structures, and bring all state-funded schools back into the oversight of elected local authorities.<sup>8</sup> The document argues for real local accountability and the setting up of local authority education committees or boards empowering councillors and elected representatives of staff, learners and members of the wider community ‘to fully participate in decision-making’. If implemented, these committees or boards would be a great first step.

But the root problems can be traced back to the structure of school governance and procurement created by the 1988 Act. Any reforming government would need to build on the work instigated by the SEA and plan how to develop, fund and empower truly democratically accountable local authorities so that they can again provide school services, meaning schools would no longer need to buy in services from private companies. It will be a mammoth task. It will require funding, training and resource allocation so that local authorities can once again build up the skills and expertise needed.

For it to succeed, educational radicals have to look at the world beyond the classroom and the school. Nothing less than a thoroughgoing revolution in the way local government operates and is funded is now needed.<sup>9</sup> Education reform has to be placed in that wider project of local democratic renewal. The current political elites, whether Tory, Labour or anyone else, are singing from the same song sheet on education. Things can change for the better – modern history shows it – but only if we are willing to honestly confront the ‘thing’.

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# STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

## Governance of schools: current issues and an alternative vision

*Anne West and David Wolfe*

### Introduction

School-based education has been transformed since 2010 by the massive increase in academies – schools outside local authority (LA) control, funded directly by central government. In 2010, LAs ‘maintained’ most secondary schools which were run by statutory school governing bodies. By January 2023, 80 per cent of secondary schools and 40 per cent of primary schools were academies.<sup>1</sup> The school system thus comprises locally administered maintained schools and centrally controlled academies.

Significantly, the governance arrangements for maintained schools and academies vary (and differ between academies). Noting this fragmentation, we consider how the school system might operate more coherently to increase equality of opportunity and enhance local democratic involvement. First, we provide an overview of the development of academies; second, an overview of school governance; third, an outline of concerns in specific areas of governance; and finally, proposals for the future.

### Development of academies

Academies were first introduced by the Labour government in the early 2000s, building on city technology colleges introduced by the Conservative government in the late 1980s. Those early academies normally replaced schools Ofsted considered failing. Known as ‘sponsored academies’, they comprised six per cent of secondary schools by the 2010 general election. Following the Academies Act 2010, maintained schools could apply to the Department for Education (DfE) to convert to academy status – with financial incentives – and become ‘converter academies’.<sup>2</sup>

Academies, in law, are ‘independent schools’ run by not-for-profit private trusts (exempt charities); they are registered as companies with Companies House and subject to both company and charity law. They are controlled and funded directly by central government via a contract, or ‘funding agreement’, between the trust and the secretary of state for education. Each trust can run a single academy under contract (a single academy trust, SAT), or many academies (a multi-academy trust, MAT) under a single contract.

Academies have a number of legal ‘freedoms’: they do not have to follow the national

curriculum, nor recruit qualified schoolteachers; they are responsible for their own admissions; and they do not have to adhere to the statutory framework regarding teachers' pay and conditions of service.

## **Governance of school-based education: past and present**

In the decades following the 1944 Education Act, schools in England were largely controlled by local education authorities (LEAs), with school governing bodies typically comprising local politicians and/or church representatives. In the 1970s, the government-commissioned Taylor Report (1977) proposed a 'stakeholder' approach to school governance with LEAs, the staff, the parents of children attending the school, and the local community being represented on the governing body. The rationale was that the stakeholders had a 'common interest in the welfare of the school'<sup>3</sup> with LAs having wider knowledge of their local communities.<sup>4</sup>

The 1986 Education Act (No 2) established school governing bodies as freestanding legal entities. The governing body runs maintained schools with oversight by the maintaining LA.<sup>5</sup> The governance of academy trusts is more complex. Academy trusts are founded by members, who can be appointed by a foundation/sponsor body, a church diocese or existing members. The members typically have no term of office, except in the case of Church of England (CofE) or Catholic trusts. Members can (but do not necessarily) appoint academy trustees and remove trustees.<sup>6</sup>

The trust board is the academy trust's decision-making body and is responsible for all academies in the trust. In a SAT, the trust board runs the school. In the case of a MAT, the trust board may (but does not need to) establish one or more local governing bodies (LGBs) to oversee an academy/group of academies. The trust board may delegate certain responsibilities to the executive leader. In a SAT, the executive leader is the principal or headteacher and in a MAT, the chief executive officer (CEO) or equivalent who heads the management team.<sup>7</sup> MATs are hierarchical, with the CEO overseeing the work of headteachers of its schools.<sup>8</sup>

School-level governance varies. The governing bodies of maintained schools and the trust boards of SATs are freestanding legal entities and responsible for running the school. For schools that are part of MATs, the trust board is the legal entity. The LGB (if one exists) may on the surface resemble a maintained school's governing body, but both its legal status and decision-making ability differ significantly. Although there is much leeway for non-religious MATs regarding local governing bodies, there are specific arrangements regarding CofE and Catholic schools; in particular, each academy within the MAT must have a governing body composed as would be the case in a voluntary-aided (faith, maintained) school. However, the MAT trustees decide what powers should be exercised by the LGB. So, although ostensibly similar to a voluntary-aided school,

a school in a church-run MAT that converts from a voluntary-aided school will in all likelihood see a shift of power away from teachers, parents and the local community, towards the church.<sup>9</sup>

Overall control in an academy lies with the trust board and can extend to the appointment of governors for LGBs, the appointment of the LGB chair and the appointment of academy headteachers.<sup>10</sup> This situation is in marked contrast to that in maintained schools where the governing body is responsible for deciding the school budget, the appointment of governors and the appointment of staff, including the headteacher.

### **Specific areas of governance**

Turning to specific areas of governance, admissions policies are the responsibility of the LA in the case of maintained community (and voluntary-controlled) schools, the school governing body in the case of voluntary-aided schools and the trust board in the case of SATs and MATS. Admissions are a key ‘freedom’ of academy trusts, and two surveys have found that over a fifth of academies reported that they had changed their admissions criteria.<sup>11</sup> In a qualitative study of secondary schools it was found that admissions arrangements were, in some cases, in line with those of maintained community schools in the area, but in others the interests of the trust board were prioritised over the interests of children in the local area.<sup>12</sup>

The curriculum is the responsibility of the school governing body of maintained schools and the trust board of SATs and MATs. Academies are required to offer a balanced and broadly based curriculum. SATs have autonomy over the curriculum within the parameters of their funding agreement, but schools *within* a MAT do not necessarily have such autonomy.<sup>13</sup> West and her co-authors found that the curriculum in academy trusts was generally aligned with the national curriculum regarding the subjects taught.<sup>14</sup>

Decisions regarding maintained schools are taken by local authorities and overseen by elected local councillors who operate in meetings subject to ‘public participation’ obligations, with minutes regarding decisions made publicly available. However, decisions for academies are taken by the trust board and there is no similar obligation. Moreover, regional directors (civil servants) acting on behalf of the secretary of state for education make decisions about academies without any local democratic oversight or requirement for open process.<sup>15</sup> Research has found that regional directors have pressured MATs with a more decentralised model to develop more hierarchical, corporate models.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of public process regarding academy trusts raises a range of issues, including use of public resources. Academy trusts are responsible for setting the salaries of their

staff and are not bound by the school teachers pay and conditions statutory framework. The House of Commons committee of public accounts in 2018 expressed concerns that some academy trusts appeared to be paying excessive salaries using public money.<sup>17</sup>

There are also differences regarding information that must be publicly available – and on school websites – between maintained schools and academies (and between different academies), making it difficult for parents and other stakeholders to make comparisons between schools of different types.<sup>18</sup>

## **Implications for policy and options for the future**

Several implications for policy emerge from our findings and from the overall observation that the current, highly fragmented, system leads to inconsistency, incoherence and lack of transparency in the way schools are governed, and by whom. Who makes what major management decisions, and how. Who sets the budget? Who appoints the headteacher? Who decides the curriculum? Who makes the school policies? Who deals with complaints? Who deals with school exclusions? Further, how are these decisions made? Where can information about their decisions be found (if at all)?

First, a common rulebook for all state-funded schools would ensure that there is less fragmentation across different school types, which would aid parents and other stakeholders.<sup>19</sup>

Second, a stakeholder model of governance for academy trusts and any LGB – including parents, staff, the LA and wider community – would provide representation of key stakeholders. In line with 1977 Taylor Report, we argue that there is a strong case for all state-funded schools to have local governing bodies with clear powers and responsibilities. These powers could include the appointment of the headteacher, responsibility for the budget and for curriculum, giving all schools a similar level of autonomy to that of maintained schools. This, we argue, acknowledges the importance of not only the school as an institution, but also the pupils, teachers, parents and community it serves.<sup>20</sup>

Third, minutes and decisions made at school level should be available for all state-funded schools to ensure public oversight of the decision-making process, especially as regards expenditure given that schools are funded by the taxpayer.

Fourth, admissions arrangements for academy trusts, including oversubscription criteria, should be simplified to overcome the current complexity. They should be agreed at a local level and then administered by the LA on behalf of all schools, as schools have a vested interest in the mix of pupils recruited. Moreover, the Local Government Ombudsman should have jurisdiction in relation to admission and exclusion panels run by academy trusts, as in the case of maintained schools, so that parents applying for a place for their child at an academy or whose child has been excluded from an academy

have access to this form of redress.<sup>21</sup>

Fifth, as regards the curriculum, there would seem to be a *prima facie* case for all schools to teach broadly the same curriculum. If the national curriculum is not followed, pupils may not have the same subsequent opportunities as those in schools that follow the national curriculum.

Sixth, in terms of staff qualifications, pay and conditions of service, there would also seem to be a *prima facie* case for the requirements to be the same for all schools, again to ensure equality of opportunity in the education provided to pupils.<sup>22</sup> If pupils are taught by unqualified teachers, their learning experiences may be of a lower quality than if taught by qualified teachers.

However, in addition to these changes to the ‘rules’ governing academies (and maintained schools), we argue that structural changes to governance are also necessary to improve the coherence of the system and restore school autonomy.

## **Structural changes to the school-based education system**

### *Option 1*

One option would be for wholesale statutory conversion of academies to maintained community or voluntary-aided schools.<sup>23</sup> However, in the short term this would in all likelihood create significant upheaval and – given the loss of LA capacity – be hard to achieve.

### *Option 2*

An alternative approach would be for a scheme of delegation to be imposed on all MATs: they would continue to be the bodies that contracted with the secretary of state. However, they could be required to pass to local governing bodies, the power to (say) decide how the budget for the individual schools in the trust is allocated. At present the distribution of funds to schools that are part of a MAT is opaque. That would at least ensure that a significant degree of school-based management was restored.

### *Option 3*

Our third proposal is for each school to be restored to being a freestanding legal entity as part of a statutory over-ride of funding agreements, each with its own mandatory local governing body. Each school as a freestanding legal entity would be required to engage with either an LA or a MAT and choose which powers to pass over to the MAT or the LA with which it chooses to forge a relationship.

Once a school was its own legal entity it would have choices:

1. It could choose oversight by a MAT: it could remain with the MAT or contract with another MAT.

2. It could choose oversight by the LA (which would restore links with the LA). In this case the contract would be between the individual school and the LA.
3. It could convert to a maintained school. At present, the only way an academy can become a maintained school again is for it to close and then for the local authority to open a new maintained school. Wolfe has proposed that returning academies could use the voluntary-aided school legal model (which, though often associated with faith schools, need not be).<sup>24</sup> Voluntary-aided schools, like academies, own or lease their own premises, so any conversion would not be associated with potentially expensive property transfer.

Provision would be made for schools to be able to switch from one superordinate body, subject to constraints to ensure short-term stability.

In conclusion, these proposals provide different approaches to pursuing the goal of a more coherent school-based education system. Each has particular merits, but in each case there would be more autonomy – if not control – at school level.

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# STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

## Ofsted and beyond

*Mary Bousted*

It has been long time coming ... but the end of Ofsted in its current form is now hovering into sight. Finally, the inspectorate's reputation as a valid and reliable schools' regulator has ebbed away – battered by research findings which demonstrate that it cannot credibly demonstrate either essential quality.

For decades Ofsted has enjoyed the political support of Labour, Conservative and Coalition governments alike. The regulator has been unassailable – even as the evidence began to mount of its toxic influence on the teaching profession and the education children receive in schools. Ministers and civil servants would agree in private conversation that, yes, Ofsted pressure led to unsustainable workloads for teachers and leaders and was a prime cause of their leaving the profession. They would accept that the pressure to meet the expected data metrics, so integral to Ofsted's judgements on school quality, narrowed the curriculum and led to teaching to the test. But, they would sigh, their hands were tied. Ofsted was too well known, too powerful and largely immune from criticism.

Gradually, however, over the last 10 or so years, Ofsted's impunity has begun to wane.

Initial questions were raised about what value the regulator was adding in addition to school data. With Ofsted judgements so closely fixed to school data measured by national tests (primary) and external exams (secondary), what were the added insights into school quality that Ofsted was giving?

Ofsted's decision to cease publication of evidence papers added to the force of that fundamental question.

And so began Ofsted's 10-year quest for an inspection framework which was valid – that is, it was a true judgement of a school's educational quality – and reliable – that is, that there could be confidence that schools would, largely, be awarded the same grades by different inspection teams.

In 2019 Ofsted did a startling U-turn away from examining school data towards a focus on a school's curriculum. Ofsted admitted that its previous inspection frameworks supported the enforcement of negative educational practices – in itself an admission that its judgements were invalid because they measured the wrong things. In a startling admission for an agency which might have 'never apologise, never explain' as a strap line, the chief inspector, Amanda Spielman admitted:

For our part, it is clear that as an inspectorate we have not placed enough emphasis on the curriculum. For a long time, our inspections have looked hardest at outcomes, placing too much weight on test and exam results when we consider the overall effectiveness of schools. This has increased pressure on school leaders, teachers and pupils alike to deliver test scores above all else.<sup>1</sup>

## **Much surveillance, little trust**

National Education Union (NEU) membership polling clearly demonstrates the extent to which Ofsted dominates the workload of leaders and teachers. Teachers and leaders in focus groups report the monitoring activities they are subject to in schools, information that is used to create workload categories for wider polling of the membership who are asked what evidence they are required to submit to senior managers, and/or the monitoring activities they are required to engage in. Of teachers surveyed, 73 per cent report that they are required to provide reports on pupil progress and 52 per cent evidence of lesson planning and preparation; 77 per cent undergo lesson observations and 71 per cent are required to provide feedback to their pupils in predefined formats. The extent and amount of teacher surveillance is excessive and unusual by international standards. England comes second in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) league table in the volume of feedback received by teachers.<sup>2</sup> Quantity does not, however, mean quality. England comes at the lower end of the OECD league table for teachers who report that the feedback they receive has a positive impact on their practice. They feel done to, rather than done with. They feel that they work in a low-trust environment – and report low levels of self-efficacy, combined with very high levels of stress.<sup>3</sup>

Work intensity combined with low task discretion brings about high levels of work stress. Teachers are nearly twice as likely as other professionals to be working under high strain, a significant element of which is the fear engendered by Ofsted – which drives school leaders, whose professional reputations are so hugely affected by Ofsted judgements, to exercise inappropriate amounts of surveillance of their teachers. School leaders in England report that they spend less time supporting their teachers, and more (towards the top of the OECD league table) in ensuring that ‘teachers feel responsible for their students’ learning outcomes’.<sup>4</sup>

## **Raising standards? Measuring quality?**

So, how effective is Ofsted in raising school standards? How reliable and valid are its judgements? That is to say, if two inspection teams visited the same school, how comparable would be their inspection judgements?

And how valid are Ofsted inspections? That is to say, do inspection judgements

measure the quality of a school's education provision, or do they measure something else altogether?

The short, and shocking, answer to these fundamental questions is we simply do not know. And neither does Ofsted. Because, as Tom Richmond of the EDSK education thinktank notes: 'Since it was created over 25 years ago, Ofsted has not published any research to support the notion that their judgements on school accurately reflect the quality of education that a school provides'.<sup>5</sup>

Strangely, some would say, shockingly, given Ofsted's claim to assess the quality of education provided by a school, it has never produced any research on the quality of its own inspection judgements. Ofsted has no evidence to support its assertion that the grades it awards are an accurate reflection of the quality of the education being delivered in a school because it has no evidence of the extent to which its inspection practices measure education quality.

Because learning is something that happens internally, within pupils' heads, Ofsted relies on proxies for learning – lesson observations, and more recently work scrutiny – but has no evidence that these inspection practices, and the inspection judgements arising from them, do reflect teaching quality and pupil learning.

Presumably Ofsted regards every one of its frequently changing inspection frameworks as valid – and perhaps that is why it has done no research into what would appear to be a fundamental area of enquiry. What this does mean, however, is that Ofsted's strapline 'raising standards, improving lives' can only be described as an aspiration because it has no evidence, other than the judgements that it awards schools, that it is raising school standards. Ofsted's claims in this regard, based on the percentages of schools awarded 'outstanding' or 'good' grades, are entirely self-referential. There is no evidence that the increasing percentage of schools being awarded 'good' Ofsted grades correlates with an actual rise in educational standards. Whilst this might indeed be the case, it is equally possible that it might not. Indeed, that is the conclusion reached by the National Audit Office in its 2018 report on Ofsted, when it came to the remarkable finding that 'Ofsted did not know whether its school inspections were having the intended impact: to raise the standards of education and improve the quality of children's and young people's lives'.<sup>6</sup>

## **Poor-quality accountability has consequences**

Every public service and the professions which works within it must accept proper and thorough accountability in the absence of which very bad things can happen. Without proper accountability, poor professional practice can go unchecked; discrimination against particular service users can go undetected and unaddressed. As public servants, teachers and leaders must be accountable for the work that they do.

But teachers and leaders should have confidence that their work will be expertly judged; that the inspection grades will be reliable and not dependent on the inspection team that arrives at their school gate. They deserve the reassurance that their professional reputations will not rest on shaky foundations of inspectors' knowledge and understanding (or the lack thereof) of subjects and age/phases in which it is entirely possible that they have no teaching experience and poor subject knowledge.

The consequence of poor-quality accountability can be costed in appalling rates of recruitment and retention of teachers. The figures are shocking. Teacher recruitment has collapsed. The government missed its target for recruitment of new secondary school teachers by 41 per cent this year and by seven per cent for primary teachers.

But it is not just teacher recruitment which is in crisis. Ten new teachers have to be recruited for every six that leave the profession – on current levels of teacher retention, this is an impossible target. More teachers left the profession for reasons other than retirement in 2021/22 than at any other time on record. One in four teachers leave the profession within three years of qualification; a third within five years. One in eight teachers who qualified in summer 2021 had quit by the following year (November 2022).

The effect of the teacher supply crisis upon the quality of education that schools provide is profound. According to the DfE's own figures, vacancies have increased by 50 per cent since last year and have more than doubled since the previous year and before the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons for the crisis in teacher supply are multifaceted and complex, and include inadequate pay, poor working conditions in dilapidated schools and the lack of opportunities for flexible working; the effect that witnessing and dealing with endemic levels of child poverty has upon teacher wellbeing are significant reasons for teacher flight.

But excessive workload, the stress that brings and the lack of autonomy induced by excessive in-school monitoring are the issues that teachers themselves raise most strongly, and most often, when asked if they intend to remain in the profession. And teachers and leaders cite Ofsted as a major cause of intolerable stress, pressure and overwork.

## **Doing inspection differently**

There is now a consensus that inspection and accountability must be done differently.

Ofsted's impunity from criticism and challenge is now over as ideas and proposals for the reform of inspection abound. Proposals come from political parties, education commissions, thinktanks and unions.

Bridget Philipson, Labour's shadow secretary of state for education, has

announced that ‘Ofsted needs reform from top to bottom’. Labour has pledged to abolish single-grade judgements, to be replaced by a report card which will give parents a balanced view of a school’s strengths and areas for improvement across a range of its functions. This reform is also recommended by the Times Education Commission, which also proposed a new ‘school report card’ with a wider range of metrics, including wellbeing, school culture, inclusion and attendance to unleash the potential of schools.

Whilst the abolition of a single grade judgement and its replacement with a school report card would undoubtedly be a major improvement to the single grade, there is significant doubt as to whether the proposals are fundamental and radical enough to really tackle the weaknesses of the inspectorate and the damage that these inflict upon the profession and the quality of our schools.

Abolition of the single-grade judgement will not solve Ofsted’s proven lack of reliable and valid judgements. And unless Labour is ready (and this is vanishingly unlikely given the state of the public finances it will inherit) to hugely increase Ofsted’s budget, the problems caused by infrequent inspections with judgements that can be years out of date will still leave schools, and the teachers and leaders who work within them, under the power of an inspection agency in whom they have lost trust and confidence.

Other thinking on reform is focused on school self-evaluation. The NEU’s recent commission on inspection reform proposes a national system of school self-evaluation, conducted through a school performance review (SPR) based on a list of contents agreed at national level, but which schools can adapt according to context.<sup>8</sup> The SPR should prioritise children and staff mental health and wellbeing, a broad and balanced curriculum, inclusive and supportive practices, and a sense of belonging, i.e. a school environment where all can flourish personally and academically.

This process will be supported and validated by a school improvement partner (SIP) trained to support school leaders in evaluation and improvement, and appointed by the school’s governing body. The validated SPR will be published as an action plan. This will include areas of good practice that others can learn from. Ofsted, in the NEU’s proposals, will retain an inspectorate of HMIs who would focus on school system improvement and thematic and research reports.

One thing, to conclude, is clear. If the opinion polls are right, and a Labour government is elected, Ofsted will be reformed. The question to be considered, and debated, is not if, but how reform is to be done and what role will be defined for the inspectorate. On one point I am absolutely clear. Teachers must be involved in this debate and their professional views, based on their experience and expertise, must be influential in whatever form inspection and accountability takes in the future. The silencing of the profession’s voice has been hugely damaging to provision of education in England. We cannot allow that to happen again.

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# RETURNING TO HEALTH

## Framing a new common sense; the way forward for English public education

*Melissa Benn*

Taken together, the papers gathered here present a bleak picture of the current condition of England's public education. Despite the hard work, commitment and imagination of the overwhelming majority of teachers, leaders and support staff, these contributions illuminate the ways in which a sense of crisis has now seeped into almost every aspect of the early years and school experience. Yet those responsible for our broken system see English education today not as a failure but as a success – as one contributor on the ConservativeHome website wrote in December 2023, 'education reform is the single standout success of the last thirteen years of Conservative government'.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to this on-high, out-of-touch rhetoric, the lineaments of Conservative failure are now only too well understood on the ground. The concept of 'equality', as promoted by the political right, has been exposed over this past decade and a half to be a narrow, meritocratic version of the term: one which, in the words of Diane Reay, 'promises and promotes the language of social justice, yet replicates wider social and economic inequalities ... leaving many (working-class children) to internalise a sense of educational failure'. The democratic deficit now yawns worryingly wide, with power continuing to pass from once accountable local authorities to a driven, ideological centre which has enabled a range of third-party actors, from hedge fund billionaires to religious foundations to educational entrepreneurs. Teaching is slowly being reduced to a largely technical activity, forcing many to abandon the very perspectives and motives that made them want to be teachers in the first place: to give back to society, to help young people, to inspire love of a subject. In the words of Mary Bousted, 'teachers feel done to, rather than done with', while Alistair McConville eloquently encapsulates the cumulative effect of recent changes on the experience of learning itself: 'Depth and authenticity (have been) sacrificed to packageability and rankability'.

And yet the damaging reforms keep on coming. The recent market review of initial teacher training (sic) is only the latest example of increased centralised control and the turn-away from proven high-quality institutions to a range of untested educational entrepreneurs. As David Spendlove, professor of education at Manchester, recently somewhat ironically observed on X (formerly Twitter): 'The continual bypassing of knowledge & wisdom within the sector has been a feature of the last decade. New

players are repeatedly seen as the solution to imagining alternatives futures *as they are not hindered by the same knowledge & wisdom essential for sustainable solutions*' (my italics).

So what now? As we enter a crucial election year it is vital that we set out a progressive alternative to the current mainstream narrative, accompanied by detailed policies for change. It is particularly important that we move beyond critique or mere abstractions and make concrete what Erik Olin Wright calls a world of 'real utopias': visions of social transformation that are not only desirable but viable and achievable. Within these pages, *FORUM* readers will find many practical proposals and imaginative solutions that would take our schools in a far more positive direction.

At the heart of these proposals lies a radically different conception of education itself, and its place in human and social development: a contrasting view, certainly, of educational equality to that peddled by the current regime, which largely works to ensure that the children of an already materially comfortable and culturally privileged middle class, and a minority of disadvantaged children, may pass through the portals of selective universities to desirable graduate jobs, at the expense of the experience of the many. Genuine educational equality, which is, of course, inextricably bound up with genuine educational *quality*, is not served by a factory-style system of mass accreditation (with failure built in to its very algorithms), but is instead framed within broader notions of social justice rather than the much more narrow aims of social mobility. It would offer not the current system of patchy, privatised and prohibitively expensive childcare, but an authentic and enriching early years experience, of the kind that Peter Moss outlines in powerful detail. It would provide a good local school to every child, albeit employing a very different idea of 'good' to the new right, obsessed with the superficial markers of a largely vanished world: blazers and ties, silent corridors, constant competition. Every child deserves to attend a school with plentiful resources, a range of thoughtful educators and support services that can recognise and meet the needs of all learners. We must also leave behind the mistaken idea that it is the task of teachers to create job opportunity and reduce inequality within wider society: schools *cannot* be the principal drivers of structural change. That is the role of government.

As the *FORUM* Board's contribution on the purposes of education makes clear, we need to reinstate the idea of education as a public good, not as a means to promote private economic advantage. Education 'affords a way of being free: that is, a way of bestowing meaning on existence'. Schooling is about far more than gaining a certificate in a handful of so-called academic subjects; it has far greater individual, societal and environmental purposes; these include helping every young person to fulfil their own talents and potential, to develop their capacities as citizens, and to contribute to long-term sustainability. Young people should be encouraged to question, rather than to submit to, all forms of designated authority.

How will this be done? John White cogently explains why the current national

curriculum is not fit for purpose, acting instead as a ‘collection of mainly traditional school subjects – a notion that has been with us since the 19th century’. In its place, he begins the task of thinking through, with the help of several distinguished educational philosophers, the possible larger aims of a different programme for learning, emphasising the importance of encouraging personal flourishing, participation as a citizen, self-governance and economic participation, with young people helped to develop a discerning view of social media and act responsibly to protect the planet. White also proposes that the content of any future national curriculum be taken out of the hands of politicians and placed with a body made up of representatives from across the educational world, as well as elected members of the public. In order to eliminate the increasingly dangerous quick-fix approach to policymaking, this body would be entrusted to produce a long-term plan.

Patrick Yarker’s contribution raises one of the most important, and yet rarely questioned, facets of English education: the ‘slippery eel’ of the ability discourse. Our entire system functions on the acceptance of largely a priori decisions regarding a child’s supposed potential: labels affixed, too early on, are the result of narrow testing and adult judgements that tend to confirm the existing advantages and disadvantages of social class. At its heart, the idea of ‘ability’ justifies a pessimistic or fatalistic view of what the young person may achieve. It denies, says Yarker:

An optimistic conception of human educability, and any approach to teaching this inspires ... Only an approach to the structuring of the education system which emancipates teachers from the constraints of high-stakes public testing, a coercive and punitive inspection regime, and the currently dominant nostrums of ‘deliverology’, can hope to enable the wholesale shift in thinking ultimately required to supersede the ‘ability’ discourse.

Meanwhile, in an era of rising exclusions and crisis levels of pupil absence following the pandemic, Paula Aycliffe lays out a roadmap for what true inclusion – ‘an ethic of everybody’ – looks like: one which involves constant collaboration, and dialogue, between staff, families, pupils and the wider school community.

One of the most urgent problems currently facing our system is the crisis in recruitment and retention of teachers, both of which are at an historic low. According to former NEU leader Mary Bousted, most teachers now ‘feel that they work in a low-trust environment – [with] low levels of self-efficacy, combined with very high levels of stress’. It is time for a fresh model of teaching, one which draws on the most thoughtful practice from around the world. Viv Ellis makes a powerful case for the re-professionalisation of teaching, one which recruits and produces highly educated individuals – rather than trained and controlled technicians – who are expected to think and act autonomously throughout their school careers and to continuously

shape and reshape their own pedagogy.

And what of a school's place within its wider community? A local primary or secondary should not have to present itself as a 'brand' product, these days often operating as part of a successful chain, setting itself up against other local 'educational businesses'. Schools, like health centres, need to be securely rooted within a locality; they are foundational social institutions, fostering connections between, and providing support to, surrounding communities.

We know that many schools played this role *perforce* during the pandemic, offering a refuge and place of continuity for many pupils and their families. For all these reasons, Mel Griffiths argues for a return of the educational functions of local authorities, granted the powers and funds to build, shape and oversee education in their areas, being accountable for their decisions. Local authorities should have the right, as they once did, to open a school in their area; to balance the interests of all against the inevitably vocal few. Schools could once again serve a wider function, with classrooms opened up, in the evenings and weekends, to adults who want to return to learning; places where art and music and drama can be enjoyed by anyone. Before the decimation of adult education, many primaries and secondaries were host to (free) evening classes. The extended schools programme, initiated in 2003 under New Labour but phased out by the Coalition, allowed many schools to provide before- and after-school childcare, support services for parents, homework clubs, sporting and cultural enrichment programmes. Prior to austerity, numerous local councils also ran borough-wide services in the music and the arts. Most of these have now, tragically, disappeared.

We come now to the nitty-gritty: the *how* of change. Yes, we are witnessing unprecedented challenges in education, as we are throughout our public services, and there are indeed more than enough 'good ideas lying around' for a bold and determined government to put into practice. But with who and what do we need to engage, in the short- and long-term, using what arguments and processes, in order to bring about positive change? How will we reverse the structural upheavals of recent decades, and disrupt the stale and damaging consensus that has developed across the political class about what a good education looks like?

It has to be acknowledged that we face an array of formidable opponents, many currently holding the reins of power, with a strong and sincere conviction concerning the efficacy of their model. Mass academisation, the introduction of free schools and the growth of powerful multi-academy trusts have changed our system in profound ways. A new generation of educational entrepreneurs – individuals and groups with significant capital and myriad connections within the elite – have increasingly stepped into the role forcibly vacated by the state, hollowing out the personnel and long-held expertise of national and local government, forms of knowledge and experience it is hard to recreate once they have been lost. Too many of those now running English education subscribe

to the familiar mix of retro-traditionalism and soft marketisation (the latter enabling the former) that has remodelled our schools to resemble a diluted, but under-resourced, version of private and grammar schools of old. Meanwhile, numerous contemporary well-resourced private schools have developed in more creative directions.

Government supporters, as we have seen, speak often of ‘education reform as the single standout success’ of the last 15 years. Most of the mainstream print and broadcast media have signed up to this official story. ‘The strange success of England’s school policy’ claimed *The Economist* recently.<sup>2</sup> The Times Education Commission came to a similar, if more qualified, judgement in its 2022 report.<sup>3</sup> The media rarely attempt to unpick or redefine what the government claims the key issues in education to be, nor to move far from an obsessive interest in the same old topics, such as Oxbridge admissions or the fate of the private sector. Recent coverage of Labour’s plans to add VAT to private school fees has been continuous, hostile and often little short of hysterical.

These may be some of the reasons why we are told that education is not a top priority for many voters, many of whom, of course, have far more pressing problems to concern them, including rampant inflation, rising mortgages and unaffordable heating bills. Some may find it hard to refute near-constant official pronouncements on the improvement of education under the Conservatives. For many families, their main concern may be just to get on and work the current system as best they can, trying to get their child into one of the so-called ‘best’ schools. Those left with no choice but to send their children to a so-called ‘worse’ school (the inevitable casualty of a system based on competition not universal high-quality provision) are simply deemed to be without sufficient ‘aspiration’.

Some might argue that the principal job of reformers is to press the main party of opposition to adopt a more progressive policy. Polling shows that parents are consistently unhappy with the spending cuts of recent years and would welcome greater investment in state education. However, the Labour Party currently displays a deep, realist caution on both public spending and the wider policy front. It has no plans to reverse, or in any way substantially reform, mass academisation, nor to phase out the historic injustice of the 11-plus, which still continues in several areas of the country.

Why, many ask, is Labour not bolder, particularly given the party’s historic role in introducing comprehensive education? There are several reasons. First, while most of the Labour front bench are state-educated (in marked contrast to the Conservative cabinet) they are of a generation far distant from the ideas, individuals and movements that led to such momentous reform in the 1960s and 1970s; they appear to have little interest in the rich, complex history of education nor to recognise, publicly at least, the major achievements of earlier Labour governments. Second, their greater understanding of, and sensitivity to, the challenges of those currently working in our schools seems only to reinforce their caution. Unlike the Coalition, which took power

in 2010 with a kind of ‘ruling class’ arrogance that led to a decade of reckless structural upheaval, Labour argues that professional exhaustion with change is a reason to go slowly. Third, reform of internal Labour Party processes has stymied the chance of radical ideas, emerging from the party’s rank and file, making it into official policy. Centralisation of decision-making appears to have become habit-forming across the political class. The Labour leadership has also ensured that most candidates with policies that run counter to its prevailing ‘safety first’ approach have not been selected; motions considered problematic do not get debated at annual conference, and those that have been passed are routinely filed away and ignored. The end result? In the words of John White, ‘Labour is scarcely challenging the status quo’. The party appears to take most of the current education landscape as inevitable and is more concerned to ‘mark’ (as in closely follow, offer critique and affect small variations in) government policy than to offer fundamental alternatives.

However, history teaches us that radical change rarely emerges from policy papers or the fierce personal determination of one or two politicians (although these undoubtedly help), and that most political parties are supremely, if belatedly, sensitive to collective and public pressure. Comprehensive reform emerged in response to mass parental uproar at the grammar/secondary modern divide, particularly as it affected middle-class and lower middle-class families, emboldened as democratic citizens by the post-war welfare state, frustrated and then outraged at their children being declared *de facto* second-class citizens. There was similar dissatisfaction from within the teaching profession and local authorities, both Labour and Conservative, weary at managing the damaging effects of the divide.

Where, then, might such collective pressure come from today? There are three areas that appear to promise relatively easy, if possibly limited, policy wins in the near future. The first relates to school inspection. The tragic suicide of primary school headteacher Ruth Perry, whose school was judged ‘inadequate’ in relation to one mainly technical and quickly remedied aspect of the school’s work, proved the final straw in terms of mainstream political and public attitudes to Ofsted. As Mary Bousted argues, ‘Ofsted’s impunity has begun to wane’. Organisations like the Heads Roundtable and HeadRest, the latter set up during the pandemic, have brought to public attention the intolerable pressures faced by school leaders up and down the country, a view backed by every professional association within education. Labour has now committed to reform ‘from top to bottom’ (but not outright abolition) of the standards watchdog and the recent ‘Beyond Ofsted’ inquiry, organised and funded by the NEU, has made many proposals for alternative methods of school accountability and improvement.<sup>4</sup>

Second, there is an intensifying unhappiness at the high-stakes, high-stress testing and exam system, from primary through to the late secondary stage. Alistair McConville presents some robust and imaginative ideas for rethinking how we might judge young

people's learning, allowing students to assemble and present a broad portfolio of achievements rather than leave school with just a handful of numbers or letters. McConville belongs to Rethinking Assessment, an influential lobby group which brings together private and state school heads and has, it is said, the ear of leading Labour figures. Should it be emboldened by a large majority, Labour might well make changes in this area, although the party does not look likely to abandon the key role of tests and exams in supposedly enforcing 'high standards' (the mantra of every anxious politician). In the long-term, there needs to be far greater emphasis on formative assessment: an ongoing, open-ended approach to young people's learning that does not bring them continually to the cliff edge of supposed failure.

A third area where reform is likely to come, especially with a new administration, is in the broadening of the curriculum, after years of its contraction under a Conservative government. Schools in England are said to face a 'creativity crisis', with official funding levels for subjects such as art, dance, music and drama amounting to just a handful of pounds per pupil per year, and with rising public anger at the impact of these cutbacks. Numerous influential organisations and reports, such as the Gulbenkian Foundation May 2023 document, *Arts in Schools*, have presented evidence of the catastrophic decline of provision.<sup>5</sup> As a result, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats are committed to restoring a more 'broad and balanced' curriculum.

Looking at the wider political picture, could the move to undemocratic centralisation realistically be reversed? Again, there are some encouraging signs. It is now accepted, across the political spectrum, that the nation's thousands of schools cannot be run directly from the Department for Education in Westminster. The Coalition government, which initially claimed that it was setting schools 'free' from local authorities, soon grasped the impossibility of this prospect, leading to the panicked enlargement of multi-academy trusts. A few multi-academy trusts have become bloated mini-educational empires, with chief executive officers who earn more than the prime minister, but government attempts to force the creation of multi-academy trusts throughout the country have had to be abandoned. The Covid crisis also showed up the effectiveness of local responses to the virus compared to the actions of a remote and floundering central government working, as in education, hand in glove with its friends in business. Another potentially positive, if complicating, development is the growing political and moral heft of regional mayors, who have an understandable desire to play a part in reinvigorated local education systems. Andy Burnham, the mayor of Manchester, has made proposals for a Manchester baccalaureate, while Jamie Driscoll in North Tyneside has used his budget to introduce important vocational reforms. It is inevitable that elected representatives will have strong ideas about education in their region and will put pressure on national government to support them. How can this relatively new triangle of government, local government and regional mayors be managed?

While there may be good arguments for small groups of schools to continue to band together within local areas, the detailed proposals put forward by Anne West and David Wolfe offer a pragmatic halfway house solution to the problem of the worrying decline in local accountability. West and Wolfe indicate several ways that academisation might be subtly unpicked, on a legal basis, while at the same time offering ideas for the strengthening of democratic governance and oversight of schools. It is clear that schools should involve parents, pupils and community representatives in a range of strategic and day-to-day decisions. Early years provision must also be transformed from a patchwork of privatised, expensive services and to become instead locally run and managed.

Finally, while the papers in this collection provide much food for thought and ideas for future campaigning, we might also turn to a set of overarching principles, based on wide international experience, recently offered by Pasi Sahlberg.<sup>6</sup> For Sahlberg, the renowned Finnish educator and a leading opponent of the global educational reform movement (GERM), a successful education system rests on three main pillars. First, such an important public service as education cannot be managed in the same way as a business; schooling relies not on competition for results or resources, but on managed collaboration, and high levels of trust and collegial responsibility. In other words, genuinely public education should be the business of the democratic state, with no embedded role for unaccountable private interests. Second, teaching is an expert and intellectual profession, requiring advanced academic education, solid scientific and practical knowledge, and continuous on-the-job professional development. Third, a successful education system should not be judged on literacy or numeracy scores alone, but should emphasise whole-child development, equity of education outcomes and wellbeing, with arts, music, drama and physical education as central offerings. Numerous studies, and thinkers, have shown that the most educationally enabling and fair systems in the world – Canada, Japan, Estonia, Finland – operate according to these principles. The educational administrator Diane Ravitch has long made a similar case in her championing of the genuine public schools of the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Figures like Sahlberg and Ravitch remind us of how much of an outlier the English education system has become, certainly within Europe. The wide reach of their work also reminds us of the risks of remaining within our own echo chambers, endlessly recirculating, with increasing frustration, the same arguments and ideas. We need to engage in a much more open contest of ideas, trying to forge a new common sense about what a stimulating and inclusive education might look like – a truly democratic politics of education, assertive but respectful (with no more *ad hominem* dismissal of opponents as ‘the Blob’). Part of that involves reminding others of the impressive tradition of progressive education, including magisterial figures such as Bridget Plowden, John Dewey, Alex Bloom, Robin Alexander and Loris Malaguzzi. At the

same time, we need to illuminate, as *FORUM* has long done, the many interesting and inspiring examples of educators who take a better approach to curriculum, behaviour, pedagogy and assessment. Our task now is to take our case to the widest possible public, constantly seeking and working with a broad range of sympathetic allies.

Here, we have reason to be optimistic; this ebook alone draws on the work of leading academics and education lawyers, educational philosophers, experienced headteachers and prominent union leaders. Looking further afield, there are now thousands of teachers (and ex-teachers) disillusioned with the marketisation of education and its capture by an ideologically rigid faction, fed up with being told what and how to teach, their professional autonomy increasingly constrained. Millions of parents and pupils instinctively dislike the narrow focus of the curriculum and the exam factory atmosphere of English education, from nursery classes upwards. There is widespread frustration at falling pay for teachers and support staff within education while pay remains absurdly high for a few at the top. School leaders, particularly in more deprived areas, are also rebelling against the pressure on them to narrow ‘attainment gaps’ in a society where inequality is forever growing. Such powerful and rational sources of dissatisfaction can be channelled into a popular programme for reform.

As Viv Ellis argues, now ‘is a time for revolutions, not for patching’. For *FORUM*, conceived and established in the great era of comprehensive reform, the many educational questions raised in this ebook represent important, if still woefully unfinished, business. Who knows what old truths a new government, emboldened by a decisive majority, may ‘find lying around’ when it comes to power? If that is to happen, these ideas need to be elaborated and developed. Sooner than we think, some of the proposals set out so cogently in this collection might become the new common sense, ideas not residing on the margins but taking centre stage in a new era of educational thinking. One day we may find barely anyone prepared to support the semi-privatised, dull and restricted education system that has been so enthusiastically endorsed for so long by a powerful minority.

## Notes

1. William Atkinson, ‘Education. Both a standout Conservative achievement and a précis of the problems of the last thirteen years’, Conservative Home, 7 December 2023: Education. Both a standout Conservative achievement, and a précis of the problems of the last thirteen years. | Conservative Home
2. Bagehot, ‘The strange success of the Tories’ schools policy’, *The Economist*, 13 July 2023: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/07/13/the-strange-success-of-the-tories-schools-policy>
3. Times Education Commission, ‘Bringing out the best’, *The Times*: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/22056664-times-education-commission-final-report>

4. Jane Perryman, Alice Bradbury, Graham Calvert, Katie Kilian, 'Beyond Ofsted: an inquiry into the future of school inspection', NEU/UCL, 2023: <https://beyondofsted.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Beyond-Ofsted-Report.pdf>; 'Educational inspection: coercive or supportive?', *FORUM* 65(3), 2023: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-65-issue-3/>
5. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and A New Direction, 'The arts in schools: foundations for the future', 2023; <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/the-arts-in-schools>
6. Valerie Strauss, 'What Finland is really doing to improve its acclaimed schools', *Washington Post*, 30 August 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/30/what-finland-is-really-doing-improve-its-acclaimed-schools/>
7. Diane Ravitch is an educational historian and policy analyst, and research professor at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. Previously, she was a US assistant secretary of education under a Republican administration. In 2010, she became 'an activist on behalf of public schools' and a stringent opponent of the charter school movement. Her influential books include *Reign of Error: the hoax of the privatisation movement and the danger to America's public schools* (2013) and *The Death and Life of the American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education* (2010).

# FURTHER READING IN *FORUM*

*FORUM* has promoted comprehensive education since its first number appeared in autumn 1958. Comprehensive education requires rethinking all aspects of formal education in the light of the principles which guide such a system, as the contributions in this ebook begin to make clear. Writing which explores the implications of establishing, sustaining and developing a comprehensive education system can be found in the *FORUM* online archive. Almost all articles are freely downloadable at:

<https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/>

Articles of particular relevance to issues addressed in this ebook include the following.

## Purposes of education

Michael Fielding, 'The person-centred school', *FORUM*, 63(3), pp95-105, 2021.

Stewart Ranson, 'Comprehensive education for mutual recognition', *FORUM*, 63(1), pp39-46, 2021.

John White, 'Love's place in school education', *FORUM*, 63(1), pp146-158, 2021.

Kathryn Spicksley, 'The centre cannot hold: primary teachers, educational purpose and the future', *FORUM*, 62(3), pp379-392, 2020.

Michael Bassey, 'Education for tackling climate change', *FORUM*, 62(2), pp227-234, 2020.

Robin Alexander, 'What's the point? Select committee ponders the meaning of education', *FORUM*, 58(2), pp155-166, 2016.

## Early childhood

*FORUM* 60(3), 'Better beginnings: an early years special', the autumn 2018 number, responded to the damaging misunderstandings and misrepresentations – particularly about the value of play and about learning to read – in Ofsted's recently published report on the reception curriculum, 'Bold beginnings'.

Nathan Archer and Jo Albin-Clark, 'Telling stories that need telling: a dialogue on resistance in early childhood education', *FORUM*, 64(2), pp21-29, 2022.

Damien Fitzgerald, 'A new public conceptualisation of education and care for young children: bridging the public-private divide', *FORUM*, 61(3), pp339-348, 2019.

Peter Moss, 'For a new public early childhood education', *FORUM*, 57(2), pp211-214, 2015.

## Image of child

Jenifer Smith, 'Reading *I Want My Hat Back* by Jon Klassen. Encounters over seven months: one child, one book, one adult', *FORUM*, 60(3), pp271-278, 2018.

Mary Jane Drummond, 'On re-reading *Closely Observed Children*', *FORUM*, 59(1), pp77-84, 2017.

## The teacher's role and work

*FORUM* 65(2), the summer 2023 number, carried several articles exploring the role and professional work of the teacher, including:

Rosie Moore and Alison Hermon, 'Using a Witch's hat to avoid "the approved pattern": Finding hope in a pedagogical stance which fosters quiet resistance,' *FORUM*, 65(2), pp10-21, 2023.

Lisa Murtagh, Elizabeth Gregory, Rosa Archer and Karen Beswick, 'Responding to the homogenous and prescriptive policy in ITE in England: Reclaiming the narrative and re-professionalising the teacher', *FORUM*, 65(2), pp30-45, 2023.

Tony Eade, 'Reclaiming teaching as a profession based on autonomy and trust', *FORUM*, 65(2), pp72-82, 2023.

Patrick Yarker, 'The three lessons: a fairy tale', *FORUM*, 65(2), pp94-96, 2023.

Dr Alex Gardner-McTaggart, 'Delivering a science of efficient effectiveness for stakeholders investing in children; or, the end of the teacher?', *FORUM*, 65(2), pp108-117, 2023.

Melissa Benn, with Robin Alexander, Paula Ayliffe, Madeleine Holt and John Yandell, 'Always at the crossroads: Progressive education today; a round-table discussion', *FORUM*, 64(3), pp88-113, 2022.

Helen Trelford, 'Initial Teacher Education in peril – Why the Market Review is about anything but "world-class training"', *FORUM*, 63(3), pp58-65, 2021.

Margaret M. Clark, 'Early Education in England: the power of politicians over policy and practice', *FORUM*, 61(3), pp387-400, 2019.

## Ability

*FORUM* 61(1), 'Calling time on "fixed ability" thinking and practice', the spring 2019 number, and the spring 2013 number, *FORUM* 55(1), 'This way out: teachers and pupils escaping from fixed ability thinking and practice', were largely devoted to critiquing the 'ability' discourse and illuminating ways beyond it.

Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Donald McIntyre, 'Developing teaching free from ability labelling: back where we started?', reprinted in *FORUM* 64(2), pp30-43, 2022.

Caroline Benn, 'The myth of giftedness', *FORUM*, 63(2), pp109-130, 2021.

Rachel Marks, 'The dinosaur in the classroom: what we stand to lose through ability-grouping in the primary school', *FORUM*, 56(1), pp45-54, 2014.

## Curriculum

Hilary Povey, 'Thoughts on a playful, curiosity-led curriculum: a walk in Sheffield in May 2020', *FORUM*, 62(3), pp335-344, 2020.

Terry Wrigley, 'For the many: a curriculum for social justice', *FORUM*, 60(2), pp179-196, 2018.

Jonathan Savage, 'Music education for all', *FORUM*, 60(1), pp111-122, 2018.

## Assessment

*FORUM* 59(2), 'Assessment: crisis and resistance', the summer 2017 number, sprang from a symposium organised by the More Than A Score campaign to present articles critical of high-stakes public testing and to provide examples of alternative approaches.

Scherto Gill, 'Beyond the tyranny of testing: towards a relational orientation to educational evaluation', *FORUM*, 62(3), pp393-404, 2020.

Lucy Wenham, "'It was deathly dull and boring and stressful": listening to parents' voices on primary school testing', *FORUM*, 61(3), pp415-426, 2019.

Max Hope, 'Reframing "attainment": creating and developing spaces for learning within schools', *FORUM*, 59(3), pp413-422, 2017.

## Inclusion

Sally Tomlinson and Craig Johnston, 'Joining the dots? Special education and alternative provision', *FORUM*, 66(1), 2024.

Sophie Potter, 'It goes without saying: how the neo-liberal agenda is endangering inclusive education', *FORUM*, 64(2), 79-86, 2022.

Ciara Draper, Jack Houghton, Beth Read, Danny Bird and J.J. Tatten, 'A socially inclusive A-star is only possible through the understanding of black holes', *FORUM*, 58(3), pp339-346, 2016.

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Andrew Allen, 'Flippin' academy governance: Top-down to bottom-up', *FORUM* 64(3), pp42-53, 2022.

Terry Wrigley and Gawain Little, 'Whose schools are they, anyway? A review essay',

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Melissa Benn, Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, 'Editorial: for a new education in a new public school', *FORUM*, 61(2), pp147-156, 2019.

Patrick Yarker, 'Segregated education and the *Forum* archive: six decades of writing against the grammar/secondary modern divide and in favour of comprehensive education (including The Grammar/Secondary Modern Divide: a table of articles from the *Forum* archive)', *FORUM*, 59(3), pp445-464, 2017.

## **Ofsted and school inspection**

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Mary Bousted, 'Ofsted: a problem in search of a solution', *FORUM*, 62(3), pp433-444, 2020.