FORUM
Volume 52, Number 1, 2010
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

FORUM

EDITORIAL

Education Can Compensate for Society

In their Report on the recent Nuffield Review of 14 to 19 education and training in England and Wales, *Education for All* (2009), Professor Richard Pring and his co-authors cite with approval (on pages 11 and 33) Basil Bernstein's (in)famous aphorism 'education cannot compensate for society'; this then became the unfortunate title of Richard Pring's article on the Nuffield Review for a recent number of *FORUM* (Volume 51, Number 2, pages 197-204); and Professor Pring used it again in a recent letter to *The Guardian* (5 January 2010), where he called Bernstein's argument 'persuasive'.

Richard Pring is a highly respected and spirited proponent of comprehensive education; but he must surely see that Bernstein's ill-judged and indefensible comment is highly damaging to the comprehensive cause he champions. Indeed, the founders of this journal, and notably Brian Simon, thought that Bernstein's entire oeuvre had a malign effect on the cause of progressive education in this country. Such was Brian's opinion of Britain's so-called 'leading educational sociologist' that, as he explains in his 1998 Autobiography *A Life in Education* (p. 123), he left it to his plain-speaking wife Joan to tell Bernstein on the telephone exactly what she thought of the 1971 Open University Reader *Knowledge and Control* (edited by Michael F.D. Young and to which Bernstein was a contributor) and of the new forms of sociological enquiry that became known as 'the New Sociology of Education'. A large part of *FORUM* Volume 17, Number 1, Autumn 1974, was devoted to a penetrating critique by 'mainstream sociologists', notably Professor Olive Banks, of the 'new' sociologists' lack of concern with the ways in which the educational system related to wider social structures.

Bernstein's article 'Education cannot compensate for society' was first published in *New Society* on 26 February 1970, and it appeared at a time when neo-Marxists on the Far Left and eugenicists on the Far Right were united in claiming that education, and more specifically schooling, could do nothing to 'transform' society or even modify its glaring inequalities and divisions.

All this meant, of course, that attempts to give real meaning to the comprehensive reform and challenge all forms of determinism by encouraging the new schools to fulfil their democratic function of enabling all children to

learn were steadily being overtaken by a wave of educational fatalism which was exerting a profound and negative influence on informed opinion both in Britain and in America.

Bernstein was already famous for his theories of linguistic difference, propounded in a number of publications in the 1960s, which upheld the view that working-class children in general, because of their deprived linguistic environment, could not develop the higher ability for conceptual thinking that could easily be developed by middle-class children (using the so-called 'elaborated code'). The limits of their achievement were thereby determined at an early age. This simplistic theory was actually taken apart in an article by language expert Brian Harrison in *FORUM*, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 1974. And Bernstein himself later claimed, in a chapter for the 1970 book *Education for Democracy* (edited by David Rubinstein & Colin Stoneman) that his ideas had been misinterpreted – a strategy he adopted many times in his career and usually after the concepts of determinism and fatalism that he had fostered had been given a marked boost in the public mind.

Bernstein's theories seemed to be in line with the thinking of right-wing pessimists on both sides of the Atlantic. Arthur Jensen agreed in his much-quoted 1969 article for *The Harvard Educational Review*, entitled 'How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?', that 'education could not compensate for society' – largely because of the hereditarian nature of 'intelligence', in terms not only of 'class', but also of 'race'. Jensen argued with great vigour that various forms of 'compensatory education' had been tried in America and had failed. What they had failed to do was to change the scores on IQ tests of 'underprivileged children' – and particularly of black children. As measured by IQ tests, black children scored an average of fifteen points below white children. According to Jensen, those 'idealists' and 'environmentalists' who had argued for massive 'compensatory educational programmes' designed to equalise opportunities had been guilty of seriously misleading the American Government. As a consequence, resources had been wasted and a great deal of effort expended in a fruitless exercise. In Jensen's view, it was clear that, just as working-class white children were inferior (in terms of 'measured intelligence') to middle- and upper-class white children, so black children were innately inferior to white children. Any attempt to 'compensate for' this natural state of affairs was simply a waste of time and money.

It was against this general background of fatalism and pessimism that *FORUM* was to play a leading role in the new 'Schools CAN make a difference' movement. Indeed, this was to be the title of a special number of *FORUM* which came out in the Spring of 1974: Volume 16, Number 2.

The Editorial for this Number lamented the fact that figures like Basil Bernstein, Hans Eysenck and Arthur Jensen had been responsible for the emergence, or re-emergence, of a number of crude determinist views about human potential. On the one hand, the eugenicists argued that a child was born 'all that he or she may become'; while, at the same time, Bernstein and his disciples held that the child was the 'victim' of its 'linguistic environment'. So

the child was, in effect, 'caught both ways'. Both through 'heredity' and 'environment', human abilities would appear to be fixed and determined. There was nothing that the schools or teachers could do about it.

Brian Simon believed that the idea that 'education cannot compensate for society' was 'a very dangerous doctrine'. He argued that the 'theoretical hopelessness' which it conveyed led to a fatalism which acted as a sort of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. Its main purpose was to persuade teachers that they are helpless in the face of deep-seated biological and environmental forces – and 'if teachers are constantly warned that they cannot bring about human development or social change through education, then perhaps they will simply give up the effort'.

Brian argued on a number of occasions – and notably in a chapter in his remarkable 1985 collection of essays *Does Education Matter?* – that education can change society – not necessarily in bringing about *short-term* social change, but certainly in enhancing the educational achievements of hitherto deprived working-class youngsters.

The phrase 'education cannot compensate for society' can, of course, have many meanings; and, to be fair to Richard Pring, he would probably not wish to see it used as a justification for 'pessimistic social determinism'. The authors of *Education for All* give the impression that their interpretation of Bernstein's dictum is that 'too much is being expected of schools and colleges'. They go on to say that 'their (schools') apparent inefficacy is in part due, not to their own inadequate efforts, but to wider and often pernicious social influences outside the formal educational and training system' (p. 11). And this would appear to be in line with the substance of a recent front-page story in *The Daily Telegraph* (2 January 2010), lamenting the fact that primary and secondary schools risk being branded as 'inadequate' by government inspectors for 'failing to promote decent race relations, gender equality and human rights'. In other words, 'too much is expected of our schools and colleges'.

I must admit I find all this profoundly depressing. Why shouldn't schools and colleges be expected to have policies designed to tackle gender, race and disability discrimination and to promote positive and realistic images of lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

Those who work in our schools may not find it easy to change and improve society in a meaningful sense if the education system retains the hierarchical and iniquitous structure bequeathed to us by thirteen years of New Labour rule; but this must not be exaggerated and is, in any case, a strong argument for radically changing the whole system, NOT for denying education's limitless potential.

Clyde Chitty

The Cambridge Primary Review

For all its caution, the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review is a revolutionary document. As hinted in its title – *Children, Their World, Their Education* – its recommendations are grounded in a deep respect for children's agency, and a corresponding appreciation of the role of parents, carers and teachers as mediators between the originality of children's agency and the inherited traditions of the cultural world which children are entering. The Review reconsiders every aspect of English primary education. Its radicalism is carefully argued, with the aid of the 28 research surveys which it commissioned, and evidence assembled on its own account, and its conclusions are at once adventurous and authoritative. If its recommendations were to be implemented, primary schools would be transformed, in their aims, their curriculum, their pedagogy, their methods of assessment, and their cultural significance.

It is not surprising that Government and Opposition alike have for the most part chosen to dismiss or ignore the Review's recommendations. The party political agenda is narrow minded, and the Review exposes the limitations of all too many of the Government's favourite initiatives. But the failure of the political elite hands local schools an opportunity. Backed by the evidence made available in the Review, they can endorse its argument and start to implement its recommendations without waiting for a backward Government to catch up. The authority of the Review's findings will make it hard for central government to resist the Cambridge agenda. Both Government and Opposition claim to favour local initiative. We should take them at their word.

So how might a single school, or a small group of schools, start? One way to begin would be to take each of the twelve aims outlined in Chapter 12 of the final report and examine the ways in which the school's practice achieves or falls short of that aim and how to rethink the practice in respect of the aim in question.

Take, for example, the aim of exciting the imagination. Here are ten sets of questions which a school might ask itself.

1. How far are we exciting the imagination of students across the curriculum, in each of its domains?
2. What evidence do we have of success? Where and with whom are we doing well, or not so well? Which ideas work best? Which domains seem hardest to pursue imaginatively?

3. How do we describe, interpret and evaluate students' imaginative achievement? How do we document imaginative work? How do we exhibit it?
4. How do we relate the imaginative work of students to other aims, such as fostering skill, or enacting dialogue? How do we match skill to imaginative purpose? What balance do we strike between the individual imagination and the collective imagination?
5. How far do the statutory demands of the national curriculum and its assessment constrain the imagination? How can we loosen these constraints?
6. How do we demonstrate to parents our commitment to the imagination ? How do we involve them in our practice? How do we justify our practice to students, parents, governors, and inspectors?
7. How can we advance our own imaginative practice as teachers and thinkers?
8. How can we involve other creative workers in the life of the school?
9. What can we learn from our students and their imaginative works?
10. How can we make our school a centre of imaginative enterprise within its neighbourhood?

The Review offers us a new vision of primary education. It can be argued with, in one respect or another, as our contributors show, but, taken as a whole, it seems to me to be definitive. It couldn't be more timely.

Michael Armstrong