
Brian Simon and *FORUM*

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ABSTRACT This is the text of a talk given at a special one-day conference held at the Institute of Education on 26 March 2010 with the title 'Brian Simon and Educational Change: biography, history and politics'.

Introduction

Brian Simon told me towards the end of his life that he regarded his two greatest achievements as: the first volume of his four-volume history of education in Britain since 1870, which was published in 1960; and the launch of the independent education journal *FORUM* two years earlier, in 1958. Gary McCulloch will be dealing with Brian's *Studies in the History of Education* in this afternoon's session; this morning, I want to concentrate on his vision for a new education journal, which, quite remarkably, and against the predictions of many at the time of its launch, has now been published three times a year without a break for the past 52 years.

I know that Gary will be arguing that Brian strongly supported the view that the history of education should be about the relationship between education and social change – indeed *Education and the Social Order* was the title of the final volume of his *History* covering the years 1940 to 1990. Ali Rattansi & David Reeder have argued in the Introduction to their 1992 collection of essays in honour of Brian, *Rethinking Radical Education*, that Brian did not see his work as simply 'academic' in nature. He saw himself as having an 'activist' role in contributing to the debate about the future direction of education and society. In the words of Rattansi & Reeder, his role as an 'activist' was 'actually linked with and shaped by his fundamental interests in history and theory' (p. 18).

Brian, then, hated the idea of being seen simply as an 'academic' historian or philosopher. He had a great belief in the relationship between academic study and political struggle. He could see no point in doing any sort of research

if the result of all your labours ended up gathering dust on library shelves. In fact, he was not a great fan of the idea of publishing articles in refereed journals, which he regarded as a somewhat incestuous exercise. The whole point about being an 'academic' or a 'scholar' centred on being able to function effectively in society – and being prepared to promote your work in the cause of changing that society according to developing aspirations. In his early articles for *Marxism Today*, he was fond of quoting one of Karl Marx's famous theses (actually the last of his 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach*): 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' – a version of which appears on Marx's tomb in Highgate Cemetery. In the words of a beautiful oration delivered by Professor Robin Alexander on the occasion of Brian being awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters at the University of Warwick, the thread which linked 'Brian the scholar' and 'Brian the campaigner' was 'his unswerving commitment to the causes of social justice and human perfectibility'.

It was these causes he sought to promote in his new educational journal.

FORUM is launched

Brian was busy in 1956 putting together a collection of essays looking at changes that had taken place both in the school system generally and within individual schools in the decade or so since the passing of the 1944 Education Act, which was published by MacGibbon & Kee with the title *New Trends in English Education* in the spring of 1957. The timing of the book's publication was indeed propitious in that the mid 1950s was a period of exciting new developments in the education system of England and Wales: Kidbrooke School, London's first new purpose-built comprehensive, had been opened in the autumn of 1954; Leicestershire's two-tier plan for county-wide comprehensive reorganisation (very much the brainchild of Brian's colleague, Robin Pedley) was launched in 1957; and 1957 also saw the publication of a report by the British Psychological Society questioning for the first time the validity of Cyril Burt's theories about fixed innate intelligence.

In his Introduction, Brian summarised the 'trends' that the book would be concentrating on under FOUR main headings:

- (1) the abolition of A, B and C streams at the junior school stage in favour of a common basic course at the outset of school life;
- (2) the entry of secondary modern school pupils for external examinations, which had shown that some could reach a standard of achievement as high as, or even higher than, many grammar-school pupils;
- (3) the introduction of comprehensive schools, a number of which had now been successfully operating for a decade and which, if generally established, would make eleven-plus selection unnecessary;

(4) the evolution towards a common curriculum within the new comprehensive schools, which pointed the way towards a well-balanced general education for all at the secondary stage. (p. 9)

Brian emphasised that this would NOT be a book 'written for teachers by others'. It would be a book 'written by teachers themselves for all who are concerned with the future of education, including parents, who are taking a growing interest in internal school organisation and teaching methods' (p. 9).

One of the themes of the book would be an emphasis on human educability: indeed, one of the chapters by Edward Blishen was called 'The Potentialities of Secondary Modern School Pupils'. Brian pointed out that the tests employed for selecting children for different types of school at the age of 11 could not measure innate ability or intelligence (even if such a thing actually existed). They could not make 'a reliable prediction about what a child may be capable of in the many possible circumstances of later life'. All the tests could do was 'measure performance in certain tasks of a scholastic type, placing the children on a graded scale' whose lack of meaning and unreliability were 'becoming increasingly apparent' (p. 11).

Brian records that the book received a lot of favourable media attention; and out of its unexpected success grew the idea of establishing a progressive journal – 'for the discussion of new trends in education', the title of the 1957 book becoming the new journal's sub-heading. With remarkable speed, and in a spirit of great optimism, *FORUM* was launched in the autumn of 1958, with Brian being joined in running the new journal by his colleague Robin Pedley and by Jack Walton, Head of the History Department at Great Barr Comprehensive School in Birmingham. Brian and Robin were to be the co-editors and they were joined as founder members of the Editorial Board by a number of the contributors to the 1957 book: Edward Blishen a teacher at Archway County Secondary School in Islington, north London and author of the widely-acclaimed 1955 novel about school life, *Roaring Boys*; Marjorie Cook, Head Teacher of the Priory Girls' Secondary Modern School in Acton in Middlesex; George Freeland, Head Teacher of Mowmacre Junior School in Leicester; and Jack Walton himself. It was hoped at the outset that a large number of the Editorial Board would be practising teachers – something which has not been a distinguishing feature of the Board as time has gone by.

Brian is not often thought of as a skilful entrepreneur; but the success of *FORUM* is a great tribute to his talents as a businessman. Launching a new journal without massive financial backing was a bold and risky enterprise in 1958, and he went ahead despite the fact that many people – both friends and legal advisers – warned him either that it was bound to fail or that its 'success' would be short-lived. Although the creation of *FORUM* was ostensibly a collaborative process (Brian, Robin and Jack formed a partnership called 'PSW (Educational) Publications'), it seems clear that, right from the outset, it was very much *Brian's baby*. He kept meticulous details in his indecipherable handwriting about every single number – particularly matters relating to publicity and sales.

The new journal would come out three times a year and an annual subscription would cost eight shillings and sixpence! Despite the optimistic tone of his Editorials, creating stability for the journal was a permanent headache for Brian. He calculated in 1958 that *FORUM* would need a minimum circulation of 2000 before it could be said to be 'economically secure' – and 3000 would enable him to expand the journal and build up some reserves against the second year's publication. The response to his initial circularisation in the summer of 1958 had been most encouraging and, even before publication, the journal could boast nearly 1000 subscribers. In the event, the first number was sold out giving a paid circulation of over 2000. By the beginning of 1959, subscriptions totalled 1350. It was typical of Brian that he should keep careful records of where the subscriptions to the early numbers came from: 33% were from secondary modern schools; 12% from grammar schools; 11% from comprehensive and bilateral schools; 8% from junior schools. Brian found the response from junior schools very disappointing; and he responded by co-opting two more junior school teachers to the Editorial Board. There was also the problem of other publications – including school magazines and the journal of a group of Harrow housewives – which decided to adopt the name 'Forum' (culminating in a battle with the sex magazine of the same name which Brian lost). At the same time, if you consult Brian's notes and letters in the Archives, you find that his relationship with Robin Pedley as co-editor was often quite acrimonious. Robin clearly resented the fact that Brian asked his mother, Lady Simon of Wythenshawe, to join the Editorial Board; and he also accused Brian of failing to give him sufficient credit for the creation for the Leicestershire Plan.

***FORUM's* Guiding Principles**

Back in the late 1950s, *FORUM* was concerned with TWO major issues: the abolition of streaming in the junior school and the reorganisation of secondary schools along comprehensive lines. Over the years, the journal has obviously broadened its scope and extended the range of its interests; but those two issues remain central to its educational vision.

FORUM has always been a campaigning journal anxious to make a contribution to national debates. The Editorial Board gave evidence to the Plowden Committee which reported in 1967, and here our argument was that the very act of unstreaming opened up quite new perspectives for the junior school. Once you discarded the practice of dividing children up according to their supposed 'innate' ability, you could view all children as having limitless potential. At the time of the so-called Great Debate of 1976-77, *FORUM* published articles for and against the idea of a common curriculum for the comprehensive school. And *FORUM* played a leading role in organising the opposition to the 1987 Education Bill, which culminated in a huge 'Demonstrative Conference' in London in March 1988 to register the education world's rejection of all aspects of Kenneth Baker's Bill.

In his autobiography, *A Life in Education*, published in 1998, Brian expressed the view that *FORUM* was actually 'at its most influential' during the 1960s and early 1970s – 'when mashed closely with the grain of the times' (p. 88). There is obviously some truth in this statement, but our readership today is larger than it has ever been, and this must be because we have been totally consistent and outspoken in our opposition to academies, trust schools, faith schools, PFI and so on. We have never deviated from our belief in the community comprehensive school as the only way of recognising and doing justice to human educability in all its forms.

In the autumn of 1991 – at the time when we were publishing our 100th number – it was felt by many members of the Editorial Board that it was time to change our original sub-heading. We were still discussing 'new trends in education'; but we didn't want anyone to think that the journal was actually *endorsing* them. So the sub-heading became 'for promoting 13-19 comprehensive education', which remains our underpinning rationale 52 years after the appearance of our first number.

We reprint below a letter from the head teacher of a community school in East Sussex which first appeared in *The Times* on 27 May 2010.

Sir, There is a myth put about by some headteachers and politicians that headteachers do not have the freedom to make the key decisions to create successful schools. They do, and there is evidence for that across the country. Heads of local authority-maintained schools have considerable powers including the freedom to set discipline standards, to determine much of their curriculum content, and to appoint and reward staff as they see fit. There is again a myth about the extent of local authority intervention. Good local education authorities provide excellent value for money in how they support their schools, leaving successful schools well alone and intervening in less successful schools appropriately.

As for the notion of the new academies gaining between 7 and 10 per cent financially, that too is not what it appears, as the additional funding will have to be used to buy the services formerly provided by the LEA. Alternative suppliers will not necessarily provide better value.

My key concern is that by seeking academy status many of these schools will evade the wider responsibilities we all have in education for raising the standards across all schools, regardless of the community they serve.

The real challenge that faces education today is how we narrow the gap in achievement between those children coming from the most deprived areas and those that do not. Dividing the system between the haves and have-nots will not help.

The way forward is schools working together, with successful schools supporting challenging schools, with new ways of joint leadership being developed and with local authorities being key brokers in driving forward that agenda so that all communities are served well by their schools, not just those that are already doing very nicely.

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