

EDITORIAL

A Comprehensive Curriculum: reaffirmation and renewal

This Special Issue on Curriculum is prefaced by two important interventions in the current debate. The first is Clyde Chitty's wonderfully clear and trenchant critique of the aptly renamed 'Demolition' government's opening months in office. His *A Massive Power Grab from Local Communities: the real significance of the 2010 White Paper and the 2011 Education Bill* provides a concise and compelling expose of proposals that are about to blight 'future generations of our children – and, in particular, those whose parents lack the social standing and financial clout needed to negotiate your way around our increasingly iniquitous state system.'

The second is John White's *The Coalition and the Curriculum* that appeared in our previous issue (Volume 52 Number 3 2010). With the profundity and elegance we have come to expect of one of our leading philosophers of education, John White – who, it will be recalled, first came to the notice of a wider professional public nearly forty years ago with the publication of his *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* (1973) – exposes the intellectual vacuity and cultural myopia of the ConDem government's approach to the curriculum. Some of the key themes he explored, particularly those to do with purposes and aims of education, run like threads through the fabric of the papers that follow.

Putting Curriculum into Perspective

John Elliott is also one of the leading figures of his generation. Not only is he one of the founders of teacher action research in this country, he is also one of our most profound curriculum thinkers. His *The Seesaw Curriculum: it's time for curriculum policy to mature* not only brings us back to fundamentals, it also interrogates a lifetime's experience of curriculum policy, development and practice. It is a profound paper, not only on the nature of curriculum but also the relationship between what he calls the apprenticeship and laboratory models of learning to teach. Pre-eminent amongst its many virtues are two key orientations the ConDem government resolutely eschews – namely, engagement

with serious intellectual argument and the necessity of taking the history of our professional endeavours seriously. Were they to do either they might begin to understand the deep stupidity and destructiveness of what they propose: were they to do both they might momentarily hesitate before ushering in a renewal of the despair and profound indignity earlier generations suffered at the hands of their right-wing forebears.

Tony Booth, probably best known to many readers through the pioneering *Index for Inclusion*, is one of the leading figures in this field. His *Curricula for the Common School: what shall we tell our children?* reveals the same wisdom, humanity and searching insight we have come to associate with his remarkable work in the field of inclusive education over many years. Written during the 2011 revision of the *Index for Inclusion* it begins by suggesting that 'One might characterise the continuing story of the school curriculum as disengaging children from their present and their future' and responds by insisting on the necessity of developing a fundamental framework of values on which a more defensible curricular alternative might rest. 'If values are about how we should live together, then curricula are about what we might learn to live well.' The remainder of the article develops a radical vision of what this might mean for those committed to it.

The bravery, imaginative energy, emancipatory intent and cumulative wisdom that so distinctively characterise the contributions of Tony Booth and John Elliott apply in equal measure to the work of Mike Davies. One of the most courageous and adventurous secondary school headteachers of his era, in *Curriculum Lost: a festival of errors* his reflections on the development of curriculum over the past 40 years engage with many of the key issues raised thus far. These have to do with the place and purpose of integrated, more holistic approaches to the curriculum that was such a distinctive feature of the 1960s and 1970s. The key, however, has to do with the double dynamic of social betrayal and emancipatory response that runs so clearly and so inspiringly through this Special Issue. 'Why', Davies asks, 'are we so supine in ignoring the waste of talent that the current curriculum arrangements represent and the distorted privilege and inequality they help to perpetuate? It doesn't have to be like this.'

The Primary School Curriculum

The four articles which follow address issues of curriculum within the context of primary education. Michael Armstrong's eloquent and insightful *Introductory Remarks* to Robin Alexander's recent Brian Simon Memorial Lecture remind us not only of Robin Alexander's stature as 'the world's foremost authority on primary education', but also, given the banality of government responses to The Cambridge Primary Review, how timely and how important Robin's *Legacies, Policies and Prospects: one year on from the Cambridge Primary Review* turned out to be. The event, the third Brian Simon Memorial Lecture given at the Institute of Education in London on Saturday 6th November, 2010, was bursting at the

seems and produced some lively discussion. For those who attended and those unable to make it, the publication of Robin Alexander's text is an important resource both for our current struggles and our future prospects.

In his *Curriculum Autonomy through Curriculum Expertise* Gareth Pimley, picks up on some of the key issues emerging from the aftermath of the Cambridge Primary Review. As with every other contributor to this Special Issue, he insists that 'decisions about the curriculum are far more likely to have a positive effect on children's learning if they are made against a backdrop of agreed aims and principles.' He then goes on to argue strongly for the importance of 'a good level of subject expertise' and the Review's valorisation of the 'enthusiastic expert'.

Of course, Michael Armstrong is not only one of English primary education's foremost intellectuals: he is also one of the most creative and imaginative thinkers and practitioners of his generation within the wider field of education. A key figure in the setting up of Countesthorpe Community College – arguably the most radical comprehensive secondary school England has ever seen – he became headteacher at Harwell County Primary School in Oxfordshire, and since then has taught and lectured all over the world, particularly on matters to do with the creative processes at the heart of learning. His *Time and Narrative at Eight Years Old: an essay in interpretation* is not only sublimely written, it is also a humbling and inspirational reminder of the necessity of a creative and sophisticated receptivity at the heart of our work with children and young people.

Subjects and their Place in the Curriculum

The contributions of subject knowledge to the curriculum are pursued in a variety of ways in the three articles that follow. In the first of these John Morgan reflects on the teaching of geography from a left-wing standpoint. His *What is Radical School Geography Today?* is an intellectual tour de force providing a clear and compelling account of a highly complex, contested topic. There is much here that has a generic significance too, e.g. resisting that slide of teaching into 'a technical, rather than an intellectual or creative activity.' Likewise the five substantive themes with which he ends his paper – 'Challenging Zombie economic geographies' alerts us to the struggle for economic explanation; 'Welfare geography' engages with the social cost of the market; 'Consuming geography to excess' focuses on the social and environmental costs of everyday acts of consumption; 'Society and nature' reminds us that the environmental crisis is also a social crisis – we cannot understand environmental problems without understanding society; and 'Crack capitalist geography' insists there are alternatives to the fast capitalist neo-liberal world. The article ends thus: 'We live in a time when the rich and the powerful routinely announce the hegemony and dominance of capitalism. The task of radical geography is to make clear that there are always alternatives to the mainstream of global neo-liberalism.' Exactly so.

The wider contexts of trans-national, neo-liberalism and their current manifestation in the ConDem position on schools subjects are also explored by Alasdair Smith in the teaching of history. In his *Big Society? Better History? Or same old nonsense? Drawing the Battle Lines for the Future of School History* he reminds us of the discourse of derision currently aimed at school history teaching and contrasts it with what is right about much contemporary practice, especially that which is mindful of recent research on how people learn. Having clearly articulated some of the key characteristics of good history teaching he confronts the pronouncements of the Better History Group. Successfully rebutting their four key positions he then argues that 'perhaps the worst feature of the BHG report is the absence of a forward looking vision' and urges us to take forward curriculum reform in the current contexts of the national protest exemplified by the student movement in November and December of 2010.

The last of our subject-oriented articles is by Anne Watson. In her *Mathematics and Comprehensive Ideals* the reader cannot help be struck by her unswerving commitment to comprehensive education in its richest senses and to the moral, intellectual and professional courage and integrity on which her work rests and on which it insists. Starting from the position that 'any school which does not take seriously the mathematical understanding of the lowest achieving students is not truly comprehensive' she explores the work of three schools who, in this sense, did indeed take a comprehensive approach. The narrative that unfolds is gripping and the quality of her writing remarkable in its steadfastness of purpose and elegance of articulation. As she insists, 'To focus on the weakest requires a moral stance about the nature of community'; it also requires 'resistance to models of teaching based on mechanistic target setting, resistance to performance culture, resistance to models of teaching based on mechanistic target-setting, resistance to models of learning that imply simple concept acquisition, confident articulation of beliefs, and the power to persuade colleagues and managers.'

Curriculum Integration

Our original plan for this Special Issue was to include a number of papers on integrated approaches to curriculum. However, considerations of space have regrettably meant that we have had to hold them over until our Summer 2011 issue. This will include a remarkable collection articles by Barry DuFour on *Social and Political Education in British Schools: 50 years of curriculum development*, Becky Francis on *Opening Minds*, John Morgan on *Enquiring Minds*, and David Price on *Learning Futures*.

What Can Schools Do?

We conclude our Special Issue with two important, companion contributions by two longstanding champions of comprehensive education – Bernard Barker and Richard Pring. Written entirely independently of each other and both in

response to two recent articles by Clyde Chitty, they raise and address deep underlying social and political issues reflected in various ways by a number of our curriculum contributors to do with inequities and injustices that still disfigure our society.

In response to Clyde Chitty's impassioned insistence in his *Education Can Compensate for Society* (FORUM, Volume 52 Number 1 2010) that Basil Bernstein's suggestion that 'education cannot compensate for society' was an 'ill-judged and indefensible comment', Richard Pring explores some of the key issues and assumptions underlying the debate. In a remarkable tour-de-force of the kind we have come to expect of one of the wisest and most persuasive philosophers of education we have in this country, his *Can Education Compensate for Society?* treats us to a characteristically cogent and humanly inspiring exploration of this hugely difficult topic. From the thesis that insists Bernstein was wrong to suggest education cannot compensate for social and economic disadvantage and the antithesis that Bernstein was right to suggest the inevitability of failure for a large minority of children, he moves to a synthesis at the heart of which lies a more richly conceived notion of causality and a quite different set of understandings about what it means to be and become an educated person.

Remarkably, the same rigour and imaginative engagement is true of the companion article *Can Schools Change Society?* which brings this Special Issue to a close. An eloquent, engaged response to Clyde Chitty's review of his book *The Pendulum Swings: transforming school reform* (FORUM, Volume 52 Number 3 2010), Bernard Barker argues that, whilst we have under-estimated what is involved in compensating for an unjust and unequal society, there is also much that can be done. One cannot help but recall that, as one of the leading figures of a remarkable group of pioneering headteachers this country has produced in the last 50 years, Bernard Barker's first book was called *Rescuing the Comprehensive Experience* (Barker, 1986). In a passage with uncannily Pringian echoes he insists that 'We must give up the idea of learning as a race for workplace usefulness and skills, and instead design a new curriculum around personal growth and development, so that children's own experience is both valued and extended, especially through the arts.'

Poetry, Posterity and the Pull of Prefigurative Practice

I end with three related observations.

Firstly, so often in the articles contained in this Special Issue, form and substance combine in ways which gesture towards the poetic. In so doing they affirm the necessity of poetry, not just in secluded spaces away from the hurly burly of daily life, but at the very heart of our intellectual and practical activity. The aesthetics of articulation invites and enables the presence of beauty, however fleeting or aspirant, in the conversations and encounters in which we make meaning, seek justice and intend joy together.

Secondly, in this Special Issue we have been lucky enough to gather together many contributions which have drawn on a lifetime's work, whether in schools or universities or both. This is not to marginalise or demean younger contributors: rather it is to insist on the possibility of wisdom and to acknowledge that whilst it so often eludes young and old alike, its relationship with a living and thoughtful past is a necessary, if not a sufficient condition for its realisation. I am mindful of the twin resonance of E.P. Thompson's alarm at 'the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson, 1963, p. 13) and Russell Jacoby's companion concern that 'society has lost its memory, and with it, its mind. The inability or refusal to think back takes its toll in the inability to think' (Jacoby, 1997, pp. 3-4).

Lastly, in her reflections on the women's movement, Shelia Rowbotham reminds us of the necessity of radical genealogies to which Thompson and Jacoby draw our attention and of the recurring demands of the present and the future in the narrative of humankind – 'Some changes have to start now, else there is no beginning for us' (Rowbotham, 1979, p. 140). The kinds of changes, the kind of prefigurative practices she was referring to are those that the radical democratic traditions of education and of social and political transformation have always held dear. They form a permanently contested, always unfinished unity; what, following the traditions of William Morris G.D.H. Cole and John Macmurray, one might call a 'democratic fellowship' (see Fielding & Moss, 2011). It is this which, in my view, provides the touchstone of curriculum development in a democratic society; it is this that provides the end and the means of democracy as a way of living and learning together, of democracy as a way of life.

References

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