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Book Reviews

School Wars: the battle for Britain's education
MELISSA BENN, 2011
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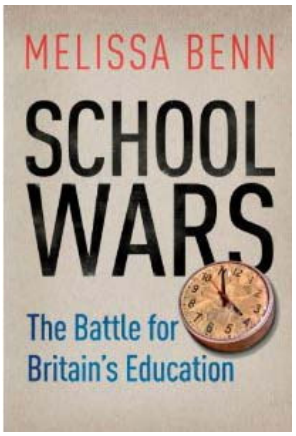

Melissa Benn has produced an impressive study of the rapidly changing school system in contemporary Britain. By its very nature as a research-based study it is very detailed but this approach provides the information necessary to support the analysis she provides and to allow readers to untangle parts of the complex fragmented system of schooling which is emerging, often under the guise of parental choice: academies, grammar schools, faith schools, free schools – each one wishing to pursue its own agenda with the support of the tax payer.

Benn's book begins with a chapter outlining some of the areas to be covered followed by two chapters sketching in the historical background of schooling in England and Wales from the 1930s when the majority of children were denied access to secondary schooling. Next there are three chapters covering the numerous changes to the school system which have resulted from treating schools as if the only criterion upon which they should be judged is the performance of their pupils in numerous examinations, which can then be included in league tables as if they were competing football teams. She ends with two chapters suggesting the possible outcomes for schools and many other sectors of the education service as they continue to become privatised and subjected to 'free market' theories alongside the remainder of the public services.

In recent times a major drive in many areas has been the reinforced selection process which allows governments to ignore their responsibilities of providing a good education for all children regardless of their circumstances. We have been here before in the years following the 1944 Education Act but the grammar school/secondary modern system is far enough away for people to have forgotten the reality of the system. There is no call for the restoration of the secondary modern schools which were the fate of the vast majority of the

children but Benn shows from contemporary research that the grammar schools did not in fact serve their pupils very well, especially those from lower income families:

> According to the 1959 Crowther Report, on the education of fifteen- to nineteen year olds, 38 per cent of grammar school pupils failed to achieve more than three passes at O level. Of the entire cohort of sixteen-year olds, only about 9 per cent achieved five or more O levels.

For those who claim that standards were higher in such years, Benn points out that, 'In 1961 the Ministry of Education even raised concerns about the deficiencies in the general education of Oxbridge candidates'. She explains that the grammar school/secondary modern system performed far worse in total than the comprehensive system which followed; the latter easily outperformed the former. Although some working-class children did get to grammar school, as the 1954 'Early Leaving Report' demonstrated, of the 1621 sample of children of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, 917, or more than half, failed to get three O level passes and 520 left before the end of their fifth year.

For those who still argue that selection would help bright working-class children Benn quotes David Willetts:

> We must break free from the belief that academic selection is any longer the way to transform the life chances of bright poor kids. This is a widespread belief, but we just have to recognise that there is overwhelming evidence that such academic selection entrenches disadvantage, it does not spread it.

Benn recognises that 'New Labour' started off with good proposals to improve the nation's schools which included generous increases in funding, primary school classes kept below 30 pupils, greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy and a pledge which was fulfilled to end the existence of outside toilets in primary schools. These policies were well received. Primary schools in general have a good reputation with parents; it is at secondary school where anxieties begin to arise. Successive governments have refused to face up to the fundamental reality facing schools, which is that their intake is reflected in the social make-up of the area in which they are situated; the income and wealth of the local population, education of the parents, general quality of the housing and employment opportunities. This has been true for decades. Moreover, policies pursued by successive governments since the 1970s have resulted in increasing the gap between the incomes of the highest and lowest paid in the country, a fact which has exacerbated the situation facing schools. Yet teachers have to cope with the results of the social problems which follow whilst governments have avoided their responsibilities by disingenuously proposing 'parental choice and diversity' as a solution. The results have been predictable; aspiring parents have used all manner of tactics to ensure that their children can get into schools within affluent catchment areas. Sometimes there are forms of

selection where the school chooses the child indirectly through their parents by using some criterion, often religious, which allows them to give preference to certain families and exclude others.

As an example Benn describes the selection criteria of Twyford, a successful voluntary-aided comprehensive: 'Applicants to the school, in classic church-school manner, have to prove "their commitment to their faith, with evidence of attendance at a place of worship going back to the age of six." Alice Hudson, Head of Twyford, acknowledges that her school takes a larger than average proportion of children who, in the past, would have gone to grammar schools: 'Schools that make it evident they care about academic achievement attract more able students. Relatively few of its pupils qualify for free school meals.'

The establishment of a multiplicity of different types of school run by all manner of organisations seeking income from general taxation to fund their belief systems and policies allows the more affluent parents to avoid inner-city schools, which have a disproportionate number of children who lack English as a first language, come from families on low incomes and often face associated social problems. The teachers in these schools face challenges daily and those teaching in more prosperous areas know they could not do any better. Yet beliefs are seriously expressed that if the independent and state sectors merged, improvements would surely follow. Benn refers to Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of schools:

> Does anyone seriously believe that teachers from top HMC schools can solve the multitude of challenges faced by teachers in sink comprehensive schools? The answer appears to be yes, some people do. Well, as someone who, unlike Mr Shepherd (of the Independent Schools Council), has spent considerable time in both kinds of school, I can only say that they are living in cloud cuckoo land.

One outcome of the multitude of school types seeking Government funding is that the public schools can be seen as just one more type of school rather than a system distinguished by the need for parents to pay fees for their children to attend; fees which for the Clarendon group are around nearly £30,000 per annum, well above the gross income of many families. Benn points to the way the products of these schools have been distorting British society for decades, a fact recognised by Sir Cyril Norwood, chairperson of the 1943 report bearing his name, who had been a pupil at Merchant Taylors' and headmaster at both Marlborough and Harrow schools: 'It is hard to resist the argument that a state which draws its leaders in overwhelming proportion from a class so limited as this is not a democracy but a pluto-democracy'. Benn points out that they continue to dominate politics, the civil service, the judiciary, the officer class in the armed forces, the City, the media, academia, most prestigious professions and the Charity Commission. A random selection of Tory Cabinets showing the percentage privately educated proves the point: Macmillan (1957) 94%, Home (1963) 91%, Thatcher (1979) 90% and so on into the Conservative-dominated

Coalition with 17 having attended private schools and the two leading government ministers, Cameron and Osborne, both millionaires. They are the schools of so many Tory MPs, most of whom readily oppose any attempt to abolish the £2 million tax break they receive annually by claiming charitable status. This sum could be a useful contribution to the Government's austerity programme, but then Cameron's claim that 'We are all in this together' was not meant to be taken seriously.

It is difficult for those not closely involved with schools to gain an accurate picture of the numerous groups running schools which have shattered the local education authority system. That system, whilst clearly not perfect, did try to make sure that schools which needed greater help for various reasons received extra funding. There is now no 'system' as such. Instead the policy of local schools cooperating in some areas is replaced by competition for those children, usually middle class, who will gain the best examination results and enhance the school's reputation, at the expense of other local schools. The principles of the market economy are now enshrined in schooling; organised selfishness now rules. What a contrast to the attitude of Robin Pedley, whom Benn quotes, who wrote of the need to encourage 'a larger and more generous attitude' within society and within us all.'

Sad though all these developments are for children as a whole, more frightening is to consider the possible long-term outcome of these developments, and this Benn does in a manner which should bring worries to all those considering the future of the country. Learning packages designed by private companies will increasingly be purchased by the school and the resulting lessons supervised by an increased number of lower paid teaching assistants under the supervision of a dozen properly trained school teachers; all part of a lower cost deskilling programme which private companies have been introducing for years in many areas of their businesses. Schools will be faced with such teaching methods in order to lower costs. Benn asks, 'Will we – parents, citizens, taxpayers – stand by as one of our most vital services passes into the hands of venture capitalists, hedge fund managers and a growing array of faith groups'. Teaching for exam results will become the major purpose of the school; education in the real sense will suffer as independent thought and discussion will not be considered 'cost effective'. Producing the 'right answer' will mean that thinking independently will not be an asset. That luxury will be restricted to those schools producing future leaders.

We have already seen the disastrous results in terms of the quality of food following the privatisation of the school meals service and treatment of staff forced to abandon freshly cooked nutritious food and replace it with reheated, processed 'junk food'. It took a celebrity chef to bring the public's attention to the results of privatisation in school catering. The bottom line for many private companies is to reduce costs; reducing the quality of the service and employee conditions is the method they employ. It is one of the reasons why they are hostile to trade unions.

Privatisation of education services has been under way for years. Gillian Shepherd, Tory Secretary of State for Education, privatised the Teachers' Pensions Agency back in 1995 even though it had met all its targets. There is big money to be made from selling services to the education system. Hackney had to foot the bill for KPMG's consultancy work concerning the future of their schools whilst Capita was awarded the contract to run the schools in Haringey. Two years on the schools were still rated 'unsatisfactory'. Yet Capita shareholders saw their dividends increase.

This book should be a wake-up call for so many of the population who may not realise just how much the school system has been fragmented by providing financial support to a range of organisations moving in to establish schools run by a host of different organisations only too pleased to be financed by the taxpayer. Continued criticism of secondary schooling, often based upon distorted media reports, has helped to undermine confidence in local schools. This has led to numerous groups suggesting they can do better. At such times rumours can have greater credence than facts, for as Benn points out, 'Of London's state secondary schools almost a quarter were judged to be 'outstanding''. The changes may be posed as purely educational. In fact as we are gradually finding out they are highly political. Benn asks people to consider 'whether our public services are to be run by a democratic state, or whether they are to be out to tender'. She has done a service in drawing our attention to the motives of many behind these recent changes.

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Earlier this year, I got off a bus in Union Square, San Francisco, and found myself confronting a militant 'Dump Obama' demonstration. Something about the aggressive, self-righteous stance of the bulky young man tending the stall stirred an atavistic streak within me and I shouted at him: 'You'd be better off dumping those pathetic Tea Party nut cases'. The bulk squared up in my direction and abused the Queen and reminded me of the war of 1812. Applauded by an elegant black woman, who said I was 'so right', I strode briskly towards Powell Street and almost stumbled into a poster of the President, with Barack wearing a Hitler moustache. The image inflamed my soul, as nothing at home would have done: 'Outrageous! What do you know about Hitler? How can you compare the President to a mass murderer?' Young hulks stepped forward and screamed in my face about the wickedness of my support for the Queen and British Empire. In a sudden flush of fear, I compared

my lily liver with the courage of Rosa Parks, and with the Civil Rights campaigners who risked their lives challenging racism and injustice. I ducked into the crowd, spotted the black woman, still watching my progress, and scampered to the safety of my nearby hotel.

My five minutes in Union Square gave me a microscopic but still bitter taste of the righteous and decidedly Biblical Tea Party anger that drives core Republican supporters, rednecks, and many blue-collar voters, and suits those wealthy businessmen and women who wish to pay no tax. They should not be dismissed as mad or bad, but understood as ordinary Americans threatened and bewildered by the lost status and de-skilling associated with globalisation and increased inequality, the squeeze on middle incomes, the export of work to China and the Pacific Rim, widespread unemployment, significant, poorly managed immigration, and the social and moral confusion of modernity. Angry and self-pitying, these folks yearn for the certainties of faith and tradition, and mourn for America's lost abundance. Feeling powerless and betrayed by liberal elites, pork barrel politicians and the state, these people provide a reservoir of acrimonious emotion for Conservative causes. It's ugly and often racist, but provides the rock on which liberal dreams founder.

Similar confused, angry, and mainly unacknowledged emotions are at work in Britain, although ignorance and intolerance are aroused and manipulated more often by right-wing newspapers than by Conservative politicians. The Coalition is constrained by an uncomfortable awareness of an electoral centre ground significantly broader than in the USA, so that ministers remember to weep crocodile tears over the poor and disadvantaged, even as they shred benefits, dismantle the welfare state and facilitate private profit from health and education. But they are no less concerned with turning capitalist disaster to their own advantage and seek to make the feckless state, not market failure, the focus for righteous indignation.

This example of *The Shock Doctrine* [1] in action has been prepared over a long period, as successive Labour and Conservative governments have based their very similar asset stripping, privatising, thought-control projects on an acute, intuitive understanding of status anxiety, and of how to appeal to insecure, fearful people in turbulent times. Their genius has been to marketise public services in ways that are mutually profitable for private interests and underfunded political parties, while offering voters the illusion of improvement, security and choice.

This artful, manipulative process, and the fears to which it appeals, helps explain the otherwise bewildering *School Wars* documented by Melissa Benn in this beautifully written and concise history of comprehensive education. She has pieced together a complex story that begins with the early stirrings of discontent against the eleven plus and selection, unfolds as a popular crusade for equal opportunity and democratic education, and eventually becomes a chronicle of lost illusions and ideological warfare. Comprehensives began as a challenge to privilege and social division, but became a point of division themselves as sharp elbowed parents and politicians manoeuvred to protect their

own children from the urban poor. Schools, especially urban schools, became scapegoats for every social and economic problem, so that ambitious politicians were empowered to introduce ceaseless reforms.

Like Melissa, I attended a London comprehensive, and we chose an urban comprehensive for our own children. Like Melissa, I have been bewildered, dismayed and discouraged by the negative portrayal of schools that have been a source of such richness in my own life. But have we come to war? Melissa believes so, and argues that a turning point has been reached, with state education fragmenting into a broken kaleidoscope of public, private and hybrid provision, and with budget cuts set to destroy the necessary infrastructure of social progress. Local authorities and democratic accountability are dissolving before our eyes, while academy chains controlled by private business impose a draconian regime of zero-tolerance discipline, pseudo-public school blazers, long hours, and endless rehearsal for worthless tests. No education officer of the past ever enjoyed a scintilla of the direct, personal power over children's learning now available to businessmen for a knockdown price.

The 'language of business' is 'invading our classrooms' [2], with children encouraged to look no further than their academy sponsor for future employment. Multinational corporations, fattened on an education market worth £100 billion annually, circle stricken schools for the profitable contracts they increasingly expect to become available. Meanwhile, the inimitable Mr Gove seems obsessed with creating the conditions for multiple clones of himself, upwardly mobile orphans reciting Pope and Dryden on their way to Oxbridge and the House of Commons.

School Wars aims to encourage those who hope for an inclusive, openhearted and effective school system. The final chapter describes a new vision of education for education's sake, draws on progressive principles from a variety of contexts, and decisively rejects strategies based on fixed abilities and pathways. But this is war, so I must add a tough clause of my own to this manifesto. Mr Gove is creating profitable chaos in the name of raising standards, so it is of fundamental importance that we demand valid measures of his achievement. New Labour is deemed to have failed, despite splendid test results. On what evidence do the Coalition and their business partners wish to be judged, and when?

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Notes

[1] Naomi Klein (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism.* New York: Picador.

[2] *School Wars*, p. 118.

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Melissa Benn's book has two main themes. First, she is concerned that the public discourse about education led by politicians and the media – that there is a crisis which is the fault of schools and local authorities – does not accord with the experience of most parents, who value and support the work of their local schools. And second, she argues that, while politicians of both right and left have sought to undermine the state system of education for the past thirty years, the current government's policies risk destroying it altogether.

The book begins with an introduction in which Benn describes her own experience of sending her daughters to local schools. The rest of the book is organised in four parts. In Part I, *The Present Threat*, she examines the policies of the current Tory-led coalition government. Part II is a historical survey which aims to demonstrate *How We Got Here*. In Part III, *The Way We Learn Now*, Benn discusses selection, privatisation and private schools. And in the final part, *What Next?*, she assesses the likely effects of current policies and ends with her own suggestions for the future.

Introduction

The Benns' experience of sending their daughters to the local primary school was very positive. It began in the early years of Tony Blair's New Labour government, when the girls benefited from 'the visible public passion of an eager new government with a clear mandate to improve the nation's schools – and, in time, generous increases in education funding' (p. ix). It was a time, however, of several missed political opportunities: 'a popular young government with an impressive majority might have made some important reforms, that not only improved our schools, but expanded the possibilities of comprehensive education itself. Sadly, the political story was to unfold in a different direction' (p. ix).

The process of transferring the girls to secondary school was stressful. It 'confirmed for me that schooling remains one of the key ways in which class identity is formed in modern Britain' (p. x) and 'made me profoundly distrustful of the concept of parental choice, in all its varieties' (p. xi). She is particularly concerned about the role of 'faith schools', some of which 'are choosing families and pupils as much as the other way around, thus creating for themselves a highly favourable pupil mix' (p. xi).

Once again, the Benns chose the local community school, with its 'friendly, open spirit, its determination to do well by every child and to keep improving' (p. xii). Their faith in 'something other than raw league tables, covert social snobbery and urban myth' was more than justified. Yet

'comprehensive schools like ours are routinely denigrated in the wider world' (p. xii). Newspapers and TV companies frequently run negative stories about state schools, all of which 'give credence to the claim that our system is 'broken'' (p. xiv).

Her objection to the objectors is based on the evidence of her own eyes: her daughters' enjoyment and sense of safety, the excellent teachers they encountered, the range of academic achievement within the school, the numerous extra-curricular activities, and the 'determined, friendly and modest' atmosphere of the school all confirmed for Benn that 'comprehensives work' (p. xv). Despite the criticisms, many comprehensive schools enjoy strong parental support, drawing on 'an extraordinary communal wealth that remains invisible to most measures of accountability' (p. xv).

Benn argues that good comprehensive education has never been presented to the people as a democratic ideal: indeed, 'it was never presented in any coherent form at all' (p. xviii). Instead, 'The nation continues to agonise over the related issues of school choice and school quality' with TV, radio and newspapers daily focusing on some new angle on the subject, be it 'parents failing to win their first choice of school, violence in the classroom or the impending crisis in further education, including rising tuition fees' (p. xviii).

The battle for Britain's schools 'has a long, bitter and tangled history' (p. xx). Firstly, there has been 'a long and harsh battle between supporters of comprehensive schools and those who want to retain selection in some form, whether through the restitution of the grammar schools or through more subtle means' (p. xx). Secondly, it has been part of a broader argument about 'whether our public services are to be run by a democratic, devolved state, or whether they are to be put out to tender' (p. xx). And thirdly, lurking behind the headlines about grammar, comprehensive and private schools, there has been a cultural strand – 'an often unarticulated anxiety, and frequently raw prejudice, about ethnic and religious difference, and a thinly veiled terror of downward mobility that fuels the frequently acrid, highly personalised clashes over school choice' (p. xxi).

Part I: The Present Threat

In Chapter 1, *Understanding the New Schools Revolution*, Benn examines the policies of the Tory-led coalition government. She notes the relatively humble origins of Education Secretary Michael Gove, whose mission, she says, is to get more people like himself – 'the naturally brilliant who were not born to rule' – to an elite university: 'the classic grammar-school narrative that still obsesses our nation' (p. 7).

Cameron and Gove were determined to learn from both the successes and failures of Tony Blair's premiership. In particular, they were not going to 'wait before pushing through radical change' (p. 8). But their zeal caused problems and forced Gove into embarrassing U-turns: for example, when he exaggerated the number of schools anxious to become academies and announced the

cancellation of Building Schools for the Future projects which, it transpired, were still going ahead.

Within just one month, Gove was presenting his Academies Bill to the Commons. England's schools were to be offered the chance to convert to academy status, with institutions already judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted to be fast-tracked through the process 'without consultation with staff, parents or the wider community; free schools could be set up on the same independent basis' (p. 9).

Then came the cuts: two-thirds of the school building programme, the abolition of the General Teaching Council and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, Child Trust funds and one-to-one tuition, the Educational Maintenance Allowance (later partly restored), a drastic reduction in the School PE and Sports Strategy (later partly restored) and the abolition of the Bookstart scheme.

None of this stopped Gove, however, who 'steamed ahead' (p. 11) with the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, which was to form the basis of the 2011 Education Act.

Meanwhile the constant denigration of state education in the media continued unabated, with the Government equally keen to portray the situation as a crisis. The political right had long argued that comprehensive schools failed bright, poor children. The Cameron government now claimed that comprehensives were 'failing all children on virtually all fronts, through low academic standards and poor vocational provision' (p. 21). The fact that almost a third of British children lived in poverty was apparently irrelevant. So it was perhaps unsurprising that the Government decided in early summer 2011 to abolish the publication of contextual value-added measures in league tables, 'one way in which government was able to track the relative achievement of schools with high numbers of children from deprived backgrounds, but now apparently deemed patronising to the poor' (p. 22).

By the end of their first year in power, with academies and free schools now the only option, it was clear that a principal aim of the government was to dismantle the role of local authorities in relation to education. 'A democratically accountable public service, nationally directed but locally administered, was fast being replaced by a state-subsidised and centrally controlled quasi-market' (p. 32).

Part II: How We Got Here

Having painted an accurate – and depressing – picture of the current state of affairs, Benn turns, in Chapter 2, *The Piecemeal Revolution*, to the history of comprehensive education.

She notes right-wing opposition to the very idea of mass education – the notion that 'the nation's children – Muslim, Christian or Jewish, upper-class or impoverished, girl or boy, black or white – might actually be educated in the same classrooms together' (p. 37). The problems began with 'the crass divisions

and base prejudices that shaped the 1944 Education Act' (p. 38), so that, while 'the state underwrote a universal, compulsory free education system for all', it 'separated the country's children into winners and losers by the age of eleven – a division that predictably shaped itself along class lines' (p. 38). The Act also 'wholly failed to address the problem of the private sector' (p. 40).

The outcome of the 1944 Act was the 'tripartite system' (grammar, technical and secondary modern schools), in which class divisions were, in Sally Tomlinson's words, 'created, legitimised and justified' (p. 42) and in which 'the twin threads of class anxiety and class ambition were woven right through the school organisation' (p. 44). To this problematic background Benn adds the lack of resources, the poor state of many buildings, and the 'complete lack of a national curriculum' (p. 44).

Despite all this, there were some exceptional schools which 'challenged the conventions and constrictions of the time' (p. 45) and Benn describes the work of one of them: St George's-in-the-East, a post-war secondary modern run by the remarkable Alex Bloom.

During the 1950s it became clear that 11-plus selection was not working and by the 1960s many middle-class parents – often Tory voters – were infuriated when their children 'failed' the 11-plus. But public sentiment failed to persuade politicians to grasp the nettle, and local authorities were *requested* rather than *compelled* to go comprehensive. As the number of comprehensive schools increased, so did the hostility towards them among reactionary politicians and the press, who sought to portray the nation's schools as being in crisis.

The 1974-1979 Labour Government felt it had to take a stand, and the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, intervened. His Ruskin College speech of October 1976 has been seen as 'one of the key turning points in the history of modern education' (p. 58). Although comprehensive reorganisation was well under way, 'many unresolved questions hung over what kind of comprehensive school and what style of learning the nation wanted for its children. In many ways, they still do' (p. 58).

Benn's historical survey continues in Chapter 3, *The Long Years of Attrition*. In the 1970s, she says, the 'piecemeal revolution' continued, 'Never openly repudiated, never truly acknowledged, but certainly never celebrated' (p. 61). The comprehensive ideal came under pressure from a number of economic and political developments: the post-war consensus broke down; the writers of the *Black Papers* attacked 'progressive' education and blamed Plowden; and successive governments 'all advocated versions of parental choice and greater school freedom while tightening the control of the daily life of schools from the centre' (p. 67). The 1988 Education Reform Act 'went further than any politicians had previously dared imagine' (p. 69), establishing Grant-Maintained Schools and City Technology Colleges and imposing a National Curriculum; and John Patten's 'even more ambitious' Education Act of 1993 aimed to 'undercut local comprehensives and local authorities through encouraging further "specialisation" in the system' (p. 70).

By 1996, 90% of children were in comprehensive schools but there was 'a resounding and growing contradiction at the heart of education' (p. 71), with governments claiming to support the comprehensive principle while attempting to bring in new forms of selection.

With its mantra 'standards, not structures', the first Blair government never had any serious intention of tackling 'the inequality embedded in favoured schools' (p. 71) – the remaining grammars, the city technology colleges and the private schools. It said local authorities could decide whether to abolish the grammar schools – and then heavily weighted the balloting arrangements in favour of retention.

Despite this 'lack of clarity' on the part of the New Labour leadership, Benn says there were successes – 'many of them': the proportion of primary school children failing to reach the expected levels in English and maths fell from a half to one fifth; the proportion of pupils achieving five good GCSEs rose from 45 to over 60%; and, for all its problems, the school buildings programme provided generations of pupils with 'access to top-class facilities for learning, art, drama and music for the first time ever' (p. 73).

But there was an air of negativity, too, with talk of 'bog-standard' comprehensives illustrating 'an inability to acknowledge that many comprehensive schools were diverse, dynamic and flourishing and that there were often substantive, structural reasons when this wasn't the case' (p. 75).

The Blairs' choice of the London Oratory for their own children 'played its part in making faith schools an increasingly popular avenue of alternative choice for the middle classes' (p. 76). It became clear that many faith schools were becoming middle-class enclaves: 'Admissions policy had become the new battleground' (p. 76).

Then there was the academies programme, which raised serious questions about 'why private individuals and religious groups necessarily possessed greater skills to run a school than a local authority' (p. 80), and whether they would bring their own discrete agendas to education – 'which of course they did, in return for a relatively small amount of capital, some of it never actually paid' (p. 80).

The academies programme marked a significant shift in government policy. From its early concentration on 'standards not structures', the New Labour government was once again 'tearing the system up by the roots' (p. 80). And after the 2005 election, it was clear that Blair intended to push ahead with 'major privatisation of state schools and to further diminish local authority control and influence' (p. 80). As a result, dissident Labour MPs set up the Alternative White Paper group and the 2006 Education and Inspections Act only passed into law with Conservative support.

Part III: The Way We Learn Now

In Chapter 4, *The Politics of Selection*, Benn notes that parents find themselves facing 'the byzantine, bewildering realities of our school system' in which little

has changed since R.H. Tawney wrote, in 1931, that the 'hereditary curse upon English education is its organization upon lines of social class' (p. 87). While politicians claim that parents are able to choose schools, most educationists argue that it is often the schools which choose their pupils. 'Selection still defines and moulds our education system', she says. 'Every piece of legislation over the past twenty-five years has resulted in more, rather than less, selection, covert or overt, including the Academies Act of 2010' (p. 88).

Proponents of grammar schools argue that they promote social mobility, despite the 'clear and consistent evidence that grammar schools educate very few children from poor homes' (p. 90). The evils of selection infect many schools – indeed, ensuring fair admissions, says Benn, is rather like 'solving an endlessly recurring series of minor crimes' (p. 92), and she lists some of the tricks used in the process which result in many comprehensive schools being, 'to all intents and purposes, secondary moderns' (p. 93).

The international evidence is equally compelling: 'whether it's Finland or South Korea or the province of Alberta in Canada, genuinely non-selective education systems routinely top the world league tables' (p. 101).

She acknowledges that the concept of balanced school intakes poses problems: 'It would be virtually impossible to engineer a good social blend in every school, even if such a thing were considered desirable' (p. 103), and she argues that 'It makes greater sense to try for a mix of attainment, through banded entry to schools' (p. 103). This would involve making a judgement on each child's intellectual ability which 'risks reproducing, if in diluted form, the problems of the eleven-plus', but, she argues, 'It may be that this is an interim price worth paying' (p. 104).

In Chapter 5, *Going Private*, Benn considers the effects of the privatisation of education. She first describes her visit to Mossbourne Community Academy, which, with its trademark red-edged grey blazers, its Richard Rogers-designed building, and its consistently positive Ofsted reports, is 'this country's most shining example of the kind of privatised school that the Coalition would like to develop' (p. 105). She notes the school's 'genuinely comprehensive intake' (p. 108), but argues that the notion that 'bad' local authority schools are closed down to make way for dazzlingly effective private academies is a distortion of the truth: 'the real story is not so simple' (p. 108).

She notes that private sponsors have provided very little money for the schools (in some cases none at all); that the programme has proved to be much more expensive than anticipated; that academies are not required to abide by national pay and conditions arrangements; that parents' rights are significantly diminished; and that academies exclude almost twice as many 'troublesome children' as other schools (p. 110).

Perhaps the greatest worry, however, is the diminution of local democracy and accountability as the government strips the local authorities of their powers:

> Take away the democratic elements of school planning and you are left with, on the one hand, a kind of widespread anarchy, where anyone with special determination, good contacts and influence, or a

> particular plan can push ahead, and, on the other, a series of mini-fiefdoms, controlled by powerful interests, who are permitted to run schools as they see fit. For all their flaws, local councillors, and many school governors, are elected. They can be removed, re-elected, or challenged at any time. (p. 112)

Benn questions the claim that academies dramatically improve exam results and notes that some of them place a heavy emphasis on vocational qualifications 'to boost league table results' (p. 115).

She points out that the academies 'are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the privatisation of state education' (p. 117); that the education market is now worth more than £100bn; and that the ever-increasing level of outsourcing since the Thatcher period has resulted in business now largely doing the job that was once done, in-house, by local authorities. Perhaps the biggest trend in the 'edu-market' is the growth of 'chains', organisations running groups of schools, often nationwide, with resources rivalling those of a local authority – 'a development that many believe will soon dominate the education landscape' (p. 121).

Meanwhile, Sweden's free schools and the American charter schools – so admired by Cameron and Gove – have been less successful than was at first claimed and have raised many concerns. The Swedish scheme 'licences parental choice on the basis of race, faith and particularly class' (p. 126), and the founder of the charter schools movement, Albert Shanker, is now apparently concerned that 'what had been intended as a progressive initiative, to improve the public school system, could be turning into the means to destroy it' (128).

Benn concludes the chapter with a warning about our obsession with raw data: 'Concentration on quantity – high test scores – pushes out any consideration of quality' and leads to 'teaching to the test', she argues (p. 132). While Wales 'chose to dump the whole testing/league-tables paraphernalia and to concentrate on learning instead', in England 'the strange marriage of privatisation and hyper-accountability, with all its pressures and restrictions, looks as though it is here to stay' (p. 134).

In Chapter 6, *The New School Ties*, she considers the English public schools, which have not – as some predicted – withered away, but have been 'ingeniously reborn' (p. 136). She begins with an account of her visit to Wellington College and then recounts the history of English public schools from the first recorded use of the term in 1180 to the present. Although there was growing hostility to them during the twentieth century, politicians of both right and left were unwilling to tackle the problem: 'Astonishingly, not a single Labour MP supported an amendment to the 1944 Act which would have required all parents to send their children to a local authority school' (p. 141).

'Let's state the obvious', she says. 'Private schools perpetuate segregation and inequality, divide neighbourhoods, friends and even families and, year after year, rob the state system of the most affluent and often high-achieving pupils' (p. 144). And she warns that in many ways 'the new, more relaxed image, with

its illusion of greater egalitarianism, is much more dangerous than the old stereotypes of boaters and bullying' (p. 147).

She notes that under Blair, private schools were actively encouraged 'to sponsor academies, partner failing schools, and help failing private schools to convert to academies' (p. 151). Such schemes run the 'enduring risk of both patronage and self-congratulation ... inevitable, perhaps, when the powerful and well resourced decide to rescue the less fortunate, however benign their intentions' (p. 153). Some of these schemes have been less than successful: 'Many of the high-profile academies of the New Labour era have already run into serious trouble' (p. 153).

Part IV: What Next?

In her penultimate chapter, *The Shape of Things to Come?*, Benn makes some predictions about the likely shape of education provision in the years ahead, noting the confusion over admissions policies and warning of 'the emergence of a new form of selection and the old tripartite division' (p. 164). She wonders what effects 'the creeping privatisation of primary education' (p. 165) will have, and warns that free schools will present 'a more direct danger of segregation' (p. 166). She notes that seven of the ten proposed free schools in London's Waltham Forest would be faith-based and warns of 'the chaos and fragmentation that would ensue if even half of these schools got going' (p. 167). There are concerns, too, that large chains of academies might effectively replace local authorities, despite government assurances to the contrary.

Parents will be faced with a bewildering diversity of provision but certain trends will be discernible: 'The fast pace of technology, and the temptation for private providers to cut costs, will increase standardised, centralised learning methods' (p. 170). At the same time, there will be a return to more traditional methods, 'harsh discipline and private-school-style uniforms' (p. 171).

And what will happen when some of the new schools – the 'converter' academies and the free schools – run into financial trouble, as they almost certainly will? (Indeed, some already have.) 'One can easily imagine the next step: government giving permission to private companies to make a profit – largely, to get schools off the taxpayer's back' (p. 172). This has already happened in Sweden and right-wing think tanks are now 'openly urging the government to move in this direction' (p. 175).

Benn poses a number of questions about the nature of our democracy and our schools. At every level, she says, public education is becoming less accountable:

> The loss of local authority involvement is literally incalculable. Centralised planning of school places; important powers of scrutiny over which schools are taking what pupils; expertise and guidance on a range of important school issues, from special needs provision to the appointment of head teachers – these collaborative elements

> will wither away if the local school landscape becomes shaped by naked competition, rather than managed collaboration. (p. 176)

She begins her final chapter, '*Go Public': a new school model for a new century*, with the warning that 'We have reached an important turning point. Our state education system is fast fragmenting, and without full and proper public debate' (p. 179). And she asks 'Will we – parents, citizens, taxpayers – stand by as one of our most vital public services passes into the hands of venture capitalists, hedge fund managers and a growing array of faith groups?' (p. 179).

She urges us to go back to first principles and 'remind ourselves of the profound importance of education for education's sake, rather than education mainly as a means of economic and professional advancement' (p. 180). She notes that Richard Pring identified three questions which should shape the education of young people: 'What is it that makes us human?', 'How did we become so?' and 'How might we become more so?' (p. 180). She argues that we could learn much from the original free-school philosophy of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on 'collaboration, experimentation and independence of thought' (p. 181), and she commends the view of A.S. Neill, that good schooling 'should explore, and help children to develop, the vital balance between compulsion and trust-in-self, duty and creative freedom' (p. 182).

She warns that government cuts – in music, arts and literary projects, one-to-one tuition, the closure of public libraries and Sure Start centres and the scrapping of many school building projects – are 'already undermining the right of every child to a broad and balanced education' (p. 183).

She condemns ability-labelling and describes how, at the Wroxham primary school in Hertfordshire, which is part of the *Learning Without Limits* network, head teacher Alison Peacock has 'outlawed all discussion and assignation of ability' (p. 186).

She condemns the 'ever-rising tide of marketisation and increasing fragmentation' which is causing us to lose sight of 'the crucial role of the state in planning and providing for public services and ensuring their rational and fair distribution' (p. 189).

She is concerned that trainee teachers should be given 'space to reflect on the profession they are about to enter', that they should be 'widely read in educational and psychological theory' and understand issues relating to race, gender, culture and class (p. 195). She argues that, in order to give teachers more professional power and autonomy, we need to develop a 'lighter-touch curriculum' and that, while we should not abandon testing altogether, 'far more of this could be undertaken on a class or year-group level, and adapted rather more to the pace at which individual classes, or pupils, progress' (p. 196). She bemoans the 'sterile division between the academic and vocational aspects of education'; argues that 'if we are seriously to reduce the differential outcomes of the better-off and the poor, we have to move towards a genuinely non-selective system'; and commends mixed-ability teaching, which, for all its challenges,

'seems to offer the fairest and overall most effective method of learning, certainly in the early years of secondary education' (p. 197).

The result of creeping privatisation is that we – citizens and parents – are becoming 'passive spectators of an alliance between the private sector and politicians as they step in to 'save' civil society from its failures, including the apparent failure of egalitarianism' (p. 199). Public services, argues Benn, should 'remain within the remit of a dynamic democratic state, at every level' (p. 200):

> We could organise our education system along much simpler and fairer lines, and in ways that unify, not divide, the nation. ... A service that allows the poorest family to feel confident that their child will receive a broadly similar educational start in life to their better-off peers, and one that promises to enrich and challenge all. A service based on neighbourhood schools – housed in well-designed, well-equipped, aesthetically pleasing and properly maintained buildings, enjoying plenty of outdoor space – with balanced intakes and a broad, rich curriculum that will allow each child, whatever their talents, temperament or interests, to flourish. (p. 201)

And she concludes:

> It is time ... to reclaim the mantle of genuine reform for our side in the long-running school wars. Genuine comprehensive reform is unfinished. There is much exciting work still to be done. The rewards, in terms of better-educated citizens of the future and greater common ground between communities and religions and classes, could be enormous. The alternative scenario – of an increasingly fragmented, mistrustful and divided nation, controlled rather than enlightened, dependent on the unstable whim of private or religious enterprise – is too frightening to contemplate. (p. 204)

Comment

Melissa Benn's book conveys a sense of urgency, which is just as well since it comes 'at a pivotal and highly dangerous point' in the history of English education. The 'choice and diversity' revolution begun by Thatcher and pursued by Blair is now being advanced 'with manic zeal' by Cameron's Tory-led coalition. Add to that the swingeing cuts in every area of public life and you have 'a high-risk strategy whose wider impact will soon be felt by the public' (p. xix).

The book is clearly heart-felt, much of it based on her own experience of the state education system – she describes herself as 'an engaged combatant, parent, writer and campaigner' (p. xxi). It was written 'partly out of anger and frustration, but mostly from a powerful sense of hope' by someone who is not only a product of comprehensive education but 'fiercely proud of that inheritance' (p. xxii).

It is well researched and informative. She conducted a wide range of interviews with heads, teachers, parents and others, and made numerous visits to a variety of schools, all of which are recounted in the book and add to its interest and authenticity.

It is extremely readable – I'm not a fast reader but I got through it in two afternoons. Benn's journalistic style is compelling – even exciting – and her sense of urgency makes the book almost impossible to put down. Above all, she manages to make you feel that change is actually possible – a thrilling antidote to the daily attacks on our schools by Gove and the media which, personally, I find so debilitating.

It is evangelistic – in the best sense of that word. Benn is anxious 'to contribute to the creation of a genuinely non-selective system and the enrichment of education for all children, not just the lucky minority' (p. xxii). Robin Pedley, an early supporter of comprehensive reform, argued that what is at stake is the encouragement of 'a larger and more generous attitude' within society and within us all. Benn writes that she hopes the reader will find evidence of that spirit in this book. I certainly did. It represents her attempt 'to confront the realities of our divided school system, and to help bring the necessary forces together to remake it in a more inclusive, open-hearted and effective form' (p. xxii).

I thoroughly commend *School Wars* to all those who, like me, are concerned about the imminent destruction of our state education system.

Links

The Local Schools Network. Founded in 2010 by Melissa Benn with fellow activists and parents Fiona Millar, Francis Gilbert and Henry Stewart, it provides a forum for the many thousands with positive experiences of state education who want to find ways to improve it, rather than disparage or dismantle it. www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk

Comprehensive Future. Campaigns for a comprehensive secondary school system in England with fair admissions criteria to all publicly funded schools, guaranteeing an equal chance to all children and an end to selection by ability and aptitude. www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk/

Learning Without Limits. Dedicated to developing approaches to teaching and learning that do not rely on determinist beliefs about ability, the project is inspired by decades of research that have drawn attention to the many complex ways in which ideas of fixed ability, and the practices based on them, can limit learning. learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk

Derek Gillard

Assessing Children's Learning
MARY JANE DRUMMOND, 2012
London: Routledge
182 pages, £22.99, ISBN 978 0 415 68673 0

Assessing Children's Learning was first published in 1993, close to the beginning of the counter-reformation to which English state schools have been subjected ever since the passing of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Now reissued in the Routledge Education Classic Edition Series, Mary Jane Drummond's superb book offers a definitive reply to all who think of education and its assessment in terms of standardised tests, levels of attainment, basic skills, and the rest of the conceptual paraphernalia that has bedevilled the National Curriculum from the outset. In an educational world which is becoming ever narrower, the reappearance of this seminal text is, surely, a hopeful sign.

For Mary Jane Drummond, assessment means looking at learning, but this is looking of a very special kind. Goethe, in the preface to his *Theory of Colours ,* noted that 'merely looking at an object cannot be of any use to us. All looking goes over into an observing, all observing into a reflecting, all reflecting into a connecting,and so one can say that with every attentive look we cast into the world, we are already theorising.' Elsewhere, among his maxims, he wrote of 'a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory.' The identification of Mary Jane Drummond with the children whose learning is at stake in her account of assessment is a compelling example of Goethe's delicate empiricism. She is in no way hostile to theory, but whatever theory she requires is embedded within the very particular practices which she describes, both inside and outside the classroom.

The book opens with the event which first aroused Mary Jane's interest in assessment:

> In February 1985, a class of seven and eight year olds, in their first year of junior schooling, were taken into the school hall where they sat at individual tables to take a mathematics test. The headteacher read out the questions, and the pupils wrote the answers in their individual test booklets. One of those children was Jason, aged seven years, six months, who had spent two and a half years in the infant department. There are 36 questions in the test and Jason answered them all. One of the answers was correct, giving Jason a raw score of two, and a standardised score of 81, 'a moderately low score', according to the teacher's guide to the test.

A teacher at Jason's school showed Jason's textbook to Mary Jane and at once she was captivated. Jason's test responses may have shown how much he had failed to learn about mathematics, yet the more she pored over those responses, the more she recognised how much else he had learned during his eight terms at school. 'He has learned how to take a test. His answers are written neatly,

with the sharpest of pencils. When he reverses a digit and sees his mistake, he crosses it out tidily. He places his answers on the line or in the box as instructed, though he often adds some more digits in other empty spaces, as if he interpreted a space as an invitation to write. He has learned to copy numbers and letters neatly and accurately, even though this is not what is being asked of him.'

Mary Jane takes us through Jason's 36 responses to the test one after another, pointing out Jason's seriousness of intent, despite his mathematical weaknesses, and speculating about the variety of his responses to the tasks that he has been set. She finds 'substantial evidence that, against what must be, for him, inconceivable odds, Jason is struggling to make sense of the test, and what his headteacher is asking him to do. His mathematical understanding is still too scanty to be of much use to him, but he uses all the other clues he can get. This is, I think, a remarkable achievement and a tribute to Jason's persistence, to his longing for meaning'.

The story of Jason is the uncompromising preface to the book's theme. 'Like all children', Mary Jane concludes, 'Jason has the right to an education in which his learning is seen as of paramount importance – not his difficulties, or his limitations, or his disadvantages, not his successes or failures – but his learning ... Unless there is, at the centre of a school's curriculum, a sustained and unshakeable interest in children's learning, there will always be children like Jason who do not learn what their teachers set out to teach them. The process of assessing children's learning by looking closely at it and striving to understand it, is the only safeguard against children's failure, the only certain guarantee of children's progress and development'.

What follows is a sustained exposition of assessment as a form of looking. Mary Jane asks three questions:

> 'What is there to see?;
> How best can we understand what we see?;
> How can we put our understanding to good use?'

In each case the answers depend on how we look. The book is packed with close readings of children's learning, drawn from a wide range of sources, both contemporary and historical. These diverse readings are constantly reminding us that learning has a double meaning, both the acquisition of knowledge and its possession, as when we speak of a man or woman of learning. It is impossible to read Mary Jane's book without being made aware of the insights that children bring to every fresh encounter with knowledge. One of the book's principal delights is its acknowledgement that it is our readiness to have our own learning challenged by the spontaneous wisdom of the children we teach that will determine the depth of our assessments and the value which we give to children's work.

Perhaps the best way of indicating the power of Mary Jane Drummond's pedagogy is to look at how the value of children's learning is recognised,

represented and responded to. Here are three examples, taken from the third and fourth chapters of the book.

The first concerns what Mary Jane describes as 'tiny fragments of learning, which may be like pearls of great price, immensely valuable in our search for understanding.' A first school teacher in Norfolk had picked up an idea from one of the letters in J.C. Powys's book, *Letters to Nicholas Ross:* 'I like the name (Klee)', Powys wrote, 'because it makes me think of KEY, which is one of the six most exciting of all words: what would be your SIX PRECIOUS WORDS? Let me think if I can name MY six: Key, silver, grass, away, kite, and wave'. Inspired by Powys's idea, the teacher invited his class of six- and seven-year-olds to list their own six precious words. As so often, the constraint served only to provoke the children's ingenuity. 'Their lists of words were astonishing', Mary Jane reports, ' not just for their diversity, but for the way in which they could be read as minute portraits of their authors' present understanding of the power and enchantment of words'. There was Lindsay, 'who loves animals, who is as small as a mouse and influential as an elephant', and who wrote 'cat, dog, mouse, bird, elephant, butterfly'; or Cara, who 'is quite unpredictable, full of ideas and little dramas', and wrote 'May, Thursday, Book, impossible, magpie, if'; or, wildest of all, Matthew, who wrote 'impact, impulse, interface, Shanghai, ice, cold'. Astonished, his teacher challenged him to write a sentence using all six words, and unabashed, he came up with the following:'My six favourite words. The impact of the impulse in the interface is the opposite of ice cold'. (The omission of Shanghai gives rise to endless speculation.)

An enchantment with lists is something that children share with literary and visual artists, as any randomly chosen page from Umberto Eco's beautiful book *The Infinity of Lists, from Homer to Joyce* will confirm. Lists make promising material for study, being rich in interpretive possibilities, endlessly inventive, a perpetual incitement to discussion. Whether practical or poetic, they are a way of playing with the possibilities of words, as Mary Jane goes on to demonstrate in the chapter that follows, in which she describes a series of discussions that she had with small groups of children in the infant school in Sheffield of which she was headteacher.. For instance, an extended discussion of the function of umbrellas and umbrella substitutes led to the following list:

a mushroom is an umbrella to a mouse
a bus shelter is an umbrella to the people in the queue
the roof is an umbrella to the house
the shell is an umbrella to the tortoise
the fleece is an umbrella for the sheep
a flower is an umbrella for the bee
a greenhouse is an umbrella for plants.

But that was not all: 'Into the midst of this burst Helen. "Channel swimmers are covered in butter." I gasped, but the group nodded approval, and agreed with interest. It took me some time to realise how far Helen had taken her understanding; we were really discussing forms of protection against water, and

so, metaphorically speaking, the Channel swimmer's grease is an umbrella. Helen's thinking was original, divergent, illuminating, – and strictly logical'.

There are times, however, when logic doesn't help, which brings me to the third example. Almost immediately after the story of six precious words comes what is the most moving, and perhaps the most instructive, of all the book's exemplary moments of insight. Six-year-old James and his mother 'were particularly close to each other and both of them found parting at the beginning of each school day very painful'. Over time they devised a parting ritual which seemed to satisfy them both. It involved them waving and blowing kisses to each other from the school doorstep, after which James would rush down the corridor to his classroom, stand on the low window sill, wait for his mother to come into view as she walked back home and wave and blow kisses once more, after which he was ready to join his class.

Mary Jane continues the story as follows:

> One misty November morning, James' class teacher was unexpectedly late and I was standing in for her. I set out on one table some drawing materials – white chalk and charcoal and grey paper – with, frankly, no purpose except that of engaging the children more or less profitably until I had time to prepare myself properly for a morning session with them. James went straight to this table and settled to work. In about 20 minutes he produced a drawing which is, I believe, extremely beautiful. (It is unfortunate that this picture, as reproduced in the book is hard to see.) It is certainly remarkably evocative of the damp mist that was curling around the trees outside the classroom window. Fragments of the same mist seemed to have crept into the school corridor, and the windows of the classroom were covered with chilly condensation. I asked James the title of his picture: 'Waving Goodbye to my Mother'. This should, of course, have been obvious, but James did not remark on my obtuseness.
>
> When I had time to gather my wits, look more carefully at his drawing, and discuss it with colleagues, the importance of what he had done began to become clear. James had drawn himself from the outside, from the other side of the classroom window, looking in through the mist and condensation. He had drawn what his mother saw, as she waved goodbye to him for the last time that morning. But he had also drawn an emotional portrait of himself – as a child who is both distressed and courageous, a child who hates parting but who has learned to say goodbye, a child who is near to tears but remains serene and composed – a very realistic self portrait. And the picture seems to represent not just this self, but James' awareness of the characteristics of this self, as something to be proud of.

And so to Mary Jane's conclusion:

> For James' teachers, this was an enormously revealing incident. We had accepted the long drawn-out ritual of his leave-taking from his mother as a necessary, but not very desirable compromise. We were none of us convinced that it was the best way to help James to learn to part more easily from his mother. But this picture seemed to offer us evidence that James' emotional development was proceeding apace. Before the age of seven, he had learned not only to understand his own – mixed – feelings, he had learned to represent those feelings. He had learned to represent them not only from his own point of view but from his mother's This picture seems to say: 'When my mother looks at me, she sees her brave, sad boy.' 'The picture records a profound understanding of the painful emotions that James experienced every morning on the way to school.

The delicate drama of Mary Jane's narrative matches the understanding and pain that she finds in James's painting. The movement from looking to observing to reflecting to connecting is representative of all that a close reading of children's work can achieve. There is a great deal to attend to in this account. I will cite just three examples. James's drawing was incidental to the day's formal curriculum, a simple, playful fill in for the child while his teacher prepared for the unexpected morning, and yet it turned out to be a profound moment of learning, both for himself and for his teacher. Appreciation of the meaning of the picture depended not just on time to examine it more closely, but time, also, to discuss it with colleagues. The picture itself represents an achievement that is as emotionally significant as it is intellectually bold. Intellect and emotion have here become inseparable. Most important of all, the interaction of child and teacher involved a sharing of experience from which each had much to learn

Asssessing learning by looking in ways such as these is far more intellectually strenuous, and admittedly far more demanding of time, than the kind of testing that Jason had to submit to, the kind of testing that has since become a staple of the school curriculum from infancy onwards. Yet for all its demands on teachers' time, sensitivity and intellectual adventurousness, this book comes as at once an inspiration and a relief. It shows us that there is a far better way of examining children's learning than the test; that the ideology of testing is, in effect, a denial of learning; that to value children's learning means to look closely; that looking closely entails a readiness to learn as well as to interpret and respond; that learning entails, not the delivery of experience but its exchange. The trouble with standardised assessment, as imposed on schools by government, is not that it is too demanding but that it is nowhere near demanding enough. Mary Jane Drummond's invaluable study shows us another way of looking, a style of observation, description and interpretation that is worthy of children's learning, and gives us the confidence to put it to the test.

Every school deserves its own copy of this book. Perhaps it could be shelved in the school library, alongside the copy of the King James Bible donated by Michael Gove. That'll be the day.

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Michael Armstrong

Education for the Inevitable:
schooling when the oil runs out
MICHAEL BASSEY, 2011
Brighton: Book Guild Publishing
184 pages, £15.99, ISBN 978 1 84624 639 5

Michael Bassey shares more than a Christian name with Michael Gove. They are both passionate about their ideas for education. They both communicate their vision persuasively. They are both sincere. There the resemblance ends. Michael Gove has not published a plain-speaking, sweeping, 'angry' book. Michael Bassey has.

His *Education for the Inevitable* is a brave, wide-ranging overview covering, or more accurately touching, aspects of educational micropolitics, macro-politics as well as adult education, the role of the media, ecological sustainability and an ethos of conviviality. It attempts to outline how a transformed education system might contribute to culture, nurture and survival when the ecological crisis culminates Given my values which are similar to his, his is a much more difficult book to review critically than any Michael Gove might eventually produce.

Like Michael Bassey 'I grieve at what is happening in education and fear for the future of my grandchildren's generation'. I agree too that 'They need an education that equips them for troubled times' especially 'when the oil runs out'. I agree that 'Every school needs to be a good school' and that 'Good schools need good governors … good local administrations … and access to good ideas', but I believe Michael Gove would argue the same and I admit to being far less certain than either of the Michaels as to what 'good' signifies and how consensus over that crucial issue can be achieved – certainly not by political/ administrative fiat or by intoxicating but populist rhetoric. In words which strangely echo Michael Gove's comments on free schools, Michael Bassey wants schools 'organised collegially, independent of government and embedded in its local community'. But there is little or no tradition of 'collegiality' to build on, so, I wonder, can it be fostered easily or quickly 'before the oil runs out'? Again state schools have never really been really independent of government (local or national) or of parental expectation; what small degree of independence they have had has been eroded over the last twenty years; and despite Coalition rhetoric the 'independence' it claims to be offering may turn out to be both

illusory and unwanted by a demoralised, deskilled teaching profession Michael Bassey portrays so vividly. He is at his iconoclastic, persuasive best when arguing against 'the excessive testing, ruthless inspection and oppressive curriculum control which has become the norm in England'. I sympathise but with some reservations – his alternative accountability system starting with parents, moving through school governors, local community, local administration, a National Education Council to Parliament is far less convincing than his critique. He wants a depoliticised, non-governmental school system but at the very time when, arguably, an incipient ecological crisis (which he vividly characterises) requires political action at all levels, including that of the school.

This review focuses on only some of the many fascinating issues in the book. He concludes by admitting that his various ideas 'to some may seem a curious medley'. They *are* certainly a curiosity-inspiring mixture – written in a style which is a far cry from the stultifying 'polystyrene prose' of government documents or the carefully phrased, defensive statements of too many educational academics. They are a refreshing change. Would that more educationists offered their vision of 'what is and what might be' – but we would also need to know how we might get from one to the other.

Colin Richards
Professor Colin Richards is a retired HMI and critic of the education policies of the current and previous government

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Politics and the Primary Teacher
PETER CUNNINGHAM, 2012
Abingdon: Routledge
144 pages, £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 415 54959 2

In his 2007 book *Teaching and Learning in the Primary Classroom*, Maurice Galton quoted a Year 6 teacher who, asked what she thought of the literacy hour, said she liked being able to use materials produced by the QCA because they 'Save you the trouble of having to plan lessons. It cuts out the need to think'.

Perhaps we should not be surprised at this chilling response. During the past thirty years the training of teachers has become almost entirely utilitarian. A knowledge of the content of the National Curriculum – and some idea of how to 'deliver' it – seems to be all that's required. This is simply not good enough. Young teachers need much more than the ability to download lesson plans, assimilate lists of facts to be taught, and acquire some skills in classroom management, useful though these may be. They need to learn to think for themselves and take an active part in the debate about the nature and purpose of education: something they can only do if they have some understanding of its history and the politics which have shaped it.

Peter Cunningham's new book contributes to that debate by providing a wealth of information to support critical thinking about the policies and provision of primary education.

Summary

Chapter 1. Introduction: exploring primary politics

In his introduction, Cunningham argues that 'the context of primary teaching is innately political' – indeed, that it has been 'excessively politicised' over the last thirty years or so. The teacher's job is 'not well understood beyond the school walls' and this lack of understanding is where 'the politics of primary teaching begins to reveal itself' (p. 1).

He then sets out the plan of the book. Chapter 2 outlines the nature of politics and political theorising, and provides a historical perspective. 'We need to be inquisitive and questioning about the historical evolution of primary policy and practice,' he says, 'as different versions of the past are presented by politicians to justify current policies, and we need to remain sceptical about those justifications' (p. 2).

Chapters 3 to 8 survey in more detail the period since the Plowden Report. The curriculum, which has become 'a critical policy issue' (p. 3), is discussed in Chapter 3; while two aspects of it – citizenship and well-being – are highlighted in Chapter 4 as 'predictable sites of contestation' (p. 3). The politicisation of pedagogy and its implications for professional autonomy and children's learning is the subject of Chapter 5. Chapter 6 looks at changes in teachers' working conditions, training and development, and at professional organisations. National accountability is the theme of Chapter 7; while Chapter 8 examines local accountability and concerns about the demise of local democracy.

Finally, Chapter 9 'draws together threads of argument and presents some concluding propositions' (p. 3).

Cunningham is keen to lay stress on the importance of personal and professional memory: he seeks to encourage discussion, argument and debate about 'the way politics has influenced, and continues to influence, primary education practice' (p. 5). To this end, each chapter is followed by questions which aim to stimulate debate, and suggestions for further reading.

Chapter 2. The Primary School as a Political Institution

Cunningham begins with a brief discussion about the history and nature of politics. He discusses the notion of ideology and suggests that key features in the political development of primary education can be grouped under three broad headings – content, teaching methods (pedagogy) and accountability.

He reviews the part religion has played in educational provision, noting that public funding of religious schools was always 'a politically contentious matter' (p. 14) and remains so today.

He argues that elementary schools provided education for citizenship, with a focus on the health and well-being of individuals and society. In this context, basic skills were of fundamental importance: universal schooling was 'certainly directed at equipping a skilled labour force' (p. 16).

He recounts the history of teacher training from the monitorial system to the introduction of BEd degree courses in 1967. Pay and conditions have often been contentious issues, alongside teachers' aspirations for full professional status. However, teachers 'never acquired the independence enjoyed by the more elite established professions of law and medicine' (p. 18).

He notes that the quality of teaching has been a political issue ever since public money was first spent on schools. The system of payment by results, introduced in 1862, led inevitably to 'teaching to the test' with 'routinised, mechanical and dull methods of teaching' (p. 18). By the early years of the twentieth century, however, 'a new breed of enlightened and progressive HMI' were encouraging elementary teachers to 'take more initiative in responding to the needs of their particular children' (p. 18), and he suggests that this trend towards greater teacher autonomy in pedagogical matters can be linked to the political circumstances of the time.

He argues that schools' broadcasting was also of political significance: it extended the curriculum and provided valuable professional development for teachers, but also signalled 'a tendency towards national standards for primary teaching methods' (p. 19).

Finance, he notes, has been 'a central aspect of the politics of schooling' since 1858, when a Royal Commission examined the effectiveness of education in church schools supported by state funds. A concern about 'value for money' has 'permeated political discourse on education ever since' (p. 19). When the state began providing schools, local taxation was seen as an alternative way of funding them – first through the School Boards and, from 1902, through the LEAs. By the late 1960s the state was spending more on education than on defence and electors were becoming concerned about how their money was spent.

The finance and regulation of public services, he says, is 'highly complex' (p. 20). HMI was established in 1839 to ensure value for money in the church schools built with public funds. This role was expanded in 1846 to include monitoring the quality of teachers and their work. The title 'Her Majesty's Inspectors' suggested independence from party political control, an important feature which was 'crucially abandoned' in the 1990s (p. 21). By the end of the twentieth century, central government – the major source of funding – was exerting 'increasing control over the character and quality of education provided by LEAs' (p. 21).

Chapter 3. Curriculum: the politics of subject knowledge

Cunningham argues that the curriculum is 'inherently political' in terms of both its purposes and its structure, and that views about these 'tend to polarise

opinion along political lines' (p. 25). He contrasts education for personal fulfilment and education for employment as 'competing paradigms, each with political implications' (p. 27).

The creation of primary schools in 1944 freed elementary schools from the task of preparing children for the world of work and allowed for a more 'child-centred' approach. Plowden gave 'a powerful endorsement to this emphasis' (p. 28). The case for personal fulfilment as a pre-eminent curriculum aim, he says, can be 'elaborated in political, psychological and other ways' (p. 28) and he examines it in the context of the government's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Personal fulfilment and vocational preparation are, he notes, 'by no means mutually exclusive', but New Labour's 'intense focus' on literacy and numeracy strategies and standards and targets, led to 'a serious and widely recognised loss of breadth and balance at Key Stages 1 and 2' (p. 29).

While elementary education sought to make working-class children more employable, it also had the important aim of 'preserving an established political order' (30). For cultural and vocational purposes, therefore, 'a structure of discrete subjects or disciplines was firmly embedded as a way of organising curriculum' (p. 30). However, 'an alternative view of curriculum structure was gradually accepted' (p. 30): Plowden 'did much to raise popular consciousness of primary curriculum and pedagogy' and endorsed the 'independence of teachers and schools in constructing the curriculum' (p. 31), while the Schools Council 'reflected the power of organised teachers to resist early attempts by departmental civil servants to intervene in curriculum reform' (p. 31). Both CACE (which had produced Plowden) and the Schools Council were abolished by Keith Joseph – 'a symbolic act' (p. 32) and a taste of things to come.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 'brought education policy to the centre of political contention'. Its imposition of a National Curriculum was 'a radical break with tradition' (p. 33) and from now on the state would determine what what was to be taught in schools. Defined in terms of traditional subjects – 'a specifically neo-Conservative agenda' (p. 33), the National Curriculum was hopelessly complicated and constantly revised.

Three reviews of the curriculum were conducted between 2006 and 2009. The Cambridge Review called for the reinstatement of a broad and balanced primary curriculum. The Rose Review (commissioned by New Labour) promised to 'make the curriculum less prescriptive and free it up for teachers' – a claim, says Cunningham, 'both wildly exaggerated and historically flawed' (p. 37). And a parliamentary enquiry argued for a slimmed-down curriculum and for reducing the politicisation of curriculum development. These calls were not heeded: the new coalition government abandoned Rose and announced that the National Curriculum would be a 'minimum national entitlement organised around subject disciplines' (p. 38).

Cunningham sums up the arguments for and against state control of the primary curriculum and argues that policies 'based on ideology rather than on educational understanding and objective research', together with political

attempts to micro-manage education, result in 'discontinuity and instability' (p. 39).

Chapter 4. Curriculum: the politics of citizenship, health and well-being

In the aftermath of the Second World War it was seen as important to imbue children with 'a sense of national identity, democratic values, law-abiding behaviour and participation in civic life' (p. 42). In the following decades, political, social and cultural change 'generated new contexts for citizenship and health education', so that schools were 'blamed for a declining respect for law and order but simultaneously expected to provide solutions' (p. 42).

Citizenship in the curriculum, Cunningham observes, is 'riddled with dilemmas, integral to the topic itself and contingent on an ever-changing political context' (p. 45) and in the past decade the citizenship agenda has been repeatedly reformulated 'in an insistent search for remedies to social and political crises' (p. 45). He warns that 'Neither politics nor citizenship education can ignore religion' (p. 47) and describes the controversies surrounding 'faith schools' and arguments about whether religious schooling suppresses 'the personal autonomy that should be the aim of all public education' (p. 48).

He notes that physical education was included in the elementary school curriculum because it was seen as important to maintain healthy males to defend the nation and healthy females to breed and rear the young: 'Citizenship in this way took a physical form' (p. 50). Health education has been redefined over the past twenty years and subsumed into personal and social education, 'thereby expressing its continuity with citizenship education' (p. 52). He argues that New Labour's policy of providing more 'joined-up and accessible services' for the needs of children and families illustrated 'a gradual elision of citizenship, health and well-being to combine current ways of working through the formal curriculum and through the wider role of the primary school' (p. 53). To reflect this new policy, the Department was renamed 'Children, Schools and Families' in 2007, a title which the Coalition Government immediately replaced by the narrower 'Department for Education', reflecting the right-wing preference for a focus on 'the basics' (p. 53).

Most primary teachers, he says, would agree that citizenship education should include 'a curriculum, pedagogy and a school ethos that teaches by precept and by example the values of democracy, self-respect and respect for others, cooperation, a healthy lifestyle, well-being and even 'happiness'' (p. 55). However, this 'vital and rich curriculum field' becomes problematic if governments 'determine the parameters of citizenship education for their own particular ends' (p. 56). Teachers need to be alert to this, 'to understand and cultivate citizenship in the fullest sense of social development for democracy, to question and resist its narrow prescription or imposition of values by the state' (p. 56).

Chapter 5. Pedagogy: a political issue?

Cunningham argues that pedagogy has become political in two ways. In a narrow sense – as classroom practice – its political significance 'derives from its greater or lesser efficiency and cost-effectiveness in achieving the state's educational objectives' (p. 58). In a broader sense, pedagogy can be conceived 'as a symbolic interaction that represents a set of power relations between the state and the individual' (p. 59). In this second broader cultural sense, pedagogy is 'bound to be profoundly political' (p. 59).

He offers three approaches to understanding the politics of pedagogy as it affects primary school teaching.

First, he explores the way pedagogy has been understood and discussed by educationists and the wider public. The view that children should be 'active agents in their own learning', rather than 'empty vessels to be filled with knowledge' (p. 60) was prevalent up to the 1960s, when Plowden promoted child-centredness and discovery methods of learning. However, concerns about a 'lack of systematic description of pedagogical processes' (p. 60) led to a 'new wave of research based on close observation of primary classrooms' (p. 61). Unfortunately, the debate which ensued was based on an 'artificially polarised discourse' of 'teacher-centred' pedagogies on the one hand and 'learner-centred' pedagogies on the other (p. 61), a polarisation which, he says, is still evident today.

Second, he considers the political direction of pedagogical practice since Plowden. He mentions the William Tyndale Affair, Jim Callaghan's 'Great Debate', the 1988 Education Reform Act, the 'Three Wise Men' report, and New Labour's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. All this, he argues, indicated 'that primary teachers could not be trusted to raise standards without the government's top-down, standards agenda' (p. 64). A Commons inquiry into pedagogy in 2009 concluded that the Department's promotion of a particular approach as the 'one best way' was 'highly problematic' (p. 65): the Department should 'send a much stronger message to Ofsted and local authorities as to the non-statutory nature of National Strategies guidance' (p. 66). A year later, Michael Gove 'responded in contradictory ways to this trend of thought' (p. 66): the National Strategies were to be abandoned, but there would be a new stage of assessment – a reading test at the end of Year 1.

He relates the history of assessment – 'a key factor influencing pedagogy' (p. 66) – from the Revised Code of 1862 to the imposition in 1988 of a national curriculum and its accompanying testing regime. The statutory tests (SATs) were needed, he says, because 'to create a free market in education, parents as consumers needed information about the quality of schools between which they were to choose' (p. 66). This function 'helps to explain the contradictory policies of a 'free market' accompanied by increased central control' (p. 66). 'Political high stakes' (p. 66) were attached to assessment, but there were concerns that the intense focus on it was – as in 1862 – distorting the curriculum.

Thirdly, he focuses on the classroom and argues that the politicisation of pedagogy has 'impacted significantly on the professional autonomy of teachers' (p. 67): their role has been reduced to 'delivering' National Strategies, and a 'dirigiste approach to pedagogy' is threatening to 'stifle creativity in teachers as well as in children' (p. 67).

He concludes that 'the concept of social pedagogy implies teamwork and a collaborative process' in 'the holistic development of children's cognitive, emotional and practical abilities' (p. 71). Unfortunately, official policy remains 'constricted by the rigid systems of assessment and testing that continue to be imposed' (p. 71).

Chapter 6. Workforce and Politics

Cunningham argues that the use of the term 'workforce' to describe teachers 'neglects and obscures the blend of vocationalism and professionalism demanded in effective primary teaching' (p. 75). The teacher's role is a complex one, making 'varied and subtle demands in terms of initial teacher education and continuing professional development', yet training and development are 'increasingly micro-managed by government' (p. 75).

He explores three ways in which politics and policy have impinged on the role of primary teachers.

First, he deals with training and professional development. 'Political intrusions' into teacher training began in the mid-1980s – and were 'hotly contested' (p. 75). The objective had been a highly educated individual and 'expert' teacher, but by 1997 the aim had become a 'competent practitioner' (p. 76). This shift, he argues, led to rigorous control of institutions, a specified training curriculum, and much greater involvement of schools. Continuing professional development faced a similar shift in policy in the late 1990s, when the introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategies resulted in professional development being 'determined by political rather than personal priorities' (p. 79).

Second, he considers conditions of work in schools. The autonomy which teachers once enjoyed was removed by the imposition of the National Curriculum and then by government intervention in pedagogy. 'Performance culture' infiltrated the primary classroom, with 'demoralised teachers "performing" for the purpose of surviving inspections' (p. 81). He argues that the discursive power of the term 'workforce remodelling', introduced by New Labour, is, 'not to be underestimated' (p. 84) and he describes various surveys which have examined the extent to which schools employ teacher assistants.

Third, he looks at the professional organisations which represent primary teachers' views and interests. A distinctive feature of the teacher union movement, he argues, is that it has been concerned not only with teachers' conditions of service and remuneration, but also with 'defending and promoting the cause of education' (86). Primary teachers became 'more confident of their status, more articulate and assertive', but critical perspectives sharpened and

teachers, through their unions, 'learned to respond as education came under attack' (p. 86). The creation of the General Teaching Council (GTC) in 1997 was a missed opportunity, he says, because the Council had 'no scope for negotiation of salaries or conditions of service' and most media coverage focused on disciplinary cases against teachers, and so 'failed to convey a positive image of the profession' (p. 87). One of Gove's first announcements was his intention to abolish the GTC.

As governments have become more interventionist, he concludes, the importance of teachers' personal career development has been eclipsed by a 'managerialist and technicist approach' (p. 88) and primary teachers have found themselves caught up in a public discourse that is 'categorical and reductive' (p. 89).

Chapter 7. National Accountability: audit and inspection

Cunningham sets out the history of the government education department and describes the processes of policy-making and legislation. He notes that since the 1970s education policy has increasingly been decided in the Prime Minister's office, and that, with the privatisation of education services (of which he gives various examples), there has been a 'fundamental change in national accountability for education' (p. 94). He argues that the 'audit culture' (p. 97) evolved in the UK in the early 1980s when economic pressures and corporate values led to government reinventing pupils and their parents as 'customers' or 'consumers' (p. 98). 'Ever-more complex and burdensome mechanisms of accountability were counter-productive', he says, 'as they led paradoxically to greater mistrust' (p. 98) and often obstructed the proper aims of education.

He argues that the statutory tests (SATs) have been used to serve 'an increasing number of purposes specified by successive governments' (p. 99), raising concerns about their validity and the distortion of teaching and learning processes; and that league tables are 'most unlikely' to be abolished in England, because political reputations have been so heavily invested in them (p. 101).

He compares the notions of 'audit' and 'quality assurance' (p. 102). Judgements about schooling are made from a range of competing viewpoints, he says: 'Hence inspection is inherently political' (p. 102). In the first half of the twentieth century HMI had a 'developmental and supportive role' (p. 102) but this changed in the 1980s when Keith Joseph began publishing inspection reports, a policy which New Labour took further, 'naming and shaming' so-called 'failing schools' (p. 102). These moves forced HMI to 'rethink their relationship with schools' (p. 103) and led to the creation of Ofsted. Frequent changes in the inspection frameworks 'began to blur the distinction ... between auditing and inspection' (p. 104) and under the coalition government Ofsted will now focus inspections on just four areas: 'pupil achievement, the quality of teaching, leadership, and children's behaviour and safety' (p. 105).

The monitoring of standards has to be 'credible and transparent', he says, so as to provide reliable data and supporting values that reflect 'the wide

aspirations of parents, and professionals' understandings of primary pupils in relation to their development' (p. 106). Competing claims have to be reconciled: 'That is the stuff of politics' (p. 106). Above all, he says, 'accountability, like politics, needs to be balanced by a sense of integrity and value, maintaining professional self-esteem and public confidence' (p. 106).

Chapter 8. Local Accountability: school, community and local democracy

Local government, says Cunningham, has 'a proud history' in relation to education, with some LEAs setting high standards in their 'progressive and child-centred practices' (p. 109). What's more, these local authorities were 'politically accountable at the ballot box to local ratepayers' (p. 110). However, central government often criticised them, alleging 'wasteful bureaucracy' (p. 111) and attacking their power to distribute funds to schools. This rhetoric, he argues, 'conveniently ignores the strict formulae for distribution already in place to which the authorities have to conform' (p. 111). He points out that Local Management of Schools has created problems for LAs, which have often been 'a convenient scapegoat for inadequate national funding of education' (p. 112). Treating them as local agencies for national initiatives has resulted in a 'deficit for local democracy' (p. 112), which has been further diminished through the practice of outsourcing educational services.

Understanding the relationships between schools and the communities they serve, he argues, 'is made difficult by the diversity of school types that have evolved over time' (p. 114). He notes that Tory governments in the 1980s gave governors much greater responsibility but imposed a national curriculum, 'undermining a significant freedom that schools had enjoyed' (p. 116). This paradox, he says, 'epitomises the ambivalence of governments in devolving weighty accountabilities to groups of lay people' (p. 116). Nonetheless, the 'broadly democratic principle' of parental and community involvement in local primary schools is 'now well established' (p. 117).

He notes the conclusions of a study which found that English heads were 'fixated on systems and routines to track pupils' attainment and monitor teacher performance, generating much time-consuming and energy-sapping paperwork' (p. 117). He observes that accountability in respect of learning goals is 'closely stipulated by the state in levels of attainment' (117) and he calls for two broader perspectives: human rights and 'learning without limits' (p. 118).

He warns that consumerism in state education leads to greater social segregation, which will be exacerbated by academies, trust schools and free schools. The problems academies were meant to address 'could equally have been tackled through well-resourced schools democratically accountable to their communities' (p. 119). Furthermore, Gove's free schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum or employ qualified teachers – 'raising serious questions about the role of both National Curriculum and Qualified Teacher Status within a national system of education' (p. 121). There are unlikely to be

many free schools, he says, but 'their political and ideological significance goes beyond their number' (p. 121).

He concludes by asking how primary education – controlled and largely funded through national government – can remain 'democratically accountable in the locality and responsive to local needs' (p. 122).

Chapter 9. Going Forward

In his final chapter, Cunningham draws together the key themes of the book and offers some suggestions for all those involved in primary schools. Teachers, he says, should draw on their own experience and knowledge to promote 'principles for teaching and learning that can be explained and defended in an antagonistic political environment' (p. 124). Despite the antagonism, it is worth remembering that all governments are to some extent characterised by 'compromise and continuity' (p. 124).

The trend towards privatisation is increasingly affecting primary schools, while academies and free schools are designed to 'reduce public spending and create an educational free market based on diversity and consumer choice' (p. 125). These developments now seem unstoppable, but 'all concerned with primary schools ... need to be aware of the changes and to strive against their negative effects on the quality of young children's educational experiences' (p. 125).

A key theme of the book is the place of democracy in our society. Cunningham notes that 'Education policies are frequently far from commanding majority support, and many policies fall short of providing equal educational opportunity or fail to respect rights enshrined in the UNCRC' (p. 125). He argues that, for all the shortcomings of local government, the 'consistent centralisation of policy-making has undermined the participation and sense of ownership that parental and community representation on governing bodies appeared to promise' (p. 125) and that the free-market ethos 'is unlikely to foster the democratic principles, participation, trust and security, self-esteem and respect for others required for effective personal, social and citizenship education for children within primary schools' (p. 125).

Governments interpret the past to justify their policies, but an independent study of the past, he argues, 'raises questions about the discourse and scepticism about a view of educational reform as simply a technical and managerial approach to narrowly defined problems' (p. 127). In this context, the collective memory of teachers is a 'valuable and accessible resource' (p. 127).

Comment

I began this review by arguing that young teachers need to learn to think for themselves and take an active part in the debate about the nature and purpose of education, and that they can only do this if they have some understanding of its history and the politics which have shaped it.

Peter Cunningham's book is a timely and invaluable contribution to that debate. Timely, because the present government is embarked on a course which will see many of the policies of the past thirty years (relating to curriculum, teacher training, privatisation etc) taken to extremes; and invaluable, because it provides support for critical thinking about the policies and provision of primary education.

Although it is aimed in the first place at the teachers themselves, it will be equally valuable for all who are concerned about our primary schools – parents, governors, and – though I suspect they're most unlikely to read it – politicians.

There are no wasted words in this book. It is packed with a huge amount of factual information relating to the history and politics of primary education, all of it relevant, interesting and extremely readable. Indeed, the first draft of my summary ran to almost 8,000 words and I found it very difficult to decide what to cut in order to reduce it to the 4,500 words reproduced above.

Cunningham's aim was to stimulate debate, so his book is not just full of facts, it also poses questions which form the basis for discussion. These are pitched at three different levels: for trainee or newly qualified teachers; for class teachers with more extensive experience; and for teachers in senior management roles.

Thus the three questions at the end of Chapter 2 are:

- In what ways is a primary teacher's work political?
- Taking any single aspect such as curriculum, human resources or provision and administration, what political debates do you identify in the present and how do these reflect situations inherited from the past?
- Compare the effects of political, economic and cultural changes on primary education in your own experience as a pupil and as a teacher. (p. 22)

He also suggests some 'independent learning tasks'. For example, at the end of the same chapter we find:

> Curriculum: What is political in curriculum content, in the knowledge and values presented for children to learn? What aspects of the knowledge and values might be politically controversial? What recent policy developments have raised issues about the content or organisation of the curriculum? (p. 22)

And finally, he provides lists of books and websites for further reading and study.

The bulk of the book is about England, but Cunningham also includes useful information about the situation in other parts of the UK, enabling interesting comparisons to be made. In the section on league tables, for example, which are 'most unlikely' to be abolished in England (p. 101), he notes that in Wales, the 'marketisation' of state-funded education has no place because 'cooperation rather than competition' (p. 101) is seen as the way to improve public services; Northern Ireland relies mainly on teacher assessment at Key Stages 1 and 2; while in Scotland, 'resistance to Westminster's testing

regime was evident from an early stage' (p. 101) with parents supporting teachers in the SATs boycott of 1991-2.

Another particularly useful feature of the book is the provision of two timelines of politics and primary education: from the seventeenth century to 1967 (pp. 12-13) and from 1964 to the present (pp. 128-130).

Among the key themes of the book, two struck me as particularly important in the current situation: the devaluing and deskilling of teachers; and the destruction of local democracy and accountability. On the former, Cunningham urges that we should aspire to 'an alternative vision of primary teaching as a profession, valued for its expertise and judgement and trusted with self-regulation ' (p. 89). In a changeable political climate, achieving that goal requires 'a critical engagement with politics on the teachers' part' (p. 89). And on the demise of local democracy, he observes that academies and free schools are 'overtly anti-democratic' (p. 119) and that, while David Cameron claims his 'Big Society' is aimed at 'dismantling the state', it is actually 'increasing state power by requiring more direction from the centre' (p. 113).

The book conveys a sense of urgency – which is appropriate, given that many of the policies currently being pursued may prove irreversible. All those involved in or concerned about the future of our primary schools must acquire some 'knowledge and understanding of how policies developed' (p. 124).

I have no doubt that *Politics and the Primary Teacher* provides exactly that knowledge and understanding. I urge you to buy it and read it – along with Melissa Benn's *School Wars*. Together, these two books provide all the information you need to understand what is happening to our schools and – hopefully – to resist the current government's attempts to dismantle our public education system.

Derek Gillard

To Miss With Love
KATHARINE BIRBALSINGH, 2011
London: Penguin Books
293 pages, £9.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-670-91899-7

> *To Miss With Love* is based on true events, but all names, persons and institutions appearing in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or institutions is entirely coincidental.
> (Publisher's disclaimer)

This is a thoughtless and ignorant book. It is ignorant where it preens itself on being most in the know, and content with rhetoric rather than thought. While there's small harm in that, for much the same could be said of many another best-seller, trouble starts when such a book is trumpeted as if it were its opposite, a source of knowledge and wisdom. If only *To Miss With Love* could

be separated from the uses to which it has been put by those who disdain and would dismantle state education in England, to be judged on its own merits. Sadly, or perhaps through calculation and a touch of that rampant self-regard which is the signature-tune of her central character, the author has seen fit to allow her fiction to be misappropriated as fact. Melanie Phillips claims this book delivers 'brutal home truths'. Toby Young apparently believes it tells 'the story of contemporary state education'.

To Miss With Love takes the form of a diary recording the working life of a Head of Department in an inner-London state school. Through the eyes of Ms Snuffleupagus, Snuffy the diary-keeper, we meet a number of characters and follow a variety of interweaving plot-strands across a year and a week of the recent past. Birbalsingh writes Snuffy's diary in the first person and the present tense to generate a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Birbalsingh wants us to see Snuffy's world the way Snuffy sees it, and to believe Snuffy's way of seeing is the way things really are. So she foregoes every possibility of exploring or exploiting the gap between author and narrator. With conviction rather than irony she has Snuffy deploy unsubstantiated assertions as if they were facts and use rhetorical questions to frame an issue in a way that brooks no alternative. She sets down as direct rather than reported speech almost every conversation Snuffy holds or hears, a technique which adds to the impression that her book offers unmediated access to what happened in a real time and place, among real people.

In keeping with her desire to avoid the measured and thoughtful, Birbalsingh privileges the fraught and sensational, the drama of conflict. Many a breathless entry sets the reader in the middle of strife between pupils, or between pupils and staff, or between Snuffy and various wrong-headed teaching and non-teaching adults. In a handful of entries Birbalsingh allows her central character to step out of a particular time and place to mount arguments or express opinions about aspects of contemporary education. The content of these opinions echo those Birbalsingh has herself voiced in the media. Many are characterised by a view of pupils as cunning, deluded, idle and feckless, or worse:

> Black kids all have that winning ace up their sleeve… the race card. (p. 55)
> I have also met students from [a local school] and they are the worst of the terrors on the buses. They are beyond repair. (p. 62)
> These kids get their sense of self from the belief that their lives are harder than anyone else's… Making something better of yourself is a concept completely alien to them. (p. 77)
> As I listened… I thought of the children at my school and wondered what they would be doing with their Christmas Eves… My guess is that most of them will be playing with their PSPs, imagining what new games Christmas Day will bring. (p. 103)
> If only children could love history [like they love PE], or languages, or English, or science, but no, those are 'difficult' subjects we have to

> force down their throats, or trick them into learning through games. (p. 175)
> [A very disruptive pupil] is a cancer in this school. And we need to cut him out. (p. 254)

Besides enhancing the possibility that *To Miss With Love* might not be fiction but thinly-disguised actuality, the diary-form allows Birbalsingh to trade on the notion that by virtue of her experience as a teacher in the heart of London she has inside knowledge, and that therefore her book's judgements and observations can be trusted. Yet many of the most significant claims she has Snuffy make or endorse about state education, state schools and the people who teach and learn in them are grossly misleading if not mendacious:

> In today's state schools, children are not allowed to know how they are doing in comparison to their peers. (p. 19)
> Teachers' salaries have gone up a lot recently. (p. 45)
> Fire me? No, it's practically impossible… It would take… years… You can't imagine some of the teachers that teach at our school. They're crap, and the head can't do anything about it… The union will fight for you to be rubbish in the classroom and not get fired – all the way. (p. 115)
> It is just so difficult to get a kid excluded. They need to burn the school down before you can get them out. (pp. 118-9)
> Rarely, if ever, does a child get permanently excluded. (p. 290)
> About half the schools in Britain are mixed ability and have no intention of ever changing. (p.193)
> 'She's out of London so she can feel satisfied about sending her kid to a state school without him being surrounded by any real state kids.' I laugh, nodding. 'Yeah, exactly…' (p. 194)

There are so many statements of a comparable falsity throughout the book that I began to wonder if *To Miss With Love* exists only to provide a vehicle for their expression. But truth will out, even in a review. Nothing forbids state pupils from knowing how they are doing compared with their peers. Teachers voted to strike in 2008 after three years of below-inflation pay-settlements, and are currently enduring a two-year pay-freeze. School governing-bodies must by law have procedures for dealing with poor performance by staff. Such procedures must have regard to statutory guidance, and must not take longer than two terms. The most serious cases, those where the education of children is in jeopardy because no order has been established in the classroom and no child is making progress, can be dealt with in four weeks. OECD research (February 2011) indicates that, of member-countries, the UK (along with the USA) has the highest proportion, some 99%, of pupils in schools that group by ability. And, when I last checked, children (including my own) who attend state schools outside London were indeed 'real'.

As for the difficulty of excluding a pupil, and the rarity of permanent exclusion, Birbalsingh's own text gives Snuffy the lie. Birbalsingh energises one narrative strand by having a character straightforwardly excluded (for assaulting a pupil, not burning the school down) and briefly introduces us to another pupil who 'was asked to leave the school permanently a year ago because of a terrible track-record of constant disruption, bullying and aggression… Had he managed to stay the course he would now be in Year 10.' (p. 177). A third pupil moves towards permanent exclusion over the course of the book. Yet a mere fortnight after the appeal against this exclusion is lost and the decision to exclude is upheld, Snuffy confides to her diary that 'rarely, if ever, does a child get permanently excluded' (p. 290).

The survival into print of such blatant self-contradiction might indicate that author and editor set little store either by a reader's capacity to remember or by a book's integrity as a crafted text. This is more than a question of technical incompetence – though it is also that. It has to do with the extent to which an uninformed reader can sustain trust in what she reads. A slipshod approach to writing suggests an unreliable grip on what is written about; care and scruple in the construction of a text argue scrupulous care for the truth worked into words. Birbalsingh's self-contradictions give the impression that accuracy and veracity are not what is important to her. Together with other features of her text to be considered later they break the compact between writer and reader and expose Birbalsingh's own bad faith. Fiction would get at the truth by a kind of lying, but not the kind we are presented with here.

Katharine Birbalsingh taught French for a decade in inner-London state schools. During that time she also wrote blogs. As 'K. Bing' she blogged about being young, single and of mixed heritage, and then turned her experiences into a novel, *Singleholic*, a text she herself has called 'multi-cultural chick-lit'. This venture may help explain, if not excuse, the remarkably reactionary attitude to gender in *To Miss With Love*. As 'Ms Snuffleupagus', Birbalsingh blogged about her day-job. It is made clear in the Foreword of *To Miss With Love* that 'Snuffy' is indeed Ms Birbalsingh's alias, an alter ego for the author, albeit a clunky one. Birbalsingh went to the University of Oxford and studied French and Philosophy; Snuffy, as she never tires of reminding her readers and her pupils, went to Cambridge. She teaches English. Birbalsingh was single when she wrote this book; Snuffy is married to a nice man who calls her 'babe' and 'soldier girl' a lot even though she is in her thirties. I am helped to understand that I should read Snuffy's husband as a nice man because the author has given him an alias too: 'Liberal'. All the characters in the text are given aliases. There are teaching colleagues such as Mr Hadenough and Ms Alternative, mothers such as Ms Crackpot, Ms Loopy and Ms Nutter, and fathers such as Mr Inevitable. Then there are the children. Since any inner-London state school will have English classes of about thirty pupils you'd expect to meet a fair number of the school-population in a book masquerading as the diary of a Head of English. In fact over the course of almost three hundred pages we meet just nineteen current pupils, one of whom makes his sole appearance very late in the

story. His name is Dumbo. His class-mates include Adorable, Munchkin, Fifty, Cent, Polish and Quiet. Other year-groups include such characters as Furious and Psycho, Seething, Deranged and Dopey. In the Sixth Form we meet Let Down (so named because the school has let him down) and Stoic, who can be gushing at times.

The use of such pseudonyms of course reduces characters to ciphers. They enter the text to display again and again their one 'representative' character-trait. Seething is seething, Furious furious, and Fifty is, er, twelve. The prevalence of names chosen because they relate to mental disorder or apparent inadequacy (Dopey, Psycho, Deranged, Dumbo, those three mothers) tells us something about a teacher-author who has her alter ego talk about 'my GCSE halfwits' (p. 120), and later advances the view (p. 126) that 'being intelligent is like being tall'. As if intelligence can be measured like height. As if intelligence and height were in any way comparable human characteristics.

Such naming is also a way for an author to not think about characters. It is a way to evade work proper to the task Birbalsingh purports to be undertaking. To name a character after a single trait or aspect obviates the need to think further about the real individuals who (supposedly) inspired the characters, and hence to understand those people a little more. To have a narrator who is a teacher adopt such an approach is particularly revealing since it is a central duty and responsibility of any teacher to observe her pupils closely and constantly, the better to help them learn. Teachers get to know pupils precisely by resisting the superficial, and looking beyond it. They trust their own eyes to see, and refuse to be blinded by the labels hung on their pupils.

How you react to the use of such pseudonyms will go a long way toward determining how you feel about the book as a whole. Since character-name rather than character itself is destiny here, a cast-list at the front of the text would spare many the trouble of reading further. Dopey however beats the rap and gets a GCSE Grade 'C' in English. Or rather, his teacher gets his grade for him:

> I have the memory of a boy who managed to do the unthinkable,
> who… put his hand in mine and allowed me to lead him to the top
> of the hill. (p. 293)

For teaching in this book owes nothing to teamwork. Snuffy may head a department but it might as well be a department of one: we never meet her colleagues. Nor does Snuffy appear to have need of them. Regularly through the book we are told, if not by Snuffy herself then by her husband, her friends, her pupils or their parents, how many hours she works, how very much she cares and how expert she is in the classroom. She upholds the standards which, we have it on her authority, so many around her let fall. Her words inspire an Oxford graduate to give up a career in the City and become a teacher instead. She speaks for a grateful forelock-tugging profession when she tells an audience: 'I think we're all pretty happy with our salaries' (p. 45). A word from

her even ensures that Seething and her boyfriend will practice safe sex: 'Yeah Miss, man, ever since you told me, we use [condoms] yeah.' (p. 182).

On the evidence of the one lesson we actually see Snuffy teach I'm hard put to see quite why the school's leadership brand her as 'outstanding', though we are told very early on (p. 12) that they do. Snuffy writes about this lesson because Mr Hadenough has come to her for help with his classes and she suggests he watch her in action. No discipline problems for Snuffy, of course. Regrettably, when Snuffy counts down from five to zero not one wag shouts 'Lift Off!' There is only silence, Snuffy's due. Her lesson involves analysing what is alleged to be a poem but for once really does read like prose chopped up and re-organised to deliver, acrostically, a hidden message: I HATE SCHOOL. After they have cracked the acrostic, pupils write their own. And that's it. Snuffy's main activity in the lesson is 'jumping on inattention, leaping around the room to keep that attention, praising good behaviour and setting detention for bad.' (p. 58) Precious little teaching would seem to go on, and precious little understanding of what poems are and how they might more richly be encountered. As for a sense of what learning might be for her pupils, Snuffy is entirely indifferent.

Snuffy doesn't convince as a teacher of English partly because of what we see in this lesson and partly because Birbalsingh never has her glance at or mention a work of literature, far less quote one directly. English teachers are always quoting, or referring, or alluding. They are forever recommending a book to their pupils, or asking what their pupils are reading, yet Snuffy never name-checks a single text, except *The Little Engine That Could*. Birbalsingh/Snuffy's own writing-style, no stranger to cliché, is also more tin-eared and haplessly unselfconscious than it is reasonable to fear from a Head of English. Snuffy will invariably describe the hair of the White women she meets as 'mousy', and the younger boys she teaches as 'cute'. Introduced to an impressive young man, Snuffy says he 'oozes dignity' (p. 208), but can dignity 'ooze'? Isn't oozing intrinsically undignified? If you tell readers you have left out 'the fights that happen every week or, indeed, every day' (p. ix) – and incidentally which is it? – surely you should be careful to do just that, and not to put in several (pp. 38, 86, 161, 246, 259), including one particularly violent encounter which you have made pivotal to the plot?

Confusion, mystification, double-dealing and lies then, from the third paragraph of the Foreword which calls the text 'this diary', and so stakes a subtle claim for Birbalsingh as our very own Valiant-for-Truth, to the final entry. From even before a word of text has been read. The cover-design blurs the book's status: fiction, or dispatches from the chalk-face? We see cartoon-images, verging on the stereotypical, of a range of pupils. Fiction, then. But there is also a photo of the celebrated teacher-author in a real London street. Above the title is a strapline: *From the whistle-blowing teacher behind the headlines.* It's a great line. It combines finger-on-the-pulse contemporaneity, the thrill of revelation and the hint of a gift. Whistle-blowers risk their jobs by uncovering malpractice, corruption and worse in the institutions which employ them, and

going public about it for the public good and not for private gain. Does this sound like Ms Birbalsingh? She rather wants it to. She worries in her Foreword about losing her job for having written this book. But Birbalsingh lost her job not, as she would have it, for 'speaking out against the system' and 'saying what we teachers are always thinking but no-one ever says' (p. ix). She lost her job for using photos of the pupils she taught to illustrate her speech to a Tory Party Conference without obtaining all necessary permissions. That is, for paying inadequate heed to the ethical implications of what she determined to do. In return she gained a lot of powerful friends and supporters. Lionised in certain quarters, she now writes for the right-wing press and makes speeches at corporate events. She intends to open and lead a Free School.

If Birbalsingh's a whistleblower it's a dog-whistle she's blowing, to summon the hounds of the Tory Right and feed them what they want. Vocational qualifications pointless? Woof. Exams getting easier? Woof. Uniform rules benefit pupils? Woof. EMA undermines the value of hard work and responsibility? Woof. School governors left-wing? Woof. Set by 'ability', it's so obvious? Woof. Teachers are powerless, the pupils are in charge? Woof. Competition a dirty word? Woof. Schools in Africa and the Caribbean are disciplined and ordered? Woof. Because they use corporal punishment, perhaps? Woof woof woof. Such fare is all the tastier served up by someone who is, or was, on the inside. It's true her book criticises League Tables, but only for failing to judge schools by the right criteria (p. 132), an argument she also uses to berate OFSTED (p. 258). Is the political tenor of her book altered thereby, or her serviceableness as an ideological pawn? Not a jot.

At the start of Phillip Pullman's *Northern Lights*, a novel not unknown in English departments in inner London schools, the Master of Jordan College, Oxford, gives Lyra Silvertongue the golden compass by which she can find her way to what is true. This compass, or alethioemeter, takes its name from an ancient Greek word to do with truth as a kind of unconcealing or disclosing of the real. Lyra becomes adept at the art of reading it, an art painstakingly learned, hedged with uncertainties and always practised with sober restraint. There's a lesson here. So lay this sorry book aside and go find Lyra.

Patrick Yarker

Reference

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