
Editorial

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At a time when our deliberately impoverished public education system is contemptuously dispatched by the grandees of market ideology to the poorhouse of an increasingly threadbare common good, the place of journals like *FORUM* becomes especially important. Among its many willingly acknowledged obligations half a dozen or so strike me as particularly important at this present time. These have to do with the interdependent tasks of creation and critique.

Arguably, the 'creative imperative' includes at least four interrelated dynamics that contribute to the vibrancy and energy of proposed alternatives. These include the need,

- firstly, to hold fast to a set of values that invites a quite different way of being in the world to what the sadly missed Marxist philosopher, Gerry Cohen, so tellingly reminds us are at the psychological and operational heart of capitalism, namely, 'greed and fear' (Cohen, 1994, p. 9);
- secondly, and conjointly, to enact and explore the daily instantiation of those values in new ways for new times subverting the presumptions of an acquisitive, self-regarding common sense and offering the possibility of more just and more creative alternatives;
- thirdly, to give succour to the practical possibility of alternatives by drawing attention to lived historical examples which either remind us of the multiple origins of the present or the viable possibility of paths not taken
- and, fourthly, the need to articulate those alternatives in ways which are both elegantly and convincingly expressed and thus as likely to appeal to those who are on the cusp of doubt as those who need no further evidence of the culpability of neo-liberalism in the creation and extension of the current crisis.

The equally important and often prior task of 'grounded critique' exemplifies a companion set of capacities needed to successfully challenge the actualities, proposals and presumptions of the status quo. These include,

- firstly, interrogation of poor argument and unreliable or contentious data;

- secondly, and increasingly frequently, exposure of what appear to be dishonesties, bad faith or cynical manipulation
- and, thirdly, the exposure of ideological presumption as just that and thus the insistent and effective denial of the current presumption of TINA (There Is No Alternative).

In practice, these two orientations are not, of course, as separate as my sketch implies: whilst the creative imperative has priority in the sense that its values offer both a basis of critique and the possibility of transformation, the analytic tools and dispositions at the heart of grounded critique often prompt a search for alternatives to poverty of argument or immiseration of human experience. Indeed, what strikes me about so many of the contributions to this issue of Forum is their simultaneous exemplification of the virtues of both 'creative imperative' and 'grounded critique'.

Peter Moss's *Readiness, Partnership, a Meeting Place? Some Thoughts on the Possible Relationship between Early Childhood and Compulsory School Education* not only challenges the presumptions of neo-liberal approaches to education, it also challenges so many attitudes about the relation between Early Childhood Education and Compulsory School Education to which we have become accustomed in the UK. Against the conservative presumptions of school readiness which take the school's understanding of the child, education, learning and knowledge for granted, he argues for a quite different view of children as learners from birth, not needing to be readied to learn, but inherently capable and avid to do so. Drawing in particular on the Reggio Emilia approach in northern Italy, he challenges us to acknowledge the possibility that the dominance of a school readiness approach might in reality entail the very real danger of schools depriving young children of their potential and competence. Too often readiness regimes promulgate a 'reductionist, fragmented and narrow approach which is more about taming, controlling and predicting than creating learning based on movement, experimentation and meaning making.' Inspired by the work of Gunilla Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi, he argues for the possibility of a meeting place between different traditions, for a common idea of education that flows across the years and through different types of schools.

Robin Alexander's *Neither National Nor a Curriculum?* is a response to the UK Secretary of State's National Curriculum proposals for England and reveals, not only the incisiveness, wisdom and eloquence to which we have become accustomed, but also the astonishing disregard by Michael Gove of evidence that does not suit his position. Here we are confronted by a Secretary of State who demonstrates beyond a shadow of doubt that he is deeply hostile to the very processes of serious intellectual exchange which form an essential part of the difficult undertaking of arriving at national policy and appropriately informed practice. The exposure of Gove's manipulation of international evidence, his highly selective use of the Expert Panel, his 'typically British tendency to determine aims after the event, so that they decorate school

prospectuses and entrance halls rather than shape the curriculum', his propensity to 'look forward by harking back' is breath-taking. We are left reflecting on 'a proposed 'national' curriculum (which) is for some children in the nation's maintained schools but not all of them'; on the scandal of 'little evidence ... of close and careful weighing of national culture, national needs and England's unique and highly complex mix of commonality and diversity'; of abandonment of governmental responsibility to 'attempt to reach a consensus on values and rationale, presuming instead that it is entirely proper in a democracy to a national curriculum to serve as a vehicle for imposing on the majority the values, beliefs and prejudices of an ideological minority'; of a national curriculum which is neither national nor a curriculum, but in reality 'a syllabus of three subjects.'

These self-same traits and the Secretary of State for Education's penchant for intellectual gerrymandering are engagingly demonstrated in **Colin Richards'** *Omnishambles: reactions to the second year of Coalition education policies*. As regular readers of *FORUM* will know, this highly entertaining mixture of published and unpublished thoughts on the contemporary education scene responds with an incisive and eloquent wit to many of the key issues with which schools, young people, parents and the community have to wrestle with as a consequence of Michael Gove's stewardship of education in the current UK government. His topics include academies, grammar schools, independent schools, free schools, inspection, testing and examinations, phonics, the national curriculum and a host of others.

John Berry's *Teachers' Professional Autonomy in England: are neo-liberal approaches incontestable?* provides some compelling original research and some equally engaging and insightful reflections on the struggle many teachers have to retain the vestiges of professional autonomy in a regime that in many important respects denies its legitimacy and opportunity. Despite its de facto denial and its demeaning and diminishing circumscription by the current government's continued emphasis on performativity through 'the illusion of freedom and the reality of coercion' his research reveals a residual loyalty to the concept of education as a liberal-humanist project. Whilst there was evidence that 'those new to teaching did little to question the demands of the current system' the experienced teachers whom he interviewed did point to some chinks of light in the prevailing managerial gloom: the notion of professional responsibility was sacrosanct; some professional autonomy seemed possible providing managerial targets were met; headteachers by and large played an important role in preserving its de facto and professional legitimacy; a degree of trust still existed at a localised level. However, against this partially positive picture, a more negative, disempowering reality emerged, e.g. unremitting drive to demonstrate narrowly measurable 'progress' resulting in occasional collusion and dishonesty; the quest for 'results' marginalizing the possibility of enjoyment and creativity in learning; pervading government mistrust; and 'a very strong sense ... that they could offer their students more were they to feel confident about breaking with the requirements of the current standards agenda.' These

more negative observations notwithstanding, Jon Berry ends on a broadly positive note, observing that 'teachers themselves continue to cling to a notion of something better to offer' and that 'Although largely compliant and acquiescent on a day-to-day basis, there is a residual idealism and appreciation of some of the forces at work upon them.'

The same 'illusion of freedom and reality of coercion' threads its way through **Ron Glatter's** *Towards Whole System Improvement*. Arguing strongly against the systemic fragmentation that a neo-liberal approach to education and schooling inevitably brings in its wake, he draws on a range international evidence which demonstrates that 'there is no convincing evidence that increasing school autonomy has the large impact on outcomes its advocates have claimed.' Himself an acclaimed international figure in the field, Ron Glatter points out that his eminent peers, Michael Fullan and Ben Levin, insist that 'an emphasis on choice and competition as the drivers of improvement has not been shown to work in England or elsewhere and that the most successful countries tend to have less differentiated systems. ... Changing structures such as governance and accountability does not yield better results for students.' In Ron Glatter's own view there are at least two fundamental requirements of an effective whole-system approach to school improvement: firstly, it should be multi-level in character i.e. 'the support and performance management of all schools should be provided locally ... Nor is it right for the only significant democratic input to schooling to be at a central level'; secondly, 'all publicly funded schools should be placed within a common administrative and legal framework based on principles of public not contract law. The distinction between maintained and non-maintained publicly funded schools is indefensible.'

John Morgan's *The Political Economies of Radical Education* takes us more overtly and more concertedly in the direction, not just of resistance, but of radical educational change. Reflecting on three recent books – Keri Facer's *Learning Futures: education, technology and social change*, Philip Woods' *Transforming Education Policy: shaping a democratic future* and *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative* by Peter Moss and myself – he highlights a common silence, namely about questions of political economy' which he rightly argues need 'to be attended to in any attempt to take their ideas further.' Drawing on a fine 1979 paper by Roger Dale he argues that the nature of any educational progress we are likely to make under conditions of later capitalism will depend to a significant degree on the nature of the 'educational settlement', or, to put it in more overtly radical democratic terms 'what kinds of political economic organisation provide a fertile ground for what types of democratic practices within schools?', or, to put it even more bluntly, what are 'the limits of radical education?' Applying the essence of Dale's critique to the post-1988 educational settlement Morgan incorporates some of the insights of Boltanski & Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* which points to capitalism's incorporation of the 'cool', the 'radical' and the 'new' in its more flexible, more responsive 'imaginary'. As one of the author's critiqued, I here need to be

mindful of my editorial responsibilities and resist the impulse to respond! John Morgan's paper is insightful and elegant and provides an important contribution to the literature and to contemporary debate. Identification of and response to the paper's lacuna, in particular how we learn from traditions of prefigurative practice, from what Eric Olin Wright calls 'non-reformist reforms' which intend and enact a subversive break with capitalism now, must wait upon another time and place.

Bernard Barker's *Grammar Schools: brief flowering of social mobility?* provides another strong rebuttal of the status quo, particularly that part of dominant ideology which seeks to misrepresent the past in order to fabricate a present and a future more finely attuned to the perpetuation of privilege and sophisticated subjugation. Not only is this a tour-de-force from one of the pioneers of comprehensive secondary schooling in England, it is an especially important rebuttal of the grammar school myth currently gaining ground, not only on the right, but also in the centre ground of UK politics. Based on, but not limited to, in-depth interviews, it brings richness and depth to our understanding of the destructive power of an education system which presumed and thereby created three different kinds of child suited to three different kinds of school in a tripartite society closer to educational apartheid than we choose to remember. Not only does Bernard Barker remind us of Jackson and Marsden's iconic research which demonstrated 'the colossal waste of talent in working class children', he also reminds us that 'pupils from working class backgrounds were less likely to be selected for grammar schools, less likely to do well in public examinations, and much less likely to progress to higher education. They were also vulnerable to another source of unfairness produced by variations in the provision of selective places, from 64% in Merionethshire to 8% at Gateshead. He further reminds us that 'Half a century ago, evidence that grammar schools were letting down successive generations of talented working class children was important in persuading policy-makers to promote more inclusive forms of schooling. Today, with experience of selection neglected or forgotten, journalistic ideologues seem free to reinvent the past to accommodate a widespread nostalgia for Latin, blazers and exclusive education.' The sentence that follows is typical both of Bernard Barker's eloquence and his understanding of the radical potential of history as an indispensable solvent of presentist ideology: 'Dreams and nostalgia seem a poor foundation for policy, however. We shall not close the chasm between the diverging destinies of rich and poor without better understanding the turbulent education history of the second half of the twentieth century.'

Those sentiments are, of course, equally applicable to the turbulent history of earlier periods of struggle for an education worthy of a society feeling its way forward to democracy as a way of life, rather than a spasmodic electoral event. **Jane Martin's** *London's Jewish Communities and State Education* provides a fascinating insight into the Anglo-Jewish contribution, not just to politics and policy making on the London County Council (LCC) Education Committee, but to the development of comprehensive education. Focusing mainly, though by

no means exclusively, on the siblings Hugh Franklin and Helen Bentwich (née Franklin) Jane Martin gives us a fascinating insight into two remarkable lives devoted, not just to public service, but also to emancipatory causes, pre-eminent among which was the fight for comprehensive education. Having the early distinction of being arrested on the Black Friday suffrage demonstration of 18 November 1910 and of subsequently trying to dog-whip Winston Churchill as the Home Secretary responsible for the police brutality, Hugh Franklin later became a co-opted member of the LCC Education Committee. A notable advocate of the common school between the wars he was also a member of the Labour Party National Executive Council and its Education Advisory Committee. Helen became vice-chair of the Teaching Staff Sub-Committee and from 1947 to 1950 served as Chair of the Education Committee and in April 1956 she became Chair of the LCC itself. Not only do we encounter some remarkably brave and forward looking individuals in Jane Martin's paper, including the redoubtable Dr Mary O'Brien Harris, one-time headteacher at Clapton Secondary School for Girls in Hackney, who in 1927 wrote in the school magazine that 'We do not want at the age of adolescence separate schools for clerks and for dressmakers, one for future nurses and doctors, and others for housekeepers and shop assistants respectively.' We also begin to get a feel for the nature of the debt we owe to brave forbears from radical traditions of state education that are too often neglected or misrepresented in a presumed homogeneity of struggle. We encounter, too, the often forgotten role of the eight experimental LCC comprehensive schools established under Helen's leadership of the LCC Education Committee that from 1946–1950 paved the way for the establishment of London's first purpose built comprehensive – Kidbrooke School – in 1955.

The absolute importance of history and, in particular, the history of education in our own countries is again underscored by **Catherine Burke's** *The Decorated School: past potency and present patronage*. Not only does it help us understand the origins of the present, it helps us re-see what presumption, exhaustion and hegemonic incorporation too often obscure, distort or discard. In the remarkable Decorated School project academics, young people, teachers and community members are coming together to rediscover, and in some cases restore, the murals, reliefs, stained glass, wall tiles, decorated floors, textile and sculptures that once formed part of a movement in education that exemplified Henry Morris's beliefs about the educative power of the built environment which preface the article thus: 'The design, decoration and equipment of our places of education cannot be regarded as anything less than of first-rate importance – as equally important, indeed, as the teacher. There is no order of precedence – competent teachers and beautiful buildings are of equal importance and equally indispensable.' It is difficult to think of a more stark contrast to the recent government insistence that new state schools 'should have 'no curves or 'faceted' curves', corners should be square, ceilings should be left bare and buildings should be clad in nothing more expensive than render or metal panels above head height. As much repetition as possible should be used

to keep costs down' (Booth, 2012). Of the many fascinating issues that emerge in the article amongst the most compelling is the journey from public art as itself an educator, through its partial displacement by the sometimes invasive imperative to display children's work, via the managerialist arrogance of supplanting both with curtains of concealment and the self-regarding installation of carpeted corridors to the headteacher's office (a real example from the paper!), through to the co-option of both art and architecture in the drive to contrive a simulacra of distinctive school ethos as a key seducer of parental choice in the education market-place. Trying to map and understand this journey, not only through actual artifacts and written records, but also through interviews with children to try to understand what sense they made of 'the removal, concealment or destruction of art objects that had become a feature of their everyday worlds' is a profoundly important undertaking.

Anticipating our next issue of *FORUM* (Volume 55, Number 1, 2013), which will explore 'Fixed Ability' Thinking, and Ability-based Practices in English Schools, the Review Symposium focuses on the remarkable *Creating Learning Without Limits* by Mandy Swann, Alison Peacock, Susan Hart & Mary Jane Drummond. The overview by Clyde Chitty and the companion appreciations by Tony Booth and Colin Richards reinforce our shared view that this is one of the most important books of its kind to appear since its progenitor volume nearly a decade ago.

Finally, we round off our current issue with reviews of two more key books likely to appeal to *FORUM* readers – *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education* by Diane Ravitch, reviewed by Clyde Chitty, and *Changing Schools: alternative ways to make a world of difference* edited by Terry Wrigley, Pat Thomson & Bob Lingard, reviewed by myself.

References

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