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EDITORIAL

Teachers Reclaiming Teaching

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For many years *FORUM*'s strapline has been 'for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education', and that remains the journal's overarching goal. Above all, therefore, the journal has been concerned with the practices in schools, and school systems, that promote genuine comprehensive education – how school places are allocated, how schools are organised, how the curriculum is planned and how pedagogical practices are enacted – all in ways that recognise the fundamental principle of the educability of all. Making progress with regard to that aspiration was never going to be straightforward, not least because the sound pedagogical arguments that support a comprehensive approach cannot be disconnected from a linked, and wider, set of political considerations. A commitment to comprehensive education is about more than a pedagogical philosophy – although we must never lose sight of the argument that comprehensivism is above all else an *educational* argument. It is also a commitment to a politics of hope, rooted in values of social justice. That is why political forces committed to the protection of privilege and inequality have always been so determined to try to turn the tide on the developing successes of the comprehensive model. It is also why this journal's founding editor asserted that 'the struggle for education in its true sense is and must be continuous' (Simon, 1985, p. 29).

This issue of *FORUM* focuses on that struggle, and particularly on the people who are at its sharp end – teachers. Those who have sought to reverse the achievements of comprehensivism have long recognised the need to assert much greater control over the work of teachers. This is partly because the type of schools envisaged, and the type of education sought for many young people, are not compatible with autonomous and free-thinking teachers. While there is often a rhetoric of creativity and criticality, the reality is very different. The experience of students is one in which content is king and the only learning that matters is that which can be measured. Hence the need for endless targets and

tests, and by implication, the need for teachers steeped in the culture of targets and tests.

However, the goals of the political Right are much more ambitious than stemming the tide of comprehensive advance. Their objective is nothing less than the wholesale privatisation of public education, in which public funds are directed to private providers who will be able to make profit from providing a 'public' service. The school system is more than subordinated to meeting the needs of an aggressive and acquisitive capitalism, but it increasingly becomes an embedded part of that capitalism. This is why teachers find themselves at the sharp end of the struggle against the neoliberal restructuring of all that has traditionally been considered 'public'. It is also why those who seek to privatise schooling have been so determined to try to break the power of organised teachers.

This issue of *FORUM* focuses on two issues. First, it seeks to shine a light on the dark side of life as a teacher today and what it means to be a teacher when teachers' professional autonomy appears to be under relentless attack. Just one of the intentional consequences of a more marketised school system is that those who work in it are often afraid to stand up and speak out about the problems they face. In a market environment schools must protect their reputations jealously. There is a fear that voices of critique, challenge and dissent are not seen as signalling systemic problems, but rather they are re-cast as an individual or institutional weakness (especially if a voice of courageous dissent appears to be a lone one). All those who work in such market contexts have an interest in presenting an outward image of unremitting optimism. Failure to do so may result in loss of local confidence, with potential consequences for institutional survival. It is easy to understand, therefore, why teachers often find it difficult to speak publicly about how they do their work, even if they how they have to do their work may conflict sharply with their sense of professional integrity and their personal values. As one teacher said to me recently when I went to work with MA students in a local school, 'To be honest Howard it's best not to think too much about things – but to just keep your head down and get on with it.' While such a response may be depressingly understandable, it must never be acceptable. Rather, it becomes even more important to develop a much better understanding of how teachers experience their work, and to give a voice to the many teachers who feel unable to speak up more loudly about how they feel their work is being degraded and devalued.

The second focus of this issue of *FORUM*, therefore, is on highlighting the myriad ways in which teachers are refusing to keep their heads down and just 'get on with it'; rather, they are resisting. In some cases this resistance assumes forms that we are familiar with, but in many cases new forms of resistance are emerging in which teachers find imaginative and novel ways to challenge current orthodoxies, reclaim their teaching and hold on to their professional pride. The aim of this issue, therefore, is to help amplify these voices of resistance – whether it is the mighty roar of organised teachers in Chicago or the quiet whisper of an anonymous teacher blogging about their

day in the classroom and the small but important ways they have refused to live in an educational world they don't believe in. Both, in their very different ways, are equally important.

Most of the articles in this issue of *FORUM* are written by classroom teachers. This has always been a feature of the journal from its inception, and I am delighted to continue that tradition in this issue. What is perhaps new is that many of these teachers are already writing for public audiences in online formats, mostly by blogging, and within this issue I have tried to capture the different ways in which teachers are using social media to open up spaces where they can discuss the educational world they want to live in, rather than the one they often feel forced to live in. Perhaps one of the best examples of this are the blogs of 'heymisssmith'. 'Miss Smith' is a primary school teacher in London, and a frequent blogger. Her blogs highlight the experiences of a teacher who constantly seeks to challenge the damaging developments in modern primary education. Many of the blogs show how such developments can be inventively subverted by a teacher who is professionally confident and personally courageous. Her blogging is just one way in which her actions can become more widely shared, giving courage to other teachers who face the same issues. 'Miss Smith' has given permission for *FORUM* to reproduce several of her blogs in this issue, and readers can see for themselves how social media is being utilised to articulate powerful messages of protest in new and engaging ways.

Several of the articles in this issue highlight ways in which, despite all the pressures to the contrary, teachers can find the spaces to assert their agency in their own classroom. This has always been a major theme in the pages of *FORUM*, and this issue builds on recent numbers in this respect. Debra Kidd, for example, writes about the different ways in which teachers can think abut time, and she makes the case for teachers to be more artisan than architect – rejecting the notion of the 'one best way' and finding ways to be comfortable with complexity and uncertainty.

There follow a number of articles that illustrate the difficulties of asserting agency in the classroom, and why it is that teachers often shun risk-taking and uncertainty for the assumed safety of conformity and compliance. @cazzypot is a classroom teacher who has written extensively about her experiences of classroom observation and the ways in which teaching is judged and graded. In this article she sets out these experiences, and the impact it has had on her personally and on her practice. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) has been central in this respect, and while there is some suggestion that Ofsted is accepting a more flexible approach to evaluating teaching (see Colin Richards' article for an analysis of these developments), the article highlights that it is far from clear whether teachers will experience any relaxation in the relentless, and sometimes crude, surveillance of their work. Unfortunately @cazzypot feels unable to write under her real name as she fears this may have consequences for her professionally. Perhaps we will only really know we are making progress when the *Guardian*

newspaper no longer feels the need to run a regular column written by 'The Secret Teacher'.

The pressures of a performativity culture, and in particular relentless judgemental observations, are not unique to schools, and Matt O'Leary's article analyses these practices in a further education college context, where Ofsted is also the regulator. Matt's article is based on research undertaken for the higher and further education sector union UCU and highlights the ways in which a surveillance culture is spreading throughout education, regardless of sector. In the article that follows, Phil Wood picks up many of these themes, and begins to identify how teachers can 'reclaim spaces' in which they can discuss alternative possibilities to those currently on offer. Phil highlights the creative ways in which teachers can use professional development opportunities, and social media, to articulate alternatives to current orthodoxies.

One practical example of how this might be achieved is discussed by Fiona King and Úna Feeley as they describe a school-based action research project in the Republic of Ireland in which teachers used the project to develop collaborative approaches to teaching and taking more control over their own classrooms. King and Feeley's article highlights how school leadership is important, but also how leadership can challenge traditional notions of managerialism, as it seeks to place teachers at the centre of teaching.

This is followed by Sue Cowley's analysis of current thinking in relation to early years education. Over the years, *FORUM* has published many articles that have focused on this key aspect of education, and we are pleased to include this powerful critique of emerging thinking as proposed policy regarding early years education is reduced to ensuring that children are 'school ready'. Sue urges us to resist the drive to 'schoolification' and makes the case for ensuring that the long-term emotional well-being of children is the central aim of early years education.

In the final series of articles the contributors begin to identify more concretely the different ways in which teachers are resisting current policy developments. Emma Ann Hardy discusses how teachers are making use of social media, such as Twitter and blogs, to create spaces for debates that are driven by teachers. Emma sees social media as a powerful source of professional support and development, but also as a means of mobilising around more explicitly political objectives. One manifestation of this was the recent 'Northern Rocks' conference (co-organised by Emma Ann Hardy and Debra Kidd) in which hundreds of teachers came together to discuss teaching as both pedagogy and work. Emma's article highlights the new and much more fluid ways in which teachers are organising and articulating alternative voices. This is both exciting and challenging – and Emma identifies the need for more traditional forms of organisation, such as the teachers' unions, to engage with these new spaces and voices.

Brian Horn's contribution reminds us that the developments that concern us are global in their scale and that teachers are experiencing the same pressures of management and control in many parts of the world. Brian's article starts

with his own experience of teaching in a school in Illinois that had adopted a 'scripted curriculum', and he recounts his story of being reprimanded for daring to depart from the scripted lesson plans he was expected to follow. Many readers will find his account chilling. Brian's article connects these experiences with wider developments in education policy in the USA, and particularly with the very powerful groups that are shaping that policy. He also describes how teachers have organised to resist these developments, and the article provides an account of how the teachers' union in Chicago was able to mobilise on a huge scale to stem the tide of neoliberal reform in that city. While the lessons from Chicago are complex, there is no doubt that the experience there can act as both education and inspiration to those who wish to pursue the goals elsewhere.

This impulse to reclaim teaching, and its international dimension, is illustrated in the article by Rene Kneyber from Holland. Rene is a classroom teacher in the Netherlands who has joined with a colleague to try to create a movement. Their goal is to turn upside down the system that prioritises the demands of capital and governments above all else, while appearing to place teachers at the bottom of this hierarchy. Rene makes the case for teachers to work together, along with their unions, to 'flip the system' and ensure teachers are at the centre of teaching. It provides an excellent example of how teachers always have the potential to take stock, organise and resist.

The final two articles provide accounts and analyses of how teachers in England and Wales are organising to resist neoliberalism – in all its forms, whether it be the imposition of narrow curricula, the worsening of working conditions or the privatisation of schooling. Both articles analyse different aspects of a campaign led by the NUT (National Union of Teachers) under the banner of 'Stand Up For Education'. Tom Unterrainer provides an account of this campaign in one locality – the city of Nottingham. Tom draws on the work of the great American community organiser Saul Alinsky to show how groups of teachers and parents have mobilised at a local level to increase community confidence and challenge the attacks on public education in the city. The article shows how innovative thinking and practical organising can challenge dominant discourses in a city that suffers badly from the consequences of inner-city poverty and market-based reforms.

In the final article NUT Deputy General Secretary Kevin Courtney and executive member Gawain Little set out the union's strategy at a national level. What is particularly welcome is their commitment to build a campaign that links the legitimate concerns of teachers about their pay, pensions and workload to a much wider set of concerns about the curriculum, testing and privatisation. In the article the authors talk about 'opening up spaces' in which people can participate in articulating an alternative vision for education. There is a clear aim to build broad and popular alliances that connect educators and communities. There will always be critics of these tactics – the union should only focus on pay and conditions issues, or the union is too focused on pay and conditions issues. Alternatively, the union shouldn't strike – or the union isn't striking

enough. What is important is that the union is doing *something*. There is a genuine attempt to take the issues to the broader public, to engage with both the public and politicians, and to seek to build a movement around an alternative. The success of that campaign can in part be seen by the removal of Michael Gove from his education brief at the end of the academic year. The NUT's action was not the only reason why Michael Gove was sacked, but it was clearly a contributory factor of considerable significance. It demonstrates that organising and activism, when combined with a much more hopeful vision of education, can win support and create the conditions for change. *FORUM* is very happy to devote its pages to publicising the NUT's *Stand Up for Education* campaign, and in our own small way, to lend our support. We hope others will join with us in doing so.

The answer must never be to not think about things, keep our heads down and just do it. Rather, the answer must always be to think very hard about the world we live in – and not 'just do it' – but 'do s*omething*'! As *FORUM*'s founding editor observed:

> the future is open and undecided; and it is, I suggest, of supreme importance that those closely involved in education recognise, and struggle consistently to realise, its potential. (Simon, 1985, p. 30)

Reference

Simon, B. (1985) *Does Education Matter?* London: Lawrence & Wishart.

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