

EDITORIAL

Political Re-education

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Five years of Coalition government have seen a rapid, and often forced, expansion of academy schools and chains, and the appearance of hundreds of free schools. A little more than half of all maintained secondary schools, and about one in eight primaries, are now academies. In that time there have also been significant alterations to some exam syllabuses and to the National Curriculum. A phonics test has been introduced, the scope for teachers to determine how they teach further tightened, and attacks on 'progressive' teaching approaches intensified. A system of unelected regional schools commissioners has been established with barely any public discussion: such a system has major implications not only for academies but for all state-funded schools in England. It is characterised by what Warwick Mansell (in a seminar address in October 2014) has called 'opaque behind-the-scenes decision making' and the 'freezing-out of most educational stakeholders'. The ground is being laid for the introduction of schooling-for-profit on a large scale. The Labour Party has yet to come out clearly against academies and free schools (though it may stop funding the current Free Schools programme) or to endorse a properly comprehensive educational vision. It has focused on 'quality of teaching' and teacher 'revalidation'; on apprenticeships and vocational or non-university higher education; and on collaboration between schools. It has promised to give parents and local communities greater say in the school system. UKIP, newly irrupted into Parliament, pledges a grammar school in every town, and keeps quiet about the inevitable corollary: two secondary moderns in every town as well. The Green Party, and other party formations further to the left, offer better policies on assessment and the curriculum, and endorse a comprehensive system.

As the general election approaches, initiatives have been developed which attempt to redirect the policy debate. The National Union of Teachers' 'Stand Up For Education' campaign has mobilised people beyond the union, and

members of the Campaign for State Education, Comprehensive Future and the Socialist Education Alliance have built the 'Picking Up The Pieces' project. This issue of *FORUM* opens in that interventionist spirit with a series of short articles, a symposium in which each contributor has responded as they saw fit to an original commission suggesting they focus on an educational phase and a particular terrain – assessment or curriculum or pedagogy – to be considered in the light of these questions:

- What should be the most urgent educational priority for the next government, and why?
- What two or three changes should a new government make which would most benefit young people's learning?
- How might comprehensive schooling begin to be reconstructed from the current circumstances?

A number of themes reveal themselves. Mindful of the Coalition's dramatic intensification of the centralisation of power, Stephen Ball urges that we reconnect education and democracy. We must build platforms for the broadest possible discussion of the what, how and why of learning, and rescue education from its current configuration as technocratic and depoliticised. (And, it might be added, as prey to the ministrations of individuals unburdened by democratic accountability who stand to gain from policies they help shape, such as the Under-Secretary of State for Schools, and the chair of the Academies Board.) For Richard Hatcher, winning the battle for democracy is central. He castigates the Labour Party's timidity and vagueness on fundamental questions of power and structure in relation to education policy. In particular he addresses contradictions in Labour's plan for local directors of school standards, and the Party's willingness to accept a multiplicity of school provision rather than to pioneer a comprehensive local system of school collaboration and support under the auspices of reformed, resourced and democratised local authorities.

Melissa Benn and Martin Allen look at the educational offer made to older students. Melissa Benn draws attention to emerging ideas for a new qualifications framework post-14 along the lines of a 'national baccalaureate'. Such a framework would offer a common curriculum for all students, with increased flexibility and the chance to mix academic and vocational elements. It would also foster cooperation on the ground between schools and colleges. Martin Allen argues against any narrow vocationalism and for a broad general diploma which gives everyone the chance to engage in high-quality technical education and training if they so choose. He wants options, not pathways, and for 'work-based learning' to include learning about the range of social and political issues entailed in selling one's labour under capitalism. In the words of Patrick Ainley, author of one of the longer articles in this issue, '[t]his would include [young people] learning about work, and not just learning to work'. Ainley's wide-ranging piece surveys the damage caused by years of market-driven policy, and draws attention to the inadequacies of Labour's current position on apprenticeships and the Technical Baccalaureate.

The neo-liberal drivers of the Coalition's educational reforms are noted by Mary James. Profound and malign consequences for students, teachers and schools have resulted from sustained use of national and international public testing as key performance indicators. The first requirement is to scrap league tables. James has other requirements, too. Sue Cox chiefly condemns Coalition education policy for entrenching inequality and unaccountability via the Academy and Free Schools programme. Cox deplores the continuing dilution of teacher autonomy and professional judgement in the matter of how to teach. Calls from some on the Right for a return to drill and instruction, supplemented by more widespread use of textbooks, threatens to accelerate this process. Policy must focus, says Cox, on the child's educational entitlement and not on the 'needs' of an education market.

A similar call sounds through Leena Robertson's piece. She highlights the drastic increase in child poverty, the infiltration of private capital into early years provision, and the de-skilling of those who work in the early years foundation stage. She warns of the ideological intention behind government calls for children to be made 'school ready'.

Sally Tomlinson quotes R.H. Tawney to shame many a contemporary Labour politician, and endorses the call by the disability movement that all children be included in school. Such inclusion requires reform to initial (and in-service) teacher education. It requires a genuine comprehensive education system, too. The fragmented and hierarchised melange that will be the legacy of the Coalition is predicated on competition and designed to incentivise the exclusion wherever possible of certain groups of children.

The symposium concludes with eleven demands from Dave Hill: his basis for a socialist education manifesto, and one made all the more urgent by the deepening under the Coalition of the social inequalities Hill has experienced, and which as a candidate in local and general elections he has campaigned against.

But can the Labour Party, structurally connected (as yet) to the organised workers' movement and so qualitatively different from the other major parties, be made to listen? In the first of this issue's longer articles Carol Hayton writes about how Labour's frontbenchers evade the question of selective education, despite much rank-and-file pressure to end the 11-plus exam in those areas where it still exists to blight the educational opportunities on offer to all children.

Andria Runcieman, who teaches in a Norfolk comprehensive, writes in detail about how involvement in a lesson studies research project enabled her and her colleagues to reflect more thoroughly on their own practice and improve the quality of the assessment exchanges they had with pupils. Neil Mercer argues how important is the effective use of spoken language in education and how valuable is small-group pupil-pupil talk, despite its dismissal by recent education secretaries. This is an area to which *FORUM* hopes to return. Julian Stern explores the tension between children's (collective) voice

and children's (individual) voices, opening up a new perspective on individual meaning making, and on the importance of democracy in school.

The final section contains a series of retrospectives by *FORUM* Board members past and present. Richard Harris reviews his three decades and more as a governor in schools at every educational phase from infant to sixth form. He concludes with a long list of people whom his local comprehensive school nurtured to success. Peter Mitchell reflects on the Inner London Education Authority a quarter-century after political opportunism by Norman Tebbit and Michael Heseltine secured its abolition. He considers how London coped with the transition to a new educational order, and ends his piece by pointing out the role comprehensive schools have played in deepening social cohesion. At a time when policy works to favour science, technology, engineering and mathematics subject-disciplines and to marginalise the arts and humanities, Michael Armstrong rescues from neglect a book by the late Marion Richardson, pioneering educationalist from the mid twentieth century, who saw children as artists and worked to ensure others would see them so. We are glad to reprint an article by Marion Richardson herself. For those who want to know more, the Marion Richardson Archive at Birmingham City University can be viewed by appointment.

FORUM exists as a platform from which to promote 3 to 19 comprehensive education. The journal stands against selective education of any and every kind. The comprehensive vision entails an end to private schools and 'public' schools in the peculiarly English sense, and to academies and free schools which act as their own admissions authorities. It means an end to selection on grounds of 'ability' and aptitude and religion, as well as on grounds of wealth. The journal promotes an education system rooted in the understanding of every learner as infinitely educable and as a powerful agent in her or his own learning. It upholds the ideal that educational environments be dedicated to transforming learning capacity, instead of predicated on the early labelling of learners. Against the view that anyone's educational future is already decided, it holds the future to be always in the making in the present and amenable to change through decisions taken in the here and now.

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