

EDITORIAL

Education: looking beyond (the) election(s)

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There is no doubt that the outcome of the UK election in May 2015 was a shock. Opinion polls had been certain that a coalition in some shape or form was the inevitable outcome. Rather, the UK has reverted to its traditional single-party majority government, albeit with an unprecedented outcome in Scotland. Nicky Morgan has returned as Secretary of State for Education, and now unfettered by a forthcoming election she is already showing her true colours – a fierce determination to drive forward the agenda associated with her predecessor.

There can also be no doubt that the election result was a huge setback. Elections do matter, and a government with Ed Miliband as prime minister would have been different to one in which David Cameron now continues in the role. Those differences are meaningful, and to very many people, in some form, the defeat of a potential Labour-led government will make a very real difference to their lives.

However, there is always a danger, and particularly at the time of an election, that we focus too much on what are small details in policy, and we neglect the many forces outside a national government that shape the reality of what education really feels like to those who study and work in schools. This tendency to parochialism is already illustrated by this editorial. Nearly 400 words in and the reader could be forgiven for thinking that not only is the only election that matters the UK election, but that the only education policy that matters is English education policy.

This issue of *FORUM* seeks to look beyond the outcome of the UK election, and beyond the borders of any one nation, and to locate developments in our schools in a much broader context – that of a neoliberal age in which national borders are becoming less and less relevant. National governments still

matter, but there are powerful commercial interests that matter more. Understanding these global developments better is how we can hope to challenge them.

The articles seek to do two things. First, is to draw on the experiences of teachers and researchers from various parts of the world to illustrate how the global education reform movement (or 'GERM') is impacting on schooling in different national contexts. Second, is to understand how those who challenge these developments are seeking to build 'movements from below' that speak back to the neoliberal 'revolution from above'.

We are delighted to include a number of articles that help illuminate developments and struggles in some key parts of the globe at the current time. For example, Pavlos Charamis and Themis Kotsifakis from the Greek teachers' union, OLME, give an insight into the crisis facing Greek students and teachers as they look to Syriza to turn the tide on austerity. Carol Caref and Kristine Mayle provide an account of developments in Chicago where an alliance of union members and the community has had considerable success in challenging school closure programmes and other reforms. Fintan O'Mahony and Halil Buyruk provide accounts of how neoliberal reforms are reshaping schooling in Ireland and Turkey respectively and highlight the need to understand how global pressures intersect with local contexts and how that results in the specific experiences of students and teachers in different nations. Alison Milner provides a fascinating insight into the experiences of four teachers working in Swedish free schools and the challenges posed to their sense of professionalism working in schools driven by profit.

Several of these articles seek to connect the experience of market-driven reforms with those who have organised to challenge these developments. Within these articles the emphasis is on trade union organisation, although what also emerges is the need for such mobilisations to build alliances with a much wider range of forces, most obviously parents and students. What also emerges from these accounts of resistance is the need to connect activism with ideas and to understand that the counter-hegemonic challenge to neoliberalism must be constructed intellectually as well as in the classrooms and on the streets. One of the great strengths of what Stuart Hall called the 'great moving Right show' has been the Right's ability to mobilise intellectual resources as part of the battle of ideas and we see this very clearly in education today. One effort to challenge this is an initiative by academics and researchers to mobilise their resources in alliance with the organising strategy set out by Kevin Courtney and Gawain Little in the summer 2014 number of *FORUM*. The project has called itself 'Reclaiming Schools', arguing, 'There is an urgent need to reclaim schools *from* the corporate interests that increasingly drive education policy ... We will play a part in the struggle to reclaim schools *for* a more optimistic vision of education' (www.reclaimingschools.org). It seeks to provide the evidence and arguments to help activists in their campaigning work, and in this issue of *FORUM* we carry three contributions from the Reclaiming Schools project – the articles by Susan Robertson, Pat Thomson and Peter Moss.

In all of these contributions it is always important to balance an understanding of the global with a focus on the local. There are hugely powerful global pressures, but they play out in different places in different ways (see Terry Wrigley's article on the curriculum or Alex Kenny and Baljeet Ghale's contributions on 'British Values'). The remaining articles in this issue *do* focus on England – but they highlight the extent to which England has acted as the laboratory for neoliberalism's huge experiment with public education. Competition (Eddie Playfair) and crude performativity (Phil Taylor and Andy Richards) combine with the heavy hand of Ofsted (Colin Richards) to create a toxic mix of markets and managerialism in the English state system, with many of these developments now being replicated in their own ways across the world.

What is apparent is that whoever had won the 2015 UK election the challenge facing those who believe in the principles that have guided *FORUM* for over 50 years would have remained largely the same. Public education needs a mass movement in which teachers, parents and students mobilise around an education system that places the values of social justice and democracy at its heart. It would be nice to believe that such a movement could emerge from the type of initiative that Eddie Playfair sets out in his brilliant article in this issue: a new 'Great Debate' in which we collectively engage with the fundamental questions in education – what is education for and what type of education system do we really want? We know there is no hope of that happening unless there is a movement to make it happen. Five more years of a government committed to privatisation and selection can only be defeated when enough people combine together to build from below and, borrowing from the American Federation of Teachers, reclaim the promise of public education.

