
Brian Simon: his life and legacy

A Special Centenary Event

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ABSTRACT This is an outline of the celebration held at the UCL Institute of Education, London, on what would have been Brian Simon's one hundredth birthday.

Brian Simon was born on 26 March 1915. Exactly one hundred years later, the life and work of this distinguished professor of education, educational historian and activist, advocate of comprehensive schooling and *FORUM* co-founder were celebrated in a series of presentations and reminiscences at the University of London Institute of Education. Brian Simon's initial teacher education took place at the Institute, and his personal papers are archived there.

Gary McCulloch welcomed us to the Drama Studio, a fitting venue in which to remember the man who claimed to have discovered Albert Finney. Gary spoke as photographs from all phases of Brian Simon's life were shown. There on screen was the schoolboy rugby-player who grew into the youthful backpacker among the Dolomites, who became the schoolteacher on stage at Salford Grammar School and then, sitting in a classroom in the USSR, the education spokesperson for Britain's Stalinist Communist Party of the 1950s and 60s, and the university academic. There too were photographs of Brian's wife Joan (about whose scholarship and social action Jane Martin wrote in *FORUM* 56(3)), and colour photographs of their family. Some of these archive photographs, along with photographs taken during the centenary event, can be seen on the website of the International Centre for Historical Research in Education.[1]

Maurice Galton offered memories of working with Brian Simon on the ORACLE project, and of being a near-neighbour to Brian and Joan in Leicester. Mike Day spoke about Brian's activism in the National Union of Students at the outbreak of World War II. Brian was President in 1940, and adroitly managed to prevent the organisation from being closed down. Michael Armstrong revisited Brian Simon's view that education is best conceived of as a meeting of minds, and reconsidered the argument (put forward in *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School*, published in 1953) for seeing the classroom as a miniature cultural world in which the wider culture is challenged as it is absorbed.

After lunch, Brian Simon's academic career became the focus. Gary McCulloch, who is writing the authorised biography of Brian Simon, spoke about documents in the archive which shed light on Brian's thinking about pedagogy as a social practice, and about the ways Brian's experience as a classroom teacher helped to fashion his theoretical outlook. Mary Jane Drummond chaired a symposium fronted by some of those involved in anti-determinist approaches to pedagogy (as advocated in the two 'Learning without Limits' studies [2]). Contributors made connections between Brian's work and the ways teachers today look to counter pervasive fixed-ability thinking and foster a more inclusive practice.[3] Tony Booth drew links between such work and the values framework articulated in and through the *Index for Inclusion*. He also emphasised that Brian Simon's championing of the comprehensive ideal involved arguments not merely to do with a school's admissions criteria but with the ways in which each and every pupil or student is seen by the school. In the final session we were able to hear Brian Simon speak, thanks to film of a conversation he had with Ruth Watts shortly before his death.[4] Ruth Watts herself introduced the film. Finally, Tom Woodin played clips from a series of interviews he conducted with colleagues and friends of Brian Simon, to round out the portrait of the man. Chris Husbands, Director of the Institute, closed the day.

The celebration was hosted by the International Centre for Historical Research in Education, University College London Institute of Education, in association with *FORUM* and the UK History of Education Society. More than seventy people attended from academic backgrounds in the history and practice of education and its research, in keeping with the breadth of Brian Simon's concerns. We are pleased to republish a number of presentations given at the event.

Notes

[1] <http://ichre.ioe.ac.uk/events/past-events/>

[2] S. Hart, A. Dixon, M.J. Drummond & D. McIntyre (2004) *Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

M. Swann, A. Peacock, S. Hart & M.J. Drummond (2012) *Creating Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

- [3] Contributors to the symposium included Holly Linklater, Rachel Marks, Mandy Swann and Patrick Yarker.
- [4] The transcript of their talk was published in *History of Education Researcher* 2003, no. 71, pp. 3-13.

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