

EDITORIAL

The Time Is Now: reconstructing high-quality, democratic, public education

In March 2016 the Government in England published its White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. It is a hugely significant document, setting out radical reform in key areas of schools policy – from school organisation and governance to the curriculum and assessment via teacher education. It is as though no aspect of the system is left untouched by what is proposed. But this is not surprising because Conservative party policy over more than three decades has been devoted to achieving a total transformation of the school system. This has always been a long game (or what Antonio Gramsci called a ‘passive revolution’) and the White Paper marks a significant stage in this process – whereby the Government commits to the total destruction of local democratic control of schooling. This is a decisive moment.

This number of *FORUM* was never planned as a special issue focused on the White Paper. It has partly become one because so many of the articles planned for this issue engage directly with the issues raised in the White Paper. *FORUM* has always been concerned with promoting comprehensive education, teaching and curricula approaches that see learning as a social process, but which start from the individual child, and with democracy as not just about school governance, but as central to pedagogical practice. This issue of *FORUM* has many articles that address these issues. As it would do. These are all issues that are challenged by the thinking that underpins the White Paper, and so in this issue of *FORUM* readers will find many articles that provide a direct response to the direction of travel set out in *Educational Excellence Everywhere* even if several of those articles were not written with that purpose in mind (several were written before the White Paper was published and, with the exception of this editorial, all were written before the Government’s so-called U-turn on 100% academisation).

Educational Excellence Everywhere: damaging and dangerous

Recognising the significance of this moment, the *FORUM* editorial board has taken the unprecedented step of developing its own response to the White Paper. This is in part because we see the White Paper as such a significant document, and in part because we believe the White Paper requires an analysis that *FORUM* is uniquely placed to provide. The White Paper is not just the latest ministerial whim or wheeze – it is part of a long-term project, and *FORUM* has chronicled and critiqued that project as far back as it can be traced – back to the 1988 Act, and indeed beyond to the Black Papers of the 1960s. Our response to the White Paper seeks to set the document in that context, and to expose why the policy proposals it contains are both damaging and dangerous. We commend it to readers, and hope it will be used widely in building the campaign required to challenge the Government's education agenda. Despite the changes announced by Nicky Morgan, and included in the Queen's Speech, we have left the submission in its original form. We do not believe the change in policy to be a material one. The Government's clear intention remains a school system with no local democratic control.

Much of the editorial board's response is devoted to critique of the White Paper, and it deliberately avoids setting out in any detail what an alternative vision of education can look like. However, *FORUM* has always been, first and foremost, a journal dedicated to promoting a positive vision of education and so we are delighted to include a specially edited piece by Robin Alexander in which he presents his submission to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry on the purposes of education (submitted in the name of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust). Robin speaks directly to the question '*what is education for?*', and in so doing makes a powerful case for a much more optimistic alternative vision of what education is and can be.

The emphasis on positive alternatives is maintained when Danny Murphy, Linda Croxford and Cathy Howieson discuss the experience of more than 50 years of comprehensive education in Scotland. Scotland and England both made bold commitments to comprehensive education in 1965, but since then the two nations have travelled very different paths. Scottish education certainly faces its challenges, but it continues to offer a positive vision to all those struggling to develop an approach to education that reflects all the hope and optimism of the comprehensive model. Certainly, those in England do not have to look far for their inspiration.

In the seven articles that follow the authors deal with a diverse range of issues that go to the heart of the issues raised in the White Paper. Nigel Gann writes about the experience of a primary school in Somerset facing forced academisation. This is a shocking, but alas not unique, story of the growing democratic deficit in the English school system, and an issue that will be exacerbated by proposals in the White Paper. Alasdair MacDonald, Jemima Reilly and Laura Worsley are recent and current school leaders from the highly successful Morpeth School in Tower Hamlets. They offer a powerful critique of

current policy developments, but they also highlight how difficult policy has been to ‘manage’ given the way it is often implemented – that is, imposed and with little time for schools to plan. The authors make a number of wide-ranging points about particular policies and possible alternatives. Some will draw wide support, and others may be more contentious. However, as a journal we would want to fully support their demand to ‘do policy differently’, and in a way that seeks to engage people in genuine debate and then develop consensus accordingly.

Colin Richards analyses recent developments in Ofsted’s role and argues that the inspectorate is now making unrealistic demands on everyone – including its own inspectors. Given the key role Ofsted now plays in the school system, and the way it has been mobilised to drive forward the Government’s academisation agenda, this article makes an important contribution to the debate about what role Ofsted should have in the future, if indeed it has any role in its current form.

In two linked articles Richard Hatcher and Martin Allen explore different aspects of policy that do not feature conspicuously in the White Paper, but which are central to it. Richard Hatcher’s article provides much-needed analysis about the development of combined authorities. These ‘super-authorities’ are closely linked to the discourse of devolved government, and in the case of places such as Manchester, to the development of the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ agenda. The problem is that what is presented as decentralisation is often the reverse and there is a danger that power is centralised in the hands of very small groups. This approach to governance reflects the same focus on ‘technical managerialism’ that is repeated through the White Paper. Moreover, this has significant implications for education as it is clear these super-authorities are likely to have substantial influence on education provision in their areas, mostly related to ‘skills development’ and labour market preparation. Both Richard Hatcher and Martin Allen highlight the trend towards a growing tension between an EBacc-driven curriculum on the one hand, and a narrow and functional vocationalism on the other.

The White Paper makes repeated references to policy being ‘evidence based’ and that teacher education and school practice needs to be ‘evidence based’. We critique this in our response to the White Paper. Terry Wrigley provides a much more detailed response and highlights the way in which particular forms of evidence are being privileged in order to promote particular policy solutions. Schools are constantly being exhorted to adopt ‘evidence-based’ practices, and the White Paper makes clear that to do otherwise risks a punitive judgement from the inspectorate (for example, in relation to the pupil premium). Those working in schools need to be much more critical users of research, and to know when and how to combine evidence and professional judgement. Terry Wrigley’s article provides an important contribution to that discussion.

In the final article that speaks to the content of the White Paper we reproduce an article by Jane Manzone (who has previously appeared in *FORUM*

under her blogging alias of *HeyMissSmith*) in which she critiques the new developments in teacher education. As ever, her arguments are trenchant, and emerge from her personal experience of supporting new teachers in the inner London primary school where she works. Her final words make powerful points and raise fundamental questions:

We need to grow our teachers slowly and support them as they develop. A young teacher must still answer the very important questions: *What is education for? What kind of teacher am I?*

The Point is to not Merely Understand the White Paper, but to Change It

The concern of this issue of *FORUM* is to not only understand the White Paper, but to change it, or more ambitiously, to change the educational landscape it seeks to occupy. *FORUM* has always concerned itself with these issues – offering cogent critique of what is being presented, alternative visions of what is possible, and considered discussion about the strategies and tactics required to get from where we are to where we want to be.

In recent issues of *FORUM*, both in articles and editorials, we have made the case to develop a ‘movement for education’ by forging alliances of parents, students, teachers, local authorities and those in the community. Indeed in a recent issue Richard Hatcher set out the case for building a social movement for education in some detail. In this issue we include two responses to that article, from Richard Harris and Gawain Little, as a contribution to further exploring this complex debate.

We are also pleased to provide a platform to the Brighton & Hove Campaign for Education, which has developed to make the case for a democratic, community voice in shaping education provision in Brighton and environs. The article was written before the White Paper was published and highlights the types of community-based education advocacy groups that have been bubbling up for some time. Before the White Paper there had been some tentative steps to try to connect these groups in the form of a national network, but since the White Paper has been published there has emerged a proliferation of such groups, and also more obvious and urgent efforts to connect them. This is a hugely important development and *FORUM* is happy to support it.

The role of teachers, and teacher unions, is clearly central to any broad alliance that may form, and with a prospect of challenging the Government and its White Paper agenda. In this issue of *FORUM* Jon Berry argues that teachers have been much more resistant to the managerial attack on schooling than is often assumed. Rather than having been ‘captured’ by the discourse of targets and performance-related pay, he argues that the vast majority of younger teachers remain committed to the same ideals of education that have guided and motivated their colleagues before them. His article provides a very contemporary analysis of teachers, and their response to attacks on the system within which they work. A rather more historical account is provided by

Richard Rieser in his personal reflections on the teachers' action in the mid 1980s, thirty years on. This article marks a very significant moment in history (and one that has received insufficient interest from labour movement and educational historians alike) – a protracted industrial dispute which *The Times* newspaper argued in an editorial was 'always about management more than money'. To remind readers, the dispute ended in 1986 (with teachers largely defeated), collective bargaining rights were suspended in 1987 (and never restored) and the 'Education Reform Act' passed into law in 1988, introducing a national curriculum, standardised testing and opted-out schools. What was started in 1988 is still being played out in 2016. *Now is the time to stop it.*

The reason to make a decisive stand now is because the White Paper marks a defining moment in the long march of Thatcherite-inspired education reform. The commitment to 100% academisation seeks the total transformation of a system. If successful the Government will have established a system of public education stripped of any local democratic control. As has been indicated, the Government has been forced to concede some ground on this issue, but its ultimate goal remains the same. It will not be the end point, as there will be much privatisation still to drive through – but a system with no local government provision of education will mark a key moment. The Government's concession is intended to give the appearance of a significant shift in policy, whilst the detail indicates it is nothing of the sort. As the Queen's Speech made clear, the academies juggernaut rolls on, and the shift in policy will make no meaningful difference to vast numbers of schools.

What has happened, however, is that a much broader swathe of opposition has been galvanised into activity as a result of the prospects for schools raised by the White Paper. Until now opposition to government education reforms has been patchy and sporadic. The reforms are intended to fragment and divide, and thereby to weaken opposition. When combined with the power of the media to shape the debate, this ability to divide and rule has often been effective. Active opposition has largely been restricted to 'the usual suspects' (including ourselves!), with those of us involved having difficulty breaking out of this narrow coalition of activists. This is manifestly no longer the case. Huge numbers of parents are seeing their children placed under intolerable pressure by a testing regime that is out of control. They also see their children experiencing a stultifying curriculum, and the damage that is doing. Vast numbers of head teachers, in successful local authority schools, are alarmed at the prospect of being swallowed up by a predatory Multi-Academy Trust. At the same time, Tory shire councillors know that the village schools they have often fought hard to protect are under threat – despite concessions and assurances.

The reality is that in its desperation to reach the totemic point of total academisation the Government has overstretched itself. In making this ideological lunge it has already antagonised vast numbers of people, who, until now, have been willing to observe from the sidelines, but not act. There is, for the first time in a long time, the prospect of developing the type of broad

coalition of parents, politicians, unions and others that can inflict a meaningful defeat on the Government's so-called 'reform' agenda. The first signs of this have already been witnessed – in relation to baseline testing and the shift in academies policy. There is no doubt that the Government looks weak on educational issues, and driving forward its White Paper agenda, in the face of substantial and wide-ranging opposition, is going to be extraordinarily difficult. The Government is fearful of this opposition and its concessions are based purely on political expediency – an effort to divide the broad alliance it faces, but to still proceed with its agenda of market fundamentalism that we analyse in our White Paper response. More slowly, yes. But proceed nevertheless.

The challenge for those who have been part of this alliance is to work intelligently to hold it together, and to continue to build it. This will need creativity and imagination. It demands that we spend less time speaking to ourselves and we engage more with those who don't agree with everything we believe in. It requires new types of activism. There may be more power in a Mumsnet chat room than a union branch meeting. Traditional methods of organising are still essential – but they are no longer sufficient. Doing what we have always done may be comfortable, but it is unlikely to be enough.

The Government's strategy of tactical retreats is intended to make the task of coalition building more difficult. However, the White Paper has made education policy issues more visible, and also made the Government's real intentions more transparent. This creates an opportunity for those who seek to offer an alternative, one that must be seized.

The outcomes, as always are uncertain. The challenges of developing a really broad coalition, and knitting together the required alliances, are substantial. But what is clear is that there has never been a more important, or better, time to stand up for education – *the time is now*.

Howard Stevenson

Since the last issue of *FORUM* was published our Editorial Board Chairperson, Michael Armstrong, passed away. There is a short notice about Michael in this issue of *FORUM*, and Robin Alexander has also graciously acknowledged Michael's contribution to his article in this issue. The Editorial Board met in April and agreed that we will publish a special issue in 2017 that will acknowledge and pay tribute to Michael's work. The Board is also working with Michael's family to arrange a memorial lecture in due course. At the same meeting, Michael Fielding was elected as our new Board Chair.

We are all desperately saddened by Michael's passing. He was a wonderful colleague on the journal, and his wise leadership was valued by us all. We miss him very much.