
Building a Social Movement for Education in England: responses to Richard Hatcher

In *FORUM* 57(3), 2015, Richard Hatcher outlined how it was necessary to build a social movement against government education policy and in support of an alternative reform agenda. We, the editors, believe this is an important, and complex, debate. As a contribution to developing further discussion around Richard's ideas we present two responses from those involved in education activism. Both contributions are submitted in a personal capacity. If you wish to further add to this debate, please email the editors (FORUM@wwwords.co.uk).

Richard Harris

In a journal such as *FORUM* it is quite right that the views of Professor Richard Hatcher should be aired and that there should be a debate about the issues raised. In his article he makes the case for 'building a social movement for education in England'. His article also contains some criticism of organisations fighting the current Tory educational agenda, including the Reclaiming Education Group of which *FORUM* is a member.

His inclusion of the criticism of the 2015 Labour Election Manifesto by Terry Wrigley would strike a chord with many campaigners. Indeed the failure of the Labour Manifesto to address many of the core concerns of people on the Left has been seen as one of the reasons for the successful election of Jeremy Corbyn. Particularly of concern, for those who believe in locally democratically accountable schools, was the failure to address the privatisation of schools through the academisation process.

The Reclaiming Education Group sought a response from all of the Labour candidates in the leadership election concerning the Group's seven-point manifesto proposals for education.[1] Of the candidates, only Andy Burnham's team and Jeremy Corbyn replied and only Jeremy Corbyn endorsed all seven points.

It is ironic that, now Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education, has published the White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* [2], even Tory local council leaders and backbench MPs have woken up to what is happening and are against the proposals. The headline in a recent *Observer* article reads, 'Tory backbench leader in attack on "forced" academies'. While being critical of

Labour pre election and coming from a left-wing perspective, Richard Hatcher may now have to consider joining forces with some unexpected allies, certainly with respect to 'forced' academisation.

For people to come together for the sake of defending a local, democratic, school system is found in both the need to oppose the extreme proposals of the White Paper itself and Nicky Morgan MP's speech launching the document.[3] In her speech, under 'Dynamism' she states:

I can hear the howls of derision from opponents of academies – asking 'what about this one or that one that struggled?' It is true some academies have been weaker than others, some haven't met the high expectations that we've set for them. But here is the crucial difference, when a local authority school failed, it was stuck with the local authority, *end of story*.

Morgan then goes on to suggest it is only academies which provide the opportunity for collaboration and mutual support. She claims that 'it's abundantly clear that academy status leads to a more dynamic, more responsive and ultimately higher-performing education system'.

The Government has consistently denied the evidence that academies have been shown to be no better in improving performance than local authority maintained schools. In the quote above Morgan deliberately misrepresents what happens in local authorities: '*end of story*' is a gross misrepresentation and blatantly not true. Maybe it is this that has stirred Conservative councillors. I have been a cabinet member for schools in a local authority. I have sat with the senior adviser looking at each school and the level of intervention and support appropriate to each. I have worked with the Director of Education, a former head teacher, not a bureaucrat but an educationist. The deliberate use of negative language to describe local authorities, and repeated by the media, is designed to set the agenda for the radical change the Tories are planning. 'Local government *control*', 'Schools *languishing* in local authorities', 'Local authority *bureaucrats*' are all repeated without challenge.

The problem of building a campaign around the main party of the Left is illustrated by Richard Hatcher by looking at the Democrats in some parts of the USA, particularly Chicago, where a Democratic Party mayor has imposed a raft of neo-liberal policies including school closures. Hence also Richard's concerns over the Labour Party and some of its policies when in government.

However, how to build a campaign is not, I might suggest, as easy as Richard Hatcher might propose. He has undoubtedly had some success in Birmingham, especially through the local branch of CASE (the Campaign for State Education), but in Birmingham I would suggest there have been many issues to generate interest. The fact is that despite some individual campaigns of note, such as in Haringey or Lewisham, many parents seem to have been indifferent to who runs their school. This is probably more to do with a lack of information than not caring. However, when Nicky Morgan claims in an interview with the *Guardian* [4] that 'moves to end councils' direct involvement

in schools did not create a democratic deficit, because many parents did not rate education as a political priority when voting', there may well be some element of truth in this. She went on to say, 'I've never yet been on a doorstep where education has come up as an issue'. Sadly, this last statement, and the implications in the first statement, have some truth and the Left must acknowledge that it has *often* proven very difficult to build broad community-based campaigns against academisation.

However, in my experience schools and further education *do* feature and her experience of 'never' is unusual. Perhaps it is owing to her not asking voters the right questions, but it is also more likely to be the lack of public information on the reality of academies and not knowing to whom parents can go if they are not satisfied. Many parents find out when it is too late. It is certainly no reason to say it will not create a democratic deficit. Indeed under her proposal local accountability to elected local authorities will be replaced by accountability through unelected privatised school executives directly to the Secretary of State. Forcing schools to become academies is an ideological proposal which flies in the face of evidence. It may be that this is the issue which now tips the scales.

The need for something like the social movement along the lines proposed by Richard Hatcher is clearly needed. But the crucial question is how to build it. If the answer to that question was straightforward it is not unreasonable to think that it would have been developed a long time ago. I would argue that central to such a movement gaining success is that people should be informed. The overwhelming evidence that counters the Tory ideology is well known, but not to the public at large. It is strange then that Richard Hatcher chooses to attack the very organisations that have been striving to get the evidence into the public domain!

Contrary to what he says in his *FORUM* article under the heading 'Influencing Labour Policy', Reclaiming Education has been an alliance since 2011 and its first conference, 'Caught in the Act', was in response to the Coalition's first Education Act. The '7 Principles' was only the most recent of several documents, starting with the Canterbury House statement, 'Our Schools are being privatised'. Again, contrary to his statement, Reclaiming Education has consistently contested the Tory agenda of academy chains and free schools.

The core of his social movement is an 'active campaign around the country to mobilise public and professional support through public meetings and the setting up of local groups or local branches'. Reclaiming Education has concentrated its limited resources on conferences and meetings in the House of Commons, plus publishing papers and using its website and links with its constituent organisation, to raise public awareness. The conferences and meetings have been well attended.

Much as the members of Reclaiming Education might agree with the need for local campaigns up and down the country, it does not have the resources to make this happen. However, better resourced organisations such as the teaching unions have held effective local campaigns. It is a shame that Professor Hatcher chooses to criticise rather than recognise what has been achieved. In 2010 there

had been no coming together of education campaigns for two decades or more, but by 2015 the original five allies, CASE, Comprehensive Future, *FORUM*, the Socialist Education Association, ISCG (Information for School and College Governors), had been joined by the Alliance for Inclusive Education and the New Vision Group as well as having established excellent relations with the teachers' unions, ATL, NASUWT and the NUT, who have all been supportive. Specifically in relation to Richard Hatcher's reference to Fiona Millar, it should be made clear that, although a member of Comprehensive Future, Fiona Millar is not a spokesperson of the Reclaiming Education Alliance and her *Guardian* articles do not necessarily reflect the Alliance views.

Richard Hatcher recognises the role of the Chicago Teachers' Union in transforming itself into the campaigning organisation that linked parents, communities and education, with huge numbers attending hearings to oppose school closures, so perhaps he should look to similarly well-resourced organisations in England that could so 'transform' themselves.

Reclaiming Education is an alliance of voluntary organisations with very limited resources that has achieved a lot in working together to raise awareness and now, combined, has hundreds of contacts. Its members would recognise the value of local campaigns. Sadly, what Nicky Morgan has exploited in pushing forward her privatisation of schools is her explicit knowledge that education has not been a major local political issue. We can debate why that might have been – but it is as it is. However, as indicated, this appears to be changing and the White Paper has created a new set of conditions. Perhaps now is the time for campaigns to emerge, both national and local. Reclaiming Education is already putting its energy into raising greater concern among parliamentarians and local authorities and where they can, members will support local campaigns. We all do what we can and by working together, rather than against each other, we can achieve more.

Notes

- [1] *FORUM*, 56(3), 596.
www.reclaimingeducation.org.uk/7%20points%20for%202015.pdf
- [2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere>
- [3] <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-educational-excellence-everywhere>
- [4] *The Guardian*, 26 March 2016, p. 13.
- [5] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere>

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The past six years have witnessed a staggering assault on the public education system. The project, begun in 1988, to replace an increasingly comprehensive system with a market-based approach, based on competition, standardisation and the illusion of choice, is close to completion.

Throughout, this process has rested on the construction of hegemonic alliances (Gramsci, 1971), within which the ability of reformers to claim to speak with, or on behalf of, parents has been crucial. As Ball (1990, 32-33) writes, this involved the

setting of expertise against common sense. The role of expert knowledge and research is regarded as less dependable than political intuition and common sense accounts of what people want ... The effectiveness of such polarities is related to the divisions they generate – parents against teachers, scholarly research against the popular media – and the *unities* they conjure up – parents as a group, of a kind, teachers as a group, of a kind. The interests of all parents are cast together as the same.

So the recent White Paper strikes an odd chord. It is almost as if, in their race to ensure the complete fragmentation of the remaining elements of public education, the Government has allowed the mask to slip. Firstly, the White Paper proposes the forced conversion of all schools, regardless of the views of parents. This is not just ignoring the views of those parents they can paint as misguided or vexatious, whose schools have adverse data or Ofsted judgements, and who can be dismissed as not acting in the best interests of their children. This is a consistent policy of removing the voice of all parents from the process. It makes open the covert and semi-covert pressure which has been used to push forward academy conversion since the 2010 Academies Act.

Secondly, the White Paper proposes the removal of parent governors and Nicky Morgan is reported as saying that being a parent is not sufficient qualification to be a governor (*The Guardian*, 2016). This directly attacks the right of parents to direct involvement in their children's education, in the cause of 'professionalising' education governance (often, in reality, centralising it to remote corporate entities).

These measures combined have introduced massive weaknesses into the White Paper that increase the chances of securing major victories on key aspects. This, of course, rests on the potential of a broad alliance of opposition,

including everyone from teacher trade unionists to Conservative councillors and MPs, with parents and communities at its core.

This situation points to the potential power of alliances and of the creation of a broad social movement in defence of education. Obviously, this is not a new idea, as recent debate in the pages of *FORUM* has shown (Unterrainer, 2014; Courtney & Little, 2014; Hatcher, 2015). The case for mobilising a sustainable social movement response to the assault on education grows stronger every day. It is a strategy that the National Union of Teachers has been actively pursuing for a number of years.

As I have argued previously in an article written with Howard Stevenson (2015, p. 97), 'The neoliberal attack on education does not just affect terms and conditions, it affects teachers' entire professional lives. Beyond that, it affects everyone associated with schools and education. And because schools lie at the heart of their communities, it affects everyone within that community. In this sense, the global assault on education affects all working people'.

The key question is: what kind of alliances are we seeking to build; what kind of movement? I would argue that any genuine social movement must have breadth. Building genuine alliances means entering into what Tattersall (2013) describes as 'strong, reciprocal and agenda-setting coalitions'. Within this, there will always be tensions between different tactics but the ability to engage with this range of tactical repertoires and to apply diverse tactical approaches in a complementary manner can significantly strengthen the strategic capacity of an organisation or alliance (Ganz, 2009).

This, I would argue, is the position with respect to the differences between the NUT's social movement strategy and the lobbying approach employed by the Reclaiming Education alliance, as described by Hatcher (2015). I think it is clear that defeating the current attacks on education and starting to reverse the neo-liberal direction in education means mobilising a grass-roots movement of education professionals, parents, students and community activists. However, this underlying approach is not incompatible with a strategy of influencing Labour policy through persuasion and negotiation. Indeed, Hatcher (2015, p 298) argues that '[The strategy of persuasion and negotiation] could have been complemented by an active campaign around the country to mobilise public and professional support through public meetings and the setting up of local groups or local branches'. The solution to this is clear but two-sided. We need to look for opportunities to develop joint work and to align our differing strategies so that they complement each other more effectively. This could and should involve both organic and more structural links.

The question of the role of strike action will also prove crucial in developing an effective social movement response. On the one hand, strike action will be a key tactic for education unions in defending and seeking to improve the living standards of their members. At the same time, the nature and context of strike action needs to reflect the broader aims of social movement unionism. The fight over terms and conditions (including pay and pensions) is

crucial both because our working conditions are our students' learning conditions and because these fights link us to the wider labour movement and the transformative power that collective action has. Under our anti-union laws, unions are barred from taking political strike action but this does not mean that unions can afford to neglect the wider political context of any such action. At some point, a social movement around education will need to challenge the laws on political strikes to more deeply link their range of action to community demands around education. However, this should not mean downplaying the importance of action over pay and conditions.

Finally, it will be important to consider the question of parliamentary politics carefully. The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader does create a totally new context, in which the Labour Party itself, and the movement around the leader, could potentially be part of a progressive social movement for change in education. However, as Hatcher (2015, p. 298) argues, 'building a popular movement is equally necessary if Corbyn wins, in order to drive forward his programme for a new National Education Service and prevent it being sabotaged by the Labour establishment (aided by a relentless right-wing media)'.

I would argue a broader movement serves an even more fundamental role than this. Even under a left-wing Labour government, it would be unrealistic to expect the key driver for progressive educational advance to come from within Parliament. It is precisely the active engagement of education professionals, parents, students and others in the development of education policy that is necessary to counteract the impact of decades of neo-liberalism. This need is only heightened by the existence of an aggressive Conservative government and the contradictions within the Parliamentary Labour Party.

The path to building a broad social movement for progressive educational advance will never be a smooth one and there will be difficult conversations to have and contradictions to resolve. However, the fight against this White Paper presents us with an unprecedented opportunity.

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