FORUM
Volume 59, Number 3, 2017
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2017.59.3.305

EDITORIAL

Against Segregated Education

The post-War tripartite system of education in England, based on the belief that there are three types of children – those academic, those technically minded, and the rest – came into existence on 1 April 1945. I learned as much from Derek Gillard's article, published in this edition of *FORUM*, about the Labour Party's attitude to selective education, and it made me laugh. What day more fitting than April Fool's Day to inaugurate such a system?

But the laugh (albeit not the last laugh) is on me, and on those who think as I do that anyone's educability is unlimited, that children do not come in kinds, and that each child, each person, is (to risk a Levinasian phrase) 'without genre'. For the ideas which buttressed the post-war system of segregated schooling retain their virulence, and, a lifetime later, help secure the education system of our day. Grammar schools survive, to ensure that secondary modern schools remain. Grammar streams exist in schools called comprehensive, and the policy of setting or grouping by so-called ability is more scandalous in the breach than in the observance. Behind their pay walls, private schools go about their business, subsidised from public funds through their charitable status, the tax relief available in respect of fees, and via exemptions to VAT and business rate. Meanwhile, like a cat at the door, the question of just what it means for a school to be 'comprehensive', and hence of just what being 'comprehensive' might mean for pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, continues insistently to scratch.

A century ago in the USA John Dewey considered at length the relationship between society and school, democracy and education. He prefaced his great work on that theme by noting how 'theories of knowing and moral development which were formulated in earlier social conditions ... still operate, in societies nominally democratic, to hamper the adequate realization of the democratic ideal'. Twenty years before, the Supreme Court had recognised the legality of segregated schooling on the basis of 'race' (or rather, racism), a decision it took campaigners until 1954 to overturn. When *Democracy and Education* was published, women in most states had yet to win the right to vote. Dewey nonetheless offered an optimistic vision:

> The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment. Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated. (Dewey, 2008, p. 26)

Dewey held that in a democracy it was the responsibility of the school, its 'steadying and integrating office', to enable individual students to find coherence among the competing and contradictory pressures and impulses met within themselves and in society. It was for the school to provide an environment in which such pressures and impulses, the inevitable result of a multi-ethnic and class-divided polity, could be balanced and made meaningful, and so navigated. The ideas, traditions, values and life experiences embodied in society would flow into the school and be available for free exchange and scrutiny. Shared experience would prompt the search for shared understanding. Dewey called this process 'social endosmosis', giving a political twist to a term drawn from biology, the science of life.

England's fragmented education system deploys a range of mechanisms to exclude students under particular rubrics: ability to pay; ability to score highly enough on a test. It is energised not by democratic convictions but by hierarchical, which is to say oppressive, drives. Brought to heel by league table pressures and the likely consequences of a poor Ofsted inspection, individual schools within the maintained sector label their intake by so-called ability, the better to keep groups apart. They sift cohorts into sets or streams, believing that to do so is in everyone's interest. Such separation, such segregation, within the system and within the school, fosters many things, though not the democratic impulse. 'An undesirable society', wrote Dewey, 'is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience.' In place of fluids intermixing under endosmosis, think phials of coloured sand deliberately and finally stratified.

Dewey understood democracy not as a collection of institutions but as a mode of associated living, one which enables us to see more clearly 'the full import' (his phrase) of our activities. One of the malignancies of the segregationist tradition in education, made especially manifest in grammar schools and the private sector, but tapped into now and again by those maintained schools which are their own admissions authority, is that the impact, significance, resonance and sustained effect of the decision to exclude – the full import of it – is not brought home to those who do the excluding.

What they wall out is the possibility of an education. One founded on a thoroughgoing democratic and hence inclusive ethic, an ethic of everybody, and sustained by a radically revised conception of the pupil as able to learn without limit when conditions are right. A comprehensive education.

*****

There is much more to discover in Derek Gillard's survey of the Labour Party's overly timid approach to segregated education's reform in England than the

date of the tripartite system's inception. His article illuminates the historic tension within the Labour Party between advocates of 'common' (or comprehensive) and 'differentiated' (or selective) secondary education. It provides context for Susanne Wiborg's consideration of the role played by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) at two significant moments: during the drive in the 1960s for comprehensivisation, and during the campaign in the 1990s against academisation. Her account, especially of the latter moment, is contentious. Howard Stevenson will reply in the next issue.

Education is nothing if it's not personal. The lifelong effect on individuals of being labelled as a 'failure' within a segregated system, and taught as such, is revealed by Emma-Louise Williams and Michael Rosen, who draw on material they have collected through the 'Sec Mod' blog. Their article starkly illustrates the injustice which stems from the grammar/secondary modern divide.

As an adjunct to these pieces of historically engaged writing, this issue of *FORUM* also includes a kind of annotated index to fifty articles in the journal's archive which deal with aspects of that divide, and with the case for comprehensive reform. In a related article, I draw attention to a handful of these texts.

Diane Reay castigates present educational inequalities. She calls for renewed vigour in opposing them, and for bold transgressive thinking. At a time when the nullity of some schools' conception of what education is, and is for, has been exposed by their willingness to jettison sixth-form students mid-course, her words are all the more urgent.

Stewart Ranson's closely argued article explores what it might mean to educate for democracy. He states: 'A divided nation needs to re-unite through learning communities that develop the capabilities of each, enabling all to participate equally in creating a just society.' Very specifically, he looks at whether a comprehensive system can be justified 'above selection or choice for private advantage'.

Comprehensive education requires innovation, not least in relation to the curriculum and to pedagogical approaches. Michael Fielding introduces a pair of articles by experienced practitioners David Taylor and Mike Davies, now working at the forward-thinking Stanley Park High School, who explore what's entailed by pursuing innovation in a comprehensive setting. The next issue of *FORUM* will contain further articles about curriculum and pedagogy at Stanley Park.

Max Hope highlights innovatory practice in relation to attainment. By creating 'inspiring classrooms in which children and young people have the freedom and space to learn in their own way and at their own pace', she writes, 'schools will be enabling "attainment" on a number of levels, including, arguably, improved academic outcomes'. Luke Abbott outlines the way teachers here and internationally make use of 'Mantle of the Expert' – a drama-based, imagination-rooted approach to classroom activity. Putting on such a mantle can free children to learn. John Blanchard redeems the humble checklist, showing how it may enhance teachers' reflective practice.

There's a much-quoted 'truth' about the measurable influence which teaching makes. It sounded suspicious to Lorna Shires, especially when she was confronted with it inside the Department for Education. She tracks down the original findings on which the claim was based, and exposes how these have been wielded ideologically. In so doing, she offers a timely reminder of the importance of the expert as assayer, skilled in trying the composition of any claim made on the basis of research. Her article is a primer in such work.

Politicians will routinely ignore education research evidence which conflicts with their *idée fixe* or flatly contradicts it. They pay scant regard to what children have to say. The value of the Year 1 phonics check, and the enforced use of synthetic phonics to teach reading are classic examples. In a sharp and authoritative article about aspects of the teaching of reading, Margaret Clark calls out government policy, exposing it as an attempt to prevent practitioners from exercising 'freedom ... to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for their individual children'. She also draws attention to recent research in which children express their views about the disconnection between phonics lessons and reading.

Finally, we celebrate the contribution of three individuals to education, and particularly to comprehensive schooling and reform. Mary Jane Drummond salutes Mabel Barker, climber and educationalist, whose commitment to rock-climbing was of a piece with the beliefs and ideas which informed her approach to education. Madeleine Holt (whose article is an extended version of an obituary carried in the *Guardian*) pays tribute to Kathleen Mitchell, headteacher of Starcross School and later of Pimlico School. The contribution made by the arts – and principally by music – to a rounded education, especially for the most deprived or disaffected students, was well understood by Mitchell. Such an understanding seems increasingly absent from education policy now.

And the third person...?

This issue of *FORUM* leads with the first part of a long interview conducted and presented by Jane Martin and Melissa Benn. The subject of the interview is Clyde Chitty, erstwhile editor of this journal and for five decades and more an indefatigable leading campaigner for comprehensive educational reform. In a wide-ranging account of his life and work as teacher, academic, writer and campaigner, Clyde talks about his experience teaching young people in comprehensive schools and secondary moderns, and in university, and reflects on his sustained political engagement. The concluding part of the interview will appear in the next issue of *FORUM*, in spring 2018.

Patrick Yarker

Reference

Dewey, J. (2008) *Democracy and Education, in The Middle Works, 1899-1924, vol. 9: 1916*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.