
On the Insistent Possibility of Comprehensive Secondary Education

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The two articles that follow – the first by Mike Davies and the second by David Taylor – provide exhilarating challenges to the diminishing and demeaning status quo of current education policy and practice in England.

The first – ‘A World We Never Had: the forgotten quest for a comprehensive school curriculum’ – is by Mike Davies, one of the outstanding pioneer radical secondary school headteachers of his generation. One-time deputy head at Bretton Woods comprehensive school in Peterborough, co-director of Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes, and founding headteacher of the remarkable Bishops Park College in Clacton, Mike reminds us not only of the struggle for truly comprehensive secondary education – as distinct from its ubiquitous organisational simulacra – he also challenges us to reclaim the comprehensive vision of equal value so eloquently argued for and enacted by another radical pioneer, Pat Daunt (see his iconic *Comprehensive Values* [Daunt, 1975]), and re-enforced a decade later by David Hargreaves in his seminal *The Challenge for the Comprehensive School* (Hargreaves, 1982).

Prompted in particular by the Tory government’s pledge to overturn laws banning the creation of new selective schools and thereby renew and extend a form of social apartheid for 11-year-old children, he reminds us that such segregation is based on tests that we cannot trust, that lack clarity, that are culturally biased, that narrow and distort the curriculum, that are susceptible to coaching and that institutionalise the ability of those with funds to effectively buy places at the privileged schools. He also points out that despite all of this there was residual support for the 11+ and thus a weakness in the public’s support for the comprehensive school. Unflinchingly, he goes on to suggest that we must therefore ‘accept that those of us who have worked assiduously [in support of comprehensive education] throughout our careers simply did not do a good enough job in articulating an exciting and uplifting vision of the common school and locating it the heart of a cohesive, compassionate and dynamic society’. He insists we look more honestly and more searchingly at

contemporary realities within the comprehensive school movement, realities which reveal the fact that 'very few if any of our comprehensive schools avoid streaming or setting or some other form of "ability" grouping'.

In a brave, eloquent, indelibly radical provocation he asks fearlessly 'how we have lost so much', insisting we acknowledge our own culpability in the failure of the comprehensive school movement to develop a synergy of intellectual and practical engagement with young people, parents and communities. This leads him not only to suggest that 'we trod too carefully, compromised too readily, and were far too precious, tentative, closed and incestuous in our conversations', but also to starkly and authentically insist that 'we simply don't have comprehensive schools worth the name'.

Focusing forensically on the curriculum and the dishonesties and delusions of 'equality of opportunity', he argues instead for an approach rooted in 'equal value'. What follows is a riveting account of what a comprehensive curriculum truly committed to the education of persons might look like. Drawing in particular on his pioneering work at Bishops Park College, he argues for and persuasively illustrates the richness and range of what he calls a 'Tartan Curriculum'.

There is much to reflect on here and much that many will contest. The point, however, is to learn from our pasts in order to create a more just, more creative, more humanly fulfilling future that honours the aspirations of democracy as a way of life, as a way of living and learning together. In the second half of his article, Mike Davies illustrates the enacted realities of alternatives to a dishonest, deeply destructive and pernicious status quo and concludes a challenging, life-affirming contribution by pointing in particular to the remarkable work of Stanley Park High School.

The second article – 'Taking off into a Strong Headwind: creating truly comprehensive, human-scale secondary education against the prevailing gales of performativity' – is by David Taylor. In it he contributes an inspiring account of Stanley Park High School's struggles against the inequities and iniquities of a buoyant selective system of education and the school's remarkable achievements and aspirations in pursuit of the kind of truly comprehensive curriculum which must inevitably and properly bear much of the weight of democratic aspiration to which this journal has lent its support for over fifty years.

On taking up his headship just over 10 years ago, he acknowledges the extremely demanding context in which the school found itself. As he says in his opening section:

Local circumstances made it challenging, and continue to do so.

There is considerable local selection. This isn't in a formal region-wide 11+ sense, but in a school-based entrance exam one.

Consequently, there are five local grammars, all of which appear in the top 30 state schools for attainment at the end of Key Stage 4. In addition, there are two faith schools, and four other 'non-selectives' that have utilised some form of selection – 'equal banding', paired

primaries, entrance tests and aptitude assessments based on sporting or performing arts excellence.

Faced with falling rolls and all the pressures and complexities that go with it, with the support of the governing body he set out on an innovative, imaginative and brave adventure very much in the tradition which Mike Davies exemplifies and espouses.

Aware of Mike Davies's work at Stantonbury Campus, Milton Keynes in the 1980s and admiring of his pioneering leadership at Bishops Park College, Clacton, he set out to transform the school. Its organisational schools-within-schools structure and its innovative and creative approach to the curriculum are firmly within the radical tradition of comprehensive secondary education in the UK. Certainly, the insistent commitment to the profoundly relational nature of education, the intergenerational reciprocity it entails and the creative, exploratory approach to the curriculum are worthy of both admiration and emulation and remind me strongly of Michael Armstrong's pioneering work at Countesthorpe Community College in the 1970s. Winner of the TES Secondary School of 2016, as measured by both conventional and radical yardsticks, Stanley Park High School's success is all the more remarkable in the unpropitious times in which we live.

Indeed, as Mike Davies suggests, not only is Stanley Park High School 'a wonderfully inspiring and uplifting place to be', its success is integrally bound up with its brave and adventurous 'determination to put students at the centre of their school'. Its 'Excellence Futures Curriculum, radical pedagogy and student-led conferences are attracting attention worldwide, but ironically less so in England.'

Let us hope the two contributions by Mike Davies and David Taylor in this issue of *FORUM* and a number of contributions from Stanley Park High School teachers in the next issue (60[1]), Spring 2018, encourage UK schools to develop a similar reciprocity to our international friends.

It has been and always will be difficult to go against the grain of national education policies that betray educational values and practices in pursuit of easily measurable, profoundly inadequate goals typically dominated by reductionist requirements of economic growth. If we are to confront, understand and deal with those difficulties, if we are to explore and develop alternatives worthy of their struggle, we must nurture solidarities of purpose and practice that include and extend the double requirements of emancipatory educational change.

The first requirement has to do with the enduring importance of history, with understanding and engaging with an alternative legacy that speaks of bravery, tenacity and the lived realities of counter-hegemonic forms of education that deny the dissembling legitimacy of TINA (There Is No Alternative).

Drawing inspiration and strength from the imperatives of a quite different past to the scripted omissions of the dominant ideology, we become more

vibrantly aware we are not first to challenge the legitimacy of a pernicious status quo. In short, they remind us it is both our duty and our privilege to 'mobilize the past against a reckless present' (Blackburn 1993, p. 7), to realise and extend the prefigurative realities they embody and the future aspirations towards which they gesture.

The second requirement has to do with the necessity of nurturing and extending contemporary solidarities of purpose and practice in and through the grounded realities of local, regional, national and international networks and alliances. It is no accident that David Taylor not only draws our attention to the missed opportunities for schools within the UK government's Building Schools for the Future initiative to learn with and from each other. In positive vein, he also underscores the importance of movements like the Coalition of Essential Schools in the USA and Human Scale Education in the UK in helping to inspire and sustain schools with similarly progressive aspirations and challenges.

References

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