
A World We Never Had: the forgotten quest for a comprehensive school curriculum

MIKE DAVIES

ABSTRACT Recently the spectre of increased selection has raised much attention, frequently associated with ‘fairness’ linked to a meritocracy – reminding us of the tension between the principles of equality of opportunity and access as the key driver of the comprehensive school as against the principles of equal value and respect. Whether the public’s interest and imagination can be galvanised to support and celebrate the comprehensive ideal of equal value will have a profound and defining effect on the future of comprehensive schools. This article is an exploration of some of the issues, especially relating to the curriculum.

Dystopia

To quote Bob Dylan, the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century feels as though ‘the times they are a-changing’ ... The sentiments of the song, written in 1964, could have been part of an apparent reawakening of interest in politics and change that was part of the story of the United Kingdom’s 2017 election. An end to austerity, closing the gap between the richest and the poorest (in economic terms), ending the assault on those on benefits, tackling issues of housing and social care as social rather than market entities, etc. However, in relation to the school system there was a conspicuous absence of a new vision or even for new demands that the present restrictions be ameliorated, apart from petitions that schools should be properly funded. There was simply no debate about what that future should be supporting apart from the continuation of the present.

Maybe even that characterisation is too generous, as in reality the electorate were presented by the Labour Party with a set of pledges that mainly related to improving funding and resourcing but were essentially benign when

it came to the nature and quality of experience of the learner. It appeared content with the present curriculum and assessment on offer, at least within secondary schools, that has existed as the cornerstone of all governments' educational policy post James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech. That consensus, in May 2017, was seemingly threatened by the offer of the Conservative Party which looked to be advancing a set of policies that held the potential to segregate and divide society further in pursuit of the old neoliberal mantra of 'choice and diversity', thinly masking a route to increasing 'separate development' for different sectors of our society. Seriously scary ideas such as removing the current 50 per cent cap on faith-based admissions for over-subscribed free schools; persisting with the expansion of 'free' schools even in areas where there is no demand for more school places; stressing the need for a 'knowledge rich' curriculum even where it is known that such emphasis exacerbates the cultural capital deficit that children inherit; but perhaps most worrying of all, the pledge to overturn laws banning the creation of new selective schools.

It is this last pledge that animates this article. It is as if we had no past, no experience, no evidence ... as Michael Fielding wrote thirty years ago in a chapter in *Education: in search of a future*.

The fight for comprehensive schools grew out of the experience of teachers, children and parents at the hands of the tripartite system which not only failed large numbers of young people both personally and educationally but also rested on a psychological theory (to do with I.Q. testing) which turned out to be manifestly false. (Fielding, 1988)

Consequently, there was a sense of incredulity when a mainstream political party suggested that we again reintroduce a form of social apartheid for 11-year-old children and normalise a form of segregation based on tests that we cannot trust; that we are unclear on what is to be tested; that cannot be produced without cultural bias; 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. Despite all of this, there was residual support for the 11+ which suggested a weakness in the public's support for the comprehensive school, and therefore we must accept that those of us who have worked assiduously 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 at the heart of a cohesive, compassionate and dynamic society.

Two years after Bob Dylan sang "The Times They Are A-Changin'" the BBC, as part of its Wednesday Play cycle, aired *Cathy Come Home*, a powerful critique of the housing crises, poverty and the exclusion of mothers. It was produced by Ken Loach who in 2016 returned to the theme of fairness, cohesion and social justice with *I, Daniel Blake*, this time the plot located around the workings of the benefits system, again exposing the powerlessness and

exploitation of the most vulnerable in society. What is remarkable is that while we have had a host of documentaries and soaps about schools, we have had nothing that has exposed the unfairness, bias and injustice that the school system has become. We need a Ken Loach to expose the dross.

To many it is a puzzle as to how we have lost so much. Not as a trip down memory lane but rather a concern that we trod too carefully, compromised too readily and were far too precious, tentative, closed and incestuous in our conversations. Those who recently argued passionately for the return to selection and the grammar/secondary modern divide were quite right in their assertion that they were only extending the principles underpinning contemporary practice. It was after all a Labour government that introduced 'specialist schools' into the mix and allowed a percentage of students to be selected on intake. Today, very few if any of our comprehensive schools avoid streaming or setting or some other form of 'ability' grouping. Parents have been intimidated by and frightened of the term 'mixed ability' although there is no evidence that heterogeneous grouping is other than a social, moral and academic good for the clear majority of students. We have even seen an increase in what many would regard as perverse ritualistic practices such as whole classes standing as the teacher enters the room, a practice frequently justified as 'showing respect'. An extraordinary claim, as it instantly conveys social distance and hierarchy, and where is the respect for the child? Similarly, at a time when even the House of Commons is relaxed about the wearing of ties, secondary schools have become ever more assiduous in the imposition of uniform and dress codes that send a clear message that school is not about the world in which you live, and which you enjoy, endure and need to understand, but about the transmission of 'rich knowledge' – in an era when it is estimated that the continued growth of the 'internet of things' will lead to the doubling of knowledge every 12 months and we have moved from a time of knowledge growing in a linear manner to one of exponential growth. It is almost as if Margaret Atwood's cult novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (published in 1996) was a metaphor for schooling where the school routines echo the claim in the novel that '[t]here is more than one kind of freedom ... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it' (Atwood, 1996). In other words, accept the dislocation of school from your everyday life and you too will enter (our) promised land.

Bright Sparks or False Dawns?

Those sceptical of politicians calling for a more limited 'knowledge rich curriculum' see it as part of the continued attempt to thwart the development of all and privilege the few. The advocates of the 'knowledge rich curriculum' are following the same logic as those hungry to see adolescence in clothing reminiscent of the 1930s. In order to better themselves, children need to leave their home life at the school gates and join the culture of the elites. The National Curriculum, the very embodiment of Harold Wilson's vision that

comprehensive schools were to be 'Grammar Schools for All', perfectly embodies this. It is a curriculum built to reflect the culture and norms of a few, delivered and tested to select those already enjoying privilege, and for many children the experience is to be graded and graded simply to degrade and withdraw. We simply don't have comprehensive schools worth the name, and with the possible exception of a handful of pioneering schools, we have never had them. For some inspiration, look to the reforms and unfolding practices in Finland, schools like Hauho Comprehensive School or Lauttasaari Primary School in Helsinki. Nearer to home, simply read and applaud the courage of Wales in commissioning, publishing and pursuing *Successful Futures*, a review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales by Professor Graham Donaldson (2015).

This is not to suggest that there are not today excellent schools in England. Schools such as Beelings School, Woodbridge, Suffolk, where children are engrossed in realistic learning contexts, building their own compelling immersive environments through the wonderful pedagogic medium of Mantle of the Expert; West Rise School, Eastbourne, which offers 'a dynamic, creative learning environment', with Room 13, Shine Radio Station, artists in residence, a school farm, a Bronze Age village, Forest School, water buffalo, chickens, sheep, ducks and 120 acres of marshland; and Hartsholme Academy, Lincoln, a school transformed through pioneering innovations, again with a commitment to rigorous real-world learning that ignites students' passions, where learners are engaged in collaborative, self-directed learning with their teachers acting as enablers using, as the school puts it, 'New pedagogies and tools ... to liberate learning from past conventions and to connect learners in new and powerful ways.' But they are all in the primary sector. Where are their secondary brothers and sisters?

We can easily point to a clutch from the past. Pioneering schools such as Countesthorpe Collage, Bretton Woods, Stantonbury Campus and Sutton Centre represented brave and bold attempts to meet the aspirations of the comprehensive ideal while the vast majority of students aged 11 to 16 were, and continue to be, subjected to experiences of ritualistic schooling and sifting rather than liberating and community building. Just look at the instances of panic over mental health, and at the remedial programmes to promote wellbeing, and view them as evidence of the 'betrayal of youth', as James Hemming once saw it (Hemming, 1980).

Be inspired by the team work and democracy at Countesthorpe and read John Watts' *The Countesthorpe Experience* (Watts, 1977) and Michael Armstrong in *FORUM*; chase up the school, Bretton Woods, built as part of a new town in Peterborough, where the school shared its library and PE/sports facilities in the shopping/leisure centre and developed a highly innovative research-based curriculum supported by the brilliant sponsor of school-based curriculum development that was embodied in Mode 3 [1] syllabuses and examinations – and what a tragic loss to teachers' professional development came with their demise. Both Bretton Woods and Sutton Centre offered their communities a full

programme of community activities and a determination to involve all in lifelong learning, contributing to community development and local democracy, wonderfully captured in Colin Fletcher's *The Challenges of Community Education* (1984). Follow some of Michael Fielding's accounts of the development of 'schools within schools', the team-based curriculum of 'shared time' and staff and student democracy at Stantonbury Campus. And then ponder where such comprehensive schools are today?

There are, of course, still pockets of innovative practice:

- Stable groups, a strategy in a Norwegian school that was concerned that friendship groups were simply perpetuating social divisions so they created relatively fixed 'work groups'
- Community-based curriculum, with individual mentoring and timetabling at West Hawaii Explorations Academy
- The Post Office running classes in money management in a Copenhagen school that included access for those claiming benefits
- Class parent groups as an alternative to whole-school PTAs so that parents can better understand the curriculum and offer support (Hargreaves Report on London Schools [Hargreaves, 1984])
- Practices of restorative justice at Bishops Park College, Clacton to end the negative cycle of sanctions and consequences
- Using subjects such as history and art to give a context and process that leads to meaningful products and outcomes, as at School 21, Stratford
- D6 at Matthew Moss, Rochdale: Saturday School where students form study groups of their own interest supported by A-level students as their coaches
- School-based multi-agency family-focused preventive/intervention teams established in Tendring, Essex

But there has never been a real and sustained breakthrough, and the dearth of such schools cannot be by accident. There was a clear warning 35 years ago when in his seminal book *The Challenge for the Comprehensive* David Hargreaves observed that 'Today we know what comprehensive schools were designed to be against. Until we ask ourselves what comprehensives are *for* they cannot go beyond the meritocratic principles on which at present they somewhat uneasily rest' (Hargreaves, 1982). Yet it is base to suggest that the leaders of today's community comprehensive schools are any less committed to innovation, excellence or community development. Maybe it is the hegemony of the prevailing political context that has so powerfully changed and refocused, narrowed, the scope of what we are about. Whether this is true or not, we have to accept some responsibility for allowing the betrayal, for it has not been for the lack of effort or commitment, but to what end? Maybe we have become besotted with 'closing the gap' without ever questioning what that gap represents or whether in its closing we are simply denying to many the opportunity to shine and display their talents.

Fake News

The immediate past chief inspector of schools, Michael Wilshaw, stated at the Festival of Education held at Wellington College, Berkshire in June 2016 that 'there were many more children in good and outstanding schools than ever before... Our education system is miles better than it was 20 years ago... And each year since, we've seen incremental improvement.' Was he being mischievous, a purveyor of fake news, or simply choosing a different yard stick to the international PISA mean scores to make his point? Such flexibility is simply not available to school staff or students in demonstrating their achievements.

A graph [2] presenting the trend in PISA mean scores from 2006 to 2015, and the improvement required to be best in Europe by 2020 (assuming 'best in Europe' scores are unchanged), shows that:

- in maths, England's score declined by two points;
- in science, England's score fell by four points in 2015; and
- in reading, England's score was unchanged.

The current measures, focus and strategies of improvement are simply barren. They recycle a lack of ambition and flair. They too narrowly focus and increasingly exclude so much, most recently the Arts. They fail to connect with learners and teachers, they do not excite, nor are they imaginative. In fact, in the name of reform and improving standards we have witnessed wave after wave of adjustments that have failed to tackle a woeful disregard for the talents and gifts of many in our society and have simply served to embed the status quo. It is as if senior politicians, preoccupied with their own passions and indifferent to everything that happened before, were

merely superimposing their footprints on those of their infinite predecessors and peers, not knowing that they're merely imitating them and that nothing is new under the sun, that everything is doomed to be become confused and mingled and homogenised, to be forgotten and left to float on a repetitive magma of which, nevertheless, no one tires, or is it just that none of us has ever found the path that will lead us out? (Marias, 2016)

We need to find that path, and to help us in that quest it is inevitable that we seek out the thoughts and writings of Pat Daunt. He articulates that 'the guiding defining principle of comprehensive education is that *the education of all children is held to be intrinsically of equal value*' (Daunt, 1975; italics in original), and posits this against the limitations and dangers of a discourse of 'equal opportunity'.

'Equal Opportunity' is Not 'Equal Value'

This next section returns to the principle of 'equal value' and tries to explore it through a reconceptualising of the curriculum. In his contribution to *Redefining*

the Comprehensive Experience, Clyde Chitty sympathetically refers to Peter Wilby's view that 'education reform in the 1960s was seen as a means of ameliorating the more brutal inequalities in our society, without in any way disturbing the basic class structure of the capitalist system' (Chitty, 1987). Chitty adds that 'it can be argued that the comprehensive reform in this country was, in part at least, a response to profound conservative instincts... Few argued for comprehensive reform along lines that were specifically related to curriculum change.' This is an echo of another reflection of Pat Daunt: 'teachers – in comprehensive schools – have discovered that in forming comprehensive schools we have not completed a major act of education reform but started one, we have not broken the back of a problem but merely set the scene in which the problem may be tackled' (Daunt, 1975).

We have a monolithic curriculum in our secondary schools. It is clearly predicated on the idea of a meritocracy and equality of opportunity. As such it has been found wanting and has led to a grave distortion of what it means to be a successful learner and person. This is not a new revelation or insight. Writing before the nationalisation of the curriculum, Michael Fielding warned that the pursuit of equal value in the guise of equality of opportunity was misguided, and was always going to fail:

It is impossible, because even if the starting line is uniform, the arrival of the competitors in various states of fitness points to a prior race which has already been run in quite unequal circumstances. It is inappropriate because the imagery of races, competitions and inevitably few winners posits a mode of life that is in harmony with meritocracy in which the success of a very small number in a narrow field is predicated on the failure of vast numbers of their fellow citizens. It is sharply out of tune with a view of society which seeks to value all its members in all their diversity. (Fielding, 1988)

The subsequent exploration of the curriculum follows the broad definition that by 'the curriculum' we mean 'All the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school' (Kerr, 1969). As suggested earlier, there is a line of thought that strongly suggests that in the absence of any real consensus or priority given to redefining what might be an appropriate curriculum for the new comprehensive schools, a void was created into which the old, traditional subject-based, grammar school curriculum trickled. Its justification was largely cultural – that is, as a method of distilling and transmitting knowledge and understanding to new generations. Whether this is defensible or sensible in 2017, it remains the basis of the National Curriculum in England. Some might argue that through inducting young citizens into its secrets, understandings and ways of working, all will then have access to a first-class education that will empower and liberate. Others see it as divisive, limited and culturally biased – limited and restrictive in a digital age with ease of access to the internet and communities of expertise across the globe. This divide swirls around and takes us back to Pat

Daunt's guiding principle: 'equal value'. Is a curriculum of respect – of equal value – one that is common to all? This seems to be the basis of much current thinking, from EBacc to the roll-out of the Chinese mastery approach to maths. Or is equal value, revealed where students can follow their passions and develop their interests, a concept which is not new in England (witness the long tradition of Summerhill) but one largely absent in our comprehensive schools?

Effectively, they (comprehensive schools) represent

two fundamentally different traditions of education. On the one hand, there is the emphasis on the child. The insistence that everything must be relevant to the child's experience and to the perceived needs of society. The argument that the teacher should be a mentor or a coach who facilitates the growth of the child's understanding. The current obsession with personalisation. On the other, there is the belief that the school is an institution in which children are initiated by teachers, who are authorities in their subjects, into a body of knowledge which has no immediate connection to their lives or necessary relevance to the problems of society. (Woodhead, 2009)

Beyond the Prevailing Monolith

Following its opening in 2002, Bishops Park College in Jaywick, Clacton attempted to recognise that both had a place and that a comprehensive curriculum honouring the equal value of each learner was more likely to be a tartan than a single thread.

In retrospect, the thinking was relatively sketchy but followed a frame that suggested that an educated person was one inducted and liberated by several strands or imperatives:

- The cultural imperative – the passing on of culture from one generation to another, including the creation of new knowledge
- The relational imperative – encouraging respect for one another and learning to live with and embrace diversity
- The socialisation imperative – ensuring that young people critically appraise and understand the norms, values and mores of our society
- The employment imperative – the skills, attitudes and dispositions that will add value to employment and entrepreneurship
- The personal imperative – fostering wellbeing and self-efficacy, inspiring the spirit of human agency
- The democratic imperative – modelling and involving all in participative practices, making choices, with and through others

Jaywick tops the Department for Communities and Local Government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation list, yet is a vibrant and strong community where adults' memories of their school experience were not good and parents demanded a better deal.

Bishops Park developed its 'tartan curriculum' 'with the national curriculum subjects woven seamlessly together. Teachers plan work around a particular theme for each half-term – 70% of class time is spent on theme work. The themes meaningfully connect the learning content and skills, rather than separating knowledge into compartments' (from Project Faraday case studies, undated).

The approach to building the curriculum at Bishops Park was part of a deliberate attempt to create a Human Scale school, one that responded to Ted Sizer's common-sense question:

How can I teach that child well, if I do not know her enthusiasms or why she makes mistakes or what seems to be out of sorts for her at a given moment, or what is behind her at home. And no two of our children are alike. And so the question for all of us is: how many children can I get to know well enough to know them and their families and their situations well at once? (Sizer, 1997)

The response was to create a series of schools within schools and to build a series of learning communities. Essentially communities of around 140/150 students with seven teachers and associated teaching assistants. This team worked in their own home areas and largely had autonomy over how time, resources and spaces were used. The curriculum was anchored by a series of half-termly team themes – either on a cross-curricular basis or as a more discrete project, the focus selected and negotiated by the class and their tutor. Today this would be referred to as PBL (problem-based learning), and would resemble the type of REAL (rigorous, engaging, authentic learning) project pioneered at High Tech High in San Diego.[3] It is also at the core of the pioneering EFC curriculum at Stanley Park High School, which is explored in this edition of *FORUM*. At the end of each half term the project teams changed and for three days became less interdisciplinary and more domain related – for example, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) or the Arts. They still retained their inquiry and applied pedagogies and aimed to end with an output such as a public exhibition or a performance. The final strand of the subject input came with a weekly Masterclass, where each teacher would lead a day-long workshop in the area of their own expertise. Alongside the above there were daily sessions in either numeracy or literacy, the emphasis changing each half-term.

If the above represented the warp of the curriculum, then the weft took the form of: (i) weekly tutorial/advisory sessions in groups of three students with their tutor to review the past week and plan the next steps; (ii) weekly clubs led by the teaching assistants, technicians and experts from outside school on a wide range of matters, including those requested by the students ... if 10 students signed up for a new club, then every effort was made to facilitate it; (iii) each term ended on a Saturday, termed 'best work day', where students, with the aid and challenge of their peers and tutor, assembled a package of their work to share and discuss with parents; (iv) given the nature of the community,

special emphasis was given to an extensive series of residential and day study visits and expeditions, all aimed at widening horizons, enriching experience and giving inspiration for a latent talent or new interest to burst forward. On reflection, what was missing was any real time or priority for students to follow individual or small group passions, an omission that is quite unforgivable in a curriculum of equal value and respect.

Like many of the pioneering schools mentioned above, Bishops Park had its day and like its older brothers and sisters made valiant attempts to model a new comprehensive curriculum. Like those, its bloom, however vibrant, could not be sustained. Its ideas, however, remain, and there is hope. (For further insights into Bishops Park, see Davies 2005, 2011.)

A Contemporary Ray of Hope

For the future. We desperately need new models of comprehensive education. There is hope. The winner of the TES Secondary School of 2016, Stanley Park High School, is a wonderfully inspiring and uplifting place to be. A school which incrementally has become increasingly successful, it is also very modest. Yet even by the metrics of the currently defined (if reductionist) 'standards' agenda it is a beacon, achieved while becoming increasingly bold and adventurous in its determination to put students at the centre of their school. Its practices build on much that is at the core of this article but go well beyond. David Taylor, headteacher at Stanley Park, has written an insightful article in this edition of *FORUM* and it is his steadfast, inclusive and courageous leadership that has inspired and turned dreams into reality for thousands of learners. Stanley Park's Excellence Futures Curriculum, radical pedagogy and student-led conferences are attracting attention worldwide, but ironically less so in England. Like all pioneers it needs partners to join it to give it strength, challenge and support. It has so much to give and is arguably the best example we have in the UK of a secondary school that lives the challenge of Ken Robinson's reflection that '[t]here is no permanent utopia for education, just a constant striving to create the best possible conditions for real people in real communities in a constantly changing world' (Robinson, 2016). Some achievement, in what many regard as a very unpromising educational landscape.

Notes

- [1] Mode 3 provided an opportunity for teachers to devise syllabus and examinations locally, at both GCE and CSE levels, prior to the introduction of the GCSE syllabus. They were devised in one or more schools with outcomes moderated and validated by the local examination board.
- [2] <https://timdracup.wordpress.com/2016/12/11/pisa-2015-englands-results-investigated/>
- [3] <https://www.hightechhigh.org/student-work/student-projects/>

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MIKE DAVIES is a former headteacher. He worked mainly in schools with an emphasis on supporting human-scale practices in relation to the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that were organised as a series of schools-within-schools, small learning communities. *Correspondence:* miked@globalnet.co.uk

