

EDITORIAL

For a New Public Education in a New Public School

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[A]ny vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces and treat education as a commodity to be purchased and consumed... [E]ducation is a public good rather than a private utility... [I]n a democracy individuals do not only express personal preferences; they also make public and collective choices related to the common good of their society.
(Carr & Hartnett, 1996, p. 192)

The title for this special issue of *FORUM* is 'For a New Public Education in a New Public School'. Its genesis was puzzlement and a question. The puzzlement was why, unlike in some other countries, the concept of 'public' has such a weak presence in education in England; we seem to prefer the language of 'state', as in 'state education' or 'state schools', the term 'public school' being used in common parlance to refer to what are in fact highly selective, elite private schools – 'comically inappropriate', as R.H. Tawney so aptly put it. This puzzlement in turn provoked a question: what would a 'public education' mean and what might a genuinely 'public school' look like?

It is particularly timely to be asking this question now. For the last 30 years, education in England has been in thrall to neoliberal thinking and policies. But that regime is now in crisis, its credibility in tatters, its consequences all too apparent in societies scarred by inequality, insecurity, anger and alienation, and in a world suffering the dreadful consequences of a thoughtless pursuit of growth, consumption and money. The neoliberal education project is similarly crumbling, amid a landscape of schools reduced to 'exam factories', and businesses competing in a market place and micro-

managed by an overweening central government. All it can offer is an impoverished discourse in which education has shrivelled to a narrow activity, individualistic, instrumentalised and commodified, governed by economic imperatives, in particular the desire to convert young people into human capital, the raw material for survival in a much-vaunted global race. Inequalities and exclusions abound, funding and staff are cut, while students and teachers alike show increasing signs of overload and stress.

Helen Gunter, in her recent book *The Politics of Public Education*, captures this deep malaise when she writes about 'promoters of education as a private "uncommon" matter', peddling

reform agendas that are focused on the transformation and replacement of local schools with autonomous providers, where parents negotiate with marketized exchanges and/or seek out faith schools that protect their beliefs. The narrowing of the purposes and design of the curriculum and pedagogy, and the re-professionalisation of the 'workforce' as enthusiastic delivery operatives means that schools as sites of thinking and taking action about educational purposes are in peril. (Gunter, 2018, pp. 2-3)

At such a turning point, the words of Milton Friedman – the godfather of neoliberalism, but writing before that creed had achieved political traction – resonate:

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (Friedman, 1962[1982], p. ix)

With neoliberalism entering its crisis, and with it the prospect of real change, this special issue of *FORUM* is not a call for yet another immediate policy upheaval; education has had its fill of that over the last 30 years. Rather, we hope it will help start a new conversation, a conversation that will contribute to new ideas 'lying around', ideas from which alternatives to existing policies may emerge – alternatives emerging from a process of widespread, democratic deliberation, alternatives that contest the neoliberal 'dictatorship of no alternative', offering themselves instead as political choices in answer to political questions.

The 15 articles that follow are wide-ranging, offering a rich mix of experience, perspectives and knowledge, though we recognise there are gaps – for example, in early childhood education and care, professional education of teachers, and new approaches to accountability. In this introductory article, informed by these contributions, we would like to offer some of our responses to the theme of this special issue. These responses, we recognise, are necessarily

both partial and provisional; we look forward to hearing from others who want to participate in this urgent and enriching conversation.

What Do We Mean by a Public Education?

A good place to start the conversation is with this basic question, and for an initial answer we would paraphrase the famous words of Abraham Lincoln: a public education is an education of the public, by the public and for the public. Helen Gunter offers a variant when she speaks of ‘education as the commons, for the commons and achieved “in common”’ (Gunter, 2018, p. 158).

By ‘of the public’, we envisage an education that is lifelong and inclusive. In their article, Nigel Todd and Alan Tuckett refer to a government report from one hundred years ago insistent that ‘adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be universal and lifelong’, while several other contributors speak to the importance of inter-generational education. An inclusive education should be just that: for everyone, including the most marginalised (e.g. prisoners, asylum seekers), and without segregation in its various insidious forms, such as ‘setting and banding within the school, through to boys’ and girls’ schools and faith schools’ (Gunter, 2018, p. 13).

‘By the public’ we understand as meaning the public assuming responsibility for education, so that it is owned and funded in common; by so doing, we recognise that each of us has ‘obligations beyond “my child”’ (Gunter, 2018, p. 174). There is mutuality and solidarity here: the public assumes responsibility for a public education, while that education makes itself democratically accountable to that same public: as Stuart Ransom puts it in his article, ‘publicness emphasises being open to public display and scrutiny’.

Finally, by ‘for the people’, we refer to an education provided in the public interest, a common good that will enhance common well-being. From this perspective, public education can be seen as part of the commons, ‘managed not for the accumulation of capital or profit but for the steady production of prosperity or wellbeing’ (Monbiot, 2017). It can similarly be seen as part of the public sphere or public domain, which is ‘a space where public questions are publicly debated and resolved, where citizens come together to decide what should count as the public interest and how it should be embodied in public policy – in other words, a space for politics’ (Marquand, 2004, p. 131).

Various consequences flow from this idea of a public education being an education for the public. It provides a broad education, expressed in a rich curriculum that enacts publicly agreed values, attitudes and aims that underpin society (see e.g. the articles by Tim Brighouse, Fiona Carnie, Scherto Gill and John White). It engages with issues of common concern, such as the environmental crisis that Keri Facer addresses in her article. As Walter Feinberg puts it in his book *What Is a Public Education and Why We Need It*, public education also reproduces the public ‘by providing the young with the skills,

dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with others about their shared interest and common destiny' (Feinberg, 2016, p. 63).

Last but not least, developing Marquand's concept of the public domain as a space for politics, a public education for the public is engaged in a process of repoliticisation, after years of neoliberalism's attempt to depoliticize life as a 'governing strategy' under which 'issues that previously were about the public, for the public, funded by the public and done in public are increasingly private and handled in private' (Gunter, 2018, p. 6). A repoliticised public education becomes a 'site for public discussion and resolution [of an issue] that was previously the concern of a few or none at all' (Gunter, 2018, p. 4); its aim becomes, as Patricia White states, 'to educate citizens to *act politically*' (original italics); and a central issue for political action becomes education itself, acknowledging Loris Malaguzzi's argument that education 'is always a political discourse whether we know it or not. It is about working with cultural choices, but it clearly means working with political choices' (cited in Cagliari et al, 2016, p. 267).

A public education of, by and for the people is necessarily a democratic education. This is partly a matter of procedures and structures. This means throwing off the stranglehold of overbearing central government control, which (as Tim Brighouse reminds us in his article) means

too much power is in Whitehall (tempting it to ever more managerialism), and some schools are not answerable to a local democratic voice, while the middle tier is a confusing muddle of overmighty, prescriptive multi-academy trusts and impotent local authorities, together with eight Regional School Commissioners, agents of the Secretary of State.

One response proposed to this is new national advisory bodies with wide stakeholder participation (e.g. Brighouse's Standing National Advisory Council or John White's National Curriculum Commission). Others (e.g. Carolyn Roberts) explore the idea of a National Education Service – though it is not clear how such new bodies would relate to a democratic public education.

More democratic structures point to less centralisation and a stronger role for local government, so that public schools are democratically accountable to local communities. Local authorities, renewed after their hollowing out by successive central regimes, must again play a key role in supporting schools and holding them to account: as Stuart Ransom writes, 'The local council as the democratic centre of local services needs to be restored to its principal role in leading the public sphere of civil society.' Ransom also argues for democratic structures at an intermediate 'locality' level between local authority and school, '[t]he appropriate tier for governing the diverse agencies and services to develop the practices of partnership ... [with a Partnership Board] to include the variety of public, private and voluntary interests, and [which] will focus on preparing the strategic plan for the locality'. Finally, and perhaps most important, democratic structures are needed at the level of the school: this means, *inter alia*,

'listening to what children, teachers and parents have to say and ensuring that every voice counts' (Fiona Carnie) and 'students involved in the school's organisation and daily running' (Patricia White).

But while structures and procedures matter, including mechanisms for decision making and holding each other to account, it is important to hold firmly in mind that democracy is much more: it is a way of living together, of relating together, of learning together. It is something achieved by doing, not by being taught. It is a value enacted in everyday life and practice. If a public education is a democratic education, that must mean taking democracy seriously.

Everything is Dangerous

Michel Foucault reminds us 'that [not] everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad' (Foucault, 1983, p. 232). This warning should be framed above the desk of every politician, civil servant, academic and teacher in the land. To argue for 'public education' must not, therefore, blind us to its possible dangers. Tim Brighouse reminds us that public services in Nazi Germany 'were committed to a regime whose values nobody now would approve', while 'public education' may have more than a whiff of populism about it, sliding into the despotic notion of 'the will of the people', with its chilling claim of homogeneity of thought and populace. So, as Feinberg reminds us, any 'appropriate theory of public education must take into account cultural pluralism and the possibility of deep disagreement among people' (2016, p. 72).

The term 'public' is also dangerous if it implies some are in that public, but others outside: in short, if it leads to exclusions. The term begs the question *who are the public?* A 'public education' needs, therefore, an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of 'public', but (to re-emphasise the point) one that does not equate comprehensive with homogeneous.

Finally, there are those who find 'public' dangerous for other reasons. For Mike Neary and Joss Wynn, '[i]n the language of critical political economy: Public and Private are complementary forms of capitalist regulation'; they argue against a public education and for social knowing, as the basis for a solidaristic form of social life built on cooperative principles. For Judith Suissa, who writes from an anarchist standpoint, 'public education' is inextricably linked to the nation state; from this perspective, the recurrent use of 'state' when talking about education in England is a true reflection of how things are. In its stead she argues that 'in a world characterised by unprecedented and growing levels of mass migration and displacement, a new, non-statist imaginary is needed'.

Public Education Takes Place in the Public School

There is general agreement that the selective, elite schools that currently claim the name 'public schools' are no such thing; indeed, that 'a new public

education could not coexist with the existing, unreformed private school system. If private schools remained untouched, their presence would persistently undermine the desired new public education system' (Green & Kynaston). While various suggestions are made as to how, in Tim Brighouse's words, 'their malign effect on "equity" and "equal opportunity"' might be mitigated (Brighouse, Green & Kynaston, John White), no authors can see any legal or practical way of doing away with these schools altogether. As well as mitigation, a new public education should offer a moral and appealing alternative to private schools; should continually call them out for the social damage they wreak and for how their apparent success is due 'largely to a massive resource input, some three times that of the state sector' (Green & Kynaston); and should request that they desist forthwith from using the term 'public school', a title to which they have no legitimate claim.

When it comes to discussion of the new public school, there is some difference of opinion about provision. John White makes the case for 'a new public education for England, but not for a new public school' (p. 177). For him, the focus should be on aims, not institutions: 'We should ensure that all schools (community schools, private schools, academies and religious schools) are working to realise the same nationally determined aims' (p. 177) Brighouse is less accepting, but still in favour of retaining faith schools, while Ransom is totally against the current proliferation of school types (as is Helen Gunter). We tend to the view that a new public school should be a genuinely comprehensive, democratically accountable community school, serving everyone in its local catchment, a place of encounter between citizens where diversity is valued – what Fielding and Moss (2011) term a 'common school'.

Which opens up to another discussion about the 'new public school', provoked by the political question: 'what is your image of the public school?' Some years ago, one of us offered this image of early childhood centres as:

Public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural political and economic significance... If civil society is where individuals – children, young people and adults – can come together to participate and engage in activities or projects of common interest and collective action, then forums are places where this coming together, this meeting, occurs. (Dahlberg et al, 2013, p. 78)

There are echoes of this image in Keri Facer's writing about the public school, which is:

at the heart of its local community ... the public school has the potential to *convene* publics around the challenge of reducing emissions... A public school in the age of climate change, then, can bring together its diverse communities to work out the difficult choices and creative possibilities presented by global warming. ... [F]ully public schools, accountable to local communities and to a wider public, may respond differently from semi-privatised

institutions accountable to shareholders and/or directly to a Minister for Education.

This public school is, in John Smyth's view, a 'crucial social institution' based on social solidarity and knowledge co-constructed with students and families, starting from students' lives, histories, cultures and background. It is comprehensive in the widest sense of the word, being a place of inter-generational learning and other projects. It is inscribed with shared public values (equality, justice, inclusion, inter-connectedness, sustainability, democracy) and ethics (caring), taking persons, well-being, dialogue, listening and relationships really seriously (Scherto Gill). It works in close relationship with other local services, to ensure an integrated educational and welfare response to the needs of local communities. And it offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities and projects, open to its students, their families and other citizens.

Rhonda Evans points us to the public schools of Alberta which, as well as being successful in traditional academic tests (such as the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]), place high importance on extra-curricular activities; why, she asks, 'would parents want private schools with all these specialities available?' John Smyth writes of 'socially just' schools in South Australia, "public spaces" ... where a multiplicity of voices can be heard, and where controversial ideas can be explored and debated without fear of retribution'. Stuart Ranson envisages '*a comprehensive campus* [original italics] that stretches across a locality or a segment of a city or county encompassing, for example, a post-16 institution, a couple of secondary schools, two or three primary schools, together with children's centres'. While Doug Martin revisits the Labour government's short-lived experiment with Extended Schools, proposing them as a precursor to what a new public school might be: 'I would argue that the new public school calls for a new holistic understanding of childhood and education, a turn from ENS [education-in-its-narrowest-sense] to EBS [education-in-its-broadest sense], and an opening out of the school to other services for children and families and to the local community; this implies new relationships and new professional roles.'

As Martin suggests, the new public school, so envisaged, raises important questions about who will work in this setting. If this institution is to be comprehensive and wide-ranging, open to all citizens and pursuing many projects, then it may well include a wide range of professionals – social pedagogues, *atelieristas* (educators with an arts background) and others with specific qualifications and experience, health professionals, social workers and, of course, teachers. There is general agreement that teachers in a new public education and a new public school need to be well qualified and to work under less pressure than teachers do today; their professionalism should be restored and respected – 'a "return of the professional" in driving learning forward', as John Smyth puts it, quoting Melissa Benn. In Alberta, as Rhonda Evans explains, teachers are frequently seconded into education departments, to work

as administrators and policy makers, an exchange of valuable experience that is as good for individual careers as it is for the education system. But clearly there is much still to be thought through if we are to create the new public educator for the new public education and to create the conditions that will enable this educator to flourish.

In Conclusion

Public education and public schools as discussed above are indeed, in the words of Wilfred Carr and Anthony Hartnett, with which we began this editorial, fundamentally 'at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces and treat education as a commodity to be purchased and consumed.' They are the antithesis of today's neoliberal regime with its profound hostility to the public, the collective, the democratic and a broadly conceived educational project. By advocating a new public education and public school, we are contesting the fundamentals of neoliberalism and participating in a wider project, to renew and revitalise the whole public domain, for we cannot look at education in isolation.

We hope this issue contributes to a new conversation about education, one from which will emerge new ideas, including alternatives to present policies. Many can take part in this conversation, individuals and organisations, practitioners and parents, young people and adults, and publics from many countries, since so much of the world has suffered the neoliberal education project. Our conversation can be enriched, too, by listening to many important voices from the past, valuing the rich traditions of progressive, democratic education, which have so much still to offer. Finally, let our conversation be marked by a new vocabulary, replacing the sterile language of neoliberalism – technical, managerial, economic – with a language of life, a language of desire and joy, excitement and wonder, democracy and experimentation.

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**ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING:
Michael Armstrong's writing for
*FORUM***

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& MARY JANE DRUMMOND

2019 224 pages ISBN 978-1-910744-05-5

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