

EDITORIAL

Keep the Faith

The causes for the destruction of political democracy in countries where it was nominally established are complex. Of one thing I think we may be sure. Wherever it has fallen it was too exclusively political in nature. It had not become part of the bone and blood of the people in daily conduct of its life. Democratic forms were limited to Parliament, elections, and combats between parties. What is happening proves conclusively, I think, that unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fibre of a people, political democracy is insecure. It can not stand in isolation. It must be buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships. The relations that exist in educational institutions are second only in importance in this respect to those which exist in industry and business, perhaps not even to them.
(Dewey, 1937/2006)

In their editorial for *FORUM*'s summer number, Melissa Benn, Michael Fielding and Peter Moss responded to what they saw as the breakdown of the neoliberal education project. They began afresh the conversation about 'a new public education in a new public school', and sought to couch it in new vocabulary, framing education as lifelong, fully inclusive, democratically responsible and provided in the public interest. The first contributor to the number, Stewart Ranson, articulated an understanding of 'public good' and 'the public' which he defended against private and sectional interest. Stewart's understanding of publicness was exemplified in the ideal of the comprehensive school, an ideal he went on to re-imagine. 'Publicness emphasises being open to public display and scrutiny', he noted, and by implication assumes a willingness to acknowledge and correct errors. In that spirit, we apologise to Stewart for our failure to spell his name correctly in the editorial.

What might a genuinely public school look like, the editors of the summer number asked? Stewart's defence of the value of comprehensive education in supporting and developing our common life together offered the

first in a series of responses across the summer number. The conversation is taken up again in the first part of this new number of *FORUM*.

At the outset, Aaron Schutz draws on the work of Saul Alinsky to consider the place of collaboration in the public realm. Civic participation necessitates an unavoidable engagement with power. Alinsky's astringent critique of the realities of power and of the limits to 'collaboration' can help correct an approach overly reliant on John Dewey's vision of democracy as a way of life animated by collaboration and mutual equality of regard. Dewey's vision was founded on what he called a working faith in the possibilities of human nature, in human intelligence and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is the faith glanced at in the title of this number of *FORUM* and for Alinsky it is altogether too dewy-eyed. It neglects the driving force of self-interest and the necessities imposed by the mesh of power relations which structure the public realm. To be heard and heeded, the powerless must organise collectively in their own interest. But how might such a perspective be presented and explored in the classroom?

Dewey's commitment to our interdependence, and to equality, informs Ruth Boyask's exploration of the meaning of the word 'public' in relation to education. The public is plural, and 'publics' embody divergent and – as is only too evident at this time – opposing understandings of what the common good might be. Boyask considers the experience of individual nation-states such as New Zealand and the UK, for which compulsory education has been a means to prepare citizens to participate in the self-governance of society. She explores the irony whereby certain models of school governance, including that of England's academies, can work to the detriment of democracy. She also scrutinises the increasing impact on education policy of transnational public spheres. How might the work of imagining an increasingly complex and technologically connected public, under the sign of different sets of principles, shed light on what a new public education could mean?

The inadequacy of England's contemporary school curriculum, constructed with little if any recourse to student and teacher voices, prompts Terry Wrigley not only to anatomise its shortcomings but also to offer an alternative. 'Knowledge-rich' nostrums predicated on teaching as delivery uphold a settled view of knowledge which is not only decontextualised and fragmented but also leached of ethical implication and aesthetic significance. Against so bleak a present Terry outlines the basis for a curriculum whose breadth and balance is informed by a fuller conception of knowledge and infused with the liberatory potential inherent in an orientation to social justice, environmental responsibility and democratic citizenship.

The fate in recent years of education at 18+ provides a glaring example of the way those with power to shape policy conceive of education as a commodity rather than a public good. As was the case in the summer number, we step a little beyond our declared focus on the 3-19 age range to include Tom Collins's article about the ways in which marketisation and the imperatives of capital drive higher education and shape its governance. Such imperatives

have prompted significant growth in the recruitment of international students (who pay very high fees) and the establishment abroad by British universities of international branch campuses. Home universities are instantly implicated in the nature and norms of the political environment within which these campuses are set up. This has consequences for the way the university and its educational offer come to be regarded.

Damien Fitzgerald addresses the situation which obtains at the other end of the age spectrum of formal education. He gives a detailed overview of the state of early childhood education and care provision, into which the private sector has considerably expanded. He argues that provision for children aged 4-6 should be seen as a distinct public phase of the education sector. He contextualises recent changes to curriculum and assessment, and notes the worrying drive towards 'schoolification'. It would be better, he argues, to shift to a later school starting age, and to concertedly reconfigure the way early childhood practitioners are prepared and supported in their role.

Benn, Fielding and Moss agree with Francis Green and David Kynaston that unless and until private schooling is 'reformed' there can be no thoroughgoing renewal of public education. The question is what might constitute acceptable reform. In a wide-ranging and historically attuned article, Jane Martin explores the establishment of the most prestigious English 'public' schools for boys. She charts their adaptation and survival as well as the sustained call by the organised workers' movement for their abolition. She reminds us that the Public Schools Act of 1868, which essentially re-founded the sector, legitimised the transfer of public assets – money, buildings and land – into private use. This misappropriation of public endowments also deprived poor students of a free education. There was widespread resistance. Brian Simon, one of *FORUM's* original founders, records in his magisterial *Studies in the History of Education* the concerted attempt to defend free education in Scarning, a village near my home in mid-Norfolk, whose rate-payers, 'feeling that we have been greatly wronged, have protested and do still protest against the unjust scheme ... which has robbed us of a free school' (Simon, 1976, p. 331). The endowment to establish that free school was set up in 1604. Rather than pay the newly required fee, Scarning's villagers organised an alternative school. It was maintained by subscriptions from across the county, testifying to the depth of support for their cause. But eventually, as in other locations where a similar fight was waged, resistance was broken, to leave an enduring sense of injustice. The debate over policy towards private schooling has revived, in part fuelled by Green and Kynaston's book, *Engines of Privilege*, which is reviewed in this number.

As an accompaniment to Jane Martin's piece, Michael Fielding introduces two short papers by the late Alex Bloom, whom Michael describes as 'one of the most radical headteachers the UK has ever seen'. Michael wrote in detail about Alex Bloom's pioneering work at St-George-in-the-East, Stepney, in two previous numbers of *FORUM*: 47(2&3) and 56(3). Bloom's work, springing from a commitment to education as democratic fellowship, still lights a path. In

the two papers reprinted here Bloom intervenes in forthright fashion at the midpoint of World War II as discussion about the future shape of secondary education intensifies.

Teaching practices can foster particular kinds of masculinity which unwittingly generate or sanction boys' underachievement, a phenomenon examined by John Quicke. He weighs up the pros and cons of the approach offered by Matt Pinkett and Mark Roberts in their influential book *Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools*, and locates their discussion, and some underlying assumptions, within a wider framework and critique.

Light relief, albeit with a serious purpose, is provided by a cautionary tale from Colin Richards, fabulist, concerning the national squirriculum and its inspection. Polly Donnison's cartoon will raise a wry smile, too. We are grateful to Polly for allowing us to reprint her cartoon. It first appeared in the July/August 2019 issue of *Educate*, the journal of the National Education Union. One cartoon pilot may have been switched for another by Prime Minister Johnson, but the plane's navigator remains the same, and so does the direction of travel.

What are we doing to our children? This question, the title of the 2018 Reclaiming Education conference, could stand at the head of the second part of this number of *FORUM*. Millions of young people still live in poverty, with all-pervading consequences (as Alex Bloom illustrates) for their experience of education. At primary school that experience continues to be overshadowed by a stifling regime of high-stakes summative testing. Moves towards increased inclusion in schools have been stymied, not least because of deep cuts to school budgets. Head teachers, academics, campaigners and trade unionists debated the way forward at the Reclaiming Education conference, as John Bolt reports.

Margaret Clark is an indefatigable researcher into how children learn to read and what enables them best to do so. Her article is enriched by reference to a wealth of research, both her own and that of others. Drawing attention to such material is one way to help counter the partial presentation by government ministers of research findings. Government policy mandating the teaching of phonics as the only way for children to be taught to read is not evidence based. Ministerial claims made for the success of the euphemistically named Phonics Screening Check, and for England's placing in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) table, are overblown. Long-serving Schools Minister Nick Gibb seizes on elements of research as weapons in a political cause. Margaret Clark holds all findings up for scrutiny in pursuit of truth, and so better serves the common good.

Key Stage 2 SATs. The Phonics Screening and Multiplication 'checks'. And now, Baseline Assessment. Where there's a test, teachers will sooner or later find themselves constrained to ready their pupils for it. Claire Lee exposes the great and continuing harm being done to learning by the relentless focus on teaching to the test which the current high-stakes summative testing regime requires of practitioners. Her article is based on material gathered in classrooms where children are prepared for the stand-alone grammar, punctuation and

spelling element of SATs. This element seems to be a device finely honed to thwart children from learning how writing can be a means for their own meaning making. Lucy Wenham describes the dilemma faced by parents whose children are subject to so educationally poisonous a system, and who see the damage done. Their voices, justly characterised by Lucy as ‘impassioned, articulate and forthright’, sound through her article. Jon Berry, long-time campaigner against high-stakes testing, urges the teacher unions to respond by asserting themselves more fully and forcefully over questions of curriculum and assessment. In his words: ‘educational and pedagogical issues must drive campaigning’. He locates the struggle against testing within the wider push for an education service free of marketisation and the threat of schooling for profit. These are among the themes addressed by Melissa Benn in her most recent book, *Life Lessons: the case for a National Education Service*, which we review.

It is to be hoped that the National Education Union will proceed with some form of collective action against high-stakes summative testing in primary schools, on a regional if not a national basis. Some 97% of members who responded to the initial consultative ballot in the summer term 2019 backed the union’s campaign to abolish such tests. A clear majority also supported a boycott. That ballot had the second-highest turnout of any national ballot run by either the National Union of Teachers or the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in the past two decades. To comply with the stringent laws restricting trade unions from taking action, turnout must be at least 50% in any substantive ballot for a strike in schools, and 40% of eligible members must vote for the strike. This is a very high threshold. But there is a possibility of reaching it in perhaps ten NEU localities. So damaging continue to be the effects of high-stakes summative testing on the process of education, on pupils and on teachers, that the case for action only strengthens.

In his late work *Creative Democracy* John Dewey declared that democracy’s task was to create a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. Freer and more humane experiences of education occupy Madeleine Holt, who finds reason to be cheerful in adventurous work being done at two comprehensive schools in the North of England. Here, the benefits to be derived from versions of project-based learning inside and outside school are being re-encountered. These approaches to teaching and learning, as with those being practised at Stanley Park High School (see *FORUM* 60/1), are diametrically opposed to delivery models of education. Predicated on trust in young people, they offer students greater scope for agency in their education, and reap encouraging results. Our Spring 2020 number will highlight further pedagogically productive and exciting initiatives, and we welcome contributions on this theme.

Attentive readers of the summer number will have been alerted to a freely downloadable e-book recently made available by our publisher. *Another Way of Looking: Michael Armstrong’s writing for FORUM* presents almost all the articles Michael published in the journal across more than fifty years of committed and scholarly involvement. Further details about the e-book and how to secure a

free copy can be found both in this issue and also on our website (www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM). Michael once wrote: 'The ideology of testing is in effect the denial of learning'. Can we not turn the tables and, by denying the ideology of testing, say yes to learning?

Patrick Yarker

References

- Dewey, J. (1937/2006) Democracy and Educational Administration, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953 Volume II: 1935-1937*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, p. 225. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Simon, B. (1976) *Studies in the History of Education: the two nations and the educational structure 1780-1870*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.