
‘This Age of Clichés’ and ‘Equality of Opportunity ... For What?’ Two articles by Alex Bloom†

Introduced by MICHAEL FIELDING

ABSTRACT Two short articles by Alex Bloom, written in wartime London, expose the easy recourse in educational policy to fine-sounding phrases – in this case ‘equality of opportunity’ – and offer a vision of education based on the spirit of cooperation and the common good.

I offer these twin articles by Alex Bloom as a companionable footnote to Jane Martin’s ‘Against Private Schools: culture, power and myths of equality’ in this issue of *FORUM*.

As is to be expected of one of the most radical head teachers the UK has ever seen, Bloom pens a withering critique of the cliché-ridden nature of the gathering momentum behind ‘equality of opportunity’ that, to our shame, continues to blight our educational aspirations and our practice. Bloom reminds his readers that vacuous phrase-mongering is worse than useless in the face of the power of poverty and adverse home circumstances to undermine the ‘opportunities’ which may be on offer in school. Phrases such as ‘equality of opportunity’ remain ‘spurious coins’ unless made good by thoroughgoing social change.

Both articles were written in the early years of World War II, during Bloom’s first headship in the East End of London, the area of the capital most heavily damaged by the Blitz. (This had lately ended, but fear of a return of sustained aerial bombardment endured.) The articles were published in the *LHTA* [London Head Teachers Association] *Bulletin*. ‘This Age of Clichés’ appeared in no. 15, October 1941, pp. 116-117 with its partner, ‘Equality of Opportunity for What?’, in no. 16, November 1941, pp. 130, 132. The sexism of Bloom’s day is reflected in some of the language of his articles, and in certain social attitudes they evince.

Sadly, though perhaps not surprisingly, 'This Age of Clichés' remains as pertinent today as it was nearly 80 years ago. Joyfully and hopefully, his 'Equality of Opportunity for What?' returns us to fundamental matters of purpose, not just of education, but of the way of life it is intended to nurture. In Bloom's own rousing words, 'Let us away with our old shibboleths and as true educationists aim to shape things to come'.

This Age of Clichés

By Alex Bloom†

We live in an age of clichés. They come trippingly off the tongue, these labour-saving devices of other people's minds: these spurious coins which tend to become the common currency and to assist us along the road to mental bankruptcy. Glibly, before the war, we talked of inferiority complexes and bolshevism; glibly now we talk of social security and New Orders; we accept such phrases; we use them self-importantly and unthinkingly – or, if there be any thought it, is of the emotional kind that, is more dangerous than no thinking at all.

The latest cliché used to describe planning for post-war education is 'Equality of Opportunity'. How sonorously it falls on the ear! How full of immense potentialities! And yet – what do you mean by the phrase? What did the late President of the Board of Education imply when he used it so frequently before he passed on?[1]

Equality of Opportunity? Yes, you say, money shall no longer buy privileges in education. All similar types of schools shall have equal conditions for working, equal treatment of staff, equal amenities ... Yes, you say, kindergartens, private schools, public schools – all will go and there will be similarity of educational opportunities for everybody.

And having achieved all that you will sit back satisfied, and feel that the Golden Age in Education has at last dawned. But though all your schools be similarly accorded equal social prestige – ah, yes, you say, of course, equal social prestige, and straightway you add the phrase to your list of clichés – though all this be done you will no more have 'equality of opportunity' than had the seven fat and well-favoured kine in the presence of the lean and ill-fed ones.[2]

The child attends school 27½ hours a week. For 27½ hours a week he may have – but only theoretically – 'equality of opportunity' with every other child. What of the remaining 140+ hours? Almost before you get him his pattern of life is formed; does that savour of 'equality of opportunity'? And when you *do* get him you have him for about one-sixth of his week. He may come from a home that just exists on the poverty line; he may be surfeited with sweets from a silver spoon. Does that savour of 'equality of opportunity'? At midday he may go out to a 'café' for a 'pie an'a pennorff'; he may go home to a well balanced meal (despite rationing) daintily served. At 4.30 he may have to wait, for a couple of hours outside a squalid house, cold and hungry, until

mother returns from work, tired and nerve-jagged; he may find tea, waiting for him in a cosy, well-lit, room with a smiling mother to serve him, and awaiting him toys to play with, books to read, and happy chatter. Does that savour of 'equality of opportunity'?

It is bed-time. Unwashed, his night attire consisting of his day clothes minus a few of the top layers, Tom goes late to rest in a badly ventilated, family bedroom. Maybe in a family bed with stirrings and noises all around him and so to sleep, 'to sleep, perchance to dream ...' John's bedtime is early; a warm bath, cosy pyjamas, a hot drink and clean sheets. And so, in a room of his own, quickly to sleep, 'to sleep, perchance to dream ...' Equality of opportunity?

The crux of the matter is that EVERY CHILD MUST HAVE AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY TO SEIZE THE EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY YOU OFFER HIM. Which is rather a complicated business.

The further implication – equality of opportunity for what? I hope to be able to develop in a later issue. Meanwhile let me insist on this – that, more harm is wrought by clichés than this world dreams of.

Equality of Opportunity – for What?

by Alex Bloom†

In my previous article I set out, to show that, in order to give children equality of opportunity in post-war education, there would have to be fundamental social changes. Having, let us suppose, achieved our Golden Age, what then would be our objectives? Equality of opportunity – for what?

That, so far, Education has failed the world is axiomatic. The causes of this failure are due, in large measure, to conditions inherent in modern civilisation and, consequently, are beyond our direct control as educationists. But we may not shelve *our* responsibility. Our grievous sin has been absence of a clear vision. Not that we require categorically to draw up an X-point charter: printed pledges seem but fortuitous fables writ large. The aims we had were as nebulous as they were self-contradictory. We tried to reconcile our idealistic theories in Education with a material conception of life. Bravely we proclaimed 'Education for Living and not for *a* living', but persistently we preached 'the ladder of success' and 'the battle of life'. Our ideal in education was co-operative; our practice, competitive.

We adopted mottoes about unselfishness, about helping others – 'Each for all and all for each' – but our schools became mark-infested and point-ridden. We went in search of scholarships; we went cup-collecting and shield-snatching. We made of the competitive spirit a fetish to which almost every activity was forced to render homage. Not every activity, thank heaven; there was one that stayed above the hectic strivings – the Music Festival. This function shone.

‘So shines a good deed in a naughty world’, a glorious example of what can be done when schools join in harmony. There were no rewards, no rivalries – and the good thereof was great.

But we turned aside and looked towards the Public Schools and saw them dwelling in houses. We thereupon devised a monstrous mockery of a House System which, in its emaciated form (for no real House System can be run in schools that are not residential) intensified the weaknesses of the original model without gaining the advantages. The school was divided into four parts each of which strove to outdo the others. School loyalty was replaced by the smaller House loyalty which, in its turn, yielded to the petty loyalty of the House section in each class. And as the loyalties became narrower they became more selfish and intolerant. (It is, I think, not, without interest to recall that when games are played without thought of League or House points, they are called *friendly* matches; this is no mere colloquial accident. Words have a vital significance.)

Further, the House system, in work and in play made profit the motive power of the child’s actions. It matters not, that these profits were not altogether personal, there was this external, artificial compulsion behind everything that was done. The child was not expected to do his work for its own sake; there was no doing a job for the sheer joy of the doing. We lost faith in childhood, in the spontaneous urge within him, and we deprived him of that innermost happiness that arises from disinterested creation.

It, can, of course, be maintained that life is like that – that incentives are needed, that there must be ambition even though ‘by that sin fell the angels’, that competition appears to be the very mainspring of living. These may be excuses for us; they cannot be justifications.

Man is by nature a gregarious animal. By nature, therefore, he is a cooperative animal. ‘Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains’, says Rousseau. One of these chains is the compulsion of competition with all its dread effects of selfishness, petty loyalties and materialism. It should be our duty – as it would be a privilege – to break those fetters.

You remember the lovely theme of the song the cobbler in ‘Chu Chin Chow’[3] sang over his last:

The stouter I cobble, the less I earn
For the soles ne’er crack, nor the uppers turn;
The better my work, the less my pay,
But work can only be done one way.

‘But work can only be done one way’ – this is one of the hardest lessons to teach and one of the most worth-while. When the tiny tot asks, ‘Please teacher, can I ‘elp ‘oo?’ the germ of willing cooperation and *active* disinterested service is there. Let us nurture it tenderly and help it to flourish, but, we shall have to inhibit our past conditionings and forgo points, profits and prizes. This may seem poor economics, but it is sound philosophy if, from our planning for the New Era, we are to have a world fit for humans to live in.

Come, then, let us away with our old shibboleths and as true educationists aim to shape the things to come. If, as Adler asserts, the child's pattern of life is formed by the time he is five years old, then we cannot begin too early. Let us take the good that is within him, and by co-operation and not by competition, show him how to use it for the common weal. Let that spirit of co-operation permeate and inspire all school activities, extra-mural as well as intra-mural. And let us encourage a loyalty as wide as his comprehension will permit. In the atmosphere thus created the child will thrive and thriving, will give of his best and be the better for it. To quote from 'Craftsmen All' by L.P. Jacks: 'Every rise in the quality of the work men do is followed swiftly and inevitably by a rise in the quality of the men who do it'.

Notes

- [1] Herwald Ramsbotham, MP for Lancaster, served as President of the Board of Education from April 1940 until July 1941. He was succeeded by R.A. Butler.
- [2] Bloom's reference is to the story of Pharaoh's dream in Genesis chapter 41 which Joseph later interprets. In the dream, the lean and ill-fed cattle devour the fat flock.
- [3] 'Chu Chin Chow', a musical comedy, premiered in the West End in 1916 and ran for over two thousand performances. It was successfully revived in London in 1940-41. Paul Robeson recorded 'The Cobbler's Song' in 1939.

At the time of writing (1941) **ALEX BLOOM** was headmaster of Globe Road Junior Boys' School in Stepney in the East End of London. In 1945 he was appointed to the headship of another Stepney school – St George-in-the-East Secondary Modern School in Cable Street – where he developed one of the most radical democratic, publicly funded secondary schools the UK has ever seen. Within 4 years the increasing level of international interest in his pioneering work meant he had to turn down many requests from would-be visitors. In September 1955, at the relatively young age of 60, Alex Bloom died in the school. The outpouring of grief with 'weeping families lin[ing] the streets to watch the funeral procession' prompted the seasoned national journalist, Roy Nash, to remark, '*It was an incredible thing to happen, absolutely unique in state education history.* In my time I've reported funerals of prominent people, but I've never seen such genuine grief as on that day in the East End. It showed the humanity of true education.'

For earlier *FORUM* articles on Alex Bloom see Michael Fielding's

Alex Bloom: pioneer of radical state education, *FORUM*, 47(2&3) (2005), 119-134. <https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2005.47.2.1>

Alex Bloom†

Radical Democratic Education as Response to Two World Wars and a Contribution to World Peace – the Inspirational Work of Alex Bloom, *FORUM*, 56(3) (2014), 513-527.

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