

## EDITORIAL

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# Celebrating Education

In March 2019, members of the National Education Union held a conference at the Institute of Education, University College London. 'Celebrating Education' was attended by over 500 teachers. The titles of its 40 plus workshops and plenaries spoke of a desire to make room for a different kind of education:

'Child-led Learning from Reception to Key Stage 1';  
'Challenging Behaviour – Flip the Narrative';  
'Broadening the Curriculum to Engage with Uncertainty – Where Children Are Not Simply Working out the Correct Answer'.

Though convened with the purpose of sharing ideas about good practice, the conference could not work completely outside the shadow of the orthodoxies which have come to dominate most English schools. There was much discussion of the reduction of teaching to preparation for tests and exams; the standardisation of pedagogy; the non-negotiable demand to prioritise a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, and a particular approach to the teaching of reading. But at the same time, the conference managed to push aside this thin gruel, and focus not so much on a critique of what has come to exist, but on glimpses of an alternative, embodied already in the work of teachers and researchers.

In this issue of *FORUM*, we bring together articles that spring directly from the conference, as well as others that reflect its celebratory purposes. They demonstrate that it is possible to find some space for alternative practice, even inside what Orwell might have called the great whale of neo-liberalism. They recognise also, however, that a fuller development of education can only take place 'outside the whale', in schools liberated from hyper-regulation. In the tradition of *FORUM*, we have tried to bring together a selection of pieces which spring out of real practice and experience, and are illuminated by reflections of a historical, cultural or theoretical kind.

We begin with Terry Wrigley's article, which seeks to restore to the concept of pedagogy some of the meanings which current policies seek to strip away. Stressing that the term is not synonymous with 'teaching method', Wrigley relocates it in a discourse where teaching is informed by reflection on

issues of value and educational purpose, in a tradition rooted in Enlightenment philosophy rather than in limited utilitarian ambitions. Wrigley's article is partnered by a piece by Phil Wright, which explores pedagogy from a different perspective, that of what he calls 'transformability'. Following the progress of a research project with 18 primary teachers, Wright takes as his starting point the attempt to break out of the 'psychological prisons' of fixed learner identities. During the course of the project, the teachers involved found that not only were these fixed identities challenged, but so too was their own pedagogical thinking. However, as Wright notes, in order for such a practice to be generalised beyond the scope of a research project, school leaders and teachers need to be offered the space to 'engage in an exploration of an alternative approach'.

The next two pieces focus on the key question of dialogue in education, describing learning processes in which – to use the description offered by Lefstein and Snell (2014) – 'teacher and pupils critically interrogate the topic of study, express and listen to multiple voices and points of view, and create respectful and equitable classroom relations' (p. 22). Catherine Gripton and Rupert Knight consider the relationship between 'shared sustained thinking' and dialogic pedagogy, constructing a continuum within which the various approaches which make up dialogic pedagogy can be aligned with such thinking. This, they argue, can provide an intellectual and practical basis on which to reclaim teachers' professional autonomy and judgement, allowing them to 'walk the talk' when it comes to dialogue in the classroom. Faye Worthy-Pauling, by contrast, looks at the external pressures faced by teachers, which too often deny breathing space to genuine dialogic practice. Reporting on the results of a master's study which brings to the fore the voices of practising teachers, she argues that 'there can be another way' – but that teachers' experiences of talk for learning are shaped and often limited by the availability of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and the attitudes of senior school leaders. Until some consistent position is developed, too many teachers, and students, will be deprived of the benefits of dialogical approaches.

Our next piece, by Tony Eaude, makes a passionate argument for the importance of the humanities in the primary curriculum. Taking a broad definition of the humanities as 'what enables children to explore and understand more about the human aspects of themselves and their own culture, other people and cultures around the world', Eaude argues that the humanities are essential not just because they enable children to understand more about themselves and the society and world they live in, but also because they are key to the formation of qualities and dispositions that contribute to children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Yet, he notes, the practice of many schools, under the pressure of accountability and high-stakes assessment, leads in a different direction. As Merryn Hutchings' research on 'Exam Factories' (2015) showed, test-driven cultures have led both to the squeezing of 'non-core' curriculum areas and to a narrowing of learning within 'core' subjects

such as English and mathematics – tellingly often now referred to in primary education as literacy and numeracy. Julian Williams’ article develops this point – but also warns against oversimplification. He explores opportunities to brush contemporary maths curricula against the grain, opening up the possibility of a broader understanding of mathematics pedagogy. At the same time he notes counter-tendencies that threaten to remove from educators control of their professional work. The questions Williams raises are important for mathematics educators to consider if they are to seize the opportunities provided by these developments, rather than be subjected to them.

Our next three articles explore distinct pedagogical approaches, each of which in its own way disrupts the dominant narrative of a pedagogy focused on instruction. Fufy Demissie begins with a case study of the use of Philosophy for Children as a ‘disruptive pedagogy’ in initial teacher education. This is followed by a personal exploration of a Mantle of the Expert course sponsored by the National Education Union (Tim Taylor & Nicole Winter) and an exploration of two projects based on combining creativity, outdoor learning and interaction with the world outside the school (Hay et al). All three pieces seek to evaluate educational initiatives in relation to criteria that lie outside current policy frameworks. They thus draw attention to what is in danger of being forgotten – that educational practice cannot be defended solely in terms of the success it seems to generate in exam scores, but must be seen in the light of other kinds of criteria, immanent to education itself.

If any institution is synonymous with the vice-like grip of policy upon the school it is Ofsted. In moving away from a system of school inspection based largely on test scores, Ofsted has sought to rehabilitate itself as an organisation concerned primarily with the quality of curriculum and pedagogy in a school. One of the problems that Ofsted faces in making this turn is a palpable lack of expertise on the part of some of its inspectors, who are required to make authoritative qualitative judgements about curricula and pedagogy while lacking experience and depth of knowledge. In this situation, which makes great demands of the inspector as well as the school, the individual capacities of inspectors are thrust into the spotlight. The article by Colin Richards, on the realities of everyday life as an Ofsted inspector, provides an engaging exploration of issues which are often concealed by the commanding tone and certainty of judgements of Ofsted reports.

Following Richards’ reflections and revelations, we then return to the experience of the classroom practitioner, with a dialogue entitled ‘How We Teach’ (Parslow-Williams et al) – an exploration, by five practitioners, of their experience of developing pedagogy within the community of a small rural primary school. It is a record of the patience of practitioners in developing forms of teaching which are not orientated towards objectives set by the Department for Education, but rooted in an attentiveness to children’s learning. There are hundreds of primary school experiences which closely resemble those set out in the dialogue, but they operate in isolation from each other, without common themes and purposes. Gawain Little’s article, the final one in this issue,

reflects on those features of the English school system which underpin this isolation and make the development of child-focused learning such a relatively lonely task. Little engages with Brian Simon's influential work, 'Why No Pedagogy in England' (1981), in order to take the measure of the changes that three decades of policy work have brought to the school. He argues that, even more than in Simon's day, England's school system is characterised by institutional division and social inequality. They combine to create, in new forms, a school regime in which, typically, a third of students are marked as failures at age 11 and again at 16. By any reasonable measure, this is a tale of governmental failure, yet it has not disturbed a quest on the part of government to identify and embed in schools a set of pedagogic norms which are likely to worsen further students' experiences of learning and to lower educational quality.

This issue of *FORUM* opens up many more questions than it answers – and so it should – but there is one that stands out in urgent need of further discussion and that is the question of assessment. As is clear from the pieces included in this collection, too often questions of pedagogy and curriculum are decided by the approach taken to assessment. Creating a new education system, which recognises the professional role of educators and supports the holistic development of students, will require a new approach to assessing learning. Given the scale, scope and importance of this project, the editors believe this would be an appropriate topic to return to in a future issue of *FORUM*, dedicated entirely to alternative approaches to assessment.

Celebrating Education was a reminder of the energies which are still stored within the English system, and which could power educational change on a significant scale. The task now for *FORUM* is to gather these energies together, to reflect on them, and in doing so to lay a basis for further change. This is formidable work, and difficult times lie ahead of us, but as the conference showed, and in Bob Dylan's words, it's not (entirely) dark yet.

**Gawain Little, Ken Jones & Jess Edwards**

### **Reference**

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