Editorial

Jane Martin and Patrick Yarker

This number relaunches *FORUM* with a new publisher. We welcome readers to our latest iteration, and thank the team at Lawrence and Wishart for their support of the journal in its new home.

FORUM made its debut as an expression of the excitement and optimism then imbuing the possibility of reform and progress in all areas of public life. It was the autumn of 1958, and the journal looked to provide facts and ideas helpful to those who, sharing its educational values, were closely involved in fashioning an education system which would offer the greatest possible range of opportunities to everyone as an entitlement, not as a privilege. Co-editors Robin Pedley and Brian Simon, lecturers in education at Leicester University who shared a principled humanistic vision, called for a public conversation about the future of education. The aim was to establish a journal its readers could feel belonged to them.

That first issue included a critique of the legacy of entrenched ideology parading as traditional values which characterised the education policies espoused by several political parties. *FORUM*'s editorial board recognised from the first how political a matter the education system cannot but be. They were committed to strengthening education as a common good, valuing the teaching profession and supporting teacher collaboration and innovation in how to 'do school' – showing that the *common* school was (and is) by no means the *uniform* school. Above all, the board believed in the educability of all children and the futility of forcing them into outworn categories.

Thirty-three years later, in the autumn of 1991, the 100th number relaunched the journal with a new subtitle which highlighted *FORUM*'s commitment to the principle of comprehensive education from age three to nineteen. The editorial celebrated *FORUM*'s history of fostering debate in support of campaigning to hasten progressive educational reform. The journal gave voice to the ideas and experiences of those pioneering change at all levels in the maintained system 'in ways suited to a democratic society committed to opening up opportunities for all to develop their interests and potential'. The centenary issue restated a commitment to 'sane alternatives whereby education can be restored as a planned properly resourced local public service, and its quality developed for the better benefit of all'.

We will continue in this tradition, even as our 200th edition begins to appear on the horizon. We promote comprehensive education, a national public service yet to be won. We uphold the view that all the nation's children and young people should be educated within a common system, and that lifelong learning is best served through

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such a system, one which refuses recourse to all forms of academic selection. Such a commitment necessarily requires its advocates to address the implications: for pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, student voices, school governance, the regime of inspection and oversight, and the overarching conception of education which befits a democracy.

England's state education system is increasingly controlled from the centre while being highly fragmented. Elements within the system, and forces acting on it, lean towards privatisation. Public, preparatory and private schools endure. Grammar schools persist, vitiating fair educational opportunities in many localities and preventing the sustained development in practice of a better conception of education for all. At every age and stage, high-stakes summative assessment enforces a narrowed curriculum, straitjackets pedagogical approaches and drains the joy from teaching and learning. Labelling young people by so-called 'ability', and segregating cohorts into 'ability' sets, conspire to limit what is possible for individuals and groups. Assumptions about 'ability' or a specious 'ability-range' are yet to be eradicated. Nor have we yet shaped pedagogy commensurate with the conception of children as the people best trusted to know how they learn, as intrinsically driven to learn, and able when conditions are conducive always to go on learning.

Nevertheless, the comprehensive ideal is alive, thanks to the dedication of practitioners and educationalists, the commitment of parents and carers, and the work of trade unions and activist groups campaigning for it on the ground. As a journal, *FORUM* will continue to be a platform from which to argue for comprehensive education. Selection, division, elitism and all that goes to make up a competitive mindset in education will be challenged in our pages. *FORUM* will spread news of the success of comprehensive education in this country and beyond. It will explore the implications and meet the many challenges of the comprehensive ideal, and so take it forward.

We open this issue with Richard Pring's measured account locating the historical and philosophical roots of the comprehensive ideal and insisting on their importance. Comprehensive schooling emerges as the antithesis of, and corrective to, an education system established to reflect and replicate the hierarchies of a class-based society and its dominant assumptions about children. Richard Pring ends his article at the moment *FORUM* begins, with the transition from a largely bipartite to a largely comprehensive system of secondary education. After World War II, some local authorities established comprehensive schools in opposition to government advice, but educational segregation continued to damage young people's overall chances. Research showed that private coaching and intensive tuition improved test scores, helping turn the grammar schools into middle-class enclaves. Campaigners, including those connected to *FORUM,* thought it a mistake not to be bold. They launched the Comprehensive Schools Committee to make the case for legislation and define what comprehensive schools are for.

Anne West and David Wolfe deftly outline the major policy changes which followed the widespread establishment of comprehensive secondary schooling in the 1960s and 1970s: in particular, the insurgency of academisation. They consider crucial differences in what is legally required of academies as compared to schools maintained by a local authority, for example around admissions criteria for pupils and students, employment conditions for staff, and issues of school governance and financial accountability. They show how lack of a common legal framework across the education system undermines equality of opportunity in a range of areas, and thwarts local democratic decision-making. They end their paper by proposing structural changes which would better cohere the school-based education system.

Julie Allan and Clara Rubner Jorgensen offer a supportive case study of a school purposefully established as a 'comprehensive free school', one with a distinctively inclusive admissions policy. As such, the school must resolve fundamental issues of learning and teaching in relation to the comprehensive ideal. The persistence of fixed 'ability' thinking within mixed-attainment teaching, and the way this can undermine an approach to education which aspires to be 'comprehensive', become evident. So does the constraining effect on the school of the system within which it must operate, a system which valorises competition between schools and celebrates a wizened notion of success.

'An education is always an expression of larger structures of power', Stewart Ranson reminds us. 'The purposes, practices, structures and resources required to regenerate a just education for all will depend upon agreements that must be forged in the wider polity'. He goes on to make an impassioned case for a renewed national political settlement of the kind which marked Britain in the aftermath of World War II. This settlement is to be predicated on conscious collective action for the common good, itself generated by wider political participation and the mediation of what is here called 'worlds of difference'. Thoroughgoing comprehensive education has a vital role to play by enabling such mediation and fostering the renewed democratic consensus on which a more just political settlement rests.

Like Stewart Ranson, Dave Hill takes the politics of education under capitalism seriously. His intention is always to move beyond a capitalist polity towards socialism. His article outlines a taxonomy to help distinguish between the perspectives offered by reformist and revolutionary traditions, and to identify nuances within these traditions. Dave Hill helped found, and chaired, the Hillcole Group of Radical Left Educators, among whom were numbered members of the *FORUM* editorial board at the time. He locates what seems Marxist within the range of responses to questions – central to comprehensive education – of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, school organisation, the role of students, and the issue of public ownership and democratic control of the system.

A comprehensive education system must cater for the early years, and for adult learners too. A pair of articles explore the possibilities offered by 'the comprehensive college'. Eddie Playfair draws on his experiences as a post-sixteen educator and college leader to show how such a college can be at the heart of its community, transforming lives, especially for those whose experience of compulsory schooling has been found wanting. He contrasts what he terms 'the selective mindset', which mis-measures and segregates, with the perspectives offered by the comprehensive ideal, an ideal he argues the Labour Party's mooted National Education Service has a role to play in realising.

Robin Simmons takes inspiration from the Macfarlane Report of forty years ago, which outlined a national system of tertiary colleges. He argues that such a system offers a feasible way towards 'a much more coherent, 'democratised' system of provision than the current model of further education based on the neo-liberal principles of markets, competition, diversity and choice'. The challenges to be faced in unpicking the current dispensation, overturning its ideological basis and instituting other necessary reforms have not been underestimated.

If England needs a model to follow in our quest for a more socially just and beneficial education system, John Coe looks to Finland to provide it. He calls for investment in children's centres and a major scaling-down of external testing in primary schools, with concomitant scaling up in procedures of teacher-led assessment. His article wonders what is to be done about the prevalence of fixed 'ability' thinking, and what should be the fate of the remaining grammar schools. *FORUM* is a space for debate, and some of John Coe's suggestions run counter to those put forward by others in this issue. Debating disagreement is a necessary part of what John Coe enjoins us to do: go forward comprehensively.

This has been *FORUM*'s consistent practice. As we embark on a new iteration, we offer two articles from *FORUM*'s extensive archive – much of it freely available online – and will offer more such articles across this year. The two we have selected here are by teacher-researchers Clyde Chitty and Roger Seckington, one-time comprehensive school teachers and longstanding members of the *FORUM* Board, who notably militated for the whole idea of comprehensive education. Each article illustrates unshakeable conviction in the comprehensive ideal. Each is a link between our educational past and present; the educator-activists of yesterday and today. Our next issue will carry more writing from the archive: Caroline Benn's examination of new forms of selection which took hold from the mid-1980s. We hope, through this systematic presentation of key debates of the past, to contribute to the re-thinking now required about the future of education in the context of Covid-19.

Selection by so-called 'academic ability' has been a bedrock of the anti-comprehensive education system. Helen Gunter's article highlights the persistence of hierarchical and segregationist attitudes to 'ability'. She takes up ideas from a paper written by *FORUM*

editorial board member Michael Fielding which locates the notion of 'personalisation' in education within a neo-liberal and eugenicist framework. Helen Gunter charts the way these ideas entered the policy-making of contemporary Conservatism and reinforce assumptions about who does and does not 'deserve' to be educated, and to what extent. Her article contains a warning to the Labour Party against falling in with the ideology of personalisation.

The reality, and the extent, of social mobility as it relates to education occupies Bernard Barker and Kate Hoskins. Their paper draws on research they have undertaken over the past decade which once again confirms that 'social reproduction is a more common reality than social mobility for many of the young people we have interviewed'. In particular, Bernard Barker and Kate Hoskins find social class powerfully determining labour market aspirations, and the education system continuing to work to reproduce rather than disrupt existing class-based social hierarchies, thereby transmitting and extending patterns of (dis)advantage.

Private capital continues to try to clear yet more space for itself in the field of education. Qasir Shah and Chris Holligan examine the model of 'no-frills' private schooling offered by James Tooley's Independent Grammar School: Durham, and by his franchise-chain in parts of India and Africa. Just what is on offer? Is it 'an education', or merely 'opportunities to become educated', a very different – and inferior – proposition? Purveying education as a cheap commodity of course relies on paying practitioners very poorly, or on employing the unqualified. What implications might this model have for the English state education system in the hands of a government likely to listen more keenly than ever to the voices of edu-business?

Under new leadership, the Labour Party has moved away from its clear commitment to scrap Key Stage 2 summative testing. Its stance on school inspection is also being reconsidered. Alan Parr wrote about the early years of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in the previous number of *FORUM*. Here he looks at the life of a single inspector, Alfred Swinburne, whose career spanned the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Drawing on Swinburne's memoirs, Alan Parr shows how supportive an inspector could be, even of progressive pedagogical and assessment practice. Swinburne, who devoted his career mainly to schools in Suffolk, established a mechanism in the county which 'brought teachers from different schools together to look at pupils' work reflecting the curricular standards across several [establishments]'. It ought to be much easier today, given the requisite political will, to establish local and regional procedures for standardisation and, where appropriate, moderation of schoolwork. Such procedures could help reassure families and communities that their schools were indeed offering the best education, and support teachers to further develop their role as expert assessors.

The continuing Covid-19 pandemic has put practitioners under significant

additional pressure over a sustained period. Perhaps unexpectedly, the great disruption to established practices has also brought some benefit. Chloe Armstrong-Jegorova reflects on how enforced changes to school routines have enabled practitioners to work in child-led ways not only with pupils in reception but across Key Stage 1. 'There has been more time for child-led conversation', she writes, 'more time to work on children's interests, more time for creative, hands-on activities and more time for play'. This has resulted in more purposeful talk and the chance to follow children's own interests for longer than is normally possible given the pressure to ensure everyone is 'Year 1-ready'. This pressure obliges reception teachers to impose a more formal curriculum sooner than is desirable. Chloe Armstrong-Jegorova calls on those working in Key Stage 1 to consider 'the value of implementing in their classrooms those pedagogical approaches which inform and infuse early years practice'. In particular, she advocates the central importance of play for the whole of childhood, and the need for primary schools to restore play as an integral part of learning.

Play is the work children are constantly engaged in to make sense of the world and find it home. Margaret Meek's understanding of that particular species of play we call reading, and her insights into how texts teach what readers learn, have sustained several generations of practitioners. Margaret Meek died in May 2020. Judith Graham celebrates her life and writing in a brief article drawn from her thoroughgoing appreciation, *Margaret Meek – A Literate Life*, to be published by *FORUM* as an e-book.

If play is children's work, it is work undertaken for the love of it: for the intrinsic reward of what is engaged in, for the fascination of what's difficult, or the joy of what's found to be naturally easy. John White considers the place that love of the activities they engage in might occupy in a student's school education. He asks what it is for a child to love an activity, and looks at how love is connected to personal flourishing, arguably a central aim of education. He writes: 'A flourishing life cannot be short of love'. Among other duties, then, school should open up for every child manifold forms of activity they could love. John White pursues these ideas, inevitably contrasting them with the reality of today's education system, one dominated by instrumentalist configurations of teaching, bureaucratic understandings of assessment, and reductive and deficit-based conceptions of children and young people.

Currently dominant policy speaks a deadening and spiritless dialect of efficiency, 'learning outcomes' and attainment-targets. It calls four- and five-year-olds in supposed danger of not making 'adequate progress' neither children nor pupils, but 'key marginals'. *FORUM* will continue to set store by an educational discourse which draws its strength from other springs and speaks a more fertile language. We will tap wisdom not only about love but also about trust, and the importance of the imagination for learning and teaching. We will keep in mind the agency of children and young people, and the power and claims of the collective as well as the individual. In the words of the philosopher

John Macmurray, we will think about education as if people mattered.

To that end, we hope readers will continue to take out an annual subscription and so ensure access to all the contents of the latest issues, as well as to the entire *FORUM* archive online and the material in our e-books. We welcome articles from all those committed to pursuing the ideal of comprehensive education in the twenty-first century.

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