

Editorial

Above and beyond: Schools and their communities during the pandemic

To think about education as if people mattered... The commitment which *FORUM*'s previous Editorial endorsed has been much in my mind while school staff rose to meet the unprecedented moment of the pandemic. A *Guardian* report (4 March 2021) suggested one school in five had set up a food bank for local families, and one in three oversaw delivery of food parcels to pupils' homes. For how can the mind feed when the body hungers? In an article tracing and celebrating the manner in which schools morphed from hubs of educational provision into networks of social sustenance, Élise Othacé details the dozens of ways in which, this past year, her school, and many another, supported the communities they serve far beyond the remit of any legal obligation.

Among the political consequences of such action by school staff may be their emboldened sense of agency. Government left it to others to see children fed and, in its indifference, moved far too slowly to ensure all children had access to online teaching. These failings characterise an entire approach, and Ken Jones indicts it in his 2020 Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, whose text was first published by the Socialist Education Association. Jones considers how the political right dismantled a model of education informed by a caring collectivism, a model which afforded progressive ideas and practices some purchase. Institutions with a degree of autonomy from national government found themselves subordinated to, or superseded by, a centralising state which rewrote the history of post-war reform, reset terms of accountability, and which (as Chloe Tomlinson and Howard Stevenson note in their article) to an extraordinary degree now frames the narrative with respect to education and its purposes. Jones assesses how far the pandemic may have loosened government's grip. Ministers suffered a series of policy reverses at the start of the year, notably when the National Education Union used Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 (on unsafe conditions at work) to justify its members' refusal to comply with the demand that all schools fully reopen. Organised and principled action, within and across schools and communities, fuels a reconstitution of the social, and an understanding of the power of the collective where, in Jones's words, 'the possibilities of change become stronger, and where the movement for a democratic and inclusive politics of education can take on new life'.

Government intends, as Ken Jones puts it, 'a particular kind of educational resumption'. The two articles which open this issue of *FORUM* argue against any return to the way we were. Back then, what passed for normal never sufficed. It will not now. Leading the way, Phil Taylor takes a close look at a cornerstone of the old regime. In laying bare the intricacies of GCSE grading, its standardisation, normalising

and distributive processes, the ‘bell curve’ thinking these cement, the injustice of ‘comparable outcomes’ and the inequalities the exam system helps reproduce, his article powerfully refutes claims by ministers that public exams alone are the fairest way to judge student attainment. The exam system’s spectacular implosion last year boosted calls in certain quarters for GCSEs to be abolished and A levels reformed. Teachers have been confirmed in their view that, if they can only come out from under the shadow of the high-stakes summative testing regime, richer educational experiences, and wider and more educationally useful kinds of assessment, are to hand. In such circumstances, it was disappointing to see the National Education Union leadership once more resist calls from members for a sustained, sharply argued, union-led campaign to scrap the current testing regime, SATs and all.

Phil Taylor ends his piece by glancing at the merit of relational approaches to assessment. Scherto Gill and Ken Gergen’s book about such approaches is reviewed in this issue, alongside a barnstorming riposte by Melissa Benn to Peter Mandler’s *The crisis of the meritocracy: Britain’s transition to mass education since the Second World War*, a book whose magisterial and Olympian overview isn’t without its blind-spots.

Strictly speaking, there’s no going back, of course: there’s only the hastening or withholding of a better tomorrow. Hilary Povey and Corinne Angier anatomise ‘progress’ as defined by the educational powers-that-be. In the eyes of those idolators of the quantitative, ‘progress’ is measurable and linear and predictable, and bolsters an understanding of education as if data mattered more than people do. Such an outlook warps educational principles, distorts professional practice and licenses schools to devise policy by which five-year-olds are denied their play for not progressing adequately. Hilary Povey and Corinne Angier reclaim a more humane, imaginative and caring conception: education as ‘a collaborative moral enterprise ... involving love for the world and ... hope in the present’.

As the tide of pandemic ebbs from these shores, the extent of poverty and deprivation stands revealed. Teachers have been well aware of it. Any child’s formal education rests on sustaining a supportive relationship between child, school and home, and hence entails some knowledge of home’s circumstances. Several articles accompany Élise Othacéhé’s in describing how schools help sustain their local communities. David Dixon recalls his headship at a primary school on an impoverished East Midlands estate in the 1990s. He and his team ran clubs at breakfast, after school and in the holidays. They looked to extend rather than trim the curriculum-offer. They established an ingenious e-learning foundation as part of a project to provide laptops for classes. His article explores the benefits and drawbacks of this project, and offers an insight into the contemporary digital divide, which, he points out, isn’t fundamentally ‘digital’. It is ‘a symptom of a more deep-seated inequality of educational provision for disadvantaged families’.

The support David Dixon's school gave the community around it surely made a textbook case for those arguing, at the turn of the millennium, for what became New Labour's extended schools policy. An education department explicitly renamed as being for children, schools and families suggested that some in government recognised the need to take what Doug Martin and Peter Moss call a 'holistic and integrated approach'. Their article, grounded in a series of case studies, reflects on the importance of the extended schools policy, and the benefits derived from the 3500 children's centres it established. Those centres would not survive the coalition government of 2010. The extended schools policy, Martin and Moss argue, offers important lessons for today. Will Labour take note?

As it grew safer for schools to reopen fully, *FORUM* convened a round-table discussion to hear more about the experience of teaching and learning through the pandemic, and how that experience might help us rethink the education system. Melissa Benn chaired what turned out to be a wide-ranging and insightful conversation. She was joined by Eliane Glaser, a parent and writer, Jim Hudson, a secondary teacher of citizenship and history, Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, and the editor of this journal. The round table was a new venture for *FORUM*; we offer an edited transcript of what was said.

Parental voices speak powerfully in the article Lucy Wenham has written with Iqra Din and Liam Eaves, two undergraduate students at Bristol University. Findings from their research are explored in an article that suggests how difficult and demoralising it was for many parents to be responsible for their children's learning at home. In the face of extraordinary demands, schools have often gone above and beyond, but in certain cases the concerns of parents at particular risk, or whose children were felt to be especially vulnerable, went unaddressed. The authors note that it didn't have to be this way. Remorseless competitive pressures imposed on schools by current policy keep the education system a long way from realising the comprehensive ideal of inclusion.

At the mid-point in this issue, Jane Martin presents a long article by Caroline Benn, originally published in *FORUM* forty years ago. 'The Myth of Giftedness' shows how valuable that slippery concept proved for those seeking to retard and reverse the spread of comprehensive education. Benn reveals the deterministic thinking at the heart of all ideas about 'giftedness' understood as fixed innate 'ability'. She sets against such thinking the simple fact that 'giftedness is what education itself helps to create and release'.

Shortage of funds, lack of capacity and a straitjacketed curriculum ally with structural racism and other forms of oppression to undermine that high purpose. Penny Rabiger puts the case for schools to educate explicitly, unapologetically and expertly for racial justice. She considers the work already being done, and what remains to be done, heartened by the upsurge of support for anti-racist education in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. In her eyes, 'learning is as much about agency as it is about knowledge

retrieval'. Imagine a Department for Education which saw it that way ...

Steve Marsling and Chris Smith offer practical help for anti-racist teaching. They have compiled a resource pack centred on the contribution made to the anti-apartheid struggle by the London Recruits, white people recruited in Britain to deliver anti-apartheid and pro-liberation materials surreptitiously to the streets of South Africa's cities. Steve Marsling, himself a Recruit, fills in the historical and political background. Chris Smith describes the pack, and urges the relevance of its content. And its form. Rather than being bound by mark schemes and model answers, teachers are invited to create a range of assessment opportunities as appropriate for their students. Chris Smith writes: 'The more I planned activities for the resource pack, the more a radical notion came home to me. Namely, that teachers working through these resources with their students would be the only people in a position to effectively judge whether students had successfully engaged with, and been engaged by, these materials'.

By reminding themselves of their expertise, and reflecting together on their experience, teachers can deepen understanding of what they do and why. This is all the more vital, argue Chloe Tomlinson and Howard Stevenson, because the battle of ideas in education is fought on terrain chosen by government. That battle is principally for the hearts and minds of teachers. By organising around ideas, teachers can develop critiques of the current system, and ways to improve it. The authors offer accounts of three projects indicative of the possibilities that exist for activist collaboration to rebut the tyranny of no alternative.

In parliamentary debates, grammar schools are routinely described as 'good', rather than as 'outstanding' or 'excellent'. With a light touch but serious intent, Alan Bainbridge, Joanne Bartley and Tom Troppe reveal how this seemingly modest designation, with its inescapably moral overtones, helps selective secondary education persist in the state system. They calculate just how much extra money would flow into non-selective schools were these to be treated as the government treats 'good' grammar schools. In the teeth of a mass of evidence refuting the notion that selective education benefits society, it is 'the moral discourse of "good schools"', say the authors, which presently shapes debate and directs policy. Supporters of comprehensivisation must reclaim the discourse of 'goodness'.

The latest in our series of articles on school inspection sees an insider's account by Martin MacArthur, who became an Ofsted inspector in 1996. He comments revealingly on the chief inspector at the time, the involvement of Serco in school inspection, the independence (or otherwise) of the inspectorate and tensions within the service. His candour refreshes.

John Quicke undertakes a nuanced exploration of consumerism, and thoughtfully considers the question of sustainable living. His article builds on writing in *FORUM* 62(2), an issue which addressed educational aspects of the environmental emergency.

John Quicke argues that enjoyment is a necessary part of that flourishing life which school should try to cultivate. Education for active citizenship should balance duties and commitments with the need for fun, and even frivolity.

Cathy Burke quietly sets the unfathomable, incalculable and immeasurable—always at the heart of education as if everybody mattered—against the dictatorship of the countable and the injuries it inflicts.

With the help of the team at Lawrence and Wishart, *FORUM* is beginning to settle into its new home. We are grateful for the patience and tolerance shown by readers and subscribers as we find our feet. We republish below the corrected text of a particularly important paragraph from the article by Anne West and David Wolfe in the previous issue which was badly mangled in production. The text has been corrected online.

Patrick Yarker

Erratum:

Decisions regarding maintained schools are taken by local authorities under the oversight of elected local councillors: they operate in meetings subject to ‘public participation’ obligations. However, decisions for academies are taken by Regional Schools Commissioners acting on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education; the Commissioners are appointed by central government, and exercise considerable power without any local democratic oversight or requirement for open process. This includes decisions about opening and closing academies, or ‘re-brokering’ them from one MAT to another. Whilst changes to maintained schools – such as opening them, closing them, expanding them, or changing the age range of pupils for whom they make provision – involve a public process such as public notices and the opportunity to object, this is not so with academies: the MAT or Regional Schools Commissioner (depending on the issue) can simply make a decision as to how to proceed.

Corrected text from: **Reforming the school-based education system in England: A common framework, rule book and a new structure for schools**, *Anne West and David Wolfe, FORUM 63(1) p23.*