The possibility of change

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2020

Ken Jones

Abstract:

This is an edited transcript of the Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, given by Ken Jones, at the request of the Socialist Education Association, in November 2020. The lecture situates Caroline's work in the context of the 'Long Revolution' of twentieth-century Britain. The lecture discusses the meaning of that revolution for education; it charts the course of the right-wing reaction to it from 1976 onwards, and the growth of managerial cultures at the level of the school which have blocked its further development. The effects within education of the Black Lives Matter and the Covid pandemic have revived, in both practical and ideational ways, some of the themes of the Long Revolution. The lecture argues that this is a change of historical significance. The possibility of change as a collective democratic project has been reawakened.

Keywords: Long Revolution, Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, contestation, schools

I'm honoured by the invitation to give this lecture.[1]

I remember Caroline for her kindness, her resolve, her grace in argument. And for her unyielding commitment to a democratic and socialist politics of education. Her politics were founded on an understanding of what Raymond Williams called the 'Long Revolution': a set of changes which extended democracy, strengthened working-class organisations, and fostered new kinds of sensibility and aspiration. These changes had to be fought for against embedded privilege.

Education was one site on which these struggles were fought out, and it was in those struggles that Caroline's work took shape. She recognised the historical significance of the movement for comprehensive education, and meticulously documented its course. She strove to broaden the horizons of the movement, so that it could become attentive to the college, the adult education class, the workplace as sites of change. She thought systematically about what would be necessary to embed educational reform in structures of local democracy, as a counterweight to bureaucratic control. Above all, she understood that intellectual engagement involved organising as well as analysis, initiative as well as commentary, open and widespread debate about means and ends rather than reliance on a central power.

Caroline's achievements belong to the past. There is a pathos in this. All those energies, one might think, all those plans pushed to one side by a model of education for which questions of democracy and collective empowerment are meaningless. Derided

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by the right and not well understood or defended by the left.

There is another way of looking at it. Her way of seeing, of attributing historical and human meaning to the work of educational change, can be recovered. And this is not so much a painstaking and lonely work of intellectual archaeology as an opportunity put in front of us by present conditions, present conflicts, present intuitions about the possibility of change as a collective and democratic project. It is these conditions and conflicts which I want to address tonight.

Hope re-set

There has been a fifty-year war over education, and the curriculum has been at its centre. It has been a war on a European scale. Its fronts have been various, from battles over education spending to polemics around pedagogy. The battles have been particularly fierce in countries where educational reform had achieved significant structural change, to the point where the right concluded that education as a site of social and cultural reproduction was slipping beyond its control. It cost too much. It didn't give employers what they wanted from the labour force and ignored the requirements of competitiveness. From this viewpoint, education was providing a home to practices which, against the constraints of the established social and economic order, counterposed the inexhaustible needs of human development. Those who worked in schools and universities had escaped accountability to government; their pursuit of what the European Commission's Reiffers Report of 1996 called 'fashionable non-selective utopias' had disconnected education from societies, 'which do not work that way' (Reiffers, 1996).

Thus the period which, for Caroline and for many others, was a time of hope, was for the right something quite different. Its foundations were out of joint and its dynamic was dangerous; to correct them, something more fundamental than a policy shift was required; there needed to be a complete resetting of purpose and process.

It is against this background that we can understand the various national reactions against educational reform, which were nearly always a reaction, also, against broader movements of change. Maria-Stella Gelmini, for instance, minister of education in the government of Silvio Berlusconi, said this in 2008:

> [There are] 40 years to be dismantled … From 1968 to nowadays the Italian education system has turned out to be what it should not be: a social safety valve, a dispenser of pay, a printing house of useless qualifications for students. Authority, hierarchy, teaching, studying, hard work and merit: these are the key words of the school we want to create, dismantling the ideological construction made out of empty pedagogism that has infected like a virus the Italian school since 1968. This requires an inescapable and difficult restructuring of our education system. (Gelmini, 2008, quoted in Jones, 2012)

We can find a similar diagnosis in the writings of Gelmini's counterparts in France, Luc Ferry and Xavier Duclos. And also of course among British Conservatives, who in this respect are far more internationalist than they let on: the rhetoric of Michael Gove, which turns upon the claim that working-class failure in education should be attributed to the intrinsic failings of progressive education (Gove, 2012), is an English instance of a discourse that is European in scope.

The challenge is the point

I hope I've said enough to indicate both the range and variety of the right's ambitions and its passionate determination to escape from the influence of 1945 and 1968 – or in the case of the Iberian countries and Greece, from the democratic revolutions of the mid-1970s.

Tonight, I want to talk about education in the country which for a long period was an inspiration to the European right. In matters of education, Nicolas Sarkozy told Gordon Brown in 2008: 'We want to do everything like you' (Jones, 2009, p216). I want to consider two aspects of the system that Sarkozy admired, two themes, which have been central to the politics of the English right, the long counter-revolution, for half a century, and which are currently, in the midst of the pandemic, being challenged.

The challenge is the point. What I'm talking about are live issues of contestation. It is not a matter of noting with appalled and powerless fascination the inexorable working of the right's politics, but of identifying those points where the action of long-suppressed and excluded forces places the right under new and increasing pressure. It's at those points where the possibilities of change become stronger and where the movement for a democratic and inclusive politics of education can take on new life.

The first theme relates to what Pierre Bourdieu (1998) called the methodical destruction of collective structures, something he took to be at the heart of neoliberalisation.

For most of the twentieth century, English education was shaped and coordinated by institutions and networks that were autonomous from national government and that relied upon influence rather than direct control to establish particular norms and working practices. In the 1960s and 1970s, these norms of organisation were the matrix in which new ideas about education developed. The period from 1960 to 1980 was one in which dispersed professional influence over educational processes increased: reform was filtered through layers of teacher, local authority and teacher educator influence in ways which encouraged a child-centred emphasis on 'progressive' pedagogy.

Summarising the outcomes of this process, in terms of the intellectual and pedagogical resources which it made available, Peter Woods writes about a period of primary education that was shaped 'by a discourse of child-centredness, discovery learning, and care' (Woods, 2004, p1). Woods sketches various 'teaching strategies' available to teachers in this period, which included:

> 'starting from the child (using prior and pupil knowledge)'; incorporating some of the child's home experiences and culture into that of the school; 'developing empathy'; 'widening perspectives' and 'aiding the critical formulation of thought.'

The last decades of the century saw the destruction of these ways of working and their replacement by a radically different perspective on teaching, and with it a new set of intellectual resources.

Quality re-valued

Over just a few years, following the Education Reform Act of 1988, schools became places where management authority, rather than collegial culture, established the ethos and purpose of the institution. This was the work of both Conservative and Labour governments.

Before 1988, the pattern of educational initiative had been at least partly shaped by teachers – hence its diversity, its occasional radicalism, its counter-tendencies towards local inertia. After 1988, a variety of forces – the national curriculum, Ofsted, a league-table-based system of accountability, private educational actors – began to remove from teachers much of this capacity. In the process, agency was transferred. There was a systematic enhancement of the capacities of school managers, briefed to effect at school level a break with the past. But managers possessed operational autonomy only within national guidelines. They in turn were subordinate to a central power, which set the terms of accountability.

The data that enabled accountability were test scores and exam results, presented in increasingly sophisticated ways which purported to measure 'value added'. What counted as good education, what counted as quality, was revalued. Children and young people came to be seen primarily as outcomes and levels. A curriculum as something to be delivered in order to produce the required data, and relationships between teachers and learners became a means to league-tabled ends. As Pat Thomson and Christine Hall (2014) have written, the sociality of the school was eroded through processes which made people in them less important than data about them.

Accompanying these changes came new versions of the past. The importance of post-war reform was minimised. It was a zone of exhausted tradition. Emphasising egalitarian rather than economic goals, it had failed to raise standards. Teachers were especially at fault: they provided not a resource for change but a barrier to it. In Tony Blair's words, they were 'forces of conservatism', shaped by 'the culture of excuses which still infects some parts of the teaching profession' (Taylor, 1999).

I am interested in rescuing the educational past from this kind of representation. I want to unlock its intellectual resources and celebrate the political and educational energies which contributed to its making. At the same time, I want to think about the significance of present conflicts, in which we are seeing a reconstitution – a partial reconstitution – of some of the collectives and some of the conceptions of the social which were so systematically destroyed.

A point of rupture

The second theme is a particular instance of collective action, of a collective production of knowledge, that calls into question the fundamental aspects of our school system – and higher education too, though I shall not talk about that tonight.

It is impossible to understand the English politics of education in the 1970s and 1980s without appreciating the ways it was shaped by cultural conflicts in which questions of 'race' and 'nation' played a central part. (This is a topic I address in *Education in Britain*, 2015) and I draw from that work in what follows.)

Following James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College, Labour in the later 1970s had reset the terms of educational reform, displacing questions of equality from their central position, calling into question progressive methods and seeking to implement change through a greater measure of central direction.

But the project of post-war reform was much too diffuse and localised to be affected in its entirety by changes decided at the level of central government. In a number of English cities, local authorities, influenced both by social movements and by cadres of Labour activists new to local government – call them the Corbyn generation – championed educational projects of a new kind. These grew out of a critical attitude to past failures to develop effective policies of equal opportunity. They involved, for the first time, an emphasis on anti-racist education.

This was what could be called a point of rupture: the idea that education was a site where imperial legacies and present injustices should be opened to question; where different ways of constructing the social – curriculum, pedagogy, institutional practices, personal relations – should be attempted.

By the early 1980s, it had become plain that the school system was failing large sections of minority ethnic students. The government endorsed the commissioning of the Rampton Report of 1981 and then promptly shelved its findings, which had identified underachievement on the part of what it called 'West Indian' students compared with whites and Asians. Rather than explaining this failure, as earlier documents had done, in terms of the linguistic deprivation of learners, Rampton attributed it in part to the – often 'unintentional' – racism of teachers, inappropriate curricula and the discouraging effects of discrimination in the labour market.

The claim that failure was linked to racism was echoed in much school-based research: the 'ethnocentricity' of teachers expressed itself in the way they interacted with children of different ethnic groups; racism in the school prompted the resistance of black and Asian students. Research findings of this sort fed into the discourse and practice of what Richard Hatcher called, ‘a dense undergrowth of journals, school and local authority policy documents, teaching materials and policy statements by campaigning organizations and teacher unions’ (Hatcher, 1998, p272). By the middle of the 1980s, some twenty-five English local authorities had appointed advisers on multicultural education; two-thirds of LAs had produced statements of policy. The Inner London Education Authority wrote of the ‘clear and pervasive influence of racism’ and of its intention to ‘place the experience of people who bear the brunt of racism at the centre of education’.(ILEA ,1983, p1). Organisations such as ALTARF (All-London Teachers Against Racism and Fascism) and NAME (National Anti-Racist Movement in Education) had established a network of curriculum activism linked to anti-racist activity outside the school.

LATE, the London Association for the Teaching of English, argued that racism: ‘is endemic in our society, enshrined in laws, in the daily life of communities, in educational policy, in school curricula and organization, in the way teachers teach and in the things children learn; no teacher can duck this fact’ (LATE, 1982). They wanted schools to eliminate institutional racism – embodied, for instance, in their admissions and exclusions policies – and to promote curriculum change, in which recognition of the histories and cultures of excluded groups should have a central part. In doing so, schools should form links with social movements outside their walls, since change in teachers’ practice was ‘brought about first by the voice of black pupils and the black community, and second by overt racism on the streets’ (*ibid*.).

A coalition, then. Or maybe, better, a convergence of energies. Of anti-fascist and anti-racist movements, which shaped events in Southall, Brick Lane, Bradford, Lewisham, Liverpool 8. Of everyday resistance and conviviality. Of the work of teachers and the initiatives of local authorities. Little of it sanctioned by government. In fact, the reverse.

Since the 1970s, Conservatism neoliberalism has been bonded with a politics of culture and race. Enoch Powell, pathfinder of the New Right, saw his politics as an attempt to find a language in which the experience of a dispossessed Englishness could be expressed. It is a language which is now fluently spoken. Calls for justice and equality have been answered by appeals to tradition and social order. Educational advance has been reduced to a question of individual effort, individual merit. Efforts at change on a larger scale have been targets for media attack and state intervention – from ILEA in the 1980s to Birmingham five years ago, in the Trojan Horse episode of which Michael Gove was impresario (Jones, 2015, p202-3). A way of excising particular kinds of knowledge and practice from what we could call the general intellect of education. From policies and practices, from ethical understandings.

The same playbook is currently in use in response to Black Lives Matter: the outbursts against ‘victim narratives’, the warnings against politicising the classroom, the protective cordon thrown around the statues of slave-traders. The question is whether the old plays, rhetorical, political, can still be made to work.

School as social safety net

This has been a fearful and exhausting year. In schools it will be remembered for constraint, shortage, desperate improvisation. It is also a period in which control by the apparatus of government, of the educational space, has been weakened. Government circulars have been more numerous than ever, but they have not entirely determined the work of schools. New points of initiative and challenge have crystallised.

This has happened because the school – I'm speaking particularly of primary schools for the moment and particularly of those which have numbers of poor children – has had to reinvent itself as a social safety net, rescuing the system from its failures of social reproduction. A system which wasn't feeding children, wasn't resourcing their learning, wasn't responding to their state of mental health.

The assumption of this new role has been picked up by academic researchers and by education unions in their surveys of members. Gemma Moss, summarising the UCL research, writes that the highest priority of most teachers and headteachers working in deprived areas was 'checking how families are coping in terms of mental health, welfare, food,' when communicating with families during lockdown:

> They knew many children would go hungry during the crisis if schools did not help their families with food. They knew that many children were without access to the internet, or a private space to study at home or outside space. They knew that home itself might not be a safe environment and worried about families they thought were struggling with mental health issues. (Moss et al., 2020.)

For some educators, these constant and unsupported efforts led to an impasse of frustration – registered in the number of heads now considering post-Covid resignation. For others, they strengthened a sense that new conditions of possibility had been established. To quote one of Moss's respondents: 'We have such a big opportunity now to really listen to children's and their families' needs … We have to let go of the rigid structures the government have put in place and allow teachers to make decisions as professionals who know the children best' (*ibid.*).

A similar movement from dissatisfaction to a new sense of the possible is evident in the comments of teachers responding to a National Education Union (NEU) survey – comments which the union put before the House of Commons Education Committee (Jones, 2020, p240):

> 'Teachers are having to learn very rapidly new ways of delivering learning when we cannot all be in school and are also dealing with the same health and family

> worries. I would like to see heads able to decide what curriculum and activities they feel should be provided e.g. a lot of creative, social and PSHE style activities to meet well-being needs'.
>
> 'Some [pupils] have struggled to engage and will need a great deal of patient support to make gains, others have thrived from the opportunity to explore learning in more creative ways. A return to the whole content of the curriculum as devised under Michael Gove's time as education secretary is a completely missed opportunity to develop. Less formal accountability could allow for a fresh look at how to make learning more exciting, collaborative, creative and better suited to the future for our children. Additionally, this would support their well-being better and make it easier to make primary school the vibrant, buzzing and exciting place it should be'.

What might be the significance of these reflections, in terms of the history I sketched above?

I spoke earlier of a period of change following the Education Reform Act, during which the sociality of the school was eroded through processes which made people in them less important than data about them. In asserting the importance of an ethic of care, teachers are speaking back against the values of that period, which is why their comments move so swiftly from a comment on the impact of Covid-19 towards a hope for a different kind of curriculum. It's a sentiment which underpins support for the cancellation of statutory assessment in primary schools in 2021 – a call which has the backing of the NEU and the two head teacher unions. A link has been activated between classroom situations and a wider politics of educational change. I take this to be something worth noting, a perception that what has failed is not just a policy for safeguarding but an entire educational programme.

Visible; intolerable

The effort to capture the social meaning of all that has happened this year has led commentators on to the slippery but productive ground of metaphor. In an interview with the Italian left newspaper *Il Manifesto* at the very start of the pandemic, the epidemiologist Frank Snowden spoke of Covid-19 as a 'disease that holds up the mirror to human beings as to who we really are' (Levantesi and Snowdon, 2020). If this is so, and if we think in terms of socio-economic systems, then the ravaged features which the mirror reveals are ones which have developed over half a century. In these fifty years, successive waves of recession, neoliberalisation and austerity have worn away at the foundations of a social settlement which, at the best of times unstable, is now in an advanced state of decline. That is what the mirror shows us: a state of inequality and polarisation, in which class and ethnicity are indicators of relative vulnerability.

To grasp the impact of the murder of George Floyd we need a different metaphor.

In the midst of the pandemic, where a greater awareness of structural injustice was already dawning, the murder of George Floyd was not so much a mirror as a shock of illumination. It made harshly visible and suddenly intolerable that which had previously been lived with, as part of the unchanging quotidian.

There are hundreds of schools, thousands of teachers who have responded to what happened in Minneapolis. Here is the reaction of school leaders in South London:

> 'We stand together to condemn the unlawful murder of an innocent black man George Floyd ...
>
> We stand united in our commitment to tackle and challenge racism, address inequality and call out discrimination.
>
> Black people are 40 times more likely to be stopped and searched in the UK. Young black people are nine times more likely to be locked up in England and Wales than their white counterparts, while BAME offenders are far more likely than others to be jailed for drug offences.
>
> As educators of a school population which is 76% Black and ethnic minority we cannot remain silent.
>
> The murder of George Floyd must prompt careful reflection about racism in Britain today, and the extent to which it shapes our values, politics and economic life.
>
> Our community needs and deserves to feel safe in the belief that its leaders condemn all acts of racism and violence and moreover that they believe racism is an abhorrence ...
>
> Lewisham school Leaders have a duty to address systemic racism in our society and we uphold this.' (Published on the website of Rathfern Primary School, Lewisham 2020 (Rathfern, 2020).)

Here is what students in Doncaster, typical of many, wrote to their former school, in criticism of their experience of education:

> 'We are writing to you as students, alumni, parents and others in regards to the events we are currently seeing unfold in regards to the Black Lives Matter movement.
>
> The systemic racism and oppression that shapes our society is frightening and young people are being taught within this system.
>
> We believe that the education system in the UK is inherently flawed in any teachings that truly represent the past. We are calling for a decolonising of the education system and a true representation of black voices within the teaching.' (Open Letter, 2020.)

For Conservatives, these comments – whether from heads or from students – have crossed a red line. Here they are, talking about systemic racism, making parallels between education, policing and incarceration, and calling for a transformation of the curriculum and a complete revaluing of history and tradition. It is as if the energies of the 1980s have escaped from their shackles and returned in stronger form.

We know the Conservative response. Like that of other governments which face newly energised movements of protest (Polloni et al., 2020), it faces the demon of social disorder with a familiar mix of genuine outrage and political calculation. 'Some schools have decided to openly support the anti-capitalist Black Lives Matter group, often fully aware that they have a statutory duty to be politically impartial', the minister for equalities, Kemi Badenoch, told the House of Commons (Badenoch, 2020). 'Schools should not under any circumstances use resources produced by organisations that take extreme political stances … even if the material itself is not extreme,' said the Department for Education's guidance on teaching Relationships and Sex Education (Department for Education, 2020).

It doesn't seem likely that the awareness and the activity generated by BLM can be tamed by warnings of this sort. The demand for a new curriculum is written on placards in the streets, discussed at Zoom meetings of teachers, inscribed in the policies of schools, responded to by exam boards. The more this activity is pursued, the more the social space of the school is opened up to new debates, new senses of possibility, licensed by the events of last summer, difficult to put back under control.

Transcend the normal

Conservatism tends to be dismissive of social explanations of educational processes and outcomes. The impact of the pandemic on students' (and teachers') lives has tended to be discounted. No great rethinking of pedagogy, curriculum and ethos is thought necessary to educational recovery, and ministers have been unmoved by the arguments of Black Lives Matter, that 'knowledge' and 'culture' should be rethought, inclusively. Instead, the emphasis has fallen on a rapid return to normal: fines levied on parents for the non-attendance of their children; the reinstatement of the high-stakes primary assessment system; the planned return from January 2021 of the highly unpopular system of school inspections. **[2]** Disadvantage will be mitigated by returning as rapidly as possible to familiar arrangements.

This insistence on a particular kind of educational resumption is also an assertion of political will, an intention to put back in their place educational actors who, during the period of pandemic, challenged both the government's policy on school closure and reopening and its notion of what was educationally desirable. I hope that those who have learned and suffered much this year will take a different view: that the normal is not that which must be returned to, but that which must be transcended. Plague is both blight and revelation, suggested Albert Camus. Much has been revealed that may have lasting significance. An opportunity has been placed in front of us by present conditions, present conflicts, present intuitions about the possibility of change as a collective and democratic project. It is one which we should embrace, as Caroline would have done.

Notes

1. The text and recording of the lecture can be found on the Socialist Education Association's website: https://socialisteducationalassociation.org/2020/11/25/cbml-2020-post-event/

2. The circumstances of the pandemic forced the government to cancel statutory assessment in primary schools in 2021, and to defer Ofsted inspections.

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