Learning lessons from the virus

A round-table discussion

Melissa Benn, with Mary Bousted, Eliane Glaser, Jim Hudson and Patrick Yarker

Abstract

As it grew safer for schools to reopen fully in spring 2021, *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 this wide-ranging and insightful conversation between 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 Patrick Yarker, the editor of this journal.

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Melissa: Let me start by welcoming you all to this *FORUM* discussion about how events of the last year might help us rethink our education system. We are joined today by parent and writer Eliane Glaser, head of the National Education Union Mary Bousted, citizenship and history teacher Jim Hudson, and Patrick Yarker, editor of *FORUM*.

This discussion was prompted by two articles, one by you, Eliane, in *Prospect*, about how seeing your primary school-aged children's learning close up filled you with horror. I think you did actually use the word 'horror'? And then Mary, you wrote a piece on similar themes and about how this year of Covid will precipitate change.

Eliane, could you begin by telling us what it was you learned when you had to home-school? Perhaps give us just a bit of background to how old your children are, and so on.

Eliane: Yes. My children are nine and eleven, so they're in years six and four and they go to the local state primary, who I should say did a brilliant job during the whole home-school period. I've got nothing but respect for the teachers. They were working under very difficult circumstances. But I was kind of horrified by the schoolwork they were sending back.

Actually, in lockdown one, I was able to have a lot of latitude as a parent in home-schooling the kids, and it really opened my eyes to what's possible with children that age. The incredible hands-on experiments you can do with them! The creative arts you can do, and how curious children are about learning … And yet, in lockdown two, when the schools provided much more in terms of worksheets and lesson plans and so on,

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that was when I was really horrified by what I realised children were learning all the time, and what they do in school. Often as a parent it's hard to know what they do all day. They don't tell you anything, and teachers are kind of put upon and can't always communicate what's going on in lessons. I was horrified by the language: terms like 'learning intentions', 'success criteria'. The lexicon of education seemed completely impenetrable. The language of the worksheets these really young kids were expected to engage with I just found completely age-inappropriate. It was like management speak.

I'm sure some of it originated in really good pedagogical principles, but any benefit was totally lost in translation. The children were having to wade through this jargon they could barely comprehend, and really off-putting language – like 'non-chronological reports' which they have to write, and these hideous comprehension exercises. It seemed to be the result of a horrendous sort of bureaucracy really. A form-filling culture.

Melissa: There's long been a running joke, relating to the changes of the Gove curriculum, to do with children learning about 'fronted adverbials'. I write for a living and I still don't know what a 'fronted adverbial' is! You make mention of that, as part of your charge that it is all so unnecessarily complex, is that right?[1]

Eliane: Yes. The grammar curriculum has attracted appropriate levels of satire and criticism. Lots of prominent writers, like Michael Rosen and Frank Cottrell-Boyce and Kate Clanchy, have called attention to the ludicrous level of grammatical terms and grammatical knowledge that six-, seven-, eight-, nine-year-olds are having to learn because of what's in the National Curriculum, and the annexes in the literacy parts of the curriculum which are stuffed with grammatical terms children have to know. As a writer myself too, it's totally inappropriate. It's not like chemistry where you need to learn the elements of the periodic table because those are the building blocks of learning chemistry. Grammatical terms are not the building blocks of good writing. Children learn grammar instinctively. Grammar is a way of describing language, you don't need it to build good sentences. So the grammar curriculum is a big part of this. You can get into a 'for and against' debate about the virtues of grammar: actually I think the problem's much broader and deeper than that. It is about a whole programme of education which is absolutely not fit for purpose for children. It's not age-appropriate. It's not creative. It's not knowledge-based, it's heavily based on jargon and these dispiriting, uninspiring worksheets. It's designed to put children off learning. Now I understand why my kids say they get bored by going to school. It's no wonder, given what they're exposed to.

Melissa: So, as you have made clear, this has been a period of awakening for you. I'll come to Mary now and ask you, over the last year is this a familiar tale to you? Have you

been hearing from parents, 'Help, is this really what our children are learning?' or has it not been like that?

Mary: We've not got a direct line to parents. We're very involved with teachers in schools. They do talk about the inappropriateness of the primary curriculum, particularly of the English curriculum in primary. I read two very interesting articles recently. One was by a mathematician saying he couldn't understand or believe the number of mathematical models his primary-school daughter was being introduced to. They weren't needed. They turned maths into a formula, and drummed out any sense of maths as a subject which was creative. So it's very similar to what Eliane has been saying about the grammatical terms, the fronted adverbials and the rest, about labelling every word in a sentence until the idea of language is just horrible to children.

Then, very interestingly, Lucy Kellaway from Teach Now, former *Financial Times* journalist, economics editor, wrote a long article in the *Financial Times* on her thoughts about going back to school and teaching economics. She said she would have 'no choice but to get back to school and buckle down to the GCSE OCR Economics Curriculum'. She said, 'I will obediently tell pupils that there are advantages and disadvantages to countries of rising productivity, and that one of the disadvantages is that if one country increases its productivity others might follow suit and end up overtaking it'. And then she said, and this was really key, 'It pains me to teach such bilge. I despise the limited way of thinking that says you need 2 advantages and 2 disadvantages to everything and you must structure every 6-mark answer in the same way. It's boring, stupid and bears no relation to the economy'.

I thought that was very interesting because Lucy Kellaway is someone who went into teaching fully signed up to the 'knowledge-rich curriculum' and to the way that education is structured, and she's moving away from that now. I think the debate is opening up.

Melissa: One of the things I have noticed is the number of teachers, over the years, who came in during the early Gove period and then after a couple of years in the classroom began to think 'there must be another way'. The more intrepid of them, like Lucy Crehan, went off to look at other successful education systems, resulting in her interesting book *Cleverlands* (reviewed in *FORUM* 60/1), and Alex Beard, who thought the system could be more creative, wrote *Natural Born Learners*. And now that rebellion is building.

Jim, can I ask you as a teacher and as a parent, is this disillusion familiar to you?

Jim: Yes. It's very interesting to hear Eliane talk about what I think of as the tale of two lockdowns. Lockdown one and lockdown two were very different in terms of the experience. It's funny, I should imagine a school would see it almost the opposite

way around from Eliane's view. By lockdown two schools were on it, delivering the curriculum as intended, as best as they could remotely. The fact that Eliane is saying lockdown one was so much better when there was creativity, when there was freedom, it's worrying for me to hear, I'll be honest. We would have said that during lockdown one we were in a bit of free-fall really as we all tried to upskill and get the tech solutions required. Maybe that highlights how the problem is with the curriculum, with what we are trying to deliver, and not necessarily with the situation that we were put in.

Melissa: Yes, Eliane's use of the term 'free-fall' struck me too. Free-fall could have negative connotations but what Eliane was implying was that, as a parent, she meant it positively, in that she was actually freer when the school wasn't quite so 'on' it.

Patrick, do you have any comment on what we've heard so far? I would imagine most of us associated with *FORUM* would find none of this very surprising.

Patrick: I want to pick up on the issue Eliane talked about around grammar. For me it signals the refusal on the part of the orthodoxy coming from the centre – from the ministry and a particular tradition – to value or even accept the language that children bring with them. The sense that children arrive in school with huge deficits, or with lacks, and that one of the things the school has to do is to fill that emptiness. This is, as Melissa said, a longstanding area of debate. Gove made it worse, but it goes back to John Dewey really and his argument that what the school should try to do isn't to start either from a body of knowledge which has to be inculcated into these empty vessels of children or simply to start with whatever the children bring. It is in some way to enable the school to bring those two things productively to meet. I think one of the symptoms since Gove has been the push back towards a sanctioned set of contents that teachers are simply required to deliver. I always object to the word 'deliver'. Teachers are not deliverers. It will be very important, I think, for teachers to join what Melissa points to as the body of parents who are fighting back. It will be important for teachers to reclaim their stake in creating the curriculum, in compiling it and not simply being transmitters of it.

Melissa: So let's look back for a moment, because present developments have a much longer history, going back to Jim Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech and then the 1988 development of the National Curriculum under Kenneth Baker and so on.

Mary, as a representative of teachers, what's your take on the long- term development of curriculum and assessment that has brought us to this moment?

Mary: I think it's a really interesting question. This morning I looked back at my PhD thesis, which was around the conception of English, how did English become a subject? It's strange to think now that it wasn't really until the turn of the last century, in about

the 1920s, that English became a unified subject. Prior to that you would have done grammar, parsing, creative writing, reading, and 'English' became something else.

If you look at the Callaghan speech, that was the beginnings of the attempt to open up 'the secret garden' of formal education. When you look back at what Callaghan was saying, it's perfectly reasonable: 'The taxpayers and the state have an investment in what children are being taught in school'. But what that turned into, particularly in the '80s – although they didn't achieve then what they've achieved now – is a debate about the nature of the curriculum and its assessment.

For me, then as now, the nature of that debate is really about culture and society. What sort of society do we want to be, and how can education help bring about that society? These debates take place under right-wing governments who want the debate to be about culture rather than about the economy. They want the debate to be about a common cultural inheritance, rather than a fair economic distribution of the wage.

Kenneth Baker was really frustrated with the National Curriculum. He wanted a short thirty-page booklet, and he said the experts had defeated him. There are parallels there with Gove. I look back at John Major, speaking to the Carlton Club on the 3 February 1993. He said: 'There will be always those that seek to sever our links with the past. Some say that the glories of British history, the plays and sonnets and Shakespeare, the works of Dickens and Trollope, even poor old Winnie the Pooh are irrelevant to the modern child. Others claim that the figurative tradition in arts and the lessons of classical architecture have no relevance to the present day. We see the destruction they have wrought that has been physical as well as emotional. We have seen the arrogance with which their disciples up and down the country have made their names by destroying urban villages. We see academics making their names by destroying our heroes. More recently the institutions that embodied our nation have come under attack, institutions in whose name our countrymen and women have been ready to make the ultimate sacrifice'

Now, that was 1993, and frankly you could have Boris Johnson or Nick Gibb or Michael Gove making that speech today with knobs on. With the Black Lives Matter movement and the You're Invited movement and the testimony of women and girls about sexual harassment, you could have that now with knobs on. The right have been very, very exercised for a long time about the provision of a cultural inheritance which is common to all.

My view is that they bark on about that all the time in order to disguise the fact that the economic inheritance their policies promote is inequality and not a fair sharing of the nation's wealth. It goes right back to Henry Newbolt in 1921. He said you had to give the working classes a share of the cultural inheritance, the immaterial, or they will start demanding with threats a communism of the material. That was the fear in 1921 and I think that's a big part of what's being played out now.

The difference we have now is that the right have very cleverly said that powerful

knowledge gives you access to economic wellbeing and health. And it doesn't, it never has. You get access to economic wellbeing and well-health through an equal society, and the only time when social mobility has gone upwards has been at times of economic growth. Well, as the right come in and impose austerity you get greater inequality, so they have to have a narrative that says, 'We really do care about equality', and they've placed that narrative in education.

Melissa: I would broadly agree with that analysis but what I would add is that ten, eleven years into a Tory government people are not so enamoured of this cultural inheritance argument as they once were. If you read Michael Gove's speech to the Social Market Foundation in February 2013, a seminal Gove intervention – in which he misrepresents and attacks what he calls the 'progressive tradition' – you see there that he sets out what he believes is powerful knowledge, i.e. 'Everyone should know about the Royal Opera House. Everyone should know about the House of Lords'. It is a public school view of what we should know, only the working classes should possess it. And he says that Gramsci would agree with him!

At the time, I think some people listened to him, and thought he had a point: that the poor were being cut off from important cultural knowledge. Whereas now, a decade in, what we're seeing is that the modern Tory version of meritocracy – built on a high English Tory cultural curriculum, and a hierarchical system – doesn't work in education, or not as Gove claimed it would. It narrows learning and doesn't foster either social mobility or social justice. In fact, it furthers what is often called 'effectively maintained inequality'. And that is partly why I think we're at a moment of change.

Mary: Can I just say that I agree with that and I'd like to come back to that later in the discussion.

Melissa: Jim, you teach citizenship and history so it's totally relevant to this. I don't know how long you've taught but I wonder if you have a teacher's eye view of how the curriculum and assessment have changed in recent times?

Jim: I think it's to do with that the broad term, the 'knowledge rich curriculum'. A more negative term might be: the 'download culture'. Somebody has decided what needs to be downloaded into our children for them to function in some meaningful way. As soon as you start from that idea, that concept that there is a prescribed content, something that should be downloaded, the arguments begin about what that is, what should be downloaded into the students? What is it as far as grammar is concerned? In the history curriculum, what dates are we selecting? In citizenship, what are we selecting in terms of what makes democracy? It's a dangerous place to start, in my view.

Melissa: Do you therefore consider yourself more of a daily downloader than an autonomous professional?

Jim: I try not to be! But sometimes you feel like it and that's one of the things that the lockdown situation of last year really highlighted. That it's fairly easy remotely to download information to children because you have no behavioural problems in the classroom, because there is no classroom. You are there, literally on a daily basis, force-feeding them nuggets of selected information, and it's fairly easy to test whether they've taken all those onboard remotely as well. What that situation highlights for me is that that's not teaching. That's not the curriculum. The curriculum is everything around that: what you model for students, the environment you create for them. More so in my subject. I'm director of citizenship, and more than any other subject citizenship is about the behaviours you model. The idea may be out of fashion now, but learning can be fun and should be fun. A joyful experience. Knowledge is not something that just has to be downloaded, but something that can be enjoyed as well.

Melissa: That's very interesting, that remote lessons actually intensified the 'delivery download' curriculum. If we go back to 2019 and before, when you were actually teaching this 'knowledge is powerful' Conservative curriculum, could you find ways to make it engaging and fun?

Jim: Absolutely. More than just fun. What we've ended up with, and I know this having come back from those lockdown situations and having downloaded so much information into students, is that the young people don't know what to do with it. 'I know this stuff now but what does that actually mean for me in the real world? How do I apply that? What schema am I using? What am I supposed to do with all this?'. Realistically that's what feels to be lacking for me. I don't like to say 'that's where they've fallen behind' because we're trying to avoid that kind of catch-up language around education at the moment. But what's lacking is that they know lots of things, but they don't know what it means to them or how to apply it in a modern world.

Melissa: To put it simply: they know, but they don't understand. Is that how you would define the difference?

Jim: Exactly. Yes.

Melissa: Eliane, before we leave this look back at recent history, there's a very interesting part of your *Prospect* article where you go back to the people who helped design the curriculum post-2010. Tell us what happened when you talked to them.

Eliane: The linguistics academics who advised on the literacy curriculum, I think all four of them, subsequently wrote back and said, 'Actually our recommendations were not properly applied. The curriculum was put together at speed.' They critique the pointless acquisition of grammatical terminology themselves. I also spoke to Tim Oates who led the reforms. He revealingly said, 'Well, in literacy we've held steady', and we haven't even improved in literacy. We've improved in maths but that's not surprising because they do so much maths. He said, 'We're pretty moribund in science', which is very revealing too, given all the effort that went into revamping the curriculum. On the knowledge point, I think that sometimes the debate gets hijacked by the idea that we do now have a knowledge-based curriculum because that's what Gove implemented. There's a very interesting political debate here, as we've been discussing, with Gove referring to E. D. Hirsch who said that educational conservatism is actually progressive because it's the only means whereby children from disadvantaged homes can secure the knowledge that will enable them to improve their condition. There's an interesting argument there. But I think we don't even have a knowledge-based curriculum! My children don't know how to identify countries on a map. This is really, really basic.

Melissa: Can I just interject with a helpful suggestion. Get your children a globe and point out all the countries. That's what I did.

Eliane: What we've got in education is an offshoot of neoliberal managerialism, an audit culture, or, as you've been saying Jim, the download culture. If you teach items that can be tested, and work on Ofsted inspection and documentation for Ofsted inspections, then you can track the ingredients in the National Curriculum through to the tests and the inspections, which are the outputs. What you have is an audit culture which is testing this data, increasingly metrified via online maths tests and so on. It's all about metrification as well. I think the argument about pro- and anti-knowledge is a red herring here, because I'd actually quite like them to learn some knowledge. I agree that it should also be about what children bring to school, but I think that the 'knowledge-based curriculum' is a misnomer given what we've got, which is really just so far from that kind of basic knowledge acquisition.

Mary: Could I just back Eliane up there? I think that's absolutely right. I don't think we have a powerful knowledge curriculum. What we have, you're absolutely right, is a curriculum which is designed to be tested. The test items become the things which are taught and, more than that, the test corrupts what is intrinsically powerful knowledge in a subject. If you're testing computer science through a written test in an exam hall you're not testing the key concepts and skills in the domain of computer science. If you're testing creative writing simply through a timed exam, you are not going through

the process of being a creative writer, which involves hard work. It doesn't involve just waiting for the muse to come upon you: it involves drafting. I'm writing a book at the moment and it's extremely hard work. It's drafting, selecting your evidence. Writing is not best assessed under a timed exam. I was speaking to a retired chief examiner at GCSE who said: 'What we're testing at the moment at GCSE is the ability to write essays in thirty-minute blocks, and the subject matter is in a sense interchangeable'.

Jim: The best example I have of that is teaching citizenship students at GCSE level to do an active citizenship project, which is brilliant. They get involved actively in moving a citizenship issue forward. They select the issue themselves. They work in groups, and all of that is lovely. And then what do they do at the end of it? They do an exam where they have to write essays on how they did their project and what went well, to a formula. It's incredible! And that's how we measure how good they are at being a citizen.

Melissa: This might be the moment to talk about another powerful movement – and moment – that seems to have arrived, which is the argument for 'rethinking assessment' which is now coming from a broad cross-section of people. There has recently been established a powerful coalition of leaders from the state sector and the private sector urging a change in how we assess young people's progress. Basically, this group, which is actually called Rethinking Assessment, is arguing that we have too heavy a test and exam culture, and that there are other ways to assess knowledge that allow for more independent thinking and so on. I wonder what you think about that. Mary, you must know about Rethinking Assessment, the group. Do you have thoughts?

Mary: Yes, I do. That is a powerful group. There are several others set up to do similar things, such as a commission *The Times* have set up with Lucy Kellaway on it and with the CBI and others about curriculum assessment. The National Education Union set up an independent commission with academics with the Edge Foundation, which involves the CBI as well. There's EDSK, the think-tank which has produced two reports recently, one on GCSEs and one on A level, arguing that the A levels and GCSEs should be scrapped and we should move to a Baccalaureate-style qualification. English and maths up to eighteen and vocational, academic and a mix of routes through that. I would also note that, even more interestingly, the row has broken out in the Tory party. You've got the one-nation Tory MPs led by Flick Drummond (in education) who has produced a series of Covid recovery papers and the most recent one has argued that GCSEs should be abolished, A levels should be abolished, we should move to a Baccalaureate. SATs should be abolished in primary because it's teaching to the test rather than teaching for learning. Then very, very noticeably, two or three weeks ago on the ConservativeHome website, Nick Gibb posted that 'the purpose of education is to teach the best that has been

thought or said, and timed exams are the best way to assess pupils'. He's determined that we will go back to full exams and we will go back to a 'knowledge-rich curriculum', and he's read Michael Oakeshott on the inheritance of human achievements.

I thought, 'Where is this coming from?'. Two days later, Robert Halfon, chair of the Education Select Committee, did a riposte, the first half of which was: 'Nick Gibb has been great and he's done free schools and he's raised standards', but then he said, 'But Nick Gibb is completely wrong. Work is very important, we should be preparing children for the world of work'. If you look at the OECD they will say that we need to focus on skills. 'I've got a workplace in my constituency where they do software where they say in two years' time computers will be able to write their own software, so what are we doing to prepare children and young people for the world of the future?'. Then Halfon said, 'A knowledge-rich curriculum has not closed the attainment gap between poor and rich children. It's come to a screeching halt, and a knowledge-rich mantra will not solve the problems we need to solve in the modern world'. Absolutely aligning himself with the OECD and saying to Nick Gibb on the ConservativeHome website, 'You're wrong'.

The Tory party is not just the party for public schools in the home counties. They want to keep hold of the Red Wall seats. I don't think the MPs in the Red Wall seats are as confident that teaching Blake will be helpful to the pupils in their area. Not that they shouldn't learn some Blake, but that shouldn't be the whole of their English curriculum. They do care about skills. They do care about productivity. I also think something else. I think they will increasingly resent the fact that schools working really hard in their constituencies get crap Ofsted grades.

Melissa: Yes, it's interesting that many of the 'rethinking assessment' arguments are now coming not from the progressive left, who have been marginalised by the Tory majority, but from within the Tory party itself. Figures like Kenneth Baker and Robert Halfon are making these arguments, but in a rather different way, concentrating more on preparing young people for the workforce rather than widening learning for its own sake. I wonder, Patrick, if you have any thoughts on that. Is my analysis too depressing, do you think?

Patrick: The dimension that isn't being discussed inside the Tory party is that of education for human liberation. Where is the critical edge? Where is the critical pedagogy? Where is the, 'We can be better than this'? The Tories won't talk in those terms and that seems to me to be one of the vital elements that the left can bring into this discussion.

Melissa: Jim, how does high-stakes assessments affect you as a teacher?

Jim: Well, I only teach GCSE and Key Stage 4 but everything seems to roll back from

it. We seem to start with the endpoint that we're trying to get to and we just roll back from that. The three-year Key Stage 4 [from year nine through to year eleven] seems almost standard now across the piece because we want more time. There is this idea that more time is the answer. We then roll back and you start to hear discussions about how the year eight curriculum is going to roll forwards into GCSE, as if that's the only aim of the year eight curriculum. That has implications for what happens in year seven, and it goes back and back and back … We've started with that endpoint of the high-stakes exam, and it just puts pressure on teachers from the get-go. I was deeply hopeful on assessment that the events this past year would give us a chance to look again at assessment and, like Mary, I was deeply disappointed from the noises coming out from central government recently. They say very clearly: 'Treat this as a hiccup. We're back to exams, and that's high-stakes exams'. I had hoped that, algorithms and the debacle of last year aside, there was evidence that we might trust the teaching profession to help with the assessment process and give teacher-assessed grades, alongside exams rather than as a replacement. None of that seems to be even on the table right now. That's deeply disappointing. In reality, we've replaced GCSE exams with exams in school which teachers mark, but those marks aren't trusted. The exam boards will check the results and there'll be serious consequences if you've got it wrong. And without a single penny coming back from the exam boards either. It seems an extraordinary situation to me.

Melissa: You're saying that this Covid period is a blip? That you don't see it leading to significant change?

Jim: I'm just saying that that's the way the noises are at the moment coming from the DfE. I had hoped it would be better, and maybe it still will be. But that's not what I'm hearing.

Melissa: I'd like us to talk about what change might we see. I can't bear the thought we're not going to see any change at all. Eliane, as one parent who has written about how your eyes have been opened to something, do you see others thinking the same? Any movement, any restlessness by parents, any change in the way they behave? It may be that more parents are going to decide to home-school. Do you see any evidence of that?

Eliane: Yes, I think there is evidence of that, but I would like to see change happen within schools. I think that a lot of parents are talking about this, but we're very atomised and isolated in our family units. Some kind of consolidation of that energy through campaigns like More Than a Score and so on is good to see, but it just makes me wonder how change actually happens, whether from bottom-up or top-down. My hope

would be that what parents can offer is an outsider's perspective. We're not trapped in these awful systems, we haven't internalised the awful language of education, and that's why when we saw it from the outside we were able to offer that insight, even though we're coming from the outside and we don't have inside knowledge. What we need to do is hold on to that moment of horror, so that what caused it doesn't become normalised for parents. We need to remember the shock of actually encountering what the kids and the teachers are going through. What I would like to see is parents coming together with teachers in a united front to challenge this. I know teachers are really put upon, but it seems like the kind of formulaic, bureaucratic learning that's going on in schools is just incredibly labour-intensive and wasteful. For me that would be a win-win in terms of actually trying to free up the burdens on teachers. I would hope for room for joint work there.

I would like to see teachers have the confidence and the training to be able to teach rather than just deliver. The teacher that I spoke to for the article I wrote very much articulated that. The thing that I think we have to overcome on the left is this language of accountability. There's this perceived need for accountability in public institutions, in schools, and I do think it compromises some campaigns on the left for change. We see that language to do with the need for accountability so often in the public sector, but really it perpetuates this culture of testing and perfection. I think it's really about how do we know what goes on inside schools? How do we know it's good enough? How do we know it's okay? The left needs to come up with a new way of thinking about that which doesn't replicate the neoliberal language of accountability which perpetuates these awful bureaucratic systems.

Melissa: Yes, and as I think Mary touched on in her article, it's a bureaucratic system that particularly penalises disadvantaged schools. Negative judgements are passed, in effect, on the economic circumstances of a school, because we all know the connection between poverty and learning. And it's for this reason, that groups like the Headteachers Roundtable are calling to 'pause Ofsted'.

Patrick, let me ask you, where do you think change is going to come from? How are we going to move towards a system that more honours education as liberation, that dissolves the monster of accountability and so on?

Patrick: I think the struggle is on three fronts. There's a struggle of ideas, which is why *FORUM* exists and why people come together in events such as this to thrash out ideas and to take on the ideas of the right and their language. The language of accountability could be counterposed by a language of trust, responsibility and public service, for example. There's a political struggle, which is why what happens in the Labour party and the Tory party is important. There's an industrial struggle, which is why the NEU is

vital. In terms of communicating with parents, I guess it's the work of people like Eliane, and Mary when she writes for the press, and a new generation who are social media savvy. For me, two things are really important. Firstly the removal of the discourse of ability, which is at the heart of so much that is wrong with the system because of the way it regards young people and constructs young people right from the beginning. I guess the second would be a return to seeing teachers as expert and, in the tradition of Lawrence Stenhouse, as researchers. At the moment, foundations like the Education Endowment Foundation and other think-tanks have weaponised research. They hand it down to teachers as evidence of so-called best practice, and remove from teachers a sense that they know what they're doing and that they can solve the difficulties they face as educators by talking with each other.

Melissa: Just on the issue of 'ability' labelling, I think the big change in the last few decades has been a shift, even within the Tory party, from advocating selective schools to advocating streaming and setting within all-in schools. Here, Theresa May was behind the times in trying to expand grammars. Basically, most people in mainstream politics now say, 'Everyone should go to school together but we must separate by ability within those institutions'.

Jim: I disagree slightly that the grammar-school war is over yet, to be honest. I think the Cameron government just moved to academisation as its battleground at that juncture. I think it's something that I wouldn't be surprised to see flare up again. Going forward, I'm with Patrick. Get back to looking at teachers as professionals. We use the term 'experts in the classroom' but we mean 'experts in the subject', not experts pedagogically. That, I think, is something we need to get back to. The best people to work out how to get things across to students are the people who see them on a daily basis. That respect for the profession, as pedagogical experts, has been, sadly, eroded. You mentioned earlier the 'blob' comment which very much summed up the way I think the profession has been seen for some time. We've got Eliane here, and it's great to hear from a parent actually. We survey parents all the time, but we end up seemingly saying: 'Well, there's a variety of views so who knows?' Or we find a view that somehow we were hoping to find in the first place, and tailor our surveying to do that. A huge positive which this past year has really reinforced for me is just how resilient our young people are, perhaps much more than I ever thought. I know it's often said, and it seems trite, but they have been through so much and come out the other side and maybe we should learn from that? Maybe we should learn that they are capable of so much more – if we let them be – than we think they are. We are setting a box around them at the very outset, and we shouldn't be doing that. We should be freeing them up. I think it's going to be really interesting to see. Whether we like it or not, we've had two years without SATs at primary level and

it's going to be really interesting to see what the follow-through from that is. I'm looking forward to having students who don't have numbers attached to them or a LAP, HAP, MAP achievement label stuck on them from day one. I'm really looking forward to it. I think that's my hope for the future.

Melissa: There're so many numbers attached to the young aren't there? You start on dolphin table but you quickly become level 2, 3, 4, 5 or whatever at primary school, and then the numbers start again at secondary school, ranging up to 9 at GCSE. Mary, how do you think this last year will reconfigure the political forces. Are you optimistic?

Mary: I think that a lot depends on how this plays out now. There's going to be a reshuffle in the summer. One person we haven't talked about here is schools' minister Nick Gibb, who has held on to his post for over ten years with a short break and is Michael Gove's representative on earth for a 'knowledge-rich curriculum'– which we don't think is knowledge rich – and who has been a very able lieutenant. I have had to deal with him on many occasions. On one occasion I literally banged my head on the desk. I literally banged my head on the desk. I quite like him personally because he works hard and he cares. He's an honourable man, but he's just completely mistaken. He's completely misguided and his faith in a 'knowledge-rich curriculum' assessed by timed exams is a blind faith. He won't take no for an answer but he's very powerful and he knows where the bodies are buried in the DfE. He's the minister that civil servants are used to. What happens to Nick Gibb I think will be a real measure of what's going to be the government's intentions. I think the thing we have to accept is that education is never the top on any government to-do list. If they're thinking about the public sector or public services they're thinking about health, because they know that health matters. They don't think education matters in the same way. It came to matter during Covid but it's very quickly gone back to not mattering anything like as much, which is why Gavin Williamson is still in post.

The other really worrying thing is that we have withdrawn from Talis, the Teaching and Learning Information Survey, which is the OECD survey about how children learn and what teachers say about their teaching styles and what children say about their learning. We've withdrawn from that. What was said about the OECD comparison is very interesting. It's absolutely right. We haven't made a move in literacy. We haven't made a move in science. John Jerrim, whose work I really rate because he takes on the OECD and I really rate people who take on the stats, is reported in *The Guardian* two weeks ago as saying that actually we haven't made any progress in maths either because the sample size was too low to tell us. He was saying that actually we won't have made any progress whatsoever. I think the last round of results was difficult for the government. Nick Gibb was able to clutch on to maths and say, 'We are making some progress'.

The final thing I would say is this. It will be very important for the Labour party to articulate an alternative, and at the moment we don't see much sign of that. We understand that they are sympathetic to the idea of less high-stakes testing. They're sympathetic to the idea of a skills-based element being incorporated into the curriculum. In my view it's not knowledge *or* skills, it should be both. You don't teach skills in a vacuum. The knowledge-rich people like E. D. Hirsch and Toby Young have no theory of learning, so knowledge for them is merely about transmission. The second thing is they've got no answer to who says knowledge is powerful. I had a Twitter spat with Katharine Birbalsingh about two weeks ago because I'd said about the Nick Gibb article on ConservativeHome that when Nick Gibb says 'the best that has been thought and said' he has no idea who did the thinking or who did the saying, and he misses out the last three words of that Matthew Arnold phrase, which are 'in the world'. 'The best that has been thought and said in the world'. Now, 'in the world' actually incorporates what children and young people through the Black Lives Matter movement are now asking, which is why is it in our curriculum we don't learn about the achievements of black scientists and black authors, and black sports people and black historians? Why is the history we learn of black people one of oppression? These are the questions being raised, as they have been at Pimlico Academy, which is run by the Future Academies chain, who have developed what the students believe are oppressive behaviour systems which discriminate. When a school says, 'You can't have hairstyles which make it difficult for people to see the front of that classroom and the whiteboard', you know what that's a euphemism for. You know that's a euphemism for Afro-Caribbean hair styles and you know that is a euphemism for you expressing your ethnicity and your race through your appearance. The fact that there's starting to be pupil revolts against that as well, supported by parents, is also very interesting. I think there are lots of interesting moments coming up in connection with all this, and I think the knowledge-rich right are very worried about that. The right – people like Katherine Birbalsingh – know that they are really weak on the question of who chooses what's powerful. They know that. They don't have an answer to it.

Jim: Who chooses the cultural capital?

Mary: Yes, exactly. Who chooses the cultural capital.

Melissa: It occurred to me while you were speaking, Mary, that perhaps the biggest challenge to the curriculum in the last year has come outside the school estate, from groups like Black Lives Matter, rather than from anyone within the education world?

If you think, Patrick, about the kind of ideas associated with *FORUM*, that would include the idea that students should have a role in co-construction of the curriculum. But nowadays the co-construction of the curriculum that we're seeing is that coming

through from protest movements, such as those calling for a more diverse syllabus. We haven't seen that kind of rebellion within schools for decades, because schools are such controlled places, and a premium is placed on obedience, by students and teachers and leaders.

Let's finish with Labour, which should be the party making arguments that are different to the government. Anybody got any thoughts on what they'd like to see Kate Green, shadow secretary of state for education, say?

Jim: I do look for that from Labour. Black Lives Matter has been hugely important. I'd add in the gender equality debate, which I also think has been hugely important. Certainly in my school in Norfolk, whose students are largely of white ethnic background, that's also been a hugely important discussion. I don't underestimate how involved students are in that, and how they are moving that debate forward at a local level. What would I like to see from Labour? Rather than sympathy for ideas I'd like to see concrete ideas. Rather than: 'Yes, we're receptive to this, we're receptive to that, we're happy to talk about that', I'd like a much firmer: 'This is what we're about in terms of education. This is what we would like to do'. A clear direction in that respect is what I would like to see most of all.

Melissa: Eliane, do you look to the Labour party to express some of the things that you've learnt over the last year?

Eliane: Yes, and I should say that I realised, when I was talking about lockdowns one and two, that I am a very comfortable, privileged parent who was able to combine home-schooling with work. I think the fact that I'm very well-resourced makes a big difference. And also that I had some degree of desire to home-school my kids in any case. I was able to scratch that itch, but I was also quite happy to send them back to school at the end of it all. Yes, principles that I would like to see expressed are knowledge, creativity, teachers having autonomy and confidence, and respect. Parents having a voice. Children actually enjoying their education. I guess I'm troubled by this idea about relevance and employability. I wonder, 'Well, what world are we actually training kids for?'. I think the world we're training them for at the moment is to be really good clock-punchers in an Amazon warehouse, or data-entry workers. We don't actually know what kind of technological future we're inheriting. There's lots of talk about how work itself is changing. I suppose I would look to those tech execs, those Silicon Valley executives in the States who all send their kids to Steiner Waldorf schools. I think we should rethink the idea of relevance and what we're preparing the kids for, and actually just go back to first principles and see that as a really valuable training for a future they could remake, rather than just fit into.

Jim: If I could just say, that's exactly what I meant when I talked about the positive I took from this past year. It's just what the young people have shown us over the past year: how adaptable they are. They are far more adaptable in many ways than we as a profession are, and that's what came through loud and clear. Maybe they are making themselves ready for the world despite us, not because of us.

Melissa: Patrick, final word. What would you like to see from the Labour party?

Patrick: Hard to know where to start, isn't it? The return of all schools to local authority oversight. The resuscitation of the idea of a National Education Service, which seemed to have some legs under the previous Labour leadership. As for the issue of 'Whose knowledge and who says?' I would hope the Labour party would want a place in the curriculum for our knowledge, the knowledge from below, the tradition of oppositional knowledge. I'd like to hear them talk about teaching as a moral act: teaching as craft, art and science, and as moral and ethical decision-making. I'd like Labour's education policy to give more space, as a previous speaker was saying, to a theory of learning rooted in the importance of the imagination. At the moment, for Ofsted, learning is remembering. It's about interleaving and working memory and all that stuff. But what drives learning is imagination, and thinking about that places the agency of the learner again at the centre. It returns to the learner their autonomy, independence and responsibility, which it is the teacher's duty and privilege to nurture and further enable. I would like to see Labour talk about that.

Melissa: That ties it up very nicely because it circles back to what Eliane said at the beginning. Can I just add, I am so sick of the political right having hijacked the very word 'knowledge'. I have never heard of anyone who is interested in education, has children, teaches or runs a school that isn't interested in knowledge. As if anybody who disagrees with them wants something other than knowledge. It annoys me intensely.

Mary: That's where they're so clever.

Melissa: What – you mean the political right claiming that only they support knowledge?

Mary: Yes, doing that binary divide is very clever. They position you as not wanting kids to know anything, not wanting standards, not wanting learning while what I am actually trying to say is: 'This is knowledge which is corrupted through the assessment process'.

Melissa: Yes but it is clever of them … that's part of the problem that anyone involved in education faces. It's the difference between what's really going on and how it's represented.

Mary: Getting involved in the debate is very nasty as well. On Twitter it's very nasty because they pile in and I do go into battle with them frequently, but I bear the scars and I find it a very lonely place.

Melissa: You're not lonely here.

Mary: No.

Melissa: Thank you for going into battle Mary, we appreciate it. And thanks to all for a great discussion, which has actually allowed us to go so much deeper than all those unpleasant, polarised yet oddly unsatisfying battles on social media.

Notes

1. Eliane Glaser, 'Homeschooling has revealed the absurdity of England's national curriculum', *Prospect*, 28 February, 2021.