Organising around ideas

Why we need to take the battle of ideas in education more seriously

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Abstract

In this article we develop the notion of 'organising around ideas'. We highlight the ways in which education debate in England has narrowed as traditional spaces for discussion and debate have been closed down. The state now has extraordinary power to shape discourses and frame narratives about the purposes of schooling. Here we argue that we must find new ways to engage in the battle of ideas, not simply as an exercise in rational argument, but as an essential element of organising and movement building. The article provides three short case studies of 'organising around ideas' in action to illustrate what this work can look like. The cases are not templates, but illustrate the flexible, grassroots-based activity that is central to building a movement from the bottom up.

Keywords: activism; trade unions; neoliberal education; culture of education; teacher identity

Introduction

An earlier version of this article began life as a contribution to a series of papers that sought to explore how education trade unions and university-based researchers might develop new collaborative partnerships in order to be able to challenge dominant narratives in education more effectively and articulate more optimistic visions of what the future might look like. Here we present an adapted version of the original, but the argument remains fundamentally the same: there is an urgent need to connect ideas and activism and to consider how we build support for the type of education system that *FORUM* readers believe in. We are all painfully aware that it is a battle of ideas that we have not been winning, and that situation is unlikely to change unless we find new ways to 'organise around ideas'.

The need for the type of 'ideas work' that we describe and discuss is based on two linked convictions. First, is an acknowledgement that the success of the neoliberal restructuring of public education systems has in part been effective because the ideas that underpin this restructuring have become deeply embedded within the system itself. Performative cultures, driven by standardised testing and targets, have often become internalised and normalised. Business logics have penetrated deep into the

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practices that frame studying and working in contemporary educational institutions. Second is the recognition that any successful challenge to the developments that we are describing requires education activists to participate in the same ideological struggle over what counts as 'common sense' – not just engaging in an abstract 'battle of ideas' but developing the grassroots 'intellectuals' who can take these ideas into the staffrooms and classrooms where the new common sense has become embedded, and where it must be disrupted.

In this paper, we provide three practical examples of what we believe 'organising around ideas' can look like and how a range of contexts and formats can be used to develop activist-researcher collaborations. Each of them shares a commitment to connect education activists (mostly, but not exclusively, working in trade unions) with those engaged in educational research in order to popularise alternative visions of what public education can and should look like, but also build the skills and capacities of grassroots activists to engage in the type of ideas work we are outlining. 'Organising around ideas' recognises the importance of 'shifting thinking' – of those who work and study in education systems, but also the need to 'shift thinking' in communities and in the wider population. There is a need to reframe our responses to fundamental questions – what is education for? How might a more democratic and socially just education system be organised? How is it possible to make change happen? However, the broader challenge is to ensure that the responses to these questions are widely understood and have popular support. There is no deterministic law that can guarantee social progress or that suggests that at some indeterminate point in the future improvement must inevitably come. Rather, the process of shifting thinking that we are describing requires the active engagement of 'organisers and leaders' who can engage in what is, in essence, a pedagogical process of social and collective learning. Undertaking this work, and developing the organisers and leaders who can assume responsibility for it, is what we mean by 'organising around ideas'. Our analysis is underpinned by a conviction that those working in education unions and other education campaign groups have a key role to play in this process (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017), as it is the potential for such organisations to develop a broader 'collective will' that can build the coalitions and popular movements required to bring about change.

As authors we share an involvement, in different capacities and to different degrees, in the three cases studies we present. All are located in England and this article begins by offering a contextual overview of educational reform in England. We acknowledge the contextual specificities of English education reform and we recognise that those who work in different contexts will face distinctive challenges. It is for individual readers to reflect on the points of contact and departure in relation to their own experience and to what extent these inform the application of learning from these case studies to different contexts.

Our analysis highlights the particular ways in which education reform in England has depended on reconfiguring the public education system and seeking to 're-culture' the teaching profession. We further argue that, despite its dramatic impact, the dominance of neoliberal ideas in the English public education system remains sharply contested and that these sites of contestation provide the spaces and opportunities in which counter-hegemonic resistance can be developed. Through the three case studies presented we seek to illustrate different ways in which activists can be developed and supported to engage in these struggles.

We conclude with some reflections on these experiences and further thoughts about what is necessary to develop this work further.

The English education policy context: Public education under attack

In England neoliberalism has been experienced in a particularly sharp form, and this has been especially the case in education. The value of education in public expenditure terms (and therefore its potential for private capital), and the key ideological function that education performs, have always ensured that public education has been a target for neoliberal restructuring. These attacks were evident before the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, and have continued in different forms ever since (Jones, 2016).

The attack on public education has sometimes taken the form of a very direct confrontation with what Conservative leader David Cameron (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 2009) called 'the education establishment' (education unions, Labour-controlled local authorities and university-based education departments), but oftentimes this attack has assumed the form of a much longer-term ideological project, akin to what Antonio Gramsci (1971) referred to as a 'war of position'. As the Conservative Party has sought to marginalise what Cameron referred to as the 'education establishment' it has been simultaneously constructing a new education establishment. Key policy actors are increasingly the chief executive officers (the titling is significant) of the new academy chains and multi-academy trusts (groups of schools organised outside of local government control), the policy developers in pro-government think tanks and the leaders of a raft of powerful organisations in education that are not part of the government but which depend hugely on receiving public money, and which manage projects and initiatives that promote government policies and agendas. To this list can be added the uncritical friends who populate the reviews set up by government to determine significant policy changes in strategically important parts of the education system.

To continue with our Gramscian analysis, we see the construction of a new hegemonic alliance in English education that is intent on 're-culturing' the whole teaching profession – forging a new 'common sense' based on competition, individualism and

(private) enterprise. Much of this is framed in wider policy discourses that claim to value 'social mobility' and meritocracy in education, but which make no substantive efforts to address structural inequalities. Rather, teachers and other education workers (individually and collectively) are scapegoated for failing to 'close the gap'.

At the epicentre of this battle of ideas is the ideological struggle for the heart and soul of the English school teacher. Traditional teacher identities were often grounded in concepts of professionalism (based on professional training and qualifications) and career (secure work combined with decent salaries and pensions), with these collective identities frequently combined with trade union membership. These identities have been intentionally challenged as the new teacher is refashioned as an individualised performative professional (Ball, 2003), always willing to 'go the extra mile' to ensure targets are met and corporate objectives are achieved. Questioning the exhortation to always 'put pupils first', despite the costs to teachers' physical and mental health, can be presented as a 'lack of commitment'. Indeed, failure to comply with this new performative culture comes with high risks. Managerial authority in the new semi-privatised school system has been increased dramatically and the 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1920) has shifted decisively in favour of the employer. A recent study by Perryman and Calvert linked these developments to the high rates of attrition among English school teachers and argued that problems within the system are much deeper than workload, rather they argue: 'part of the problem lies within the culture of teaching, the constant scrutiny, the need to perform and hyper-critical management. Reducing workload will not address these cultural issues' (Perryman and Calvert, 2019 p19).

However, arguably more significant, and certainly more insidious, is the ideological reframing of the school system in ways that are intended to encourage teachers to believe that 'there is no alternative', and that change is not possible. Perhaps the clearest example of this ideological reframing is evident in the reforms of teacher education, whereby training is increasingly workplace-based (with universities' role correspondingly marginalised) and is very largely driven by the demands of Ofsted. The most recent iteration of this, announced in January 2021, is the establishment by central government of an 'Institute of Teaching' that the minister has claimed will 'revolutionise teacher training' (*Schools Week*, 2021) but which, in essence, centralises control of teacher education even more in the hands of the state. The teacher-education curriculum no longer looks critically at fundamental questions of education philosophy and purpose, but focuses narrowly on how to function in a hyper-centralised system reinforced through a complex ecosystem of high-stakes accountability. After these powerful and formative experiences, early-career teachers are bombarded by a raft of equally powerful ideological devices, from privatised professional development to performance appraisal and performance pay, that reinforce the exhortation of modern-day scientific management that there is only 'one best way' (Taylor, 1911), and that the

'good teacher' is one who complies and conforms to 'professional standards' (Connell, 2010).

Teachers fight back – taking on the battle of ideas

Teachers are not taken in by the efforts to reconfigure the English education system and to recast them as the compliant 'deliverers' of the state's preferred curriculum and the values embedded within it. Teachers often experience the system as brutal in terms of the demands it makes on them (Perryman and Calvert, 2019), but they are also frustrated by their lack of autonomy and the extent to which the performative culture seeks to distort and corrupt their values. For example, in the most recent OECD TALIS survey, teachers in England ranked forty-sixth out of forty-eight in terms of their satisfaction with levels of professional autonomy, while they ranked the same in terms of satisfaction with participation in decision-making in their school. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the European Commission identified that teachers in England had the lowest levels of job satisfaction of all EU28 countries (European Commission, 2019).

This is why the developments we have been describing continue to be contested in multiple ways – both at a national level by education unions and others, but also by countless teachers every day in their classrooms through small acts of resistance that put the interests of the child before the demands of the system (Ball and Olmedo, 2013).

However, we believe we must also acknowledge that the state has been highly effective in undermining the values of comprehensive education (non-selective community schools in England) and beginning to forge a new common sense that fuses neoliberal and neoconservative values. The state has mobilised its substantial resources over several decades in this battle of ideas and it would be extraordinary if this has not had an impact on teachers' work, but also their identities. We believe, therefore, that if teachers are to push back against the system we are describing then they too must engage in the 'battle of ideas' that has been waged against them. We recognise that there will be moments, such as campaigns on pay and workload, when organised teachers can directly challenge the system that both drains them and deskills them, and that these moments provide important opportunities to resist. However, we believe that for resistance to become meaningful (by which we mean significant victories that become embedded) then there has to be wholesale ideological reform of the system, and that is only possible when those ideas are widely understood and popularised by those forming the movement for change. In short, teachers (and their allies) must believe that another world is possible, and that their collective action can make change happen. Without the ideas that make it possible to imagine and articulate such an alternative, it is a hard to see how change is possible.

For these reasons, we believe it is essential that education workers organise around

ideas, by which we mean taking our own education as educators seriously, taking the education of others seriously (colleagues, parents, fellow union members) and, finally, developing others as educational leaders (defined as those who lead and organise in educative ways). It is educational work that is focused explicitly on articulating an alternative to education in its neoliberal form, and to supporting those who seek to make change happen. In recent times this is not work that has always been taken seriously by education trade unions and others (Little and McDowell, 2017), but we argue this historic neglect of a more explicitly political education has to be remedied. Failure to engage in this work is tantamount to leaving the mighty resources of capital and the political right unchecked and being satisfied with fighting battles on terrain entirely determined by others.

Fortunately, we already see the signs of change, and we are aware of myriad examples of this type of work developing in many different contexts and, in the short sections that follow, we set out three examples of initiatives we have been involved in that illustrate this work in practice. In each case there is a coming together of activists and academics to help grassroots organisers in education rethink what the future might look like and how collective action can make change happen. The process is based on principles of co-construction with the intention to both deepen individual understandings and to develop collective visions and action. The three examples are a reading group organised by grassroots young educators in the National Education Union (*#NEUideas* reading group), a university-activist collaboration (Ideas for activist teachers) and the final case focuses on the Momentum-organised *The World Transformed* initiative. The diverse examples illustrate the flexible range of activities that are an important feature of this type of work. What works best in any given context will be determined by those engaged in the initiatives themselves and the wider context within which they are nested.

#NEUideas reading group

Early in 2018 a network of teachers, organised in the London Young Teachers' Section of the National Union of Teachers (now the National Education Union, or NEU and hence *#NEUideas*) agreed to form a reading group among its members. Teachers in the network were frustrated by the instrumentalist approach to their teacher education, and also the promotion of 'new orthodoxies' in schools that often privileged a highly political 'what works' agenda frequently framed as objective and value-neutral.

A small organising group was formed that included members of the young teachers' network and an academic. The group established a format for meetings that involved the selection of an appropriate text (topical, easy to access – preferably open access – and of interest to the group) and oftentimes contact with the author to provide a short opening presentation. The inaugural meeting discussed Stephen Ball's book *The*

Education Debate (Policy Press, 2017) and was opened by the author. Since then the group has met on a regular basis, and has been able to sustain its activities through the pandemic by moving sessions online. A wide range of texts have been discussed, allowing participants to develop alternative perspectives on key issues, from racism and schooling to trade-union organising. Attendance inevitably varies, but is often strong with twenty to thirty-plus participants. What is significant is that many of those who have attended have not always attended traditional union meetings, while several people have become more involved in union work following attendance at the reading group.

In our view, the most significant benefit is that a growing group of young trade union activists are able to go back into their schools and staffrooms and feel confident to challenge dominant narratives, and to ensure that alternative ideas are kept alive in the daily discussions that frame the real working lives of educators. We believe the aims of the group are best expressed in the words of the group's own members, as they described a workshop they organised at a union event:

> The *NEUideas* reading group offers participants an opportunity to explore their educational philosophies and practices through reading and discussion. With cutbacks in teacher training and professional development, with regressive ideologies percolating in schools through media and policy papers into classrooms, now more than ever it is important for educators to educate themselves. Join the group to learn how the power of ideas can lead to change and how a reading group can engage young teachers in the union.

Ideas for activist teachers

Ideas for activist teachers was established by two academic staff at the University of Nottingham who were interested in working with educators in trade unions and social movements to try to connect theory and practice more effectively. Some seed corn funding allowed the Nottingham team to organise a residential weekend in which travel, accommodation and subsistence costs were covered. A dozen participants were recruited, mostly from one of the teachers' unions, but participants were not exclusively trade-union activists.

The core purpose of the weekend was to introduce the ideas of a small number of key thinkers (Antonio Gramsci, Paolo Freire and Ana Dinerstein) and to consider how these ideas might inform participants' work as educators in their classrooms, but also as activists in unions and social movements. The intention was to 'model the methods' and to organise workshops in ways that illustrated, for example, what Freirean critical pedagogy might look like in practice. The format of the weekend was intentionally flexible, with considerable opportunity for participants to share experiences and

discuss collectively how they might make use of the ideas they were discussing in their activities after the event.

The event was organised as deliberately informal and low key. There was no 'sponsor' and no formal learning outcomes. Participants were encouraged to relate discussions to future activities, but there was no discussion of plans and targets. The intention was to create a space in which the pressures of performativity (to have 'results', 'outcomes', 'objectives') were completely absent and to demonstrate what can be possible when we free ourselves from the tyranny of managerialist language and norms.

The workshop was very successful and served to illustrate what is possible when academics and activists work together in ways that challenge conventional notions of teacher and learner. Future workshops are currently being discussed, including a version 'commissioned' by the local branch of an education union to use as an education and training event to further develop activists.

The World Transformed

The World Transformed is a festival of politics, ideas and culture that has taken place alongside, but independently of, the Labour party conference every year since 2016. The festival has always had an education stream to discuss specifically the key issues facing the education sector. Topics have ranged from the need to abolish private schools to building a vision for a national education service. In recent years, local 'Transformed' festivals throughout the year have also been held, with the aim of activists holding smaller political education festivals in their communities.

Though the way the festival is organised continues to evolve, the education sessions are generally put together by education activists, teachers and trade unionists working alongside the main festival organisers. The format for the sessions varies. For example, there have been policy workshops where participants work collaboratively to propose education policies that would improve the school system, and panel events where academics, school workers, trade unionists, politicians and education journalists come together to discuss a topic before the event opens up to the audience. In 2020, the festival moved completely online due to the pandemic.

To give an example of one recent event at *The World Transformed*, in 2019 there was a panel event titled 'Radical pedagogy: what is education for?'. This event was arranged and chaired by a primary school teacher who was also an active union member. Four academics spoke on the panel, each offering different visions for education.

One spoke of the possibility of working outside of institutions to provide radical anti-imperialist education. She illustrated this by drawing on a website put together to facilitate access to education around the history of Palestine. A second spoke of the current experiences of working-class pupils in education, introducing the audience

to Bourdieu and his theory of cultural and social capital. A third spoke about Antonio Gramsci and how his theories can be applied to the current contexts of schools and education trade unionism. A final scholar spoke more generally about critical approaches to education. Members of the audience were invited to reflect upon their own ideas of what education is for and to compare the ideas discussed with those dominant in the school system today. They were given the opportunity to ask questions and respond to panellists. Those who attended commented that the session had given them access to analysis and theoretical concepts that helped them to think more clearly about what they encounter in the classroom on a day-to-day basis.

Sessions such as those detailed above provide the opportunity for teachers, as well as parents, support staff and students, to encounter critiques of the school system and explore alternatives. A dialogue is facilitated between those who have greater access to theoretical knowledge of ideas and research around the school system and those who work in our schools on a daily basis. This allows academics to see the relevance of their work to those who are teaching on the ground. For teachers, this can provide exposure to theories which shine a light on the contradictions of our current school system, for example, the overemphasis on testing and its implications for students and teachers. While teachers are confronted with such contradiction daily, they are rarely given any opportunity to challenge the hegemonic narratives around these. Events such as *The World Transformed* are exceptions to this – they problematise what is often normalised and contest the oversimplified narratives designed to legitimise many of the most damaging aspects of our education system. Above all, they allow teachers the opportunity to explore alternatives, to believe that things can be done differently, and to begin to build a vision of how this might be achieved.

Concluding reflections

In this article, we have sought to make the case for developing stronger relationships between education activists (involved in education unions and broader educational campaigns) and educational researchers and academics. While there is nothing intrinsically new about this work, we believe the closing down of spaces for debate that result from changes in teacher education and new managerial cultures in schools makes this work more urgent. Our concern is that the threat posed by the global education reform movement (Sahlberg, 2016) intentionally seeks to destabilise many of the key pillars of public education, and in particular the collective voice of teachers and educators as represented by the organised education trade union and other movements. The challenge is often a direct and crude one (for example, the weakening of collective bargaining arrangements or the promotion of an anti-union managerialism), but most powerfully it is an ideological one in which discourses are

shifted and professional identities are dismantled and reconstituted. We believe that this drive for hegemonic dominance must be challenged by acting in counter-hegemonic ways, that is by challenging the new 'common sense' of privatisation and performativity, and constructing an alternative common sense based on a very different set of values and pedagogical understandings. This requires education activists to 'organise around ideas', but it also requires education unions to build their own collective capacity by consciously developing the next generation of organisers and leaders. We conceive of these 'organisers and leaders' as akin to the organic intellectuals that Gramsci identified as central to bringing about meaningful and organic change. The pivotal task therefore is to actively construct this new generation of organisers and leaders, and we believe building on creative relationships between educational researchers and education activists as a form of co-construction is critical to this political project.

In setting out these examples of new ways of working between education activists and those engaged in critical education research we recognise that this can pose particular challenges and generate inevitable tensions. For education unions, for example, this can be a form of activity that represents a significant shift from established practices. Even in countries where some trade unions have close affiliations with political parties, education unions typically eschew such links. The possibility of being more 'political', even if this is not about party connections, is one that sits uncomfortably with the traditional cultures of many unions. However, a failure to recognise the highly politicised nature of the current attacks on public education risks failing to engage in the only battle that can make a fundamental difference – the battle for the heart and soul of state education, which is ultimately a battle for the hearts and minds of individuals within and beyond the education system itself.

Such an approach also, by necessity, is about engaging grassroots members in debates about ideas, with all the consequences that flow from this. This is achieved by creating open spaces to discuss and debate, and it is this pedagogic process that is both energising and potentially transformative. It is also, by definition, uneven and unpredictable. There is no thinking that does not involve asking difficult and challenging questions. For example, any discussion about inequalities in the education system must, at some point, question how our own organisations often reproduce in their own structures the inequalities they purport to challenge in the labour market. It is our view that as education activists, in whatever contexts we work, we must not only welcome such discussion and debate, but should create the spaces that encourage and nurture it. Failure to do so will stifle and stultify, and in the longer-term lead to atrophy. However, to do so often requires a cultural shift that embraces risk and the willingness to 'let go', and we understand that these are not easy changes to make for organisations that have historically often worked in very different ways.

In similar ways, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and tensions for

critical educational researchers who want to engage in the type of initiatives we have described in this paper. Not least is the importance of recognising that university academics are themselves workers in the neoliberal system they critique, governed by the same performative pressures that are evident elsewhere in the education system. Indeed, critical scholars often face these tensions particularly acutely as their critical positioning within their discipline frequently cuts them off from the research funding that is necessary to secure stable work and long-term career progression. Being a researcher who seeks to 'go against the grain' has personal consequences, often experienced most sharply by those already disadvantaged in a labour market that thrives on precarity. No number of exhortations to academic freedom changes that reality. Critical education researchers therefore have to learn to work 'in and against' the system, an experience that involves both challenge and risk. In this context, critical education scholars need themselves to draw on the most basic resource of education activists to develop forms of collective working and mutual solidarity that can help sustain difficult work in hostile environments. Such approaches by no means eliminate the challenges, but they can provide the support necessary to sustain the work of the critical scholar/activist described by Michael Apple (2010) and illustrated in this article.

We finish by arguing that this is long, slow and difficult work, but that a failure to engage in this activity will result in the continued domination of a set of ideas that are inimical to the interests of democratic and socially just public education. As Gramsci himself recognised: 'there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders … But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings' (Gramsci, 1971, p334).

Here Gramsci is not referring to the popular conception of the intellectual as a remote and detached scholar, but rather to those individuals who are often rooted in everyday workplaces and communities and who can act as 'constructor, organiser and "permanent persuader"' (p 10). These are people who can disrupt orthodoxies and help imagine new possibilities. Through their abilities to articulate alternatives, they can 'shift thinking'. However, developing the new generation of 'organisers and leaders' requires all of us to rethink what we mean by 'leaders', and to reimagine what it can mean to 'organise around ideas'. Our view is that this is much more likely when education activists and critical education researchers find new and more creative ways to collaborate. The short case studies in this article offer some examples of the possibilities. They are inevitably framed by the specific contexts within which they have been formed. The challenge is to create the conditions where similar collaborations can develop and thrive elsewhere – forged and formed by those engaged in the process of reconstruction that is now an imperative.

Postscript: *FORUM* and the battle of ideas

When this article was first developed, its focus was on showcasing practical case studies of education activists and critical education researchers working together to 'organise around ideas'. Of course, the work we are describing, and the reasons for engaging in it, are not so different from the work *FORUM* has been doing since 1958. Helping teachers critique the system they work in, imagining how it might be better and supporting them to build the movements that can bring about change is the work *FORUM* has been doing, without interruption, for more than sixty years. At times *FORUM* has been at the forefront of new and exciting developments in education as the campaign for genuine comprehensive education gathered momentum. For now, we live in quite different times, and *FORUM* finds itself providing the arguments and evidence to defend past achievements and to look for ways to both resist the status quo and reignite the comprehensive ideal. However, as this article explains, that task is difficult because the state has enormous control over the system, and spaces for discussion and debate are not as open as they should be. That is why the work of *FORUM* is as important today as it has ever been – because there is no other journal that does what *FORUM* does. Please consider subscribing to *FORUM*. It is a small but important act that helps sustain the journal and the work it does. After all, the dictatorship of 'there is no alternative' cannot be overthrown without ideas.

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