

# EDITORIAL

## Re-imagining education

*FORUM* is part of the movement for instituting a system of comprehensive education. Such a system would, among other things, prevent selection of young people for different types of education in different types of schools. It would do so principally on the grounds that a selective system educationally damages all young people in it. Commitment to a system of comprehensive education entails a particular conception of human educability: that it is limitless. Such a view is radically at odds with the conception of human educability which informs arguments in support of educational selection between types of school and also within schools of any type. It poses a host of questions which adherents of comprehensive education must continue to address, related to all aspects of an education system: the nature of learning and teaching, how those who learn are to be regarded and how their learning might best be assessed, what is to be taught, how those who are taught may be grouped and organised in school, how education and democracy, school and community entwine, and more broadly, the social purposes of education. To envisage a comprehensive system is to re-imagine education thoroughly.

'Re-imagining Education' was the title Emily Rowe, a teacher in a Suffolk primary school, and Jeni Smith, one of the school's governors, gave to the project they undertook with Emily's class of year 5 and year 6 pupils during the 2020/2021 school year. They wanted to understand more about how pupils had experienced the effects of the pandemic, especially in relation to their education. At home, online and in school, what might pupils have learned to do? What had they discovered about themselves, and especially about themselves as learners?

Away from the classroom, it transpired, Emily's pupils had continued to learn all manner of things, even as they missed the experience of school, part of whose point, after all, is to augment and extend what can be learned outside it. The project led Emily to understand more fully 'how children need each other, to be better socially and intellectually, and to spark interest and ideas'. It served to remind her how teaching depends not on talking, but on listening. It left her feeling 'hopeful and reassured about teaching'. The article she and Jeni Smith have written repays re-reading and culminates in a list (a roll of honour, really) of what the pupils let Emily know they had learned. Here's confirmation that children are better conceived of 'not as lost and needing to catch up... but as active, competent and strong'.

To re-imagine education is the project all teachers undertake, at least potentially, every time they teach a class. Government policymakers work to constrain, discourage and even outlaw such re-imagining. This dictatorial tendency, which insists teaching's complexity

can be reduced to a set of approved techniques or a sanctioned standard model, was on show in the summer in the pages of the ‘Initial Teacher Training Market Review’ (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review>). A mild symptom exhibited by those the tendency afflicts is their use of the word ‘trainee’ to describe someone who aspires to be a teacher, and ‘training’ to describe the process of a teacher’s professional education and development. A more full-blown symptom declares itself on page 12 of the review, which reads in part:

... all trainees who teach early reading must be taught about systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). ... It is also important that trainees are familiarised with the evidence for the effectiveness of SSP and that time is not used teaching them alternative approaches.

Outrageous enough that government imposes on practitioners one sole method for the teaching of anything. Here the Review’s proposed curriculum unashamedly seeks to prohibit intellectual curiosity, and compromise intellectual integrity.

In her informed and measured analysis of the Market Review, Helen Trelford takes issue with many aspects of it. She explores the damaging implications for current provision inherent in the Review’s proposals and points out how it elevates certain ‘evidence’ beyond any critique, a stance which hardly inspires confidence in the promised consultation process which will follow the Review. At the time of writing, several university-based providers of Initial Teacher Education have rejected the single model of ‘training’ proposed in the Review and called on government to think again.

Nerys Roberts-Law teaches young children in France. She writes about giving her class of five-to-seven-year-olds their own notebooks, and the time and encouragement to use these for their own thoughtful and imaginative purposes. Doing so enabled her to see her pupils more clearly, the better to help them learn. The nature and importance of imagination in relation to learning are explored in her article. Mindful of practitioners who work without recourse to notions of fixed innate ‘ability’, Roberts-Law looks at ways in which the principles which inform such anti-determinist pedagogy are also those which help foster her pupils’ imagination.

In the final issue of 2020, (*FORUM* 62/3) Dena Eden detailed how secondary teachers in Norfolk adapted to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic and the initial lockdown. Now, in a companion piece based, once again, on a series of interviews with teachers and school leaders, she considers the impact on secondary school staff of an unprecedented year. Her article testifies to the resolve and resilience of staff in the face of radically-revised work-roles, even heavier workloads, a notably unhelpful public narrative about a ‘lost’ generation of young people, and the widening social and educational inequalities which the pandemic intensified.

Agnieszka Bates and Bryan Slater outline the trap they perceive in the Education

Secretary's willingness to declare teachers to be 'heroes' in the wake of the Covid year. They appraise the government's roadmap to recovery, predicated on academic 'catching up' and the restoration of the previous order, and find it doesn't begin to match up to the complexity of young people's lives nor to the scale of the problems the education system faces. They urge an open public discussion of fundamental questions in relation to the nature and purposes of schools and education. Such a conversation might begin to counterbalance the discourse of restoration by setting against it a renewed conception of the school system based on public trust, caring and public service. A re-imagining, if you like.

One of the effects of the various systemic changes to state education made by governments of both stripes over the past three decades, though accelerated by the right wing of the Conservative party, has been to drive experienced teachers out of the profession and so, in the telling phrase of Terry Wrigley and Gawain Little, to try to 'extinguish the memory' of what a decent education looks like. Very sadly, Terry Wrigley died while this issue of *FORUM* was in production. Terry was a staunch supporter of comprehensive education, and always a good friend to *FORUM*. We will acknowledge and celebrate his work as a writer and educational activist in a future number.

In the review essay Terry co-authored with Gawain Little, ideas and perspectives from four recently-published books are presented. The essay draws out overlapping themes and clarifies perspectives on what has happened, in order not only to focus theory but also to resource those looking to bring about change. The authors argue that the policy of academisation, and the re-configuration of what it means to teach, have been principle manifestations in the school sector of capitalism's neo-liberal turn. Academisation has increased the system's fragmentation. It has intensified competition between schools rather than nurturing co-operation. Academy governance is plagued by a deep democratic deficit resulting in conditions which have given rise to a host of financial scandals, as more than one of the books they draw on exposes in detail.

They are equally aware of the way neo-liberal policy has sought to re-fashion or 're-culture' what it is to be a teacher, and to foreclose discussion in society about the aims of education. They want to rally opposition to what has happened, resource it with clear-eyed understanding, and build a campaigning coalition to improve the education system.

Among the books Terry Wrigley and Gawain Little consider are Pat Thomson's *School Scandals*, which was reviewed by Richard House in the spring issue (*FORUM* 63/1), and Terry Edwards and Carl Parson's jointly authored polemic, *How to Dismantle the English Education System in 10 Easy Steps*, which is reviewed in this issue by Richard Harris.

The pandemic imposed many constraints on educators. Perhaps the most far-reaching was the requirement to teach online. Victoria Byfield, Chloe Berrisford and Polly Herbert, teach on the BA Education degree at Brighton University. The course

involves learning about children's literacy development and how to support it. In normal times, students take part in 'process drama' as one way of coming to understand what encountering and exploring fiction can be like for children. The authors explain why they thought it important to retain elements of 'process drama' as part of the online provision for their course, and how they managed to do so while teaching 'remotely'. Their commitment and success is inspiring.

Vicky Grube lives in North Carolina and runs an after-school artist's studio for younger children. Her article begins in her own childhood, among the doodles she drew, and the comic book characters she first met then. It deepens into a sustained reflection on memory, affect, drawing as meaning making, and how art and its practice can teach at any age. That art can do so is partly the work of the imagination, whose importance for all learning John Dewey recognised. Dewey makes an appearance in Vicky Grube's article, and his thoughts about imagination and learning are the subject of the article which follows hers.

This is the last issue in the first volume of *FORUM* to be published by Lawrence and Wishart, whose support we continue to be very grateful for. The editorial which launched this landmark volume quoted from the work of the philosopher John Macmurray. His thinking about education has been a particular influence on Michael Fielding, for over twenty years a stalwart of the *FORUM* Editorial Board and a champion of imaginative pedagogical practice in classrooms and across schools. It seems especially fitting to round off this year's volume with an article by Michael Fielding himself, one of several to be found in the *FORUM* archive. Jane Martin introduces 'The Person-Centred School'. Concerned with how we become persons, a question whose answer education is meant to help supply and formal schooling enable, Fielding here offers an original taxonomy of schools, built around the twin organising axes of 'the personal' and 'the functional'. A conception of education which leans increasingly towards the functional, extolling 'productivity' and 'performance' above all else, has led over recent decades, as Fielding perceived it would, to a situation in which teachers are increasingly regarded as 'pedagogical technicians' or 'cultural operatives', and teaching left more and more strait-jacketed.

The person-centred school continues to be the aspiration of those campaigning for a truly comprehensive education system. Practitioners continue to do their best to offer a decent education to their classes, one which frames its justification in a language-worlds away from the venomous lexicon of outcomes, efficiency, data, linear progress and the like which characterises the current dominant policy approach. This issue features accounts from practitioners who outline their various hopeful and protean pedagogical imaginaries. Their accounts confirm for us that imagination is still at work, in many classrooms, despite the constraints imposed by the high stakes testing regime at all levels and the educational harm it is known to cause, and despite the other policy-

barriers, whether imposed from government or more parochially, which would limit the space teachers currently have to show who they are as teachers. A system which prizes the teacher's imagination along with the child's: that might be one way to define comprehensive education.

The late Margaret Meek knew a thing or two about imagination, not least how it makes possible learning to read. In 'Margaret Meek – A Literate Life', the second e-book which *FORUM* has produced, Judith Graham surveys all of Margaret Meek's published writings and offers both a tribute and a commentary. 'Margaret Meek – A Literate Life'. It will be available on our website to download for free.

To re-imagine education: it's no more than a beginning. Imagined on the page, the comprehensive ideal, a vision of education which offers a resolution to fundamental contradictions besetting our school system, remains to be realised in the world. What's to be done to bring that about writes its own long list. But how make the change, unless first we imagine the change we'll work to make?

**Patrick Yarker**