Editorial

Reconstruction: towards a more socially just education service

Patrick Yarker

These days, about 4.5 per cent of national income is spent on education. Ten years ago, the figure was 5.6 per cent. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), who review it annually, spending on education has stayed broadly within this range over the past 30 years, whichever government was in power.

The economy grew modestly year-on-year in the decade between the financial crash and the arrival of the pandemic. Even so, spending per pupil in England's state schools fell during that period by 9 per cent in real terms, the largest fall in 40 years. The most deprived English secondary schools saw per-pupil spending fall by 14 per cent. Government plans look set to ensure that overall spending on schools will not have grown at all in the 15 years to 2024, an accomplishment the IFS suggests is unprecedented in the era following World War II. Pupil premium funding does not keep pace with inflation, while funding per student in further education and sixth form colleges over the past decade has declined significantly as student numbers have substantially increased.

Yet government spends more on education than on any other public service except health.

Funding isn't everything. But chronic financial constraints diminish what schools can do, curtailing schools all the more decisively in a society like ours, characterised – for a long time now – by widening differentials in household income. Children from the poorest homes remain more likely to perform less well at exams than do their better-off peers.

Alarming as this is, it is hardly news. In her article, Diane Reay castigates an education system which remains 'as divided and inequitable as it was 100 years ago', and in which attainment gaps are as entrenched as ever. Inequality, she writes, is sedimented in the system's ethos and values, making it all but impervious to progressive improvement. Policies which assume, for example, the superiority of competition over co-operation, the existence of a natural hierarchy of levels of academic 'ability', or that practitioners should accede compliantly rather than question responsibly, have made life miserable for many in schools, and for far too long. We must address again how government funds education, and improve how those in government (and opposition) understand what it is to educate.

A hard row to hoe. But encountering adversity, especially when it seems insurmountable, prompts, in Tim Brighouse at least, a surge of optimism. His speculative article reviews, from a vantage-point in the middle of the current century, certain

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changes to education policy and practice which the next two decades may have in store. He acknowledges what he calls 'all the poisons in the system', notably 'unbridled competition based on norm-referenced tests and exams', and the intolerant and exclusionary approaches too often adopted by schools to manage the behaviour and self-presentation of young people. Nevertheless, there's a bright side. In exploring it, he draws on the recently published book he co-authored with Mick Waters, and which will be reviewed in our next number. Tim Brighouse sees 2022 as a watershed year for education. As it proceeds, the movement for progressive change begins to coalesce once more, impelled by debates to do with learning and assessment, how best to effect the transition between years six and seven, the nature of the curriculum, and of teachers' expertise.

Nowhere is government misunderstanding more corrosive of the better educational interests of all children than with respect to reading. A measured, painstaking and carefully grounded article by Wendy Scott draws attention to the shortcomings and contradictions which distinguish the latest government intervention here. She shines a critical light on the record of Nick Gibb, who, as school standards minister, insisted that children be taught to read by means of one particular kind of phonic-based method. Time and again, Gibb made claims for the effectiveness of this method which evidence did not bear out. He deployed statistics in misleading ways to serve his cause. He refused to recognise the wealth of expertise embodied in teachers of early years and primary children, and would not listen to what they had to say about readers and reading. As a result, teachers have been corralled into preparing children for the phonics 'screening check' and for mass testing of a withered 'literacy'. How perverse it is, as Wendy Scott points out, that the new *Reading Framework* instructs teachers to make available in their classrooms only those books which pupils can already 'decode'... as if the impulse to learn did not perpetually germinate in the midst of a meeting with what is new and challenging! A sounder policy would fund teachers to help pupils greet all kinds of reading materials, including those apparently beyond them. Happily, Wendy Scott suggests that this particular element of Gibbian dogma is likely to be more honoured in the breach than the observance.

As a contribution to the development of a better way forward in helping children learn to read, *FORUM* is proud to publish an e-book by Judith Graham which offers a magisterial overview of the writings of the late scholar, Margaret Meek. *Margaret Meek – a literate life* is freely downloadable from the *FORUM* website.[1] Academics and practitioners will find much in it to resource their understanding of the complexities and subtleties involved in a child's becoming, and remaining, a reader.

The ethical values which inform education policy are framed in light of the way learning is understood. Equally important in the contest over such values, and hence the character of education policy, is the way in which the child who learns is conceived

of, both in the here-and-now and as the educated young person in an intended future. Tony Eaude believes that education must enable critical thinking and help form active citizens. Elements of the curriculum collected under the heading 'humanities' – history, geography, religious education, modern foreign languages, citizenship and the like – have an irreplaceable role to play in this. They help children (and not only children) explore what it is to be human. A more fluid and capacious understanding of what constitutes a humanities curriculum, and an approach to teaching these subjects which is more varied than currently pertains, and which prizes dialogue more highly, will, it is argued, better help children understand the context and culture within which they find themselves. A humanities curriculum thus renewed, or, as Tony Eaude has it, rehumanised, will help children and young people meet contemporary society with confidence and thoughtfulness rather than with anxiety. Tony Eaude's nuanced article draws on the Humanities 20:20 initiative. It strengthens the case for that broadly based curriculum so necessary for educating the child conceived of wholly: as a person, rather than a synthesis of data, a grid of knowledge-gaps or a malleable unit to be shaped for economic service as worker and consumer.

We continue to spotlight articles from the extensive *FORUM* archive, a treasure-house of writing and thinking from the past 60 years, which looks to advance understanding of the comprehensive ideal and all its implications. Jane Martin introduces a short piece by Margaret Gracie about the importance of play in fostering what Gracie calls 'children's autonomous thinking'. This text might be thought to have been superseded by the advances made in early years foundation stage practice since Gracie was writing in the mid-1970s. But government policy continues to mistake 'play' as a lesser form of learning, and sometimes as no learning at all. It continues to conceive of children as only and always the recipients of teaching, rather than, from time to time, as agents of teaching too. The policy watchword is 'school readiness', a formulation which offers the polar opposite of a welcome to children as they are. To chorus the watchword is to silence a truth: that education begins when children are met with as the teacher finds them, and not as the teacher might wish or hope them to be. Margaret Gracie reminds us that what children know is of particular significance for a teacher, and that children try to know the world – which is to say, to make it intelligible – in all circumstances, however adverse.

Better, if we can, to render those circumstances less adverse. To do so requires reconstituting the dominant values which currently inform the education system, or which have infiltrated it over the decades since Margaret Gracie was writing, even as governments have widened inequalities of income and wealth-distribution, or at best have failed finally to halt and reverse such widening. In a sweeping and impassioned piece, Eddie Playfair underscores the crucial contradiction: that our society's education system offers opportunity for greater human flourishing at the same time as it creates

and powerfully reinforces social inequality. He calls on us to move beyond a conception of education as yet another commodity, and to uphold in the name of social justice the values of collaboration, co-operation and solidarity, in order to begin to fashion a coherent national education service.

Eddie Playfair's article is based on a presentation he gave at an online conference last autumn, hosted by the campaigning group Reclaiming Education. The conference focused on how education might be reconstructed more justly in further education institutions and sixth form colleges. Other presentations were given by Sally Dicketts, president of the Association of Colleges, and Tom Wilson, chair of the Group Training Association. Michael Pyke offers an overview of that event. His article was originally published in *CASEnotes* number 84.

Last summer, teachers were required formally to grade their GCSE and A-level students. An account of the experience is given by an anonymous practitioner, whose balanced reflections have been reorganised as an interview. Readers are invited to contribute further thoughts on the issues raised.

A sense of the magnitude and urgency of what Eddie Playfair sees as a general crisis also informs the article by David Dixon. He is especially alert to the likely consequences of global heating, and the challenges this poses to schools and school leaders. His piece, at times a polemical one, criticises the 'traditional' approach to teaching and learning, with its marginalisation of arts and humanities subjects and its over-concentration on skilling a workforce for what he calls the 'business-as-usual economy'. Drawing on his doctoral research into the ways 'green leaders' lead their schools, David Dixon emphasises how important it is to live out the values of sustainability and co-operation in one's work, as well as outside it. An ideal of leadership as service seems to impel these headteachers; an ideal which, paradoxically, has room for the Machiavellian, in a particular sense.

Willingness to take a stand for what one believes, to act on the values one professes and to work from the bottom up mark out the 'green leaders' David Dixon has in mind. Such commitments were characteristic of Terry Wrigley, who died suddenly last autumn. A tireless advocate of education for social justice, and a good friend to *FORUM*, his loss has been keenly felt. Howard Stevenson writes about Terry's work, and the political vision which inspired it to the last.

Those who value the arts and humanities tend to believe stories give life to what is otherwise only information. The Gini coefficient of inequality, the PISA comparator percentages,[2] the expected standards bar charts for each key stage; all of these mean something differently when set beside the memory of a home visit to a child whose new school uniform hung in a house with no food in the kitchen, or after hearing a student of colour relate the number of times he was stopped on the street by police in a single day. Super-abundant is the harvest of the quantitative, so necessary for making policy.

But what shakes the heart and moves the mind to think again is the handful of grain which is a story.

Tory education ministers heading to the Blackpool shore for their party conference later this year could do worse than rehearse the story Dickens tells about Paul Dombey. Young Paul Dombey, I mean, and not his widowed, miscalculating father. Sent, aged six, to a small private school by the sea to be made a man, Paul must memorise the powerful knowledge found in textbooks and regurgitate it when tested. He and his peers have little time to play. Scarcely a child, for all his tender years, and burdened with the intrinsic urge to find out and make sense, what Paul says can be so unexpected and at variance with the norms of behaviour (not to mention the curriculum) as to marvellously unsettle. 'What's money?', he asks his father who, like our education secretary, has so much of it. What is it, after all? What can it do, and not do? Paul weighs all responses against what he knows from experience and what he suspects will be his fate. Preternaturally alive to his narrative function as a reminder of our mortality, Paul wants those around him not to think of him badly. Just by being himself he brings out their better nature, educating, it may be hoped, even his father's iron heart. The knowledge-cramming which Paul endures to fit him for manhood is pointless. He dies before his seventh birthday, thinking – as he has so often thought – about what's otherwise than knowledge: that dimension of life he has heard in what the waves are always saying, and seen in a print which hung on the stairs at his school.

Notes

1. Judith Graham, *Margaret Meek: a literate life*, A FORUM ebook publication in association with Lawrence & Wishart, 2022, ISBN 978-1-913546-57-1, https://lwbooks.co.uk/product/a-literate-life

2. The Gini coefficient is the most widely used summary measure of inequality in the distribution of household income (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/methodologies/theginicoefficient); PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tests are run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and taken by 15-year-olds in 79 countries and regions.