

# The wild blue yonder ...

## ... a speculative glance at English education policy and practice in the mid-century

*Tim Brighouse*

### **Abstract**

This article looks back in imagination from the mid-21st century at the development of education policy and practice in England's school system since 1944.

**Keywords:** optimism; reform; admissions; exclusions; collaboration; multi-academy trusts; expert teachers

Every 10 years or so I am unable to resist the optimism which always surfaces at times of apparently insurmountable adversity. Absurdly, I write 'futures pieces' in which the recurring image is of 'with one bound we shall be free'. So, in 1981 I wrote a 'Glimpse of the Future' for The Curriculum Association<sup>1</sup> when we were wrestling with falling school rolls and repeated cuts to schools' budgets (sounds familiar?) amid an ever-present fear of nuclear war. Ten years later, in 1990, at Keele University I imagined myself returning in 2020 to meet an outstanding PGCE student whom I was then teaching and who, by 2020, was running a school within a chain of schools serving many of the educational *and* social needs of the whole community.<sup>2</sup> And in 2002, I couldn't resist a new gaze into the wild blue yonder – of 2022. Therefore, as I was about to join the London Challenge, I wrote a 'Dreams or nightmares' lecture in honour of Brian Simon and Caroline Benn, which *FORUM* published.<sup>3</sup> It was a shot across the bows of unbridled market competition among schools and the dangers it could pose for urban youngsters. My alternative to such a nightmare consisted of partnerships of schools called 'collegiates'.

Therefore, when the editor asked if I fancied looking ahead to 2040, I couldn't resist: anyway, a bit of incorrigible optimism tempered by realism is timely, given the Covid pandemic and looming climate crisis. If still alive in 2040, I would be receiving my congratulatory centenary birthday card from King William Vth. It is set in France where I will have been living as a recluse, oblivious to what has been happening in English schools until there is a knock on the door ...

My visitor is American granddaughter, Maddy, a graduate of Teach First and now a professor in the sociology of education at the Institute of Education within UCL. She began to update me on what had been happening in schools in England. Through the eyes of her discipline, she tells me of the contextual influences on schools since I emigrated in 2022.

*'You remember how they talked of "catch up" after the first-wave Covid-19 pandemic? Well, that soon gave way to a general doubt and disillusion with the damage to children's well-being caused not just to some by the pandemic, but to many more by years of unbridled competition based on norm-referenced tests and exams – which of course ensured success was rationed with about a third of pupils condemned to be seen as "failures" – but also by the zero-tolerance approach to discipline. But you know all that because you wrote that book with Mick Waters About our Schools: improving on previous best.<sup>4</sup> It caused a stir because you had been seen as two of the "good guys": so, people were shocked when you called out so many things that people had preferred to ignore.'*

As I poured a glass of wine for her, I smiled recalling the furore surrounding the book. It was based on interviews with a dozen or more ministers and secretaries of state, four chief inspectors and dozens of others. *'Yes, Maddy, I remember David Blunkett saying his one regret was that he hadn't understood norm-referencing and that the exam system was unfit for purpose'*. I recalled, too, how shocked Mick and I had been that ministers were unaware of the extraordinary divergence between Scotland's permanent exclusions (just five in 2018) and England's (7583 in the same year) and about the exclusive cultures which had grown in schools because of the fierce high stakes and narrowly focused accountability regime. The publication of our book had coincided with a growing disillusion with the English schooling system which, over the first 20 years of the new millennium, had increasingly diverged from those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and so many others internationally.

Wine glass in hand, granddaughter Maddy proceeded to explain events between the early 2020s and 2040. First, however, she reminded me of our book's thesis, which was that there had been two distinct 'educational ages' between the Second World War and the arrival of the pandemic, and that Covid-19 highlighted the need for change. The first age, beginning from the Butler 1944 Act, had been one of 'trust and optimism', part of the Attlee government's implementation of much of the Beveridge Report's war on 'want', 'squalor', 'disease', 'idleness' and, so far as education was concerned, 'ignorance'. Commanding cross-party support, the age depended on a 'trust' among the three main institutional players that each would play their part. Ministers set the scene and had but a handful of powers to intervene. Headteachers and teachers in their schools decided on the curriculum and weaved their magic in the classroom, on the playing fields and on school trips. In the middle, local education authorities did most of the 'heavy lifting' as they built new schools and expanded existing ones, bought residential and day centres for outdoor education, and established new services for youth provision, careers advice and music, while organising school meals and coming to grips with ideas of 'inclusion' following the Warnock Report of 1978 on provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. LEAs were in their heyday, creating and running polytechnics, colleges of advanced technology and FE colleges, organising and staffing

adult education classes, managing colleges of education on behalf of the Department for Education (who managed nothing directly). And then there had been a second age of ‘markets, centralisation and managerialism’, which lasted from Baker’s 1988 Act to the beginning of the pandemic. It was based on Mrs Thatcher’s beloved neo-liberal economic theories as applied to public services. For schooling, this meant increasingly diverse types of school which enjoyed more autonomy so far as school budgets were concerned, a common prescribed national curriculum, published school league tables of results in SATs (standard attainment tests) and GCSE exams, more parental choice of school, and Ofsted inspections which confirmed successes and failures. The latter – an inevitable fellow-traveller of markets – paradoxically led to centralisation and managerialism, as the DFE, mistrustful of a weakened local government, tried to deal with school failure.

### **Consensus for change**

The two ages had been punctuated by a decade or more of doubt and disillusion epitomised by the Ruskin speech of PM James Callaghan in 1976. My visitor was going into too much detail about the distant past, so I held up my hand to interrupt. *‘Maddy, I am not yet totally senile, although I acknowledge I am helped by my MED (memory enhancing device)’*, pointing to the AI implant in my scalp. *‘I guessed that 2022 would be a watershed year. There were all sorts of debates going on: even The Times established an education commission. Our book was just another pebble in the pond. Callaghan’s speech in 1976 didn’t really impact for a dozen years until Baker seized the issues and passed the 1988 Act. So, how long did the debate about the future of schools go on after the Covid pandemic? How long did it take for successors to that hapless guy Williamson to do something useful and change direction, to usher in what Mick and I called an “age of hope, ambition and collaborative partnerships”?’*

*‘Hold on, Grandpa! I’m getting there. It took until 2030 – and Zahari and Williamson had long gone – for there to be another great Education Act: so, 40 odd years from Butler to Baker and another 40 odd to 2030. Immediately after the publication of your book people were still preoccupied by other things ... getting used to the fact that the Covid pandemic had become endemic, like ‘flu after 1918. And you will remember Johnson introduced the change to the national insurance so that it became a hypothecated health and care tax. For a while people were overwhelmed by other things, Brexit and labour shortages and, of course, the frequency of climate disasters, some in far-away places but others alarmingly closer to home, particularly the flooding of London as the Thames barrier failed in the floods of 2026. And there was the pan-European reaction to climate migration, which added an extra twist to economic migration. As you know, that’s still the major issue, exacerbated by nationalism and humanity’s failure to create and abide by global agreements’.*

And she rehearsed the doubt and disillusion and the wish to do better in education

epitomised by *The Times* Commission, which reported in the summer of 2022. *‘But, like your book, its findings fell at first on deaf ears, although it added to the feeling of doubt and disillusion, so that it wasn’t until the election of 2027 that there was a consensus for change when some from all parties (including the Conservatives, who had become tired of Boris Johnson’s empty rhetoric) promised proportional representation if elected, to get away from what was called adversarial party politics towards “consensual democracy”. By then, many national politicians woke up to the fact that our schooling system was so backward-looking that it was preparing youngsters for a world which no longer existed. For heaven’s sake, there were no simple list of agreed purposes of schooling! Therefore, the national unity government, formed by those candidates from all parties promising PR, set up three framework commissions: one for health and social care, which had fallen into a quagmire after Johnson’s botched reform; another on work, poverty and housing; and a third on education. Each framework commission sat for a year, involved “citizens’ assemblies” and came up with 10-year plans’.*

## **Exclusions; collaborations**

I pressed her about which things set out in our book had come to fruition and which had fallen on stony ground.

*‘Well, the framework commission was the main one you asked for, to limit the power of the secretary of state. So, you would approve of the seven- to 10-year educational plan to which each secretary of state has to refer when making decisions. We had the first in 2030 as a guide to the Education Act of that year passed by the new coalition government which had been elected under PR. The second 10-year plan is due out next month, and the framework commission in 2037 started citizens’ juries and consultation: it has just finished its work. To some extent it looks as though the next one will deliver more of what you advocated’.*

I was impatient to know the detail of what happened in the years immediately after our book had been published. *‘Maddy, what did they do about exclusions? That caused the biggest stir – it was part of the reason I came to France’.*

She smiled. *‘You mean all those macho heads of secondary schools who claimed that schools would descend into chaos if you removed the sanction, when you pointed out that for every single child excluded from Scottish schools, 1500 children were kicked out of English schools? Well, yes they didn’t forgive you and there was a furore, but it settled down and the 2030 plan abolished fixed-term exclusions and invited multi-academy trusts to set targets for reducing permanent exclusions’.*

I interrupted, *‘Are MATs everywhere?’.*

*‘Pretty much’, she nodded, ‘but they are reformed along the lines your book advocated. Each must include a local sponsor, and an elected local councillor is a non-voting member of the trust board. After the awful early financial scandals, they are now properly audited by public district audit, which was re-established for the purpose. And if they are one of the 10 large*

*national trusts, they are required to organise in groups of 20 locally so they can be responsive to the needs of the communities they serve. And, as I have said, their targets to reduce exclusions mean each MAT has a range of alternative provisions. We moved on a long time ago from assertive discipline, zero tolerance and language dominated by use of the words “behaviour” and “discipline”. We learnt from the Scots who had reduced exclusions so dramatically and now we talk about schools being places where pupils learn to build “relationships” and question why some children are “distressed”. It’s amazing how much progress can be made simply by using the right language. We no longer have a behaviour tsar who claims he learnt his techniques by being a bouncer in a night club’.*

*‘That clears up the story so far as exclusions are concerned. But you just said “almost” all schools were in collaborative partnerships, if that’s what the MATs are. But which schools aren’t?’, I asked.*

*‘Certainly the MATs are now “collaborative partnerships”, and it’s the MATs, not individual schools, which are the focus of Ofsted inspections, although the normal MAT Ofsted inspection involves the MAT nominating a school for the Ofsted team to do an in-depth review with a view to seeing whether it matches the MAT’s assessment. MATs are judged by Ofsted on school improvement and how inclusive they are. So, they each have a substantial SEND budget and are assessed on their partnerships with the nominated partner SEND school MAT in their region. And yes, they also have to demonstrate creative alternative provision. Most schools, but not all, are in MATS. The exceptions are those free schools which have survived and haven’t morphed into a large chain. So, for example XP schools in Doncaster and Gateshead continue to flourish and the Michaela schools hang on, although their methodology, as you might imagine, is no longer mainstream. Free schools owed their existence apparently to this strange guy called Michael Gove, who nobody remembers now unless they find a copy of the King James Bible on their staff bookshelf. But he was odd even by ministerial standards in that he was oblivious to unforeseen consequences. He wanted to let a thousand flowers bloom and didn’t worry overmuch about the weeds. But you must have known him?’, she asked. I confessed I did, albeit fleetingly, and that he regarded me as part of what he called the ‘blob’ – academics and other educationalists who were dangerous to the maintenance of educational standards of pupil outcome.*

## **Assessments and scorecards**

We fell into more discussion, and I learnt that one of Mick Waters and my pet proposals had come to nothing. We had envisaged an open school to which all pupils could belong at any time in their school career, but especially in their teenage years, when each secondary school would have among its staff – the ones who make really trusted relationships with the pupils – three or four ‘open school tutors’. They would facilitate access to the open school’s curated collection of resources, courses and experiences

(real and virtual), which would capture any learner's interest and enable them to access consistently high-quality educational activity and experience, as well as enable teachers to stay abreast of the latest developments in AI.

*'The government said it couldn't afford to do it, even though it would have been a small cost then. By the time they woke up to the issue there was a cornucopia of online resources, some available to schools or parents for purchase, led by Pearson and other publishers, while others were online and free. Schools used a smorgasbord of online materials. What teachers and schools needed was a reliable guide and that's where the Education Endowment Fund and the Chartered College for Teaching – both led by women', she smiled, 'came in. Each won a huge grant from the same anonymous philanthropist on condition they formed a more structured partnership and linked to the Open University, thereby emerging as the champion of a revived but transformed schooling system where all schools were able to improve their pedagogy and offer high-quality experiences. So, you were right about some things in your book, but not all'.*

Heartened, I encouraged her to tell me more about assessment, tests and exams.

*'Much improved. We are to have a balanced scorecard for schools next year, which you advocated. Exams and pupil tasks – to validate their progress in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes and commitment to citizenship – are set nationally and marked locally with external moderation online. The old exam boards, which made such a profit out of the external exam system, are gone. Each school has a chartered assessor on its staff and a licence to assess, which can be revoked. If it is, the school is put under the aegis of another multi-academy trust until its "home" trust and school are deemed to have put things right. So, the students aren't penalised, and standards are maintained. There's random testing in English, maths and science at 11 and 15 to establish standards over time and mirror international testing by OECD's PIRLS and TIMMs.<sup>5</sup> Schools do an early diagnostic range of tests at pupil-entry (which is now generally at age six after a totally reformed pre-school set of nursery provisions modelled on Reggio Emilia) and the SATs in year six but not in one go. The emphasis in the transition years is on an EPQ (extended project qualification)-type mini-research they start in year six and complete in year seven at secondary school – also something you and Mick advocated'.*

By this stage I wanted to interrupt with questions, but I let her go on. *'At secondary school, pupils accumulate level two qualifications, taking them when ready, and the major summative and informative assessment across academic vocational attitudes and citizenship takes place at 18, very much along the lines originally advocated by Mike Tomlinson all those years before'.*

Then, Maddy rehearsed the fate of our book's six main recommendations – we called them 'foundation stones to secure a more equitable schooling system'. Two had bitten the dust – the open school, and a scheme to find talent in every child between year seven and year nine. The other four, however, had been adopted. Maddy had already mentioned the framework commission and the transition EPQ-type project. She explained how our proposal for discrete curriculums for childhood and adolescence



had struck a chord and was widely welcomed, with the EPQ transition project being a bridge between the two.

*‘Your identification of various “adverse adolescent experiences” as risk factors to be spotted and mitigated by school caused considerable debate’, she said. ‘But the foundation stone which the profession liked best was the establishment of expert consultant teachers, analogous to consultant physicians, in a ratio of 1:120 pupils and paid almost the same as headteachers. As you pointed out, there had been an aborted version of this with the advanced skill teachers in the noughties. The consultant teacher is now a firmly established and deeply respected position, and they are all fellows of the Chartered College of Teaching, so they plug into the best pedagogical sources. Four out of six of your main recommendations isn’t too bad, is it? And they have agreed for the first time a set of clear aims and purposes for schools, many of which you set out in your book. That’s had the effect of allowing schools the room to do lots of things beyond the purely academic. And’, she ended cheerfully, ‘they even adopted some of your 39 steps’.*

## **An equity tax**

These steps had ranged over a whole set of systemic practices, some of which, singly and in combination, meant schools had little incentive to work with others collaboratively in securing equitable outcomes for all pupils and not just some. In running through some of these, Maddy confirmed that school admission policies now had to be approved by an independent admission agency run by the local authority and that they – rather than schools – ran the process, thereby avoiding the all-too-common practice of some academies and church schools whereby they chose parents rather than vice versa. She also said that SEND funding had been sorted out to avoid children with the most needs being used as bargaining pawns by schools for extra finance through the education, health and care plan (EHCP) tribunal processes in the botched reform of statementing in 2015. *‘MATs all have to have a partnership plan to show not just how inclusive they are but how, in partnership with the LA, they are spending the high-needs block grant for those children with the most barriers to their learning’.*

*‘Perhaps I was a bit of a wimp leaving in 2022. It sounds good!’*, I remarked, as I topped up her wine. *‘We called for an age of hope, ambition and collaborative partnerships: has that really happened?’* She nodded and outlined how schools were ‘much more relaxed and humane places under the influence of the reforms’ and that they really were ‘year-round resources for the whole local community’. *‘But we still have a private school sector, and they haven’t introduced your “equity taxes” yet’.* Tongue-in-cheek, Mick and I had advocated that anybody sending their child to a private school would pay an ‘equity tax’, which would be distributed to the state-funded schools in their area. This would be a sum equivalent to half the difference between an index of private school fees,

calculated by the average fees of schools that cabinet members had attended, and the national average AWPU (age-weighted pupil unit). Just to make progress towards greater equity in schooling, we also suggested using the same measure for setting the schools budgets each year, but adding 2 per cent a year plus inflation to the state-funded schools/academies system, so that the disparity would narrow from roughly one-third to two-thirds of the cost of leading day private schools over a 20-year period. We hadn't challenged the private schools charitable status because we saw it as something which would be a 'time and energy trap', as the privileged fought by every legal means to maintain their unjust advantages.

I was sorry to hear that the idea of 'equity taxes' had been rejected, and said so. Maddy, however, explained that it wasn't quite as clear-cut as that and, prompted by Boris Johnson's earmarked tax for health (through the national insurance hike in 2022), the whole issue of hypothecated taxes had surfaced and become the rationale for a white paper suggesting that England would have its own form of devolution, with city regional mayors answerable to regional assemblies, but that so far nothing had been settled.

We needed to talk of other things, such as the practical consequences of the 2 per cent rise in temperatures, and of both the in-country and international impact of climate migration and its effect on the desirable environmental advantages of the peripheries of Northern Europe, which enjoyed an enviably high position on what was called the 'survival advantage index'. But before we did, I couldn't resist asking Maddy if I would recognise the schools of 2040. She reassured me that I would, and that they were incomparably better places than they had been all those years before. Even better teaching and curriculum experiences, mixed-age learning groups, year-round pupil experiences (orchestrated by their own personal tutor at their home academy within its partnerships of academies) and available-anytime/anywhere online resources, and active intergenerational community links. *'You would recognise them because you kept predicting how it could be from the "glimpse of the future" through to "comprehensive schools then, now and in the future". The model of how it could be was clear – indeed, the MAT reformed as you suggest in your book with Mick Waters is what you described in 2002 as "collegiate". What you and Mick did in About our Schools; improving on previous best – and what without his influence your previous pieces lacked – was to point out all the poisons in the system which had to be purged if the dream was to be realised. Of course, there are still problems', she paused. 'What we now need is another "futures" piece looking at 2060. How about giving it a go?'*



### **Purposes of schooling** (from *About our schools*, Chapter 1)

We want our children to understand through their schooling that:

It will be their duty as adults to guard and participate in a representative democracy that values national and local government. To that end, schools will progressively involve students in many aspects of school life and the community in which the school and the families are located.

- Their religious faith and beliefs will be respected and they will be encouraged through their schooling to respect all faiths and the humanist position.
- The many differently rewarded jobs and careers, which are vital to the well-being and practical operation of our society and others elsewhere in the world, are open to them. These include producing our food, construction and manufacturing, providing energy, medicine and care, logistics, information and entertainment, defending us, making and upholding our laws, cleaning up our mess and doing the tasks that only few can face, caring for our world and working to support less fortunate people and causes, offering solace and helping others to learn, perhaps in classrooms, libraries, galleries or museums. This kaleidoscope of employed and self-employed opportunities, available in the private, public and voluntary sectors, is ever changing and expanding under the influence of accelerating political, economic, social and technological developments.
- These careers require differing talents and schooling experiences will be based on valuing as individuals and equipping them with the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills to make a successful and rewarding contribution to society as adults, in and out of work.
- They will be encouraged and expected to think for themselves and act for others through their life at school and in the community. They will be aware of how decisions are reached and how actions can work to solve or create problems. In doing so, they will explore and understand the range of obligations, contributions, rights and choices open to them in our own and other societies.
- They will be offered a range of learning opportunities that will reap more benefit if they commit to learning and seek further learning experiences in other positive contexts.
- They will encounter through their schooling experiences expert help in acquiring a foundation of skills and knowledge which will allow them to survive and flourish in our own or other societies.
- They will be thirsty to learn about the way civilisation has sought to solve its

problems and made incredible discoveries and achievements, while also, at times, making mistakes.

- They will have the ability to navigate media, including social media, and become critical and discerning users of developments in this field.
- They will be equipped to make good arguments for a just cause by understanding the views of others and thereby influencing their social and political environment.
- They will understand and appreciate that our world is comprised of people from different cultures, races and orientations and be aware of the ways that power can be exercised with care or can be abused and that people can be respected and valued or exploited and persecuted. Their actions in the present and the future will reflect an understanding of our civilisation's past accomplishments as well as acknowledging that some of those achievements have come at the cost of prejudiced and flawed thinking.
- They will recognise their responsibility to protect the planet and contribute by living sustainably with the aim of preserving biodiversity and limiting global warming.

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## Notes

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2. B. O'Hagan, *The Charnwood Papers*, Ticknall, Derbyshire, Education Now Press Co-operative, 1991, pp 92-106.
3. Tim Brighouse, 'Comprehensive schools: then and now and in the future. Is it time to draw a line in the sand and create a new ideal?', *FORUM* 45(1), 2003, pp 3-11.
4. Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters, *About our schools*, Carmarthen, Crown House, 2022.
5. Progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS) and trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS).