

# Terry Wrigley, 1948-2021

## An obituary

*Howard Stevenson*

In October last year, Terry Wrigley passed away after his leukaemia, only relatively recently diagnosed, deteriorated rapidly. Our condolences are extended to Terry's family, and to all those who knew him as a colleague and a friend. Certainly *FORUM* has lost a very good friend, and someone who was a keen advocate for the journal in so many ways.

Terry was born into a working-class family in Lancashire in 1948. He went on to study French and German at Cambridge University, and this led in turn to a career in education as a teacher in schools and universities, a local authority advisor and consultant, and a prolific researcher and writer. Terry retired from the University of Edinburgh in 2010, but he did not retire from the work that had driven him throughout his adult life. Rather, he continued to work relentlessly throughout his 'retirement', and indeed right up until the point when his condition literally made working impossible.

I first met Terry in Nottingham in 2013. We both spoke at a meeting organised by the local branch of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) that was building the campaign against standardised testing in primary schools. In many ways, the meeting was consummate Terry. He had made a long journey to speak at the meeting, but the event was important to him as it was so central to Terry's views about what was wrong with the current education system, and how it might be different. Terry spoke powerfully about everything that was wrong with an education system that was obsessed with measuring, comparing and ranking, and he spoke eloquently about what a much-more optimistic and hopeful education system could look like. These were the issues that framed so much of Terry's work: the struggle for an education system that was humane and equitable and which always started from the needs of the children, in all their richness and diversity.

The meeting was also consummate Terry because it involved him working with members of the NUT. As a Marxist, Terry understood how education systems work to reproduce the structural inequalities in society, and his work never shied away from a clear analysis of relationships between education and class. However, Terry also understood the importance of organised labour as the engine of social change, and that any efforts to bring about the type of change he believed in required academics and scholars to work with activists, in particular those working in trade unions. This was the essence of Terry as a scholar-activist, or an activist academic. He always understood that it was not sufficient to do critical research, but that the researcher had a responsibility to make that work accessible to those who could make best use of it – the activists working in schools and communities who were in the frontline of challenging the neo-liberal restructuring of education. Hence Terry's commitment to

make the long journey to Nottingham that day in 2013, but one he repeated countless times as he worked with union activists to support a range of campaigns, most particularly the campaign against SATs.

Terry's academic activism was driven by the need to challenge the dominance of neo-liberal thinking in education, to disrupt the common sense it sought to embed and to offer practical alternatives to the status quo. So many of his publications were organised around the efforts of those engaged in working 'in and against' the system, and demonstrating in practical terms how it was possible to create hope from within a system that appeared to offer so little of it. *Schools of Hope, Another School is Possible* and *Changing Schools: alternative ways to make a world of difference* (the latter edited with Pat Thomson and Bob Lingard) are all excellent examples of this aspect of Terry's work.<sup>1</sup> However, he also recognised the need to engage more directly in the 'battle of ideas' with the mix of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideology that asserts such a strong grip on the English education system. The wide range of Terry's expertise made him extremely well placed to understand all the connections between the drive to academise schools, the push for a 'core knowledge' curriculum and the promotion of a crude 'what works' orthodoxy in educational research. For Terry, this was a hegemonic project that must be challenged through counter-hegemonic activism, and a direct challenge to the ideas that are promoted not just by right-wing politicians and the *Daily Mail*, but through Ofsted, increasingly in initial teacher education and by bodies such as the Educational Endowment Foundation. Hence Terry's work directly challenging the Hirsch-inspired curriculum reforms in English schools, and his brilliant critique of the obsession with randomised control trials as the gold standard in educational research, published by the *British Educational Research Journal* in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Terry presented a similar argument in *FORUM* in his powerful critique of the role of the Education Endowment Foundation and its notorious 'toolkit'.<sup>3</sup>

In all of the above work, Terry understood the need to not only confront the ideas and arguments of the political right, but to work actively to popularise the ideas that provided an alternative pole for those seeking an education system focused on social justice, democracy and the rights of young people. That is partly why he was so supportive of *FORUM*, which he saw as a more accessible journal than many of the traditional peer-reviewed journals hidden behind global publishers' paywalls. Terry wrote in the journal many times, and we will be finding a way to acknowledge that contribution in the near future. His articles reflected the wide range of his interests and his expertise, but readers unfamiliar with Terry's work can do no worse than see the special issue that he guest-edited, entitled 'Assessment: crisis and resistance'.<sup>4</sup> The issue brought together a range of powerful contributions, but also included Terry's own writing about the matters that were at the core of his interest as an educator and researcher.

It was his commitment to take these ideas directly to teachers that motivated him

to establish the ‘Reclaiming Schools’ website. He and I established the project as we saw the way in which teachers were debating educational issues via blogs and social media, but in a space where alternative ideas were largely invisible. The intention was to produce research-based blogs on topical issues in a format that would make them engaging and accessible to busy teachers. Several of us were involved in the project, and we received valuable support from the NUT, but it was Terry who kept the project going with a prolific output of blogs on a host of issues.

This energy was characteristic of everything Terry did, and continued up until illness eventually sapped even his stock of it. For example, in May 2020, as the Covid pandemic raged, Terry established a group of researchers and experts who were able to advise the Independent SAGE group on the safe opening of schools. The group (known as the emergency advisory group on learning and education or EAGLE) generated large amounts of evidence to guide decisions about safe school opening, but also advised on much wider questions. What steps would need to be taken to support schools and their students through the pandemic and, furthermore, what was the role of education and schools in building a more socially just society beyond Covid? Terry’s interest was always in connecting immediate struggles with the bigger picture, and in thinking through how a better future could be fashioned from the present.

This short piece can only capture a fraction of Terry’s work. For all of us who knew and worked with him, his loss is enormous. Not just because his work was so valuable, and we have far too little of this type of research, but because working with Terry was always such a pleasure. There was never any ego or self-aggrandisement with Terry. His interest was in making a difference, in particular for those young people most disadvantaged. He always did it quietly and without regard for personal gain or prestige. We miss him.

**Howard Stevenson** chairs the *FORUM* editorial board.

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## Notes

1. Terry Wrigley, *Schools of Hope: a new agenda for school improvement*, Trentham Books, 2003; Terry Wrigley, *Another School is Possible*, London, Bookmarks Publications, 2006; Terry Wrigley, Pat Thomson and Bob Lingard (eds), *Changing Schools: alternative ways to make a world of difference*, London, Routledge, 2012.
2. Terry Wrigley, ‘The power of “evidence”: reliable science or a set of blunt tools?’, *British Educational Research Journal*, 44:3, pp359-376.
3. Terry Wrigley, ‘Not so simple: the problem with “evidence-based practice” and the EEF toolkit’, *FORUM* 58 (2), pp237-252.
4. *FORUM* 59 (2).