Editorial

Pockets of resistance: taking back control from within our education systems

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> 'It's a little Anxious,' [Piglet] said to himself, 'to be a Very Small Animal Entirely Surrounded by Water. Christopher Robin and Pooh could escape by Climbing Trees, and Kanga could escape by Jumping, and Rabbit could escape by Burrowing, and Owl could escape by Flying, and Eeyore could escape by – by Making a Loud Noise Until Rescued, and here am I, surrounded by water and I can't do anything'.[1]

We're writing this editorial on Thursday 5 May 2022, the date many adults go to the polls in the local elections. From the expansion of doorstep recycling, respect for #NoMowMay or a campaign to keep the local swimming pool open, local elections can feel like a way of doing something, of making a difference. But what about other areas? What about the bigger issues not controlled locally? How do we grab a semblance of control or power to bring about change in a system in which we may feel, like Piglet from *Winnie-the-Pooh*, that 'you're only a Very Small Animal' who 'can't do anything'?

This special issue considers this within the context of education. Taking the idea of 'pockets of resistance' we look at where and how educators – from trainee teachers about to join a seemingly inflexible workplace to those who, with the benefit of hindsight, can reflect on where changes could be possible – might find ways, big or small, to resist, subvert or simply say 'no' to the status quo, to current policy and to ever-more stringent and directed 'ways of being/doing' emerging across learning and teaching.

As government (or academy) control appears to tighten – or at least wants to tighten – in or over many aspects of our education systems, we seek to uncover the 'below the surface' resistances. Where and how are educationalists finding ways to survive – and even potentially thrive – despite top-down control and rising pressures for conformity? Where are there examples of individuals or collectives finding an alternative route within the systems, enabling them to remain true to their values while still 'doing' or 'performing' the required directives? Are there real opportunities being utilised to hear and include young people's voices?

When we, as editors, put out a call for papers addressing 'pockets of resistance' we envisaged the term in quite a loose way; those small areas – pockets – where the 'very small animals' can do something that goes, in some small way, against something that didn't feel right, something that didn't sit with the practitioner, for example, as morally or educationally appropriate. Nathan Archer and Jo Albin-Clark extend this, noting the physical dimensions and positioning of a pocket: anything in it must be inherently small

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and close to the individual. We expected, mainly, to find people doing things which would certainly make them feel better, that may make a direct difference to the young people they're working with, but that, perhaps, wouldn't go much further. We suppose our hope was that this special issue would give a voice to these resistances, perhaps opening them up to a wider audience and, maybe, allowing the pockets to overspill and to be the impetus for wider change.

What we weren't prepared for was the sheer volume of interest received. Much like the initial response that Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Donald McIntyre had to their advertisement for participants in the University of Cambridge's Learning Without Limits project (which we revisit in this issue when we delve into the *FORUM* archive) we found that, across the spectrum of education, people wanted to tell someone what they were doing. They wanted acknowledgement of the resistances they were taking or making. Often these resistances were really a way to shed light on something that wasn't right, to say 'I'm struggling here'. They wanted to know, sometimes, that it was okay to carry on when they couldn't see the 'big changes' so beloved of the cherry-picked world of promoted educational research, especially that promoted by key stakeholders. And it is these stories that we carry in this issue. We invite you to read these, to engage with the diverse ways of 'doing different' presented here and, as Archer and Albin-Clark call for, to 'tell each other stories of how we do it and tell those stories about what matters to those who matter'.

It is to some of these individual stories that we turn first. Lis Bundock and Rosie Moore beautifully illustrate how seemingly small, individual actions can take root and build within a community. Drawing on the notion of the 'tempered radical',[2] Bundock and Moore show how educators, at the very earliest stages of their careers, set about quiet resistance, finding ways to address inequalities and offer moments of hope to young people from across marginalised groups. Through their writing we hear stories of our newest teachers setting out to be role models to LGBQT pupils, to support marginalised families living in extreme poverty, and bringing about dialogue and modelling around decolonising the curriculum. However, Bundock and Moore's work also comes with an underlying warning; that we need to cultivate critical discussion, enquiry and deep reflection to counter and disrupt the comfort of compliance which may otherwise develop. We ask you to hold this warning in mind when reading each of Sophie Potter's, Lucy Russell's and Sally Tomlinson's papers, all of which draw attention to normalised silences and dangerous compliances emerging in our schools.

The theme of small (but again not insignificant) actions is also taken up by Nathan Archer and Jo Albin-Clark. Through a dialogue between two early childhood education researchers, they show us how, in a sector which has received a battering of late and which has been inundated by an intensification of policy directives, some educators are pushing back. They surface the less visible pockets of resistance, highlighting

the ways educators have found to circumvent, mediate and disrupt demands upon them, illustrating, what the authors title 'ethical pedagogical decision-making in action'. Through the dialogue, we see the need for the real expert to resist top-down, unevidenced demands that seek to undermine years of developed expertise: three- and four-year-olds lying on their tummies pushing small cars is appropriate; a formal focus on handwriting is not. Such resistance, or 'pushing back' against approaches and policy directives which are not educationally sound, takes us to our regular trip into the *FORUM* archives. Our selected paper from 2002 provides an early account of the Learning Without Limits project at Cambridge University Faculty of Education. Here we find the accounts of nine teachers who challenged received wisdom on the notion of fixed 'ability' and/or intelligence. The practices of the teachers described in this article fit strongly within our definition of pockets of resistance, illustrating how things can be done differently in or against policy imperatives. We hear how individuals resisted, just as in Archer and Albin-Clark's paper, practices which were pedagogically and morally unsound. But there is also a hesitancy on our part in revisiting this paper, for it highlights that the resistances sitting at the centre of this issue – and the need for these resistances to exist at all – is still there. Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Donald McIntyre warned us 20 years ago that there was 'an urgent need to challenge this dismissal of the ideas that inspired the comprehensive project'. The resistances told in this issue suggest we haven't yet addressed this; we may even be travelling in the wrong direction.

The resistances documented above involve some form of active challenge, but as Kathryn Spicksley shows us, sometimes it is simply through holding on to our moral beliefs that resistances are formed and solidified. Spicksley's paper examines resistance to academisation, something which has recently come to the fore again with the government announcement of a plan for full academisation by 2030. Often resistance in this arena is quite vocal, led by community groups, but Spicksley takes a different stance, looking at what happens to teachers once 'in the academy'. Drawing on her research in primary academies, she shows how resistance can be identified on 'the inside' of academy schools from both executive leaders and new, young teachers. For instance, she finds that 'the unrivalled career progression' that supposedly attracts young teachers to the academy system is not referred to by most young teachers working in academy schools. Put simply, they do not identify as 'academy' teachers. Instead, they see themselves as teachers of children making a difference to children's lives. Spicksley sees the lack of commitment to the academy, from both the leaders and new teachers working in them, as a form of resistance in itself.

In the resistances explored here (and the undoubted many that aren't told), what often begins as an individual thought or action rarely stays as such. Collective resistances, whether these be conscious joining of actions, supportive conversations

or the development of a network of like-minded educationalists, often form. Ralph Emmerink's paper, challenging the status quo around graded assessment systems, locates this collective change in a less visited, yet important, place: the young people themselves. Emmerink's suggested shift is to focus on assessment feedback, not grades. Within this, he emphasises the need to develop young people's assessment or feedback literacy, making the provision of feedback a dialogical experience and always about moving forward. This certainly has resonances with some of the early practices of the Learning Without Limits teachers and suggests the power of bringing others on board in a collective endeavour.

The potential power of collective resistance is illustrated in the papers of Rajwant Saghera and Madeleine Holt. Saghera presents a discussion of eco-pedagogy, an approach to education that offers resistance to the currently dominant 'top-down' approach. Eco-pedagogy 'focuses not just on sustainability practices and causes, but also challenges top-down, market-focused approaches that exist in our current society, and which contribute to planetary injustice'. The aims are broad: 'Eco-pedagogy aims to deconstruct capitalist ideologies and legitimise the importance of centring learning on sustainability'. But Saghera offers a tangible example within the approach (the Green School in Bali) that gives an insight as to how such resistance to the status quo might be achieved in practice, as well as discussing difficulties and obstacles. With a different concern – addressing the needs of young people in a disadvantaged area – but with the same underlying desire to resist the status quo, Holt's paper brings us back to England and to the very different approach to education seen at XP School in Doncaster. Holt's paper – and accompanying film – documents a radically different approach, essentially a collective resistance to the 'recent tendency in UK schools to focus on tough discipline, teaching to exams and excluding students'. The school's motto, 'Above all, compassion', evident across Holt's paper and film, shows how a collective resistance can bring about real change for young people. Importantly, Holt also supports those inspired to acts of resistance through the film, providing educators with a toolkit to support them in considering how they might begin to bring about education change (or their own resistance).

A headline-grabbing statement in Holt's writing must be that 'XP has not expelled a single student in seven years'. If exclusions were low or uncommon elsewhere this might go unnoticed, but as Sophie Potter shows in her paper, exclusions have increased markedly in the last 10 years; in 2018/19, the last year for which reliable data exists, 7894 young people were permanently excluded from secondary schools. Potter examines this trend within the broader context of what she terms 'the slow creep of the unsaid … The insidious inclusion of political agendas [which] allows for a subtle shift in cultural attitudes'. Potter argues that the increase in multi-academy trusts (MATs) running schools under a neoliberal agenda has resulted in establishing 'norms which are at odds

with an equitable, just system', particularly where the inclusion of young people with special educational needs and disabilities is concerned. The discourses and practices leading to new norms have been drip-fed, slowly and without discussion (with Potter making a delightful analogy with Roald Dahl's Mr Twit, as he 'slowly adds penny-sized pieces of wood onto Mrs Twit's walking stick and chair until, eventually, she believes she has shrunk').[3] Exhausted educators (particularly since the pandemic struck and its impacts continue to be felt) have not the time or space to discuss or object to changes. This article powerfully gives awareness to the unquestioned tactics at play in this system.

The invisibility of cultural norms and discourses, and the difficulty then to challenge these, is central to Lucy Russell's paper. She discusses the prevalence of sexism and sexual harassment and analyses the way that gendered social norms render them invisible. As with issues of racism (see Sally Tomlinson's article), the longstanding, embedded nature of the problem is clear: 'it is about resisting centuries of ingrained inequality'. Russell suggests that this means its impacts have tended to be overlooked, with girls, in particular, affected by victim blaming, for instance. She notes the changing discourse and how recent initiatives have highlighted the situation, providing examples of how the problem is now being tackled in schools through a variety of everyday practices. She highlights the importance of working with boys and addressing masculinity, as well as hearing the student voice and supporting student activism. The elements and themes for a whole-school approach to the issues provide valuable practical guidance. Importantly, while discussing the immediate ways that resistance is and can be enacted, Russell recognises the wider frame of reference. She acknowledges that, given recent policies and initiatives, such as relationship and sex education, educators can now 'resist gender inequality, within guidance, within the law but with a vision for a better future for their students'. Though, as she points out 'that doesn't mean the gendered social norms that make up our society have gone away. Without question they are still present, but often invisible'.

Our lack of awareness, as a society, of dominant discourses and cultural norms can leave significant injustices unspoken or unchallenged. In her paper examining where we are now with respect to race and education, Sally Tomlinson lays bare the stark realities of social and racial injustices and the levels of ignorance and misinformation that are perpetuated through education systems. She says:

> Despite the efforts of many schools, teachers, parents and others, the curriculum is still basically one designed for a white middle class in imperial times. The persistence of an ethnocentric curriculum has ensured that generations of children have left their schools ignorant and misinformed about the realities of their own society and of Britain's place in a post-colonial and now post-Brexit world.

Her wide-ranging historical overview is densely packed to provide the background to

where we are now in the 21st century and drives home the need to resist the forces in education that have contributed to the situation. She describes in some detail how initiatives that have been repeatedly introduced over the years have been met with hostility by politicians and policymakers 'who still hold imperialist misconceptions of Britain's standing in the world'. Tomlinson suggests that there are growing signs, now, of opposition that is resulting in positive change and an improved curriculum for young people in a multicultural, multiracial, multi-faith society and she cites some encouraging examples. She concludes by reiterating the need for all those concerned with education to 'combat the monstrous ignorance'.

What is perhaps revealing across the corpus of papers discussed above is the range of issues under resistance. This isn't multiple people acting on a singular entity recently gone awry in our education system. Instead, multiple concerns are leading to multiple resistances at multiple levels. Nigel Gann helps us make sense of this in his paper, identifying several key aspects of current statutory education in England that demonstrate what he sees as a loss of moral purpose. He powerfully summarises these, each in turn, as characteristics that present 'obstacles to a fair and equable education system': the embedded inequality of outcomes; the systemic absence of an accessible and locally autonomous system; the elimination of community participation in the ownership of schooling; the focus on transactional outcomes of productivity, materialism and competition'. In his discussion he highlights specific practices that could be resisted and others that could be adopted within existing structures to address these issues, working towards a restoration of education as a public, and community, good, rather than a public utility.

The multiple aspects identified in Gann's piece remind us that any resistance – while it may take the form of individual action – is set within a broader context. The effectiveness of all 'pockets of resistance' ultimately depends on decisions and actions in this broader context, which takes us to the final two papers of this issue. John White unwittingly gives credence to Piglet's anxiety, suggesting that while the stories of resistance told in this issue may be helpful to teachers disaffected by the status quo but not quite seeing what they can do about it, at the end of the day, these small resistances are of little import to the powerful authorities, with White provokingly suggesting that 'those in charge of it may even see such harmless pockets of resistance as a kind of sedative to keep their opponents quiet'. So, if individual resistances don't have the power to bring about change, what does? White argues that the challenge needs to be *of* the status quo, rather than against it, as seen in many acts of resistance. By this, he argues for a challenge to the apparent lack of aims in the English school curricula, contrasting this with the other nations of the United Kingdom who all have, or will shortly have, aims-based curricula. Such clear educational aims will give strength and understanding to the values underpinning resistive actions. To challenge the status quo in the way White

proposes is clearly far beyond an individual act of resistance (which he recognises in identifying the need for a national campaign and local pockets of resistance).

Moving in the direction of wider actions in the extreme, our final paper from Michael Bassey proposes something somewhat more radical. Bassey gives us a timely reminder of the failures of current education ministers to recognise the need for young people to be prepared for the ecological problems on the horizon. While this might foreseeably be mitigated through absorption into a curricular aim in White's proposed approach, Bassey takes a different direction. Far from the small and individual acts of many of the papers, he advocates that the only way forward is not to resist internally or in any small way, but to abolish, or 'defenestrate', both Ofsted and the Department for Education.

As editors, we wanted to create some type of narrative in how we presented these papers. We initially explored the idea of magnitude of resistance, but it quickly became obvious that this was nonsensical; an individual act that seems insignificant to others may take great bravery to enact. A 'small' resistance may be the only resistance which feels safe, and so while collective action may appear more visible or more effective, such engagement may put oneself in a position of perceived or real danger. What we have instead is a collective, a range of stories of doing something, anything, differently, at whatever scale feels comfortable and possible. Our hope is that the reader will find something of the collective comfort White refers to, but, with the benefit of awareness of the wider context, will be better placed to consider how and where they take individual or collective action forward.

Notes

1. Piglet, quoted in Chapter 9, 'In which piglet is entirely surrounded by water', of A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, London, Methuen, 1926.
2. S. McBlain, J. Dunn and I. Luke, *Contemporary Childhood*, London, Sage, 2017.
3. Roald Dahl, *The Twits*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1982.