

A deeper pocket?

John White

Abstract

This brief paper welcomes the notion of local pockets of resistance while raising two problems about it. One of these concerns teachers' values and leads into wider considerations about what the underlying aims of education should be. This prepares the ground for the 'deeper pocket' of the title. This has to do with challenging the lack of official – i.e. public, not hidden – aims informing English school curricula. In this, England will soon be at odds with the three other UK nations, all of which, as from September 2022, will have aims-based curricula. A many-sided national campaign is recommended to target this weakness in the English system, working closely with more local pockets of resistance.

Key words: aims of education; aims-based curricula; philosophy of education; school curricula in UK

Introduction

While warming to the idea behind this issue of *Forum*, I see problems with it and also ways of dealing with it. I agree wholeheartedly with the need to challenge an educational regime that has tightened its grip over the last dozen years. England has a national curriculum little different in its overall structure from the grammar school curriculum introduced 120 years ago. With its heavy emphasis on knowledge transmission, it is well suited to an assessment system that helps students from more affluent families – who take advantage of parental choice and local league tables to get their children into the best-performing schools – to do well in exams, go on to university and into well-paid jobs. Under the banner of 'equality of opportunity', the authorities would like us all to see this as an egalitarian school system, since this route to the top excludes no one and is said to give everyone the same chance. The slogan is in fact an ideological smokescreen that masks a selective system more subtle than the in-your-face IQ-based division between successes and failures in the days of the 11-plus. Allowing a few less-privileged children to pass through the exam bottleneck is no threat to, and indeed strengthens, the prevailing social order.

I'm attracted by the ingenious idea of pockets of resistance within the current system and, although I no longer work in a school myself, I look forward to seeing what others write. The collective result should be helpful to teachers disaffected by the status quo but not quite seeing what they can do about it.

One sentence in the ‘Call for papers’ particularly struck me. It asks: ‘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?’.

Is it enough, I wonder, to refer generally to being ‘true to their values’? Does that let in too much? A climate change denier or a political or religious extremist could in principle create their own pocket of resistance using all kinds of subtle ways of hiding their tracks and keeping within the rules. I’m sure this won’t apply to those who reply to the Call, who are most likely to have what we’d all call perfectly sound educational values in mind. But this raises another issue. *What is* a perfectly sound educational value? And are those in their pockets of resistance able to justify the values that guide them?

A second problem is about how effective encouraging teachers to create such pockets is likely to be. Publicising what they do may well encourage others to do likewise, as I have said, but on the flipside it may also alert the authorities to possible loopholes in the system, which they may wish to stop. Recent times have seen various tightenings of the screw in education policy. If one of our pockets proves a serious threat, it might lead the authorities to give the screw another turn. But if – as is perhaps more likely – it does not, even if other teachers are inspired to follow suit, the regime as a whole will not be weakened. Those in charge of it may even see such harmless pockets of resistance as a kind of sedative to keep their opponents quiet, uninterested in mounting larger-scale challenges. In saying this, I am not at all setting my face against the very idea of the kind of pockets of resistance in *Forum’s* Call, merely pointing out some possible – and admittedly speculative – considerations.

I turn now to the ‘deeper pocket’ of this article’s title. To introduce it, let me go back to my earlier question about whether those who create their pockets of resistance can justify the values that have led them into opposition. This is not an easy task. It quickly takes us into philosophical concerns about what the underlying aims of education should be. And, as so often with philosophical issues, there has been endless debate on this topic, dating back in this case to Plato in *The Republic*.

Although looking for ethical experts who can lay down definitively what education should be for is a wild goose chase, what I find striking about recent discussions of this question is the large measure of consensus about it that you find among well-known philosophers interested in educational aims in the USA and in the UK. Harry Brighouse from Illinois, Philip Kitcher from Columbia, Meira Levinson from Harvard, Martha Nussbaum from Chicago, Michael Reiss and myself from the Institute of Education all broadly converge on the same range of desirable aims.¹ These are self-maintenance through work, personal fulfilment, citizenship and moral concern. True there are often, as might be expected, differences in their views on more specific aspects of these, but the measure of agreement among them

is remarkable. I am willing to bet that most of those writing here about pockets of resistance will have been guided in their iconoclasm by one or more aims in this list. If they wish to explore them more fully, they might well find it useful to look at philosophical writings in this area. These can help in elucidating in detail what these broadly agreed aims involve, in showing the multiple interconnections between them, and in enabling *FORUM* resisters as well as others to see their own values against a broader background. It can give them confidence, if they need this, that their resistance is based on sound foundations, as well as helping them and other opponents to build on what they have in common.

A curriculum based on aims

This lengthy introduction brings me at last to what the title's 'deeper pocket' involves. Individual acts of resistance against the status quo are admirable. But the status quo itself needs to be challenged – and challenged at its most vulnerable point. This is about what the aims of school education should be. Compare the 210 pages on educational aims in the eminent American philosopher Philip Kitcher's new book *The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education* with the 40 *vapid words* on the aims that are supposed to be powering the English national curriculum: 'The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement'.²

And the 32 *even more vapid words* dating from 1988 and still in force that cover academies as well as other schools: 'promot[ing] the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepar[ing] pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'.³

Many suspect that the *real* aims of government policy – not the smokescreen ones found in curriculum regulations – are economic. They are to promote economic growth through basic literacy and numeracy for all and an assessment system that allows high fliers to go on to university and well-paid jobs while others fill less-demanding roles or no roles at all.

A new development on the UK educational scene provides a way of mounting the challenge to the Achilles heel of government policy mentioned above. In September 2022, Wales is introducing a new version of its school curriculum, *Curriculum for Wales*.⁴ Like the Scottish curriculum and that of Northern Ireland, the Welsh one is to be aims-based. That is to say, the first consideration in each of these cases is what school education should be about; and once the aims are in place, the curriculum itself is designed to reflect these in the shape of more specific aims in different areas of learning. The 'four purposes' of the new Welsh curriculum are:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

These are then elaborated in much more detail. They are to be embodied in the content matter of the six ‘areas of learning and experience’: expressive arts; health and wellbeing; humanities; languages, literacy and communication; mathematics and numeracy; science and technology.

The ‘four purposes’ map well on to the aims discussed by the US and UK philosophers mentioned above. This is not surprising. Once one begins to think seriously about what education should be for, it is in these directions that one is likely to look. And it is equally evident that aims are not to be left as mere mission statements, dangling in the void: they should inform the school curriculum and its ethos at every point. In our *An Aims-based Curriculum*, Michael Reiss and I explain in more detail how this may be done.⁵

From September 2022, England will be the odd one out among the four UK nations in not having an aims-based curriculum. This is not to say that the other systems are perfect: they all have to struggle with the legacy of a traditional one and know that fitting aims to appropriate content is not easy. But at least they are on the road to this. Among other things, they have all instituted a curriculum commission to review matters every few years and make suggestions for improvement. By contrast, England is nowhere. It has shown no signs of taking aims seriously, leaving them as high-sounding statements tacked on to an antique curricular structure that suits prevailing political priorities.

This is the message that educators’ wider resistance to the status quo must be constantly and forcefully repeating. They should mount an organised campaign to bring it home wherever they can – in newspapers, blogs, radio and TV items, social media. They need to work with politicians, teacher unions and journalists to press the authorities to make the changes needed. Alliances should be created with a similar range of influencers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so as to shame or otherwise put pressure on the English government to follow its neighbours. Curriculum reform on these lines should be a central plank in the education manifestos of parties aiming to end our long domination by Conservative administrations.

So what is needed now is a nationwide campaign of resistance to government curriculum policy for England that focuses relentlessly on the inadequacy of its stated aims, presenting an alternative befitting a democracy in which we all work together for our own and others’ wellbeing. Once the challenge is under way, the pockets of resistance described in this issue of *FORUM* may well not remain isolated points of

protest, but become part of a growing collective effort to reform the status quo from within, while activists at the level of more theoretical challenges collaborate with them from without.

John White is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Education, UCL Institute of Education, where he worked from 1965 until 2000 after six years' teaching in schools and colleges. His main interest is in the aims of education, especially in enabling students to lead fulfilling personal lives. Over 300 of his publications are available on open access at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-White-15>

john.white@ucl.ac.uk

Notes

1. H. Brighouse, *On Education*, London, Routledge, 2006; P. Kitcher, *The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-main-enterprise-of-the-world-9780190928971?cc=gb&lang=en&>; Meira Levinson, 'Meira Levinson on the aims of education', 2015, <https://philosophybites.com/2015/01/meira-levinson-on-the-aims-of-education.html>; Martha Nussbaum, 'The struggle within: How to educate for democracy', ABC Religion and Ethics, 2019, Michael Reiss and John White, *An Aims-Based Curriculum: The Significance of Human Flourishing for Schools*, London, IOE Press, 2013.
2. Kitcher, 2022, *op.cit.*; Department for Education, 'National curriculum in England: framework for key stages 1 to 4', updated 2 December 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4>, section 3.1.
3. *Ibid.*, section 2.1.
4. Welsh Government, 'Curriculum for Wales', updated 10 January 2022, <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales>
5. Reiss and White, 2013, *op.cit.*