Editorial

New thinking!

Patrick Yarker

Spring! New growth! Renewal! A future un-foreclosed! 'The New', wrote Ernst Bloch, 'circulates in the mind in first love, also in the feeling of spring; the latter has nevertheless hardly found a single philosopher.' Hardly found one save Bloch himself, perhaps, philosopher par excellence of hope. And Hannah Arendt, for whom the genuinely new is made possible by what she calls natality, our capacity to begin: to break with the status quo and initiate the new. Natality, in Arendt's eyes, is not so much the biological commonplace as that capacity which distinguishes us as human: 'beings whose essence is beginning', as she puts it. By 'beginning' we express our uniqueness, departing from the given categories. For Arendt the prime example of beginning would be revolution. Beginning is a form of freedom, and the practice of beginning – intervening, taking the initiative, inaugurating authenticity – is freedom's practice.

Beginning needs beginners – those who start from scratch and those who, not absolute beginners, turn again to make a new start. The first five articles in this number are written by beginners-again, new graduates of Master's-level education courses. Two are classroom teachers. They write about matters of enduring concern: teachers' professional identity, students' well-being, the state education system's continuing failure of working-class children, and how the past (in the form of curriculum content) shall be made a living inheritance for today's students. They draw on a range of approaches to educational research: individual case-studies, focus group interviews, theorised reflections on personal experience, and analytical scrutiny of the effects of policy. In a period dominated by the low aspirations of officially sanctioned pedagogic instrumentalism and unreflective 'what works' pragmatism, this handful of articles again raises the question of what it might mean to research one's own educational practice, to subject it – or elements of it – to sustained enquiry and scrutiny in order to enrich professional judgement.

Those who have lately made the policy weather in initial teacher education aspire to render teaching 'a far more exact science than it has ever been before', in the words of Ian Bauckham (in the *Times Educational Supplement* on 18 December 2023). They see teachers as the objects of research or its recipients, not as researchers themselves. They seek to shape practitioners' judgement rather than better enabling the practitioner to judge. In the end, they hanker for a foolproof teaching method. But what if, as Lawrence Stenhouse suggested, teaching is more art than science? What if a 'science' of teaching could never be exact enough, or if teaching's exactingness exceeds what the domain of science can encompass?

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To imagine, design and undertake a research project as a practitioner is surely to make a beginning of the kind Hannah Arendt identified. Such work signals a commitment to the life of the mind, lifeblood of any teaching which aspires to be good, and to the sustained endeavour of reflecting on what one does and thinks as a teacher and why. It endorses a vision of teaching which requires more than the ready-made. Such a vision might be thought vital to attract, inspire and sustain practitioners, while the lack of it has contributed to an intensifying crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, and to the low esteem in which the profession seems currently to be held. Erica Halley addresses this. She asks of today's teachers, her peers, who are we and why do we do what we do? She considers the 'complex times' in which she joined the profession, a period marked by the rigours of teaching in the pandemic, the rapid turnover in education secretaries, and drawn-out industrial action in pursuit of improved pay and conditions. Halley's small-scale investigation into the perceptions which today's new teachers have of their profession and of their identity as teachers reveals undiminished passion to improve the lives of students, telling criticism of the ways in which bureaucratic barriers and pointscoring by politicians make the job of teaching harder, a tempered solidarity, and, in a conclusion that might surprise, a group of people by no means bowed down despite the challenges of the job and who remain, as one might hope of teachers, hopeful.

The government's flagship education project in response to the waning of the Covid pandemic was the National Tutoring Programme (NTP). The programme is critically considered by Julie Platten. She calls it 'a contentious, high-profile policy solution' to the perceived problem which the pandemic generated of 'lost learning', a term she carefully scrutinises for its discursive power. She offers a concise history of the NTP which highlights its mis-steps and high costs, noting in particular how the government has evaded responsibility for the less-than-stellar outcomes. By framing the NTP as a narrative, Platten can mount a series of sharp readings of particular tropes and metaphors which government deployed first to frame the policy and then to promote it so as to garner political benefit. Platten also considers aspects of the language used in the education select committee's critical report into the programme. Her article demonstrates what she calls 'the transformation of the policy from well-intentioned intervention targeting disadvantaged students to a government accountability lever', one which shifts the blame for perceived failure away from government on to schools, while loading schools with much of the cost.

Abigail Milligan draws on her work in the key stage three history classroom to investigate the notion of 'powerful knowledge' and to offer ways in which students can be empowered by changing the focus of the curriculum and amending approaches to teaching it. She argues that the history curriculum currently fails to engage contemporary students and is without meaning for them. History for this generation is rendered mere

subject-content to be 'received' from their teacher and re-presented in exams. It is not knowledge that empowers. In contrast, an approach to the subject which puts the idea of 'empowerment' at its centre could be very engaging for students if it looked, for example, at how contemporary movements against racism and sexism have arisen from past events and particular traditions. Such an approach might connect with students' own concerns and experiences, thereby illuminating correspondences between 'then' and 'now'. This approach also affords ways in which students can continue to find their own voices. Milligan describes teaching a module about human rights to year eight students, and reflects on what this revealed about the nature of curriculum and the development of understanding among her students. She learned much herself, not least that teaching pupils topics beyond the GCSE syllabus will not disadvantage them.

A similar desire to see pupils and students transformed by an education which is more holistic, rounded and inclusive informs the sustained consideration of the experience of working-class pupils which Brian Stillings offers in his article. As a school improvement adviser, he is caught between the government's levelling-up agenda with its intransigent exam-centred approach and his own stated commitment to 'trying to make education fairer'. This is a difficult and complex place to be. He is all too aware of funding inequities across the fragmented landscape of English public education, as well as the damage cause by these inequalities to especially deprived layers of the working class, from whose ranks he comes. He offers a history of the Govian reforms to curriculum and assessment, and castigates the shallow model of cultural capital – what he terms the 'knowledge organiser approach'– which helped shape it and which Ofsted deploys as a basis for judgement. England's embedded processes of testing cohorts of students and blaming schools are contrasted with approaches taken by higher-performing jurisdictions. These characteristically emphasise generating trust and extending support. Schools and their leaders must move on from 'accountability and fear' towards a more caring, though no less rigorous, understanding of what it means to be educated.

The profound and long-lasting way in which an uncaring approach can affect pupils and students is explored in Claire Plews's work with a single student in an FE college. A focus on 'learning loss' since the pandemic's waning has obscured the increase in mental ill-health among a generation of children and young people, and has prevented schools from addressing it. The student who participated in Plews's research articulates her sense of being ignored, overlooked, disrespected, unheard and unheeded in school. For this student, lockdown was paradoxically a liberation. It freed her from what she felt to be an oppressive situation, one which routinely denied her agency. Plews makes very clear that an education policy which elevates test scores and exam results to pride of place will sacrifice the well-being of many students, offering them no way to be valued or cared for during their passage through formal education. Attempts

by government to address this situation are, she says, tokenistic at best. We must pay heed to the young people who are enduring rather than enjoying the educational offer currently made them. She concludes that 'instead of expecting children to thrive under any circumstances and then needing to provide therapy for those who don't, we should create an educational environment that children can thrive in'. Just so.

The second half of this number, its balancing handful of articles, opens with an interview conducted by David Kazamias with Professor Maria Nikolokaki who has taught for decades in primary and secondary classrooms as well as at university. She has translated into Greek two books by Paolo Freire, compelled by Freire's commitment to 'humanisation' and by his insistence that hope be the foundation for politics. An avowedly critical pedagogue, Professor Nikolokaki reflects on how vital it is continually to consider educational purposes, a focus which concentration on teaching methods and school governance obscures. She explores what 'critical pedagogy' and its tradition has meant, and what it might mean today for teachers and young people coerced by the pressures of high-stakes public testing and the drive to ensure students are 'career-ready'. Critical class consciousness, democratic practices (including in the classroom) and building solidarity offer foundations for a better educational future

The Socialist Educational Association last year launched its Manifesto for Education. John Whiting and Ian Duckett introduce the Manifesto's main elements and argue its necessity. In contrast to the cautious reforms proposed by the Labour Party, the SEA Manifesto is bold to address the despoliation which successive Conservative administrations have visited on the educational landscape. Whiting and Duckett outline the sharp real-terms decline in spending per pupil, the dramatic and sustained failure to recruit and retain teachers, the long neglect of infrastructure, and so on. All this must be changed. Education funding must increase. The academisation policy must be dismantled and schools returned to democratic local authority oversight. Approaches to curriculum, assessment and pedagogy must be renewed. In short, an incoming Labour government should turn away, or be pushed away, from marketisation, centralisation and quasi-privatisation and toward the implementation of a National Education Service along comprehensive lines. *FORUM* welcomes responses to the SEA's Manifesto proposals.

Sally Tomlinson (who contributed to the Manifesto) and Craig Johnston note the government's intention formally to corral into a single national system expanding SEND (special educational needs and disability) provision and the variety of alternative provisions which are currently available. Economic considerations fuel this intention. Recent decades have seen a remorseless expansion in the diagnosing and labelling of special needs 'conditions', and a concomitant expansion in the market for providing care, thereby destabilising notions of 'inclusion' in mainstream education. Tomlinson and Johnston trace the development of provision over the past half-century. They pay

particular attention to the impact the academisation policy has made to rising costs, and to the way the children of the working class, in particular Black boys, are continually found to be apparently most in need of special or alternative provision. More recently, middle-class families have been willing to resort to litigation to enforce additional provision for their children. The government's improvement plan, announced in March last year, looks set to ensure that 'a second schooling system, or at best an elaborate sub-system, is on track to be cemented into the English … system.' And yet this policy seems destined to repeat the pattern of the past in its short-termism, and in the lack of adequate financial provision being made.

In a provocative article, Charlotte Haines Lyon considers the importance for neoliberal education of authoritarian schooling. She draws on ideas from political theology to reveal how such schooling necessarily demonises children and young people. Michaela Community School provides a case study, and 'the Michaela way' an example of the populist tendencies fuelled by neoliberal conceptions of what it is to educate. Haines Lyon argues that: 'Neoliberal education is an exercise in creating compliant and efficient commodities: adaptive, resilient children who become the workforce'. She examines the salvationist rhetoric deployed by staff to justify the authoritarian approach to teaching and learning taken at Michaela (and elsewhere) and to extol its virtues.

One virtue, in the eyes of those who endorse 'the Michaela way', is the lack of trust extended to pupils and students at the school, and the corresponding restriction of their scope for agency. Those who understand that learning is at root about making sense out of experience – reconstructing meaning and recognising the significance of such meaning in one's own life – will share Haines Lyon's concern at the educational deficiencies inherent in all authoritarian approaches to education.

A final article explores the emergence of Oak National Academy and its lavishly funded reconfiguration by the Department for Education as a mechanism through which to disseminate a standardised teaching model. That model is all too suited to the needs of authoritarian schooling, for which 'delivery' is the only pedagogy, and acts of ventriloquism on the part of teacher and student the sole basis for assessment.

The number concludes with a letter about Ofsted's agendas, and reviews of recent books by Lorna Smith and by Alison Clark.

'That which is coming up is not yet decided,' writes Bloch, affirming the importance of a militant if wary optimism 'actively and partisanly in league with the good which is working its way through'. What's needed are courage, knowledge and decision. Howard Stevenson, who stepped down at the end of last year as chair of the *FORUM* board, would surely agree. Howard took the chair at a moment when the board faced a crisis. *FORUM* needed a new publisher and might well have ceased to appear, a little short of its 200th issue, if Howard hadn't perceived that Lawrence Wishart could afford

the journal a suitable home and, with the board's agreement, taken the lead in making possible its relocation when Symposium Journals, our former publisher, dissolved. This move has opened new possibilities for the way the physical journal looks and for what we are able to offer online. That the journal managed to move house successfully was in large measure down to Howard, who has led the board through the latter period of the pandemic and its aftermath with sensitivity, deftness and characteristic good humour.

Rachel Marks is the new chair of *FORUM*'s board.

If the public education system in England is to measure up to the challenges it faces, we must think along new lines. More of the same isn't good enough, whether it's the same old Ofsted, high-stakes public testing and league tables, or what masquerades as the new, like the Michaela way, Oak or the NTP. The chance to meet and welcome the genuinely new, to *begin* as Arendt might have it, arrives when those whose voices go unheard in the current dispensation are enabled to speak and are actively listened to as part of the policy discussion. A coercive element seems inscribed in the system as shaped by current education policy. Meanwhile an ethic of responsibility and care, the deployment of more democratic practices, and the further extension of trust and agency to young people are kept at bay where they are not deemed wholly dispensable. Increasing numbers of pupils and students vote with their feet, truanting particular classes or not going to school at all. New educational thinking could do worse than begin from the notion that the totality of the experience young people are required to undergo educationally must work for them, as well as for the state whose citizens they are being educated to be. Formal education must make sense and be of value in their eyes. It must give them enough of what they find they want, need and enjoy.

In *The Principle of Hope* Bloch writes: 'The pull towards what is lacking never ends. The lack of what we dream about hurts not less, but more. It thus prevents us from getting used to deprivation. What hurts, oppresses and weakens us all the time has to go'. Let new educational thinking hasten it on its way.