Editorial

Changing times

Patrick Yarker

What was in the air, a lifetime ago, when a young man on the road to a Nobel Prize first sang that the times were a-changin'? Four stanzas of admonition, assertion, advice, pleading and command give way to a final stanza whose taut lines sound ever more urgent as they conjure an apocalyptic mood: 'The line it is drawn/The curse it is cast …'. Established hierarchies will be flipped on their head. Old roads and the old order will give place to new.

The times are always changing. At the heart of the matter is the direction in which they can be made to change.

For many years, joy in learning has been hounded out of England's state schools by tests and high-stakes public exams, and by the denial of agency to pupils and students, an inevitable consequence of instructional models of practice. Joy in teaching becomes more and more fugitive thanks to the intensification, truly remorseless, of workload, and the ever-tightening grip on practice of an orthodoxy built on errors: that learning is remembering, teaching is delivery and assessment is testing. Young people pursuing the BA Education course on which I work are not at all sure they can be the teachers they have it in them to be in the system as it currently exists. Their commitment and drive are not to be questioned, but they are soberly aware of the joyless nature of the system they would enter as practitioners.

Peter Moss locates the source of this joylessness, and of many other educational ills, in the Global Education Reform Movement which has infected England's education policymaking. His incisive survey of what's wrong with the system is reprinted from the latest ebook *FORUM* has published: 'Renewing public education: proposals for an inclusive, democratic and joyful system'. An incoming Labour administration could do much worse than weigh the merits of Peter Moss's diagnosis, and the proposals for improvement put forward in the rest of the ebook.

Imagination is one portal through which changed times arrive. Doug Martin and Jo Bishop offer a reimagining of English schooling based on findings from a research project undertaken during the pandemic. This revealed how the role of school was renewed across that testing time, and perceptions changed about the relationship between school, community and other community services. The authors ask whether schooling could be redefined through 'multi-school partnerships based upon locality and not the business models associated with MATS [multi-academy trusts]'. They wonder whether new partnerships might be forged with community-based services, and a new educational dispensation founded in cooperation rather than market competitiveness.

 DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2024.66.2.01

Still keenly interested in what educational research can offer, practitioners seem increasingly dissatisfied with the mechanical and technicist version of teaching which much government-endorsed research gives rise to. Or so the first of two anonymous authors in this number suggests. After outlining the history of 'ResearchED', and noting how that organisation has helped whittle away the intellectual foundations for teaching by its disdain for philosophy, sociology, the arts and humanities as a basis for practice, the article considers how particular contributions at a recent ResearchEd conference opposed this outlook. The author detects the gloss beginning to fade from the 'new science of teaching' and the didactic instrumentalism it has re-booted.

Exhorted to be recipients of educational research, teachers are too often denied the opportunity to be researchers themselves. It was not always so. John Elliott pays tribute to the late David Ebbutt, whose contribution to in-school research and to the claims of the teacher-as-researcher – a way of being a teacher which Professor Elliott among others has long worked to develop – it remains essential to acknowledge and continue. This tradition is maintained in small part by certain contributions in *FORUM* down the years, including in this number. Researching one's own practice offers another way in which joy in teaching can be welcomed home.

Student-led talk is an essential activity in classrooms that better enable learning. Rupert Knight continues to develop the perspectives on classroom talk which he outlined in *FORUM* 65(1). He scrutinises the inadequacies of an 'oracy' model which emphasises talk as performance and is overly concerned with 'skills'. The better alternative, he argues, is 'orality', a more all-embracing and flexible approach which helps students present ideas in talk on their own terms, rather than being required at all times to make their utterance conform to what is deemed 'correct'. In considering what it might mean to enable students to speak on their own terms, he explores three questions: 'Who speaks? When may they speak? How must they speak?'.

Theresa Nimoh is also concerned with the vital role of student talk in learning. She outlines and reflects on a research project she undertook as a teacher of mathematics to key stage 2 children. Her project involved the use of cue cards to help pupils frame and undergird productive talk for better mathematical understanding. The project raised her own awareness of the potential in such devices to help young people better articulate what they want to say by enhancing their repertoire of ways to make meaning through talk, thereby extending their command of mathematical reasoning.

David Bray reminds us that public assessment in England is still based on norm-referencing, the process whereby 'student performance in an examination or test is … measured by comparison with the performance of others'. As a consequence, the public exam system cannot but reproduce injustices year after year. Government claims that the process is legitimate because, by reconfirming the status quo, it maintains standards. But the experience of public assessment during the pandemic laid bare how

norm-referencing rations grades. A class works hard and is well taught, but ultimately these factors may not determine the grades the students are awarded. David Bray calls on an incoming government to fashion a better model.

In his contribution to *FORUM*'s latest ebook, John White argues for radical curriculum reform. The current curriculum, expressing in some measure the aims established for education, is complicit in the joylessness of contemporary schooling. Adrian Lyons argues that it fails to prepare young people to lead a fulfilling and flourishing life. He notes how aesthetic and creative elements of the curriculum have been exiled by the current government. Better curriculum models exist elsewhere in Europe, as David Bray also points out, and we should learn from them.

In an intellectually wide-ranging article, Andy Markwick and Michael Reiss argue that revamped curricula and new pedagogies are vital if the education system is to meet the major challenges of our time, notably that of climate change. The national curriculum applies to fewer and fewer schools, and is increasingly seen as inadequate. Markwick and Reiss engage with several contemporary educational thinkers and philosophers, including Michael Young and John White, as they examine the notion of 'powerful knowledge' and the nature of an aims-based curriculum. The urgency of the crisis humankind faces prompts them to stress the importance of critical thinking, the value of interdisciplinary learning and the merit in judiciously-devised inquiry-led pedagogies.

As any practitioner knows, the way in which a school is led makes a decisive difference to the morale, motivation and effectiveness of everyone who works there. This number's second anonymous author gives an account of two contrasting leadership styles they have encountered in school. The author scrutinises each style through twin lenses: one theoretical, to reveal strengths and weaknesses, and the other poetical, to capture the effect of the style on their own being and practice. Something more than is commonly disclosed of the joy and pain of being a teacher is made apparent through this approach.

Tim Bartlett offers a warm tribute to a pioneering and supportive headteacher, Derek Roberts, erstwhile contributor to *FORUM* in the heyday of comprehensive school expansion. The values which informed Derek Roberts' approach to school leadership included: 'mutual respect; an absolute focus on each individual pupil; listening; hearing; cheerfulness … inclusivity; commitment to success for all; a belief that intelligence is not fixed but is always able to develop'. Such values continue to resonate, especially for those who hold fast to the comprehensive ideal. *FORUM* would be glad to receive accounts of the work and legacy of other pioneering comprehensive headteachers.

Fifty years on from Portugal's 'Carnation Revolution', Lawrence Bradby reflects on his family's experience of that country's education system. He notes the system's youthfulness – universal secondary schooling has been established within living memory for many adults. He also notes the system's apparent stability, a consequence

of the narrow curriculum and a teacher-centric approach to pedagogy. Less familiar is a school culture characterised by overtly warm and close teacher-pupil relationships, coupled with the burdensome possibility that a student might 'fail' a year and be required to retake it entirely.

If the imagination is one portal through which change arrives, and if by 'change' we mean democratic, inclusive and joyful classrooms, then Andrew Jones sees benefit in cultivating the sociological imagination. To do so would help correct the scientistic approach currently favoured by the Department for Education, the Education Endowment Foundation and similar organisations. It would expand the understanding of pedagogy beyond a fixation with teaching methods to encompass the ethical, the philosophical and particularly the sociological dimensions inherent in the work of teaching. Andrew Jones makes a case for revisiting the work of American sociologist C. Wright Mills. His work provides an 'alternative critical framework to promote critical thinking, democracy and social justice within the confines of teaching and learning'. The sociological imagination can legitimise attempts by teachers to link the experiences of individual students to the set material of the curriculum, and to reveal or create means whereby subject-content and the world outside the classroom can meaningfully meet. This enlivens teaching, and in Andrew Jones's view can 'empower students to become agents of social change'.

Full citizenship, for Wright Mills, meant just such involvement in the public sphere. His last book, published soon after his early death in 1962, was intended to be an introduction to Marxist thinkers, ideas, politicians and policies 'for those who … are bored with politics and political philosophy, who have withdrawn to or never emerged from a strictly private life'.[1] Alpesh Maisuria and Stephen Beresford consider from a Marxist standpoint how neoliberal capitalism has 'thwarted the possibility of comprehensive education'. That education, predicated on an optimistic view of human educability, contains the potential for what has been called learning without limits, while under capitalism schooling is regarded first and last as the main element in the social production of labour power. As well as (re)producing skills, competencies and the requisite body of sanctioned knowledge in a pupil or student, capitalist schooling reproduces those attitudes, traits and habits of mind necessary not for full citizenship in Wright Mills's sense, but for 'employability'. Maisuria and Beresford argue: 'Comprehensive education is an anathema to this reduction of education to labour power production in its egalitarian facilitation of education that exceeds the requirements of the capitalist class'. Mindful that comprehensive education clashes with ruling-class interest, its advocates must prepare accordingly.

In the concluding article, Eddie Playfair echoes the urgent tone in which Andy Markwick and Michael Reiss speak. He envisages how a curriculum for social justice might be brought about 'at a time of planetary and systemic crisis'. His watchwords

are 'equality, democracy, solidarity and criticality', and his list of principles for action includes 'radical imagination … as well as political organisation'. For renewing public education, nothing is more needful.

This number closes with an invitation from Professor Jane Martin in connection with a new research project: 'Making good teachers. Politics, policymaking, and practice in teacher education from the nineteenth century to the present.' Jane would like to hear from anyone interested in sharing memories of being a 'trainee teacher'.

The autumn number of *FORUM* will be edited by Professor John Holford. It is entitled: 'Reconstructing adult education for the common good.'

Notes

1. Charles Wright Mills, *The Marxists,* Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Pelican, 1963, p11.