

Education in England

An ailing system, historical amnesia and hope for the future

Peter Moss

Abstract

This article reprints the introduction (minus the final paragraph) to *FORUM's* latest ebook: 'Renewing public education: proposals for an inclusive, democratic and joyful system'. Peter Moss diagnoses the malaise which has long afflicted English public education, tracing the source of the distemper to the effects of the Global Education Reform Movement and offering hope of a cure. By recalling to mind and practice the exiled 'progressive' tradition in education and the alternative perspectives and approaches it offers, he shows how we can begin to write a better, more democratic, story for public education in England.

Keywords: public education; Global Education Reform Movement; neoliberalism; progressive education; democratic education; inclusion

An ailing system

Public education in England today is in poor health. It suffers the effects of 40 years' affliction by GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement, a condition diagnosed by Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg as emerging 'since the 1980s and ... adopted as an educational reform orthodoxy within many education systems throughout the world'.¹ Sahlberg identifies five main symptoms of GERM, symptoms readily observed in the English outbreak: test-based accountability, with its obsessive desire for measurement; standardisation of performance for pupils and schools; focusing down on a few core subjects, with a consequent narrowing of curriculum and education; corporate and business management models; and a market logic with individual and institutional competition at its core.

GERM has been a global pandemic, the educational manifestation of the deeper malaise of neoliberal capitalism, an economic theory and political movement which has dominated much of the world since the 1980s, 'when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan teamed up to bring the neoliberal script to the international stage'.² Driven by values of competition, individual choice and calculation, by disdain for the public domain, and by a desire to extend private enterprise, commodification and the profit motive into more and more areas of life, neoliberalism has sought to economise existence, converting 'non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones ... [extending] market metrics and practices to every dimension of human life; political,

cultural, personal, vocational, educational'.³ In the view of Stephen Ball, one of the foremost analysts of neoliberalism, it now 'configures great swathes of our daily lives and structures our experience of the world – how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and others, and how we relate to ourselves and others'.⁴

Neoliberalism has left its mark on today's education not only through GERM. The neoliberal world has created an increasingly unequal, insecure and unsupportive environment for children and families; it has eroded democracy, solidarity and cooperation; it has both economised the social and depoliticised the political, reducing education to a technical practice. It has insisted on the most limited of purposes for today's education, redefining education in terms of human capital development and meeting the needs of a highly competitive economy. In the economised and technical world of neoliberal education, children have been reduced to units of future human capital, teachers to technicians delivering prescribed recipes for predefined outcomes, schools to exam factories readying children to be flexible and market-ready workers, and parents to consumers of a commodified education.

GERM and neoliberalism have been global phenomena. But they have been felt most keenly in the Anglophone world, and in particular in England and its education. A centralised state, made more so by the undermining since the 1980s of other centres of influence such as trade unions and local authorities, and an electoral system that awards a monopoly of power to a single, minority party, have provided ideal conditions for the inexorable spread of GERM. Where resistance has been encountered – challenges, for example, to yet more testing or forced academisation – it has been dismissively swept aside; vociferous criticism has been boorishly dismissed as the ravings of the 'Blob'.

The result has been a new educational dispensation: the growth of educational markets (from early years to higher education) with an increasing number and diversity of providers in competition with one another, combined with increasingly strong management of this diversity by a powerful central government and its agents. In the process, any vestige of local democratic control or accountability has become vanishingly rare – 'thin democratic gruel', indeed, as Melissa Benn characterised England's education in the 2023 Jarvis Memorial Lecture.⁵ Public education has truly become 'state' education, with schools increasingly accountable only to the minister in Whitehall.

At the same time that public education has gone down with GERM, its health has continued to be debilitated by a chronic condition: the presence of private education. Accounting for 7 per cent of compulsory school-age pupils, through highly selective intakes and vastly more resources than public education, private education reproduces inequality, privilege and social division;⁶ it leeches off the public sector, the main source of teacher education and of new teachers in the private sector; and, to add insult to injury, its elite schools misleadingly claim the name 'public school' for what are anything but public. Moreover, as a result of government policy, since the 1980s the

private sector has gained a dominant position in an expanding early childhood sector, with private services, most run as businesses for profit, providing the largest number of places: early childhood education is in large measure private education.

The GERM-induced attack on the education system in England has had serious consequences. Stress, fear and anxiety are rife, consequences for children and teachers of what Stephen Ball has called the ‘terrors of performativity’ and for parents of the exercise of ‘high stakes’ consumer choice. Conformity, obedience and lack of agency are now routinely expected of children and teachers alike. The obsessive pursuit of standardisation and measurement, with frequent national assessments of children starting as early as four years of age, what the Italian educator Loris Malaguzzi disparagingly referred to as ‘Anglo-Saxon testology’, has resulted in ‘a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories’.⁷ It has also contributed to a stultifying of teaching, with ‘ability grouping’ of young children, from as young as three-years-old, now common and the ‘ability’ discourse pervasive; as Malaguzzi put it, school and culture rob children of most of the ‘hundred languages’ with which they are born by clinging to the myth of fixed innate ‘ability’ or ‘potential’ and so denying an optimistic view of human educability. As workloads, pressures and control of school teachers have all intensified, and pay has failed to keep pace with inflation, a workforce crisis is building: recruitment has faltered and retention plummeted. The situation is particularly acute in early childhood education, with its low levels of qualification and scandalously poor pay.

And all the time, education has become increasingly irrelevant to the world we find ourselves in today. Driven by neoliberalism’s compulsive quest for economic performance, the production of workers for the ever-changing demands of a predatory capitalism and of *Homo economicus* to the fore, alternative and more pressing purposes of education have been sidelined or totally ignored. The need, for example, to recognise the crucial contribution education can make to a range of urgent social, political and environmental goals: rebuilding solidarity and cooperation; renewing democratic culture and a capacity for critical thinking; enabling environmental, social and economic sustainability (and yes, the economic is important, but as one among many purposes of education); nurturing children’s untold potentiality and their creative capabilities (Malaguzzi’s ‘hundred languages’ of childhood); developing respect for diversity and a capacity for caring, etc. etc.

Historical amnesia

In 2011, Michael Fielding and Peter Moss wrote that ‘[h]istorical amnesia is the contemporary educational condition, as we are urged to focus our attentions on an education that will conform to market principles and deliver subjects for the market,

individualistic consumers and flexible workers'.⁸ Since then, memory loss has got worse.

This has had two serious consequences. First, it has enabled the spreaders of GERM to get away with proffering false narratives about the past, what Melissa Benn has described as 'cartoon-style representations of a complex tradition, particularly a set of differing practices that have largely involved decades of honourable and innovative intellectual and classroom work.'⁹ The purpose of history, for these spreaders, has been as a warning of past (and imagined) horrors, as a validation of the escape from such horrors offered by the current regime, and as a warning that there is no alternative. This should be a warning: when what really happened in the past is forgotten, imagined events can be invoked to maintain compliance with the current regime.

Second, historical amnesia risks the creation of silences about what has actually happened, certainly some of it bad and ugly, but a lot that is good and worthy of remembrance. With memory restored, it turns out there is much to celebrate, to inspire and to seek to emulate. We can stand on the shoulders of giants, from home and abroad, educators such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Susan Isaacs, Winifred Mercier, Alex Bloom, Paolo Freire, Bridget Plowden, Loris Malaguzzi and many, many more. These have been the proponents, practitioners and standard-bearers for an education totally at odds with today's ideas and practices, so readily and disdainfully dismissed as 'progressives', but in reality bearing witness to a subversive and exciting reality: there are alternatives. Remembering brings with it an antidote to GERM.

With memory restored, we can also 'develop a clear and well-informed narrative about the history of our state education system',¹⁰ reclaiming a pride in what has been achieved when principled purpose has been deployed with political courage. This is a narrative that includes: the phasing out of selection in most parts of the country, and the introduction of comprehensive reform, in the post-war period; internationally acclaimed primary education of the same period; the work over many years of the Inner London Education Authority and other local education authorities; the children's centres and extended schools of the 2000s - important elements of the Labour government's ambitious 'Every Child Matters' policy; and more besides.

All are part of a proud 'progressive' tradition that has understood education, schools and teachers in richer, more complex and more exhilarating ways than the impoverished, simplistic and enervating product of GERM and its spreaders. We might call it 'education in its broadest sense', standing in marked contrast to today's 'education in its narrowest sense'.

Hope for the future

As we suggested above, historical amnesia plays an important part in supporting neoliberalism's belief and mantra - that there is no alternative. There is no alternative

because neoliberalism, and GERM, offer a theory of everything – and nothing must disturb that belief, including a thoughtful and measured view of the past. To assert there is no alternative contributes to the fervour of true believers, including the ‘New Educational Establishment that now runs, and rules, our system’,¹¹ while adding to the sense of hopelessness of the majority, including the many who have grown up knowing nothing different, being constantly reminded ‘that’s just the way life is’. Hopelessness breeds apathy and an understandable tendency to turn inwards and focus exclusively on the individual, despairing of any prospect of decisive change through collective action. For if this is just the way life is, so this is how life must be, for if there is no alternative, why bother trying to change anything?’

But there have been and always will be alternatives. There are other education narratives to be told, narratives that contain encouraging and exhilarating stories, narratives that remind us of the exciting possibilities of education, of what children, teachers and schools are capable of given the right conditions. Narratives that can give us hope for the future, not least because they have brought past changes for the better, sometimes big changes. Narratives that can feed the conviction that a better future is possible – but also necessary.

Necessary because of the converging crises – economic, political, social, environmental – confronting humankind, and the part that education and schools must surely play in helping humankind survive them. Necessary because neoliberalism itself is a busted flush, its era passing away as it loses credibility and as the disastrous consequences it has brought about become ever more visible. As Jens Beckert, director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, concludes, ‘[Neoliberalism’s] promises did not survive the test of the real world. Today, they are largely exhausted’.¹² We could say the same of GERM, that variant of the neoliberal virus, despite the vast amounts of treasure and human resources expended on trying to make it work.

Confronted by this necessity, creating and broadcasting politically strong narratives offering alternatives to neoliberalism is the task before us today, a challenge that must include education. Narratives that draw on the past and present to offer hope for and provoke reflection about the future. That is the purpose of this *FORUM* publication:¹³ not only to offer more analysis of the damage wrought by 40 years of GERM and neoliberalism, but also to open up to alternatives, to how the damage can be repaired and to how education can contribute to a healthy and caring society in which citizens can live flourishing, dignified and fulfilled lives in a democratic, just and sustainable environment.

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Notes

1. Passi Sahlberg, 'Global Educational Reform Movement is here!', 2012, blog at PasiSahlberg.com. <https://pasisahlberg.com/global-educational-reform-movement-is-here/>
2. Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*, London, Random House Business Books, 2017, p67.
3. Wendy Brown, 'Sacrificial citizenship: neoliberalism, human capital and austerity politics', *Constellations*, 23(1), pp3-14, 2016, p3.
4. Stephen J. Ball, 'Preface', in Guy Roberts-Holmes and Peter Moss, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020, pp xv-xviii.
5. Melissa Benn, Fred Jarvis Memorial Lecture, 1 July 2023: <https://newvisionsforeducation.org.uk/fred-jarvis-memorial-lecture-2023>
6. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, 'in 2022–23, average private school fees across the UK were £15,200 in today's prices (net of bursaries and scholarships). This is £7,200 or nearly 90% higher than state school spending per pupil, which was £8,000 in 2022–23 (including day-to-day and capital spending). The gap between private school fees and state school spending per pupil has more than doubled since 2010, when the gap was about 40% or £3,500': <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/tax-private-school-fees-and-state-school-spending>
7. Paula Cagliari, Marina Castagnetti, Claudia Giudici, Carlina Rinaldi, Veà Vecchi and Peter Moss, *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: Selected writings and speeches 1945-1993*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p331.
8. Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School: A democratic alternative*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, p66.
9. Benn, 2023, *op. cit.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Jens Beckert, 'The exhausted futures of neoliberalism: from promissory legitimacy to social anomie', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13(3), 2020, pp318-330, p322.
13. Renewing public education - Lawrence Wishart (lwbooks.co.uk)