

Editorial

Teaching controversy

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Mildred Taylor's prize-winning novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, charts the fortunes of Cassie Logan and her African American family in the Mississippi of the 1930s. It offers in some respects a quiet corrective to another one-time favourite among GCSE English Literature set texts, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Taylor draws on her own experience and that of her family for several episodes in her novel, including the chapter in which Cassie's mother, Mary Logan, must teach her segregated class of African American students about the institution of chattel slavery. Expected to adhere to the material of the approved state textbook, Mary Logan instead offers her own account: 'She spoke on the cruelty of it; of the rich economic cycle it generated as slaves produced the raw products for the factories of the North and Europe; how the country profited and grew from the free labour of a people still not free'.¹

Word of her practice reaches the headteacher. He arrives with members of the all-white school board, characters already revealed to be racist, to observe Mary Logan as she teaches. At the end of the lesson he is made to dismiss her for failing to teach what is in the textbook, and for teaching what is not in it:

'... if it ain't in here, then you got no right teaching it. This book's approved by the Board of Education and you're expected to teach what's in it'.

'I can't do that'.

'And why not?'.

Mama, her back straight and her eyes fixed on the men, answered, 'Because all that's in that book isn't true'.

Taylor's fictional confrontation is all the more resonantly emblematic because it turns on a teacher's real power to influence the minds of pupils and students. Were Mary Logan to go by the book she would align herself with the mandated content and seem to endorse its racist lesson, thereby miseducating her students, one of whom is her own child. Mary Logan's job is at stake. But so is the nature of her community's self-understanding and sense of identity: the truth about who they are.

Truth being rarely pure and never simple, the use by teachers of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* has been challenged in several US states, by African Americans among others, and the novel removed from required reading lists.

In England, too, arguments over which texts students should read are hardly unknown. They remind us of the tensions in play across the entire curriculum, not

just one part of it, and of the enduring struggle over the purposes of education and the aims which inform, openly or implicitly, the content of syllabi and the orientation of the education system as a whole. They ask two questions of our current ‘knowledge-rich’ approach and its apparatus: whose knowledge are we to be schooled in? And who is to decide?

Like much fine fiction for young people, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* explores the extent to which those most oppressed by it may contest the currently dominant order and assail the historical limits in order to exceed them. The novel sets great store by debate and discussion, even as it illustrates the limits of this way of changing people and thus society. It dramatises the possibilities and limits of individual and collective action, and recognises debate itself as a form of action. It is clear-eyed about the structured imbalance of power in the society it depicts, and the unjust and brutal consequences that result. To read the novel is to be reminded of what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once suggested about any idea: that a price could be attached. Some ideas would cost little, others much. How does one pay for ideas? With courage, Wittgenstein thought.

To engage responsibly in school with what is controversial – to test the historical limits of what can be thought, said or done in relation to how we live together in society – may well require courage of a teacher. It certainly requires principled forethought. The power teachers have to influence the minds of pupils and students, perhaps decisively, confers a cardinal responsibility. It is what defines the role. This responsibility for enabling every child to learn may justify a decision not to teach what is on the syllabus, or to teach what is not on it.

How best, then, to address controversy in the classroom? What turn out to be the teacher’s other responsibilities here? What turn out to be the school’s? And if a teacher can’t in conscience teach what’s in the textbook or the scheme of work, what then? This number of *FORUM* includes a range of articles which wrestle with these always-difficult questions. I hope that, as they read, practitioners in particular will be encouraged to reflect on their own circumstances and on why they work as they do, coming to find their principled professional self-confidence enhanced. For too long, it seems to me, those beyond the classroom, and sometimes far beyond it, have had the lion’s share in deciding what is to be required of teachers and their teaching.

This is most egregiously apparent in relation to the teaching of beginner readers to read. Current stipulations enforce the use, ‘first and foremost’, of programmes of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). Sue Cox exposes this policy’s inherent shortcomings and denounces its detrimental effect in the lives of children. She shows how SSP programmes can work to curtail reading rather than enlarge it, and laments in particular the experience of five-year-old Daisy, whose exposure to the mandated approach has grievously undermined her sense of herself as a reader. Daisy will not be the only child for whom this is true.

The single mandated method of teaching beginner readers to read (and are we not always learning to read?) is to be opposed, resisted and worked around because, as Sue Cox makes clear, it sets aside any meaning-making on the part of the beginner reader save that sanctioned by the method. The underlying conception of what it is to teach and learn which can impose one sole way to teach beginner readers to read finds its apotheosis in a GCSE literature course predicated on the notion that the meaning of the set text is fixed, pre-loaded and gathered in the confines of the mark-scheme. To reproduce this meaning more or less completely and thoroughly is the chief task of the student. But what if any text means more than the teacher or examiner can think it means? What if this superfluity of meaning is to be welcomed and explored as part of a text's being read? That students make their own meanings out of their encounter with curriculum content, beyond the meanings 'delivered' to them or expected from them, is a perspective the current assessment system hardly supports. Rather, it confirms an overarching education policy which sidelines children and young people as makers of their own meanings.

Duncan Morrison considers the kinds of pressure which can be brought to bear on teachers who seek responsibly to engage with areas of controversy in the curriculum, or are charged with doing so, notably when addressing issues of social class, anti-racism, sexuality and gender equality. Such teachers are especially exposed in a system which prioritises remembering given meanings and reproducing them. To teach controversy requires less by way of 'delivery' and more by way of discussion, with the complex challenges this can bring as regards care for people's feelings and the productive articulation of opposing points of view. Duncan Morrison suggests that teachers who do this work must beware of self-censorship prompted by the intolerance or hatred all too prevalent in our contemporary public space. He identifies what he calls a 'climate of fear' which makes teachers vulnerable in their workplace or community for doing their job, and leads them to doubt and trammel their own practice, making it harder to tackle ignorance about, or prejudice and animosity towards, particular social groups. An added complication arises when aspects of the required curriculum run counter to the views or beliefs of individual practitioners. He writes: 'The interaction of personal prejudices and discomfort with a climate of fear is, I would argue, the key determinant of how controversial issues are dealt with in primary settings'.

The bar for what might be regarded as controversial curriculum content is set lower in the primary phase than at secondary level, given the youth of the pupils and their relative lack of experience in developing thought-out positions. Daryn Egan-Simon offers several ways in which practitioners at secondary level, particularly teachers of history, can begin to make their classrooms into places where controversial issues and material may be addressed in educationally responsible and valuable ways. He starts from a principled belief 'that history, when approached dialogically, can become a

catalyst for meaningful, critical conversations, with relevance extending far beyond the classroom'. At heart is the idea of dialogue, more Gadamerian than Socratic: a faith in the ability of people to be open to hearing ideas and evidence which run counter to their own thinking without closing their minds or feeling only victimised or offended, so that critical thinking, empathy and active citizenship – an essential trio of curriculum aims for Daryn Egan-Simon – might develop within a respectfully inclusive classroom. His article offers practical approaches for building and maintaining relationships which are robust enough to sustain what he calls 'difficult conversations' while supporting each individual student.

In practice this takes skill and tenacity on the part of the teacher, and asks much of students. It requires a policy framework which extends trust to teachers to determine responsibly what can and cannot be said in the course of a lesson, and which can cope productively with misjudgements or poor decisions, whether on the teacher's part or the student's. Since policy cannot anticipate or pre-empt every situation, principles of respect and care are to be lived out in the moment by all concerned, and the experience learned from.

The importance of a nuanced approach on the part of teachers and school leaders is underscored by Andrew B. Jones. He considers the challenges for practitioners in maintaining a position of political impartiality in today's classroom. 'On one hand', he writes, teachers must 'navigate the need to provide a balanced and impartial education that respects the diverse views of students and the broader public. On the other hand, they are responsible for countering misinformation and extremist ideologies that may surface in the classroom'. Charged with upholding what the government determines (not uncontroversially) to be 'fundamental British values', teachers look to foster critical thinking and democratic engagement. The power teachers wield to influence the understanding of their students in matters political is recognised by government, and laws limit what teachers may do. Andrew Jones reminds us that 'schools must prohibit promotion of partisan political views and ensure a balanced presentation of opposing views on political issues'. Yet teachers are regularly criticised in the right-wing press for supposedly brainwashing their students. Such public stoking of distrust enhances the climate of fear.

Controversy's hallmark is the accelerated intensification of feeling on all sides. Teachers reckon with the sense of vulnerability and the degree of emotional investment which a controversial issue is likely to generate among students, even as they put their faith in the pursuit of reason and humane caring for others over and above assertions of any individual's 'rightness'. Andrew B. Jones explores how teachers try to do justice to difficult histories in the face of misinformation, conspiracy theories, the divisive rhetoric common on some social media, and their own biases. His article thoughtfully and informatively introduces the terrain teachers traverse as they seek to enable greater

understanding while avoiding either an excess of caution or overt partisanship.

But, with its cache of unreason, might 'partisanship' be too loaded a term? Distinction can be made between the nature of the political views held and the way in which they are held. Extreme views (if such they be) may be held moderately: open to reasoned challenge and revision and with a sense that one may be wrong. Mary Logan reminds us it is also necessary to stand for what one believes. To speak up and take the consequences. Dave Hill has done so. A founder member of the group of radical and Marxist educators brought together in the Hillcole Group, and always a supporter of comprehensive education, in this first of a pair of articles (the second will appear in the next number) he gives an account of his lifetime of practice, and an insight into what it has cost him to be identified as a Marxist teacher. That an impoverished boy from post-war London's East End can ascend to a university chair might be thought cause for celebration on the political Right, and a vindication of the faith in that quarter in social mobility through aspiration, application and education. And no doubt it would be, were Dave Hill's character and political outlook not, in his own word, 'bolshie'. He looks at the effects on others as well as himself of his decades of teaching and activism inside and outside classrooms and seminar rooms. What difference did he make, and what difference was made in him and to him?

The Hillcole Group convened at the house which Caroline and Tony Benn owned in Holland Park in London. Caroline Benn devoted decades of her life to informing, energising and helping to orientate the movement for comprehensive education across much of the second half of the 20th century. In an article which draws on Caroline Benn's archives, Jane Martin outlines Benn's life and some of her formative influences, before expertly reviewing her work for the comprehensive movement. The political tide continues to run against those principles which nurture the creation of a comprehensive education system: a system intent to recognise and harness everyone's unlimited capacity to learn and which would value equally everyone's right to learn, making provision for it in an unsegregated and freely accessible system of common schooling. In such times it remains more important than ever, as Jane Martin reminds us, to remember and celebrate the legacy of Caroline Benn and her peers.

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture is one way of doing so. A packed committee room in the House of Commons heard Sammy Wright, author of *Exam Nation*, give the 2024 lecture. His text is reproduced in this number. For permission to include it here, *FORUM* thanks the Socialist Educational Association, who co-sponsored the lecture and have published the text on their own website. Sammy Wright reiterates the importance of the stories we tell about school. They reveal how we value education and are central to changing what it means to educate. He has something to say about the cultural appeal of the 'heroic' teacher, and about the nature of the system with which such a teacher contends.

His lecture includes the words of several students. One is Clark, who talks about his erratic pattern of school attendance and the reasons for it. Clark speaks a local variety of English: a non-standard dialect. Speakers of such dialects frequently find themselves marginalised in school, especially where an expectation that the standard form will be used in all circumstances is uncontroversial. Sofia Lampropoulou, Victorina Gonzalez-Diaz, Kate Flynn and Liz Parr offer a critique of this stance. Their paper derives from research they undertook with teachers in secondary schools in Liverpool to explore the dilemmas faced when seeking to include and better enable speakers of non-standard English, not least when teachers are positioned as gatekeepers of the standard form. How you sound in school – your accent, vocabulary and syntax – at once plays into a series of what Sofia Lampropoulou and her colleagues call ‘language ideologies’, often resulting in misrecognition. Teachers, too, may have found themselves judged adversely on the basis of their speech, or felt compelled to alter it. The paper implies that conceptions of ‘appropriateness’, as well as of ‘correctness’, will need to be revised if localised accents and dialects are genuinely to be valued and made use of in the classroom, for everyone’s educational benefit.

In the autumn of 2024, the new government launched a review of the school curriculum and assessment procedures for England. A panel of academics and multi-academy trust executives, chaired by Professor Becky Francis, and including a special educational needs and disability (SEND) consultant and figures from Ofqual and the Reach Foundation (which helped set up Oak National Academy) issued a call for evidence. The absence from the panel of any teachers’ union and local authority representatives, or any non-academy practitioners, speaks volumes. Nevertheless, a host of individual educationalists, and many organisations – including the National Education Union and the Socialist Educational Association (SEA) – did respond. We publish the *FORUM* Editorial Board’s contribution, along with that of John White, who makes the case for an aims-based curriculum. He argues that England can learn from approaches taken in the other home countries, and that the current Labour administration should pick up where its previous iteration left off. The informing aim of any new curriculum should be to ensure all children are successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens.

Carl Parsons decries the fragmentation of England’s state education system: fruit of a policy of unchecked academisation. His letter is followed by Sally Tomlinson’s tribute to her friend and colleague, the distinguished educationalist and stalwart advocate of comprehensive education, Professor Richard Pring, who died in October last year.

Thanks to unremitting pressures of workload, to custom and the dead hand of routine, much about our education system which external authority asserts goes un-reconsidered in school. Over-ripe for questioning are such notions as ‘ability’; ‘best practice’; ‘evidence-informed’ recommendations; ‘fluency’; ‘decoding’... On page 47 of

its 2023 *Reading Framework* the Department for Education insists teachers demonstrate ‘fidelity’, but only to the SSP programme: to the textbook and not to the cardinal professional responsibility, which here requires ensuring every beginner continues learning to read, by any means necessary. In the light of such official exhortation, and the misunderstanding of teaching and learning which prompts it, we need more controversy in education, not less.

Note

1. Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, New York, The Dial Press, 1976; both quoted passages appear on p125 of this version: https://www.renaissanceacademyschools.com/uploads/1/5/2/9/15294762/roll_of_thunder_hear_my_cry_book.pdf