Editorial

Weighing upon the subject: education and mental ill-health

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Much as some politicians may prefer to deny it, widespread mental ill-health is a reality. The unjust social structures and unreconstructed social attitudes which help produce that reality can't be wished away. They must be dismantled. The urgency of this task hits home when those who suffer are heard, since, in the words of a refugee who was also a philosopher: 'The need to let suffering speak is the condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject'. In an impact report which the charity Young Minds conducted in 2023, children and young people spoke of how burdened they feel by academic pressures, bullying and certain kinds of behaviour management policy in school.[1] That element of 'objectivity' which is our education system can weigh upon them gravely, to the detriment of their mental well-being.

Yet in recent months, a Labour minister and the leader of Reform UK have separately declared that mental ill-health is being over-diagnosed in Britain. Health minister Wes Streeting spoke in March 2025 along these lines as government moved to reduce disability payments for those of working age. In April, Nigel Farage claimed that doctors were significantly over-diagnosing children with mental health conditions and with special educational needs. As a consequence, he believed, school leavers were being funnelled into a life of victimhood.[2]

Academic experts rebutted these comments. Dr Dario Moreno-Agostino (who works in London at University College and Kings College) was reported as saying that 'analysis of longitudinal data, tracking cohorts born in 1970, 1958 and 1946, suggests that after the pandemic all three generations reached or surpassed the worst mental health levels in 40 years'.[3] NHS records cited in the same report show rates of common mental disorders more than doubled in 16-to 24-year-olds between 2000 and 2019. They have increased more steeply since then.

Several articles in this number of *FORUM* address aspects of the suffering – principally the non-physical suffering – inflicted on people in school and by school which incubates or exacerbates mental ill-health. Official policy in England cannot avoid being implicated in such suffering all the while it maintains an overly constraining educational framework. That framework's chief components are the regime of high-stakes public testing, coercive Ofsted inspection, 'ability'-labelling, hyper-accountability and, through academisation, denial to parents and staff of ways to be meaningfully represented when school policy decisions are made locally. Not one of these policies or educational perspectives serves to make schools the welcoming, supportive, enabling and happy places which those who work in or attend them want them to be. More and

more it becomes clear that they do the reverse.

Laura Quick writes about the emotional labour required of certain pupils as they try to present themselves in ways they think their school wants. These pupils, labelled 'low-attaining', believe they must exhibit resilience in their demeanour and deportment, even though to do so requires they deny their own feelings. They must conform to what Laura Quick terms 'the new discourse of happiness' as made manifest for example in the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) curriculum. This proposes that success and well-being come from adapting to the suffering one's situation engenders, rather than working with others to change conditions in order to make that situation more habitable. The discourse turns being happy into something to aspire to and become capable of: a conscious responsibility rather than a natural reaction. The two young people in Laura Quick's article show how this 'responsibilisation' only works to burden them further. More generally, the article indicts 'positive psychology' for diverting attention from those social structures which engender inequalities of all kinds, much to the benefit of a certain kind of politics.

Being a victim of bullying contributes significantly to feeling anxious or depressed, and to a propensity to self-harm**.** Andrew Maile presents yet more evidence to support this grim reality, and offers an account of a recent initiative to help stop bullying in the primary phase and undo, or at least dilute, the suffering and the damage to mental health it causes. Bullying should not be seen as in any way a 'normal' part of the experience of school. His article recognises the effects of bullying on pupils, and also on teachers: 'Classrooms in which there were higher identified levels of bullying perpetration were also associated with lower perceptions of teacher self-efficacy'. Effective anti-bullying approaches remain greatly needed, as does support for teachers to become confident in adopting them.

Craig Johnston and Sally Tomlinson conclude the magisterial overview of the history and development of 'alternative provision' (AP) which they began in *FORUM* 66, 1. Their article sharply critiques the recurrence in a new guise of a parallel system allowing for the removal from mainstream classrooms of children 'variously regarded as disruptive, disabled, and defective … so that the "normal" schools can carry on teaching "normal" children without making changes to existing provisions'. Alternative provision fundamentally challenges the claim to inclusion which is a cornerstone of any system of comprehensive education. The clients of contemporary AP, as of similar systems in the past, are largely, the authors say, 'children from working-class homes, the racial minority, mainly male and SEND'. Craig Johnston and Sally Tomlinson warn of a slow but steady move away 'from recommendations set out by the Warnock Committee (in 1978) – or a widespread agreement that all children have a right to be included both in society and in mainstream schools – to a normalising of different forms or levels of ex/inclusion'.

Doug Martin recalls the way in which schools were repositioned as crucial to the nation's resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how their role as vital hubs of community support dissolved as soon as the government determined that the pandemic was over and normal service to be resumed. He notes the current Labour government's plans for '90 multi-professional hubs based in schools around England sited in areas of high deprivation' and wonders whether this might signal a willingness by ministers to move away from reckoning the value of the education system solely in terms of exam scores. He argues that the previous Labour government's extended schools policy, and the Sure Start programme, offer proven and effective ways to build trust between schools, and between schools, communities and community-based service providers.

That government's education bill has met with resistance from those parts of the new educational establishment (in Melissa Benn's phrase) which have a vested interest in maintaining and extending the academisation programme. Academisation precisely prevents the 'new mutuality' which Doug Martin calls for between schools, their communities, local services and local authorities, and the establishment of a renewed system of local democratic accountability. Those who stand fast against the academisation juggernaut are the focus of Richard Cunningham's article: secondary head teachers who have refused to see their schools become academies or to join multi-academy trusts. He identifies what is shared in the outlook of these head teachers, though his article suggests this may not include opposition in principle to academisation.

Katie Spicksley's concern is with how to be a teacher. As teaching's recruitment and retention crisis continues, she explores ways in which the role of the teacher is currently imagined in society, and how policy discourse fosters this imaginary and, to a degree, looks to enforce it. 'Teachers are leaving the profession', she writes, 'because their professional identities are at odds with their working lives, and this is damaging to their mental well-being'. To help alleviate the crisis, she argues, give teachers space in which to discuss professional identity and consider the kind of teacher they want to be. Her article details a research project which would enable early career teachers to do just this; it ends with an invitation to readers to participate.

One of the chief factors understood as tending to make people ill mentally as well as physically is the experience of poverty. In the UK today four million children are officially poor. This is an increase of almost three-quarters of a million since 2010, when Labour last held office, and the highest figure since records began. The Child Poverty Action Group reports that almost a million of these school-aged children, although impoverished, are deemed nonetheless not to meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals. England has the highest share of these children.[4] Dave Hill's article, companion to the article he wrote in this year's spring number, describes the mental and physical pressures which growing up in poverty after World War 2 imposed on children such as his brothers and himself. And yet, he writes, 'we never went hungry', unlike the

millions today reliant on food banks. He describes a childhood home with neither inside toilet nor fridge, and remembers how his mother was forced to pawn her sole valuable possession. 'I am not complaining here on a personal basis', he writes. 'I am complaining on a class basis. This was the lot, the material conditions of existence, of eating, working, living, sickness, death, common among low-paid strata of the working class'. These conditions shaped millions of lives and have gone on shaping them, he reminds us, before he reflects on what must be done to replace a society which not only permits but produces these conditions.

Eric Bolton was the last senior chief inspector before Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools gave way to Ofsted in the early 1990s. This transmutation he terms a 'demise' in his unpublished memoir, extracts from which Colin Richards introduces. An English teacher in the 1960s, then an inspector for English in south London boroughs, Eric Bolton went on to work with several secretaries of state for education in the Thatcher governments of the 1980s. He has something to say about those years in particular, and about the 'thoughtless destruction' of HMI by John Major's administration.

Ofsted surely takes the palm as an aggravator of mental ill-health among those at work in educational settings. Running it close may be the policy framework which constrains classroom teachers, and their pupils and students, from being creative and venturesome in their work while preventing them from having more say in matters of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Ministers construe schools as credentials factories. When put into effect, this misunderstanding of education's main purpose literally makes people sick. The autumn number of *FORUM* will offer a more fruitful exploration of the many purposes of education.

By then, in company with hundreds of other journals which offer a platform for critical, oppositional or subaltern voices, FORUM *will have been de-listed from the bibliographic database at ERIC, the Education Resources Information Centre, which is funded via the Institute of Education Sciences by the US government. This de-listing exercise would seem to be a consequence of moves by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to reduce US government expenditure. If you work in a university, please consider including* FORUM *on your reading lists, along with articles from the journal's long history of publication. Please also encourage your students not only to read the journal but to consider writing for it. Practical support of this kind helps keep* FORUM *going.*

Notes

1. 'Deconstructing the system: young people's voices on mental health, society and inequality'*, Young Minds*, April 2023, pp11-13: deconstructing-the-system-report.pdf.

2. Rethink Mental Illness, 'Nigel Farage says mental health conditions are "over-diagnosed"- we disagree,' 24 April 2025: Nigel Farage says mental health conditions are "over-diagnosed" – we disagree.

3. Hannah Devlin, 'Does the UK have a mental health overdiagnosis problem?', *The Guardian*, 5 April 2025: Does the UK have a mental health overdiagnosis problem? | Mental health | The Guardian.

4. Alpesh Maisuria, Education and Childhood Research Group, 'Parent poverty: the missing chapter in the Government's Child Poverty Strategy', UWE Bristol Education Blog, 27 March 2025: Parent poverty: The missing chapter in the Government's Child Poverty Strategy | Education blog.