Editorial

Education: to what purpose?

Peter Moss and Patrick Yarker

> … the newscasts' terrible stories
> of life in my time, the knowing it's worse than that,
> much worse …
>
> Adrienne Rich *To the Days*

Our times have merited a label. In June 2022, the US historian Adam Tooze borrowed the term 'polycrisis' to describe a present of 'multiple macroscopic risks hedged with great uncertainty [whose] interactions tend to be escalatory'.[1] The term emerged from the French philosopher Edgar Morin's thinking about the nature of complexity. It catches, for Tooze, the tenor of our contemporary moment. Exceptional challenges for humankind have arisen simultaneously in seemingly-unrelated domains – economic, pathogenic, environmental, geopolitical – and we find ourselves in the grip of 'a combination of complex interconnected and existential crises that are more than the sum of their parts', as Peter Moss puts it in the article which opens this number of *FORUM*.

Nothing easier than to list these crises. Global heating and the climate breakdown that results have come into focus alongside nuclear war, a mortal pandemic, the unsustainable rate of exploitation of the earth's resources, and the system of production for private profit, as principal threats to the coherent continuance of our species. How hospitable a planet are we handing on to our children's children? How hospitable, that is, for everyone, and not just for the rich or the lucky?

Collectively, and across millennia, people have sustained the endeavour of education to help understand, interpret and make sense of our condition, to perpetuate what we have found out about it and, where possible, to improve it. A formal endeavour, education extends informally too: before school, beyond and after it. So the public invitation we extended as editors to write about the purposes of that endeavour was careful to speak about 'education' rather than 'schooling'. Even so, formal education in settings such as school is what contributors to this number have mainly addressed. A consequence, perhaps, of just how little public discussion there has been in England in recent years regarding the purposes of education, as compared with discussion about certain techniques of schooling, or behaviour in school.

A decade and a half of Conservative misrule has given way to a Labour government seemingly content to let the central thrust of formal education policy continue much

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as before. The prime purpose of schooling, and increasingly of university, remains the preparation of pupils and students for a series of high-stakes public assessments which qualify and stratify the cohort in the service of the economy. Learning for earning. Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball have been driven to observe that, as the Covid pandemic has receded, 'the economic relations and "benefits" of schooling are reasserted. Education has been relaunched as before with little thought as to how it currently contributes to our extinction or how it might possibly contribute to our continuation'.[2] They see no future for school as an institution.

Such an outlook sets itself against the claim Keri Facer has made (in her 2011 book , *Learning Futures: Education, technology and social change*) for school as a place which can 'help resist possible futures of breakdown and dispossession', albeit only by re-making itself.[3] Facer distinguishes between our current model, the 'future-proofing' school, and the 'future-building school' which would serve us better. Such a school would augment 'the capacity of its students and communities to imagine and build alternative futures … [and be] a critical counterpoint to discourses of both despair and delusion'.

Nor is the provocatively pessimistic judgement on formal education passed by Collet-Sabé and Ball shared by our contributors, though all would agree with Peter Moss that formal education has yet to rise to the challenge of the times and escape what he terms its 'narrow economic rationale'. Moss connects the poverty of imaginative (and indeed optimistic) thinking about education's purposes with the lack of a thriving and energetic democratic culture. Such a culture would stoke that eagerness for experience in the young which, for John Dewey, bore witness to incipient intellectual curiosity, something current education policy overlooks and which today's schooling can appear to neglect. Straitjacketed by instrumentalism, education policy cannot advance a more holistic, inclusive, nurturing and creative conception and practice. Moss argues that a greater premium must be placed on critical thinking and those caring elements of teaching and learning which still prompt many people to want to work in the classroom.

John White holds the term 'polycrisis' at a certain distance, though he recognises that the scale and interconnectedness of the challenges we face 'suggest a new phenomenon'. More encompassing than mere schooling, education names an endeavour whose purposes are principally to do with personal fulfilment, political citizenship and economic participation. These bring tensions which formal education must negotiate between a self-concerned individualism and an altruistic and communal orientation. The condition of our times should make education more responsive to the need for fuller democratic participation, and more mindful of the responsibilities of the citizen. Insofar as they can be discovered from official policy pronouncements or the national curriculum, the purposes which presently steer our school system remain inadequate.

Characteristically combining research findings with personal history, Diane Reay points out how atypical have proved the few moments of progressive 'child-centredness'

that feature in England's post-war educational approach. The order of the day in school has almost always been education along traditional lines: a delivery-based didacticism. To conceive of formal education principally in terms of servicing the economy has helped ensure the reproduction of oppressive class relations. More money continues to be spent on educating the more affluent among the young rather than the impoverished. A rhetoric of aspiration and social mobility disguises the imbalance. Reay calls for 'a national conversation about what education should be for, [one] that includes listening, discussion, negotiation and compromise'. She draws attention to the ideas of Theodore Brameld, a mid-20th century philosopher in the USA, whose work responded to John Dewey's writings and to the heightened political tensions of the Cold War era and its doctrine of mutually assured destruction.

Formal education as 'a negotiated social process' leads Eddie Playfair to argue that it should address a variety of purposes both individual and social, immediate and lifelong, and should make the most of 'the mutually constitutive tension between individual and collective educational purposes, and between what is and what could be'. He upholds the example set by the Chartists. They championed in the 19th century a conception of formal education in line with the needs of the organised working class, rather than those of their social superiors. The powerful knowledge they looked to make their own, to produce and to pass on, was that which fostered critical thinking about contemporary social conditions. It charted ways to ameliorate these conditions and bend the social structure towards greater equality. In Playfair's view, joyful and emancipatory approaches to teaching and learning, and a larger imaginative franchise, better enable education's wider purposes.

How, then, to encourage the Labour government to break with the chief lineaments of Conservative education policy and move in that direction? Research has its role to play, claims Gemma Moss. Labour seems wedded to a 'standards agenda' promulgated by the previous administration. In pursuit of it, ministers 'distributed responsibility for system improvement from central government to a range of other actors'. This devolution has meant that, when government targets go unmet, 'it becomes harder to hold the government to account for the system choices made'. The same metrics applied under the Conservatives continue to operate, thereby ensuring the same approaches. By revealing the risks of stability, and the costs of a conservative approach to the system, research can 'change the political calculations'. In particular, research could foreground what children and young people themselves have to say about their schooling: its narrow curriculum, its failed SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) model, its overly instructional approach to teaching … By drawing on children's voices, research could further illuminate for policymakers the many ways in which poverty influences the lives of children in school. 'Look at education through a social lens', says Moss, 'put the social benefits of education back in their rightful place', and ways to address other

priorities, notably those to do with health, will become clearer.

In a society where over four million children live in poverty, one of those priorities is to stop children going hungry. Austerity policies, benefit cuts and the demolition of the welfare state have seen food bank use soar in the past 15 years. Some 2500 food banks can be found in communities in England now, yet far more (about 4000) are to be found in schools.[4] The purposes of education should not entail directly assuaging the impact of poverty through provision of food, clothes, shoes and toiletries. But if the family cannot provide, teachers and school staff will not turn away. Alice Bradbury and Sharon Vince draw on their own research (explored more fully in a book they published this year)[5] to consider how schools have become 'responsibilised' in this way, and what results. In schools attended by the poorest children, they write, 'an ethic of care is prioritised over concerns about accountability measures'. Face to face with the child who lacks food, it cannot be otherwise. At government level, where the child is faceless, can the same truly be said? Caring provision of this fundamental kind, devolved by default to schools, is neither funded nor recognised. Ofsted may even regard it as a distraction, or an excuse for 'poor' results. For Bradbury and Vince: 'Schools are an important part of alleviating the everyday suffering of children living in poverty, but they cannot address the long-term cause of food insecurity'.

Claire Cameron takes the increased prevalence of child poverty as a defining feature of our time. Early childhood education and care services (ECEC), though very fragmented, must attempt to mitigate the worst effects of food insecurity, poor housing, family instability, debt and so on. She argues that, in contrast to the Sure Start programme of the previous Labour government, current policies help the affluent 'much more than their poorer neighbours'. As the holder of the first (and so far only) chair of social pedagogy in the UK, she explains what a social pedagogic approach to reducing child poverty would mean, and how it is put into practice in mainland Europe. Rooted in a social justice perspective, social pedagogy melds learning, care, child development and attention to well-being into its practice. She details how initiatives on the ground in this country have helped lessen some of the most damaging effects of child poverty, even though the way ECEC is currently organised creates many problems of access. Redesignating this provision under the banner of 'education' rather than as part of 'care' would be a step forward.

Social pedagogy puts great store by the concept of '*haltung*', a German word which has been translated as 'ethos' or 'mindset' and which Claire Cameron renders as 'moral compass'. It has something in common with the perspective which helped nourish Maria Montessori's educational ideas. Nathan Archer writes about these. Social pedagogy approaches, and Montessori-based education, stand against the corporatised thrust of mainstream early years and primary provision, infused as it is with market logic, where individualism is fostered and the communal neglected. Montessorian education is, by

contrast, 'rooted in a unitary vision of the world, within the universe as an organising force. The notion of relationships and mutuality are central'. Archer offers a detailed account of different aspects of the Montessorian approach, including its concern with 'cosmic purpose' and with 'peace education' in relation to child development. By implication he illuminates what is missing from the mainstream.

High-stakes accountability and market-driven reforms have whittled away an understanding of education as a public good whose purpose is human flourishing. 'Metrics', writes Brian Stillings, 'have become a proxy for quality'. The vital role education plays in enabling people to become subjects for themselves, and as such able to respond thoughtfully, ethically, caringly and with hope to the challenges of the time, has been made far more difficult. He draws on his experience as an inspector and school improvement advisor to consider how school leaders, teachers and students might improve the situation, despite a policy context which seems designed to thwart rather than support their best efforts. He argues for a reassertion of democratic values in schools and a reinvigoration of professional trust. Teachers in particular must be aided by research and professional dialogue to recognise and respond all the more fully to the great complexity of their work and its manifold nuances. Only open debate can adequately respect the relational, ethical, individual and social dimensions of education and begin to answer the question of what it is for.

Ian Duckett defends comprehensive education's role in helping society towards a more equitable and just order. This means refusing the logic which sets school against school and student against student, and which ultimately reproduces the oppressive social relations of which Diane Reay speaks. The comprehensive ideal remains 'a project of human liberation voyaging upstream against the tide of commodified knowledge and [socially] stratified schooling'. By emphasising values of democracy, solidarity, empathy, and individual and collective agency, the comprehensive ideal holds out the prospect of realising that conception of education advocated by many contributors, one which is holistic, inclusive, critical, broad and caring. Technical fixes cannot serve its establishment. We need, says Ian Duckett, 'radical imagining'.

Patrick Yarker agrees. He would reinstate in the comprehensive system's curriculum, and in its pedagogy and processes of assessment, those currently exiled elements which are beyond measurement (though not beyond judgement), and which serve more thoroughly and alertly the call to ethical responsibility inherent in all teaching.

A letter from Colin Richards gently reminds teachers that doing their best to realise the high ideals that brought them into the profession cannot but generate a sense of having fallen short. Those who aspire genuinely to teach will, in one sense, never be good enough. Ways must be found to accommodate this inevitability and the guilt it can kindle, such that teachers will keep rising to meet the challenge of the work.

Such sympathetic and acute understanding of the teacher's dilemma, a world away from the picture outlined in official documents, is one of the fruits, we imagine, of reflecting sustainedly on education's enduringly humane purposes, and weighing how its institutions and proceedings may be tailored more fittingly to them, the better to answer the examination set for us by our times.

Notes

1. Adam Tooze, 'Defining polycrisis: from crisis pictures to the crisis matrix', *Substack Chartbook*, 24 June 2022: https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-130-defining-polycrisis.

2. Jordi Collet-Sabé and Stephen Ball, 'Beyond School. The challenge of co-producing and commoning a different episteme for education', *Journal of Education Policy*, 38 (6), 2022, pp895–910, p896: https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2022.2157890.

3. Keri Facer, *Learning Futures: education, technology and social change*, Oxford, Routledge, 2011. The quotation here comes from p29; the next one from p106.

4. Cabot Institute for the Environment, 'New research reveals there are more school-based than regular foodbanks nationwide', University of Bristol press release, 17 April 2024: https://www.bristol.ac.uk/cabot/news/2024/foodbanks.html.

5. Alice Bradbury and Sharon Vince, *Foodbanks in Nurseries and Schools: The education sector's responses to the cost-of-living crisis*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2025.