

Editorial

Education, new populism and democracy

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I must begin with an apology to Professor Gemma Moss. Her article about the role of research in shaping education policy should have appeared in the previous number of *FORUM*. I very much regret that it did not, and am grateful to Professor Moss for kind permission to publish it in this issue.

Gemma Moss begins her article by questioning the ambivalence which has characterised the Labour government's approach to school policy since it took power. On the one hand, a stated aim to reduce child poverty and value the work of teachers. On the other, endorsement of the Govian standards agenda with all it implies. 'Rather than owning the opportunity the election brought to tackle the most deep-seated challenges in education', Gemma Moss writes, 'the DfE seems to be committed to more of the same. One has to ask why'.

The rise of what Charlotte Haines Lyon calls 'new populism' may offer part of the answer. This species of politics – which has variants on the Left, though Rightist versions make the current running – is driven by grievance, she argues, and infused with conspiracy-thinking. It seeks to erode trust in existing state institutions and the possibility that those who work in them might act in good faith. It frames as duplicitous, even threatening, mechanisms of public discourse vital to democracy's functioning; not least the entire mainstream media, whose best elements check their facts, endeavour to report with rigour and offer honest self-correction. Alongside traditional targets – politicians, lawyers – the new populism has begun to paint as nefarious healthcare professionals and teachers in school and university. In place of a politics which attempts, in the service of its social vision, to address adequately the complex workings of a bourgeois state and the play of its class forces, new populism parades scapegoats and nostrums. Carried far enough, Charlotte Haines Lyon suggests, such politics will delegitimise democracy itself.

Formal education is of particular significance wherever democracy is understood as the continual work of associated living whereby everyone is regarded with equal respect while society cooperatively pursues social ends. Ends which would also enable the full flourishing of the individual. Such a project requires the realisation of social justice. The comprehensive ideal is radically democratic in its intention to offer equitable common schooling, and thus a socially shared experience, which, as John Dewey puts it in *Democracy and Education*, will be constructed so as to discount 'the effects of economic inequalities, and secure to all the wards of the nation equality of equipment for their future career'. Charlotte Haines Lyon underscores the importance

of school in nurturing ‘the relational capacities that democratic life requires’. These capacities are grounded, she says, in trust, care and love. I would add to the list just resistance to bigotry and prejudice of all kinds, and the upholding of human solidarity.

In describing a radical democratic initiative in a Suffolk primary school, Emily Rowe and Jenifer Smith ask three questions: who speaks, who listens, who cares? Each question resounds through any consideration of democracy, whether in school or beyond it. The last carries particular weight. ‘Who cares?’ can be asked, after all, in a way that, dismissive and excluding, makes it clear the speaker, and those on whose behalf they are speaking, do not care. ‘Who cares? We don’t!’. It would seem that school addresses many pupils in these tones today, and presents itself as a place where a significant number of young people feel they cannot truly speak, be listened to, be cared for or believed in, or belong.

The Department for Education pupil, parent and learner voice survey is a regularly conducted online survey of a panel of parents in primary, secondary and special schools, and of pupils in secondary schools, weighted to be representative of those who use the state system.¹ Its most recent findings indicate that almost one-third (31 per cent) of children did not feel as if they belonged in school most days or every day (in the fortnight when the survey was carried out, May 2025). The figure was an improvement on the previous year, when over half (53 per cent) felt that way, and the trend across the past five years does show improvement. But female pupils, as well as those eligible for free school meals, identified with SEND, and in Key Stage 4, all reported lower levels of ‘school belonging’.

One in five secondary school pupils did not feel safe in school most days or every day. Two in five did not enjoy school most days or every day, though again this was an improvement on the previous year when, shockingly, more than half (52 per cent) reported this. Figures for whether children and young people felt they had someone in school who believed in them, really cared about them or felt they would be a success are at a similar level. In other words, two in five young people do not feel this way. The impact on young people’s motivation to learn is marked, with 30 per cent reporting that they did not feel fairly or strongly motivated to learn.

A school distinguished by caring and just relationships. A school in which every single young person feels recognised and valued. A school where everyone wants to make a contribution to the collective life because they sense the school is a worthwhile community and want to belong to it. Such a school was the vision of Alex Bloom, pioneer head of a London secondary modern in the decade after the end of World War II. As part of what he called his ‘pattern’ for enabling the school to become such a community, Bloom embarked on its thorough-going democratisation. Michael Fielding sketched an overview of Bloom’s work in *FORUM* some 20 years ago. We republish that article to herald the arrival this year of Michael’s book-length study:

How Alex Bloom Built Radical Secondary Education in Post-war London, from UCL Press.

‘Education feels most fulfilling when it becomes a shared enterprise’, write Emily Rowe and Jenifer Smith. They describe how a regular whole-school meeting involving every member of the school community became instituted in their primary school. Alex Bloom’s writings, and Michael Fielding’s, resource their exploration of the meeting’s significance. ‘Lightly but firmly’, in their words, they place it within a tradition of school-level democratic projects such as those at Countesthorpe College, Summerhill and Bloom’s school in Stepney, St George-in-the-East. They reveal how the meeting insisted on its own arrival naturally, ‘from an ethos where children’s voices were honoured and where teachers not only listened but thought about and acted on what children said and did. It was part of ... a method of living’.

The value of listening to what children say about their own schooling, the good, the bad and the ugly, is urged by Gemma Moss. Research which captures these perspectives can inform policy and work against inertia and the conservatism that sets in. The ‘standards agenda’ need not be the only star by which to guide the system. As the impact of poverty continues to make itself felt in the lives of many children, and hence in the day-to-day life of their schools, and as schools attempt to meet the crisis in the best interests of those they educate, policy has lagged behind reality. ‘Look at education through a social lens’, says Gemma Moss, ‘put the social benefits of education back in their rightful place’, and ways to address other priorities will become clearer.

But those social benefits, visible when formal education is understood as a holistic endeavour, are overlooked while policy focuses too intently on ‘attainment’, itself conceived most narrowly. The government-funded Education Endowment Foundation’s Toolkits claim to offer, as Rachel France writes, ‘an accessible summary of education evidence of a wide variety of educational topics key to improving pupil attainment’. The kits supposedly provide schools with knowledge of ‘what works’. Rachel France describes how this drably instrumentalist approach infiltrated formal education from the health sector. She lays out various grounds on which it has been criticised, before painstakingly analysing the ‘Behavioural Interventions’ toolkit and evaluating aspects of the methods used to compile it. She reveals significant flaws in several areas (not least, the calculation of an intervention’s ‘impact size’) before weighing up the overall implications for the value of the kit, especially as regards its generalisable conclusions, its presentation of intervention costs, and its failure to engage with the complexity of ‘behaviour’. This particular toolkit, in her view, could justifiably be labelled an example of science-washing. ‘By not supporting a specific choice of intervention together with the conditions under which it might work, for whom and why’, Rachel France asks, ‘what is the toolkit actually doing?’.

Like mandatory phonics teaching and closed-book literature exams, the toolkit

is a fruit of the general tendency of government policy to whittle away responsibly exercised professional autonomy and replace it with directives or a strong steer from the centre. School leaders find themselves surrounded by new demands and hemmed in by the attendant responsibilities. As Richard Cunningham charts, modern head teachers have seen their role reconfigured from one of educational leadership to what he calls 'managerial compliance'. The deprofessionalisation of classroom teachers finds its twin here. Headship is now about accountability and resource distribution, with time and space for professional creativity and inspirational service more and more squeezed out, and an 'ethics of performance' imposed. Richard Cunningham argues that 'the expertise gained on the way to headship is not the same as the expertise that needs to be used when in headship.' Among many malign consequences is a crisis in head teacher recruitment, part of the wider crisis of teacher retention and recruitment that head teachers must do their best to cope with locally.

David Abbott investigates the notion of 'quality' in education, and comes out against it. 'Quality' is a deeply ideological term, he argues. It has wrought 'tremendous damage to our prospects of achieving a democratic and egalitarian education system' by embedding a 'technocratic' idea of teaching and a neoliberal ideology of what teaching comprises. He explores the etymology and history of the word 'quality' before homing in on what he calls its discursive reinvention in the 1970s, amid the pivotal debate about the direction to be taken in state education and the sustained assault on comprehensive schooling from the hard right wing of the Conservative Party. He questions related aspects of the 'quality' discourse, such as the idea of 'continuous improvement' in education, and denies that the quality of teaching is the most important factor in improving outcomes for pupils and students. This claim supports a conception of educational improvement as 'readily measurable and amenable to a technocratic solution' and deflects from a proper concern with salient factors external to the school. David Abbott warns that teachers and others at work in education are inevitably caught up in the 'quality' discourse and reproduce its norms and values. We focus over-much on 'instrumental means' for improving 'outcomes' and so 'fail to consider the values and the political ends which [our] actions promote'.

Lee Calderbank works in a setting for young people with special educational needs. His article reflects on seven years as a teacher in mainstream and specialist settings, and is partly inspired by the importance which some of John Dewey's ideas continue to have for him. Dewey was not near the top of the list of educational figures invited to contribute to a series called 'My pedagogic creed' which appeared in the *US School Journal* in 1896 and 1897. Yet no contribution is remembered today save his. It remains a beacon. Lee Calderbank offers a searching account of his own creed as a teacher, and a defence of the principles which underlie it. Listening to the voices of young people and engaging them in dialogue are essential articles of

his credo, and manifest his commitment to holistic education, the education of the person, and hence to the importance of the ‘spiritual’ dimension of education. He offers one example from his classroom as emblematic of the way in which valuing relationships and giving students scope to make their own choices about how to go about their work – the time taken, the redrafting they can do, the reflections shared – deepen learning and highlight for the teacher pedagogic challenges which might otherwise be passed over.

FORUM and the Socialist Educational Association again proudly co-sponsored the annual Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, which took place in November 2025. This was the 25th lecture in the series. Three principal speakers considered whether the comprehensive revolution has been successfully completed or thus far defeated. Diane Reay argued that comprehensivisation was as yet incompletely realised. India Rees brought news from the classroom of the pressures besetting teachers such as she. Fiona Millar held that in major respects key comprehensive principles are embedded in the formal education system, notwithstanding the continuance of selective education in certain regions of England and despite the endurance of an independent sector. We should celebrate the achievements of comprehensive education far more than we do. All three speeches are published in this number. The archive of lectures is available on the SEA website.²

The pupil speaks. The teacher fails to listen. Who cares? Anna Kim unfolds the implications in her heartfelt, detailed and clear-eyed account of the changing nature of Germany’s education system post-reunification. She draws on personal and family experience of racism, as well as her own reading and research, to tell a bleak but all-too-familiar tale of under-resourced schools and overly instrumentalised approaches to teaching and learning within a culture grappling with major economic and social challenges and suffused by antagonism towards particular minorities. Despite the indifference or downright hostility of the system’s shapers, and many of its movers who neither listen nor care, and the growing influence of a politics which bares its teeth at those who stand up for social solidarity, caring and the commitment to justice which is democracy’s promise, she advocates a practice of hope in the classroom.

When is it not an act of hopefulness to endorse the comprehensive ideal? To evince a belief in general human educability. To hold that everyone can learn and go on learning when conditions are made right. Chief among those right conditions is a system of common schooling in which every feature and process is informed by that ideal. Only through the establishment of such a system can the democratic spirit in education find itself fulfilled. We face the same moment while that work is yet undone, whether in a time of new populism or old backsliding. As the poet Carolyn Forché has written: *It is either the beginning or the end/of the world, and the choice is ourselves/or nothing.*

Notes

1. Department for Education, 'Pupil experiences in school: academic year 2024 to 2025': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-experiences-in-school-academic-year-2024-to-2025>.
2. Socialist Educational Association, 'Caroline Benn Memorial Lectures': <https://socialisteducationalassociation.org/caroline-benn-memorial-lectures/>.