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'Alex Bloom, pioneer of radical state education'

by Michael Fielding

Abstract

In 'Alex Bloom, pioneer of radical state education', Michael Fielding offers an introductory overview of the work of head teacher Alex Bloom, who led St George-in-the-East secondary modern school for a decade immediately after World War II. The school was located in a highly impoverished and ethnically mixed district close to London's docks. Given these circumstances, and driven by his own principled commitments, Bloom embarked on perhaps the most radical sustained initiative yet undertaken in English state education.

Michael Fielding served for many years on *FORUM*'s editorial board. His forthcoming book about Bloom's work restores to public memory an inspirational adventure in education and honours the person behind it. Bloom's example reminds us that approaches rooted in caring relationships and sustained belief in the educability of all young people will garner a rich educational harvest.

Introduction by Patrick Yarker

The 1944 Education Act laid down that after the end of World War II there would be free universal secondary education in England and Wales up to the age of 15. To meet the promise, the wartime government created a tripartite system of secondary education. This was predicated on the IQ-ism of the previous decades, its quintessence the 11-plus exam, and comprised grammar, technical and 'modern' schools. After VE Day, Attlee's Labour government zealously pursued the segregatory policy.

In effect the system was 'bipartite'. No more than 300 or so 'technical' schools were ever in operation, but by 1955 some 3500 secondary modern schools had been opened – more than half the total number of secondary schools – alongside 1100 grammar schools (and, it's worth noting, 16 schools designated 'comprehensive').[1]

The system ensured that those young people whom the 11-plus funnelled into secondary modern schools, perhaps 80 per cent of all state-educated students, could not follow an exam course. Labour policy spun this deprivation as liberatory: the secondary modern school would be free of the restrictions imposed by an external exam syllabus and the pressure that accrues from having to sit a high-stakes public test. But such

'freedom' effectively denied secondary modern students the possibility of accessing A-level courses and thus the chance to gain a university place. It was one inevitable result of the pessimism about working-class children's educability which IQ-ism and its heir, 'ability' thinking, feeds off and fosters.

Instead of the divisive 'bipartite' system, Attlee's government might have implemented a system of 'multilateral' or comprehensive schools. Labour Party conferences during the war had unanimously resolved that the party should do this.[2] Labour's failure to follow this course meant that it fell to local authorities to keep the comprehensive ideal alive through the 1950s. Even as scattered local schemes were making their difficult way, arguably the most radical sustained initiative ever undertaken in the history of English state education was unfolding, not in one of the handful of pioneering comprehensives but in a secondary modern school in London's Blitzed East End.

From October 1945 until his early death in September 1955, Alex Bloom led St George-in-the-East Modern School in Cable Street, Stepney. As head teacher, he banned from his school not only corporal punishment but punishment of any kind. He rejected 'streaming'. He replaced the ethos of competition between the 260 students with one of cooperation and, on the sports pitch, instituted 'friendly' rather than competitive matches with neighbouring schools. Perhaps most significantly of all, Bloom worked to infuse his school with a thorough-going democratic spirit and pattern of proceeding, in keeping with his belief that the school must be in advance of society if it is to renew and extend society's own democratic orientation. The essential need to undertake such renewal and extension was, for Bloom, a chief lesson of World War II. So he instigated a negotiated curriculum and flexible timetables, and established a whole-school council comprising all students and staff which met weekly and was given genuine rather than token responsibility for the good running of the institution.

Or rather, the community. Bloom's commitment sprang from his belief in the possibility that school could be a gathering sustained by humane principles lived out daily. To establish and maintain such a setting, one in which 'just and caring' relationships might grow and so foster 'responsible, democratic and constructive living' (as he put it), Bloom consciously worked to eliminate the fear, boredom and confusion that John Holt identifies as chiefly destructive of children's intelligence in school.[3] Distinctive pedagogical approaches to this end included conceiving of formal education as a holistic endeavour nurtured in properly caring relationships of support, recognition and celebration; the extension to young people of agency and choice over elements of the curriculum; the use of student-led small groups, project work and collaborative self-assessment; and the day-to-day, week-to-week involvement of the students in running the school and being responsible for what happened in it, effected through formal mechanisms.

Ironically enough, contemporary school inspectors praised Bloom's work at St George-in-the-East. They said it embodied the intentions of the 1944 Education Act. Michael Fielding wryly notes this in his much-anticipated book *How Alex Bloom Built Radical Democratic Secondary Education in Post-war London*, to be published by UCL Press this year. As herald to the book, and to laud an example of that educational radicalism which contemporary political timidity, reaction or disdain would discount or dismiss, we republish Michael's overview of Alex Bloom's pioneering work at St George-in-the-East and the principles which inspired it.

Notes

1. See Education: Historical statistics, Table 3, p16: https://researchbriefings.files. parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf

2. See Derek Gillard, 'Education in the UK: a history', 2018, Chapter 10: Education in the UK: a history - Chapter 10.

3. On the opening page of the original foreword, and again on the last page of the foreword to the revised edition of *How Children Fail*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982, p1, p8.

Alex Bloom

Pioneer of radical state education

Michael Fielding

Abstract

Alex Bloom is one of the greatest figures of radical state education in England. His approach to 'personalised learning' and the development of a negotiated curriculum was immeasurably more profound and more inspiring than anything to emerge thus far from the current DfES. His approach to student voice was much more radical than anything presently emerging from the current new wave of activity. His school, St George-in-the-East, a secondary modern school in Stepney in the East End of London, utterly rejected regimentation, corporal punishment (still the norm at the time) and the use of marks, prizes and competition. On the fiftieth anniversary of his death it is fitting to return to learn again from his still unfulfilled legacy.

One of the greatest figures

Alex Bloom is arguably one of the greatest figures of radical state education in England, not only in the second half of the twentieth century when he did his most memorable

work, but of the entire period of compulsory formal schooling. The period in which he worked as a head teacher (1945-1955) is relatively neglected; the kind of school he led (a secondary modern school) was, rightly, reviled by many of the comprehensive school pioneers; and the kind of education he advocated in his writing and exemplified in his practice (radical democratic schooling in the tradition of the European New Education movement) is the very antithesis of dominant models of state education to which we have been so destructively and ignorantly subjected for an entire generation.

Yet Alex Bloom is one of only two heads of state secondary schools to be mentioned in W. A. C. Stewart's magnum opus *The Educational Innovators – Volume II: Progressive Schools 1881-1967*. His death on Tuesday 20 September 1955 was reported the following day in *The Times* and his obituary which appeared on the Saturday talked of a remarkable man whose school, St George-in-the East, Stepney in the East End of London 'with its bomb ruins and overcrowded homes and tenements' had an international reputation as 'a great educational experiment' (*The Times* 1955).[1]

Here is someone whose work significantly inspired one of the best-known novels of the post-war generation [2] and one of the most important literary accounts of secondary teaching ever written in English. Here is someone whose work anticipates and still outreaches even the most creative periods of the comprehensive school movement that were to follow. Here is someone who took the democratic imperatives of lived citizenship education more seriously and interpreted them more radically and more imaginatively than anyone within the state sector before or since, and in so doing earned the praise and support of Summerhill's A.S. Neill (see Neill, 1956, p85, and Stewart, 1968, p359). Here is someone whose understanding and daily practice of 'personalised learning' was immeasurably more profound and more inspiring than anything to emerge thus far from the current DfES.[3] Here is someone whose commitment to 'student voice' is a humbling reminder of how far we have yet to go in even approximating to what he achieved in the decade immediately following the end of the Second World War.

It is a measure of the poverty of leading edge contemporary thought and the regressive nature of much that we are now required to do that Bloom's work remains virtually unknown.[4] It is a measure of the vibrancy and integrity of the radical tradition in English state education that Bloom's legacy can be traced through the work of pioneering comprehensive schools of the 1970s and 1980s like Countesthorpe Community College in Leicestershire, Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes and Thomas Bennett Community School, Crawley to the new pioneers like Bishops Park College, Clacton.[5]

Why is Alex Bloom's work so important?

There are at least three kinds of argument that give substance to claims about the

stature and enduring relevance of Bloom's work. The first has to do with its depth, its willingness to start with fundamentals of education and offer a particular account of what it means to become a person. In contrast to the alarming superficiality of most current approaches to 'personalisation' which seem to float smilingly on the shallow surface of unargued economic imperatives, all that Alex Bloom did was rooted in an explicitly articulated set of views about the nature of our humanity, of how we become persons and how the processes of formal education must start from and contribute to individual human flourishing in and through community.

The second has to do with its vitality, with its insistent capacity to test out and thereby evolve a principled practice that, perhaps paradoxically, remains both provisional and uncompromising. Bloom's views of human flourishing that formed the basis of his work were constantly renewed and revitalised through the daily challenges and reflective practices that gave both philosophical unity and lived coherence to the work of the school. His was no disengaged intellectualism, nor was it the kind of brash superficiality of so much of the 'what works' philosophy that disgraces our contemporary professional life. Rather, his approach was one that drew its dynamic vitality and principled integrity from accustomed dialogue between teachers and students, and a cumulative acceptance of a shared responsibility for the quality and consistency of its practical consequences.

The third has to do with its historical resonance, with its rootedness in and contribution to a radical tradition of education that exemplifies its legitimacy and continuing relevance through the solidarities and continuities with those who have struggled, not only to make education more just, but more joyful and more expressive of our creative capacities as human beings. We are not the first to challenge the intellectual and practical basis of the status quo and to name a view of education that transcends the impoverishment of contemporary schooling. Our capacity to do so with eloquence and conviction is sustained by counter-narratives of the past that insist on the practical possibility of another reality, of living life as it might be, not merely as powerful others with quite different motives and intentions require.

Education as the development of persons in community: beyond the superficiality of 'personalisation'

Alex Bloom opened St George-in-the-East Secondary Modern School, in Cable Street, Stepney on 1 October 1945 'with some 260 boys and girls from neighbouring schools and with 10 members of staff most of whom were unknown to each other'[6] (Bloom, 1948, p121),[7] and to Bloom himself. He decided that if his radical vision of education was to stand any chance of succeeding a piecemeal approach could not work: 'A consciously democratic community could not be formed gradually by the

removal of one taboo after another'. Thus, the school 'began without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition' (*ibid*.), and in order to overcome staff concerns about its novelty and its presumed impracticability substantial time was devoted to discussing and getting a feeling for what was known as 'the school pattern' and the principles underlying it. In contrast to our current predilection for avoiding matters of principle and the philosophical foundations of what we aspire to achieve in our daily work, this is precisely where Bloom started and through 'peaceful penetration, courage and patience' there evolved 'within two and a half years, a homogenous, living force'(*ibid*). What then were the key elements of Bloom's 'school pattern'?

His fundamental starting point was our humanity, our being and development as persons. Our sense of who we are, our worth and capacity to feel and be significant go hand in hand with our capacity to contribute to the community within which our sense of significance and uniqueness grows and flourishes. In Bloom's experience, St George-in-the-East's children emerging from primary schools invariably felt 'inferior' and 'unwanted'. His response was to provide a school community that took an entirely different view of them; one which believed that 'what the child is was much more important than what the child could do' (*ibid.*); one that sought to replace the debilitating influence of fear as the prime incentive to 'progress'. 'Fear of authority (... imposed for disciplinary purposes), fear of failure, (... by means of marks, prizes and competition, for obtaining results); and the fear of punishment (for all these purposes)' must be replaced by 'friendship, security and the recognition of each child's worth' (Bloom, 1952, pp135-136).

The two of the most important driving forces of the 'school pattern' were:

1. the child must feel that ... he does count, that he is wanted, that he has a contribution to make to the common good;
2. the child must feel that the school community is worthwhile' (Bloom, undated).

Individuality and community are thus integrally related and the young person's 'two loyalties – one to himself, the other to his community' (Bloom, 1948, p120) condition each other reciprocally. Furthermore, in keeping with his deep commitment to a communally situated individuality, Bloom also emphasised two other fundamentals that gave the school its distinctive, radical character. These were, firstly, that any form of competition other than against oneself was not acceptable. Secondly, the capacity and opportunity to make choices about what, how, when and with whom one learns provided the restless dynamic that constantly energised and renewed St George-in-the-East as a community of learning that far exceeds anything currently suggested by even the most imaginative and thoughtful of those advocating 'personalised learning' today.

In Bloom's own words: 'Perhaps the crux of things, now, lies in the realisation of the individuality of each child with all that this implies of individual treatment, individual approach, individual work' (Bloom, undated).

Against competition: 'because there are neither carrots nor goads, there will be no donkeys'

Why was Bloom so implacably opposed to competition and how was this unwavering stand received? In addition to the already stated abhorrence of 'marks, prizes and competition' on the grounds that they were rooted in a damaging fear of failure, there were two additional strands to his argument, one to do with deeply held views about the moral basis of human conduct and the other to do with the philosophical and lived integrity of the school's guiding principles. These were beautifully articulated in 'Our Pattern' where he suggests that:

> 'To get the child to appreciate these two duties (to himself and to his community) objective rewards and punishments are false stimuli, for, unless the right thing is done for the right reason one lives unethically. Similarly, objective competition is wrong; it is not only unethical but it tends to destroy a communal spirit' (*ibid.*).

They were also eloquently crafted in his paper 'Compete or Co-operate'. Here Bloom argues not only that there is a fundamental contradiction between 'competing against and co-operating with' (Bloom, 1949, p171), but that a communally oriented school does not need the artificial stimulus of 'carrots and goads'. In such a school the children will:

> 'come to realize the self that is theirs and respect the self that is their neighbour's. And because there are neither carrots nor goads, there will be no donkeys, for when children are treated as we would have them be, they tend to reach out accordingly' (*ibid.*).

Of course, in a competitive capitalist society, the daily realities with which these principles engaged were inevitably challenging. However, whilst at first the children found it hard to grasp, over time they came to accept and appreciate the school ethos which was, as these extracts intimate, not just anti-competitive, but proactively, imaginatively, extensively and actively communal in its daily work and its special occasions: 'every new activity means more children actively working for the school' (Bloom, 1948, p120).

Opportunities for active involvement included one of the most outstanding democratic structures of any state secondary school in England, before or since. They also included – and this is Bloom's own list based on what he had encouraged and developed in the first two and a half years of the school's life – school dinners

(then relatively unusual in similar schools), close contact with the local library and local clubs, parents' days, swimming galas, local music festivals, nativity plays, carol concerts, art exhibitions, old scholars reunions and a school association comprised of teachers, parents, welfare services and club leaders. The commitment to residential experience by means of the regular school camp was also substantial: even in these early years of the school Bloom tells us that: 'We have made three such visits, of a fortnight each … taking with us more than three-quarters of the school' (*ibid.*, p121).

Developing democratic individuality: situating choice in collegial action

In Alex Bloom's ten years at St George-in-the-East his commitment to the radical progressive touchstone of education as an holistic process of joint enquiry animated by the creative energies of young people and adults working in an exploratory, open-ended way remained a constant driving force of all that he did. At the centre of his work was a rich sense of individuality and community as the mutually constitutive principles of the good democratic life and an education worthy of those aspirations. His insistence that 'the foundation of all democratic concepts is the belief in the uniqueness of the human personality, with, as a corollary, the right of the individual person to harmonious growth in his community' (Bloom, 1953, p177) stands in marked contrast to progressivism's subsequent slide into the thin, if enthusiastic, individualism of later years. Bloom would have been distressed by this kind of naïveté. He was insistent that:

> 'We have never preached – or practised – laissez-faire at St George's. Rather have we set out to achieve a balance between personal growth and social needs. In the establishment of such a harmony lies the integration of the personality' (*ibid.*, p174).

How, then, did Alex Bloom develop a curriculum framework and culture of enquiry that honoured and enabled individual choice; one that encouraged an holistic rather than a fragmented approach to learning; and one that made real the radical democratic vision of communitarian progressive education in which individuality emerges as both the agent and the object of creative community engagement?

Bloom's last major paper – 'Self-government, study and choice at a secondary modern school' (Bloom, 1953) – gives us a feel for some of the key issues. In it he offers 'three facets of our life at St George-in-the-East that evoke living experiences which tend towards progress in just human relations: our School Council, our School Study and our Elective Activities' (*ibid.*, p174). Of the three, I will say a little here about the last two, school study and elective activities, and return to the first, school council, in more detail in the next section.

School study

In earlier years, i.e. 1945-1952, Bloom had tried a range of approaches to collaborative, student-centred learning that would have been familiar in name, if not in practice, to teachers with progressive leanings. These included projects, 'centres of interest', and social studies which were used individually, in small groups and as class or form studies. However, after wide experience of all these approaches the school had come to the view that 'the most effective learning is achieved and the keenest interest maintained through' what they called 'school study' (*ibid.*, p175). In order to retain the commitment to engaging with the interests of students, wide topics, such as 'man's dependence on man', were collectively agreed by staff. Each form then took one of the agreed facets of the school study as its own theme and divided it into group topics. Students then worked in self-chosen groups 'making their notes, building charts, paying their visits, while the teacher proceeded with them as co-adventurer, stimulating them and acting as their ever present help' (*ibid.*).

The collegial individuality at the heart of form studies was then further developed and nested within the larger communal engagement of the whole school (about 260 children). 'Once a fortnight the whole school met in the Hall to receive reports from the children in each Form on the progress being made in the study, a member of staff taking the chair' (*ibid.*). Bloom's paper goes on to give further examples of this mode of working that culminated in the annual school conference planned and arranged by the staff. Here each form teacher gave the school a résumé of their work connected with the school study. There then followed a film illustrative of the theme of the school study before students broke into mixed age discussion groups whose representatives subsequently reported the trend of their discussions to the whole school.

These are, in my view, remarkable examples of one school's imaginative engagement with an agreed set of radical democratic educational principles in the most challenging of circumstances that included serious poverty, substantial social deprivation and significant lack of resources.[8] Here we have the vibrancy of individual interest and energy stimulated and developed through the increasing breadth and depth of collaborative research, and in such a way that communities of enquiry feed off each other in a nested, cumulative way that is informative, stimulating and celebratory.

Elective activities

School study took up the work of the school in the mornings. In the afternoons, elective activities continued the commitment to communally situated choice. Here, at least two decades before second-wave pioneers of the comprehensive movement, we have something that anticipates, and arguably exceeds, the aspirations of, for example, Stantonbury Campus's once famous day 10.[9] Here, 50 years before Bishop Park's highly

innovative curriculum pattern (see Mike Davies' paper in this special issue),[10] we have daily arrangements in which, 'children make up their own afternoon timetable' (*ibid.*, p176). Bloom's paper goes on to describe how this highly flexible system operated on a day-to-day basis and how students themselves not only made choices from staff offerings, but also suggested offerings themselves. What is as pertinent and even more compelling is his evaluation of elective activities in action:

> 'Need one elaborate the value and joy of these afternoons? Groups which are cross-sections of the school, meeting for their self-chosen activities, purposefully employed. Through the abundance of their creative experiences the children find an emotional release in an atmosphere that is sympatico. And always with them rests the satisfaction that they, they have made the choice' (*ibid.*).

Radical student voice: a vision of the future from the past

In many ways the most remarkable feature of this very remarkable school, inspired and sustained by a very remarkable man, was the centrality of what we would now call 'student voice' in its daily life and its intellectual and practical enquiry. The philosophical and theoretical grounding of the centrality of student voice goes back to the fundamental beliefs that informed the democratic progressive tradition of education from which Bloom drew his inspiration and to which he contributed so much. Education must be driven by the creative energies of young people themselves and realised through a lived understanding of and joy in partnership with others. It is through the demanding reciprocities of its realisation that we develop our situated individuality and in doing so contribute to the common good. Within this tradition individuality is preferred to individualism and community to collectivism. To ground these aspirations Bloom developed a set of organisational arrangements that sought to express and promote this view of the good life, and one of the most impressive features of St George-in-the-East was the range, complexity and, above all, detailed coherence of those organisational structures, to which I now turn.

School council with a difference

The school council at St George-in-the-East was, in many respects, decades ahead of its time, not only because it met regularly in school time, that is to say on a weekly basis, but also because the range and depth of its activities far outstrip anything most schools have managed to develop since, despite the current resurgence of 'student voice', aptly celebrated in an earlier special issue of *FORUM* (Volume 43, Number 1, 2001).

Like every other aspect of education at St George-in-the-East, the school council and other student voice arrangements went through different phases of development. The fullest and last description of its work and function (see Bloom, 1953) re-emphasised one

of the key principles informing the 'school pattern', namely that the school community is worthy of support in significant part because student involvement contributes to young people's sense that 'the school becomes our school with a consequent enrichment of community feeling' (*ibid.*, p175).

One of the remarkable things about the school council was that, whilst it had a strong student dimension to it, the school council at St George-in-the-East was … a set of arrangements that enabled the voices of staff and the voices of students to talk, together and separately, at different times for different purposes. It was certainly not the now frequently encountered tokenistic enclave in which some student voices talk to each other without much evidence that staff, or indeed other students, know very much or care very much about what was said and what did or did not happen as a result.

There were three dimensions of the work of the school council – staff (the staff panel), students (the pupil panel) and school (the joint panel and the school council itself) (Figure 1). The staff panel met every Monday lunchtime and included all staff, i.e. about 10 people. The pupil panel comprised the head boy and head girl, their two deputies and the secretary, all of whom were elected by students. It also included elected form reps. The panel met every Friday morning and considered all school matters. There were reports from form reps and business sent by staff. It also appointed a range of pupil committees which took responsibility for running various aspects of school life e.g.:

- dance – midday dancing in the hall (remember this was the beginning of the rock and roll era!)
- meals – canteen and school dinners
- sports – playground games, outside matches, sports equipment
- tidy – appearance of the school
- social – concerts, parties, visitors.

Each committee was also linked to a member of staff who undertook a liaison role. Form meetings took place every Monday morning, in part to hear reports of the previous Friday's pupil panel meeting.

The joint panel met on the last Friday of the month. It comprised members of both staff and pupil panels and chairs of all pupil committees. Reports were given by a member of staff for the staff panel, by the head girl or head boy for the pupil panel, and by chairs of the various pupil committees. On the Monday following the joint panel meeting there was a full school council meeting presided over alternately by a member of staff and by a member of the pupil panel agreed at the previous school council.

Over the years, Bloom worked hard on various forerunners to these arrangements, one of which I will mention in a moment. Unsurprisingly, in taking stock of those

School Council		
Staff	Students	School
Staff Panel • All staff (about 10)	*Pupil Panel* • Head Boy / Girl • Deputy HB / HG • Secretary • Form Reps • Headteacher	*Joint Panel* • Staff Panel Member • Head Boy / Girl • Chairs of Pupil Committees • Headteacher

Weekly Meeting Schedule

Form Meeting *Monday Morning*　　Pupil Committees *Ongoing* ▼　　　　　　　　　▼ Pupil Panel *Friday Morning*	Staff Panel *Monday lunchtime*

Monthly Meeting Schedule

Pupil Panel　　　　Staff Panel
▼　　　　　　　　▼

Joint Panel
Last Friday of the month

▼

School Council
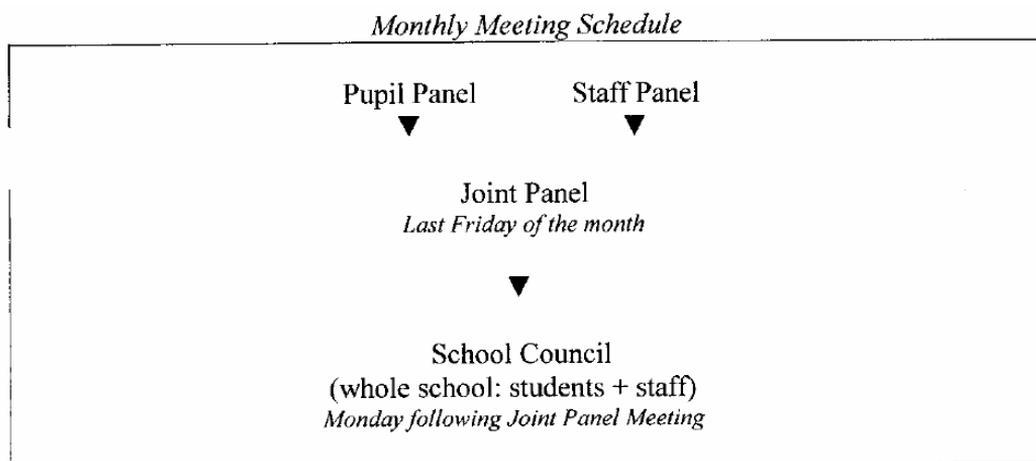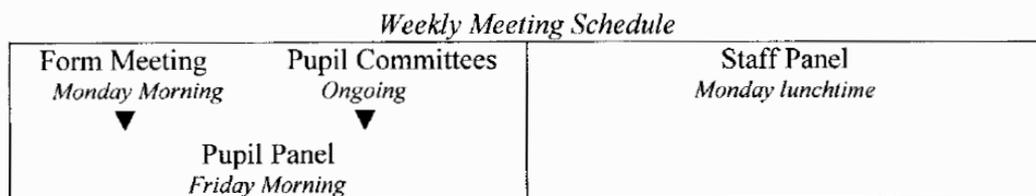(whole school: students + staff)
Monday following Joint Panel Meeting

Figure 1. Democratic Structure of St.George-in-theEast Secondary Modern School, Stepney, London E1 (1953).

just described, he underscores the centrality of the democratic aspirations that drove much of his work:

> It will seem that we, as teachers, have very little power. Nor do we need it. We are, by the nature of our work, in authority. Our School Council prevents us from being authoritarian. A large part of the school organisation is in the hands of the children themselves, and the value of the experiences afforded by the School Council in responsible, democratic and constructive living is great. (*ibid.*, p175)

Setting out the organisational architecture of democratic participation in the school

does not, of course, say a great deal about what kinds of things were discussed and how matters were taken forward. Nor does it say anything about the spirit in which such arrangements evolved, a matter I will return to in a moment. Interested readers will, no doubt, wish to refer to Bloom's original accounts (see note 7) themselves. There is, however, another very rich and useful resource which gives us a feel for both these matters. It comes from a most unexpected quarter, namely the internationally acclaimed 'novel' *To Sir With Love* by the Guyanan author E.R. Braithwaite.

Immediately prior to World War Two, Braithwaite studied at Cambridge University and on the outbreak of hostilities he joined the RAF as a pilot. Having returned to Cambridge at the end of the war and completed his studies he then tried to get a job that would utilise his engineering skills and qualifications, but the racial prejudice he encountered in civilian life, though not in the RAF, resulted in no engineering job and his eventual arrival, without any formal teacher training, at St George-in-the-East. The origins of *To Sir With Love* lie in his daily struggle to learn how to teach in a way that engaged young people respectfully, creatively and demandingly in a school that, as we have seen, took these matters very seriously indeed. In recent interviews,[11] Braithwaite has insisted that *To Sir With Love* is not a novel, not fiction;[12] rather, it is a selection from his own notes and reflections that he wrote every day when he got home as a way of learning how to teach better. This is not, of course, to diminish the artistic merits of the book. What is pertinent to this study of Bloom's work is Braithwaite's firm insistence that all that is contained in *To Sir With Love* actually happened and, as such, it is a legitimate additional source of insight into the kind of community that St George-in-the-East was just after the war.

To Sir With Love is indeed a rich testament not only to Braithwaite's courage and creativity as a teacher, but also to the work of Alex Bloom.[13] Within the present context there are two particular points that cast additional light on the highly innovative student voice work then developing at the school. The first concerns the quite remarkable account of a forerunner to the school council meetings we have just considered. The second concerns something Bloom omitted from his 1953 paper, but which provides additional exemplification of the pioneering nature of his work, namely, the weekly reviews.

Student voice as it might be

Chapter 17 of *To Sir With Love* opens with an air of excitement: 'The half yearly report of the Students' Council … was one of the most important days in the calendar of (the) school' (Braithwaite, 1969, p102), and Braithwaite admits to 'being as excited as the children as the day approached' (*ibid.*). The proceedings begin with Bloom speaking 'at length, re-iterating the aims and policy of the school and of the important contribution each child could make to the furtherance of those aims' (*ibid.*). Bloom is then followed

by the head girl explaining the purpose of the council and its activities prior to each class, through its chosen reps for each subject, reporting on their half-year's work with 'the emphasis ... on what they understood rather than what they were expected to learn' (*ibid.*, p103). What then transpires is a truly remarkable process in which students move beyond reportage and appreciation to a reciprocally demanding, sometimes critical, dialogue with three randomly chosen members of staff who, with varying degrees of skill and conviction, seek to justify and, in some cases defend, the basis of the school curriculum on which the student body had communally reflected in such detail. In this instance, one of the older boys challenged the nature of PE that the school offered:

> 'He complained that the PT was ill-conceived and pointless, and the routine monotonous; he could see no advantage in doing it; a jolly good game was far better. Apparently, he was voicing the opinion of all the boys, for they cheered him loudly' (*ibid.*, p105).

There then follows a series of impassioned, thought-provoking exchanges between students and staff about the nature and possible justification of compulsion, the necessity of recognising differences in need and capacity, the importance of thinking about and helping others, and the relationship between school and wider society, particularly with regard to preparation for adult life.

This is student voice as it might be. This is student voice making a quantum leap from our current attempts at carefully circumscribed, often rather timid encounters of small consequence and little learning. Here is a leap that takes us into a quite different world of rich and vibrant exchange between young people and adults as equal partners in the processes of learning in a shared, very public place. Here we transcend the cautious compartmentalisation of student voice and staff voice and create new, publicly shared, common spaces that are brave, exploratory, vibrant in their willingness to challenge, to listen, to laugh, to risk adventure. and to do so together in ways which affirm our shared humanity.

Weekly reviews

Whilst this exhilarating articulation of an early version of the school council adds a lived dimension to other more deliberately analytic accounts of student voice at St George-in-the-East, it is also important to understand that Bloom's development of student voice was expressed as much through daily encounter as it was through the development of a richly democratic, public realm. Some of the most moving parts of Braithwaite's book draw on ways in which young people's felt experience of teaching and learning at the school were affirmed, legitimated and made significant through the simple mechanism of each student's 'weekly review'. In these reviews:

'Each child would review the events of his school work in his own words, in his own way; he was free to comment, to criticise, to agree or disagree, with any person, subject or method, as long as it was in some way associated with the school' (*ibid.*, p49).

Bloom not only insisted on the necessity of weekly reviews, he staunchly supported the right of young people to say what they thought and felt 'without reprisal' (*ibid.*, p50). What better way to draw this section on radical student voice to a close than with Braithwaite's account of Bloom's defence of a practice that speaks to us, quietly and wisely, on the 50th anniversary of his death. In reading it we gain courage and hope and come to understand our spiritual debt to teachers like Alex Bloom, E.R. Braithwaite and those amongst our contemporaries contributing to this special issue 'who', in Stephen Spender's memorable words, 'are truly great. Who from the womb remember the soul's history … Who in their lives fight for life, who wear at their hearts the fire's centre' (Spender, 1964).

'Look at it this way', (Mr Bloom) had said. 'It is of advantage to both pupil and teacher. If a child wants to write about something which matters to him, he will take some pains to set it down as carefully and with as much detail as possible; that must in some way improve his written English in terms of spelling, construction and style. Week by week we are able, through his reviews, to follow and observe his progress in such things. As for the teachers, we soon get a pretty good idea what the children think of us and whether or not we are getting close to them. It may sometimes be rather deflating to discover that a well-prepared lesson did not really excite Johnny

Smith's interest, but, after all, the lesson was intended to benefit Johnny Smith, not his teacher; if it was uninteresting to him then the teacher must think again. You will discover that these children are reasonably fair, even when they comment on us. If we are careless about our clothing, manners or person they will soon notice it, and it would be pointless to be angry with them for pointing such things out. Finally, from the reviews, the sensible teacher will observe the trend of individual and collective interests and plan his work accordingly.' (*ibid.*, p50)

Whilst the words are not Bloom's the integrity of the advocacy and the substance of the argument are entirely true to the spirit and practice of his life's work.

'He is educated who is able to recognise relationships between things and to experience just relationships with persons'

Student voice is important because education is essentially about relationships. As Bloom has it: 'He is educated who is able to recognise relationships between things and to experience just relationships with persons' (Bloom, 1952, p136). It is through

certain kinds of relationships that we come to understand and change the world. Whilst the organisational arrangements that have featured so prominently in the latter half of this paper are without doubt among the most impressive features of St George-in-the-East, they are not, however, the most important. The communitarian strand of radical democratic progressive schooling which Bloom's work exemplifies regards relationships, our encounters with others, as both the end and the means of our fulfilment. Organisational arrangements, democratic or otherwise, are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of our well-being together. They should be expressive of just and caring human relationships, and the degree to which they achieve this is a measure of their legitimacy and their creative capacity to sustain and encourage a better world.

Fundamental to the success of any attempt to realise a community in which human beings can be and become good persons is the establishment of certain kinds of relationships amongst those involved. The capacity to become aware of the thoughts and feelings of young people and the adults who learn and work with them through the structures of daily encounter must rest not only on the energy and imagination with which individual, group and community share their work together, but also on the way these encounters are conducted, the honesty and openness of their touch, the courage of their engagement with conflict, and the firmness of their desire to value difference as well as confront what should be opposed.

In researching and learning from Alex Bloom's work, through his writing and through the memories of those who knew him when they were his students or his colleagues, what strikes me again and again, above all else, is the deep and joyful humanity of his commitment to the education of young people, especially those who came from one of the poorest, but most resilient, communities in London's East End. I am reminded here of one of John Berger's recent essays in which he quotes a letter from his friend Leon Kossoff. In the letter Kossoff mentions having recently 'heard a blind man talking on the radio about his experience of light. He said: "Reassuring, encouraging people makes a kind of light"' (Berger, 2002, p83). Bloom's legacy is one which testifies to his kindness, to the light he made and the light by which he helps us to see a little more clearly the absolute necessity of love.

'The need for pioneers is the more intense'

In closing his seminal 1949 paper 'Compete or Co-operate', rightly and respectfully republished in his honour after his untimely death six years later, Bloom asserts not only the grounded reality of what he has been so eloquently articulating, but the necessity of others within the state sector following suit. His advocacy provides a fitting rallying cry with which to end this short tribute to his work. 'Finally', he says:

> I must repeat that ours is a State school and that what we have achieved has been

done within the orbit of the State system of education. I underline this not because we expect, as a consequence, sympathetic consideration, but in order to assure those many hesitant folk working under similar conditions that, within the framework of State education and despite the limitations of space, staff and substance, progressive education is possible. It may well be that, because of these limitations, the need for pioneers is the more intense. (Bloom, 1949, p172)

In reflecting recently on his own life and work, John Berger has remarked on the importance of 'encounter', of encounters where 'certain experiences are passed from one to another'. In these situations, he says, there is:

'immediately the question of ... as though they were a flame, of putting hands around them to protect that story, or to protect that flame, and that is one of the things that happens on a page' (Berger, 2005).

This preliminary appreciation of the courage, creativity and profound humanity of one of the great pioneers of radical democratic state education is an attempt to put hands around the flame of Alex Bloom's work, to protect his story in these pages and to encourage us to not only retell other stories that have also been shamefully forgotten, but tell each other new stories, weave our own narratives into the fabric of the future.

Alex Bloom lives!

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Notes

1. It is important to add the companion admission that Bloom's work 'was better known to our overseas visitors … than it is to most British educationists' (*The Times*, 1955).

2. *To Sir With Love* by E.R. Braithwaite, first published in 1959.

3. One of the most significant failings of current work on 'personalisation' is not only its blindness to its own silent and unexamined presumptions about how we develop as human beings, but also its wilful disregard for thinkers and practitioners who did not run a business or who had the apparent misfortune to do their best work before the introduction of the national curriculum.

4. One should not be too hard on contemporary failings which were, as can be seen from Note [1], almost as true 50 years ago as they are today.

5. Mike Davies, the head teacher of Bishops Park College, Clacton, is not, of course, entirely 'new'. He was formerly Co-Director of Stantonbury Campus, Milton Keynes.

6. It is important to register the view that size matters. Any educational philosophy that is based on the importance of relationships and the continuities and reciprocities that flow from it has to take seriously the necessity of schools being small places that encourage human encounter. St George-in-the-East had around 260 students, Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes deliberately restructured in the mid-1980s to form five schools-within-schools, and Bishops Park College in Clacton, the first purpose-built UK school based on these principles (see Mike Davies's paper, 'Less is More: the move to person-centred, human scale education', *FORUM*, 47 (2 & 3), 2005: https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-47-issue-2/abstract-2559/), comprises three mini-schools that will eventually have about 300 students in each. Human Scale Education is the most important UK based organisation promoting these values and developments. Its sister organisation in the USA is the Coalition of Essential Schools.

7. PDF files of most of Bloom's key papers and other related documents can be found on the University of Sussex Centre for Educational Innovation website: www.

sussex.ac.uk/education/cei. The centre is currently moving into a more explicitly radical phase of engagement. The work of Alex Bloom initiates the first of our three new projects – Reclaiming the Radical Tradition in State Education. The second project, Macmurray Studies in Education, draws attention to the largely unpublished, but immensely important educational writings of the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray. The third project, which partners our work on Macmurray, concerns the reclamation of our Person Centred Intellectual Heritage which has also fallen foul of the inveterately English propensity for a selective and deeply conservative amnesia which this special issue of *FORUM* seeks to redress.

8. With regard to poverty and social deprivation, one of Bloom's early descriptions of the Stepney community he served so unwaveringly read as follows:

> The lives of our children are beset with more than the average difficulties. The neighbourhood was heavily bombed and the ruins are not helpful influences. Very many of the children live in conditions of over crowding and in houses or tenements far from sanitary. The number of broken homes, of homes that are unhappy or where moral values are lacking is sadly large. So many of our children are 'lonely and bothered' that the school environment is – save for some of the clubs – the only place wherein they can feel wanted and secure. The school role, moreover, comprises an unusual medley of tongues and race and colour. (Bloom 1948, p120)

With regard to lack of resources, an entry in *The Times* of 27 May 1947, records Bloom seconding an NAHT (National Association of Headteachers) call to the government to 'release paper and other materials' to overcome an acute shortage of books which resulted in some London schools being 'reduced to writing on slates' (*The Times*, 1947).

9. This was part of the curriculum, originally the last (tenth) day of a two-week timetable, in which staff, and sometimes students, offered a very wide range of activities and studies to the whole school.

10. Mike Davies, 'Less is More: the move to person-centred, human scale education', *FORUM*, 47 (2 & 3), 2005: https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-47-issue-2/abstract-2559/

11. Telephone interviews with the author in June and July 2005.

12. Hence my use of quotation marks around 'novel' in the previous paragraph.

13. The film, as distinct from the book, of *To Sir With Love* is quite another matter. Despite its status as a cinema classic, my own view, and, more importantly, the view of E.R. Braithwaite, is that it is a betrayal of the book. This is, of course, a big topic that cannot be pursued adequately within the context of this paper.