

Editorial

The futures of teaching

Patrick Yarker

This special issue addressing the futures of teaching is the fruit of sustained hard work in adverse circumstances by guest editors Viv Ellis and Marie Brennan. Their welcome intention has been to create intellectual resources with which to reimagine teaching, teacher education and the endeavour of schooling. As they make clear in the introduction to the collection of articles they present in this number, ‘we, as a community of educators, have to become better both at identifying and clarifying the challenges and coming up with our own ideas and tools beyond the usual policy toolkits’.

The special issue, formed of 10 major articles, builds on work in recent years by colleagues at Monash University’s Faculty of Education who have explored the experiences of Australian teachers, and in particular their conditions of work and the nature of the relationship between their schools and wider society. As in Australia, England’s teachers are quitting the profession in large numbers. They are burned out in short order by a workload they have far too little hand in determining. They are demoralised by the rigidities of a system calculated, it sometimes seems fanatically, to serve the demands of a high-stakes assessment regime. These rigidities make it increasingly difficult for many teachers to teach in ways which, in their professional judgement, would improve the experience of school for their pupils and students.

Given such conditions, little wonder that the crisis of teacher recruitment in England remains a chronic one. Pressure may have eased a notch at primary level (according to the latest report from the Nuffield Foundation for Educational Research),¹ but shortages persist, some of them severe. The government’s own survey of teachers’ working lives reveals that three out of four teachers report their workload is unacceptable.²

Nevertheless, as Ernst Bloch, utopian philosopher, would have it, the obsession with what is better remains, even when what is better has been prevented for so long.³ An attempt to shift the conversation about teaching’s future, or its possible futures, in a more hopeful direction keeps faith with those teachers and student-teachers who hunger for more imaginative, life-enhancing and joyful ways to go about their work and better enable their classes. The dignity and potential of the profession, and its singular importance, are nourished thereby. Teachers mediate – as it were, at the point of production – the reproduction of the good of society. Much of what current education policy sanctions can scarcely be said to foster that good. It denies students voice and agency. It mandates for the purposes of formal assessment a certain understanding only, a given viewpoint, a learned right answer, and so baulks rather than strengthens the meaning-making impulse in every pupil and student. It drastically curtails

opportunities for artistic and craft-based activity, and for the work of hands, indifferent (it would seem) to the inherent value for everyone's education of music, dance, drama, drawing, painting, pottery, woodwork, singing, planting things, growing them ...

Two further articles consider both the future and present of teaching. One future for teaching turns on what Michael Armstrong, the *FORUM* board's much missed late chairperson, identified as most necessary for the profession: a rediscovery of the imagination.⁴ Imagination, which teacher and philosopher Gaston Bachelard called a form of human boldness, harbours a playful element, and the value of 'playfulness' in relation to teaching, and to the mentoring of teachers and student teachers, is vividly restated in the article by the Playful Teacher Collective. It stems from the 'Playing Teacher' project, about which Kathryn Spicksley wrote in *FORUM* 67.2.⁵ Teachers and teacher-educators who participated in the project reflect on the significance of 'play' as a professional disposition. They make the case for more playful classroom practices, and for an orientation to the 'playful' as generative of more co-agentic, engaged and engaging classrooms. Classrooms in which, as one teacher puts it, the learning can speak into the learner's world.

Surveys suggest that more and more teachers are coming to favour the Green Party. Its leader, Zack Polanski, was invited to address the National Education Union's annual conference at the end of March. Daniel Kebede, the union's general secretary, told the *Times Educational Supplement* that the Green Party's vision for education 'perfectly mirrors our own'.⁶ In one respect, at least, let's hope this isn't so, for on the evidence of his conference speech Polanski has yet to understand the dangers inherent in the 'ability' discourse which permeates education policy, practice and discussion. As Rachel Marks writes in her penetrating analysis of Polanski's speech, 'unexamined assumptions about ability ... continue to underpin many of the injustices he identifies'. Nor do Polanski's own unexamined assumptions about 'ability' escape scrutiny. The 'ability' discourse is deeply implicated in the way schools help reproduce social inequality rather than end it. Finding a way beyond 'ability' thinking and practice is essential if comprehensive education is to fulfil its promise and if teaching itself is to have a future, or futures, rather than merely to endure a perpetual present.

The *FORUM* board is very grateful to Viv Ellis and Marie Brennan for guest editing this special issue. We also thank Derek Gillard for two book reviews republished here from his invaluable website.

A correction to close. The previous number of *FORUM* carried an article by Rachel France which exposed in detail the shortcomings of an EEF Toolkit. A citation in the article, note 43, was wrongly presented. It should have read as follows: 'Geoff Norman, 'RCT=results confounded and trivial: the perils of grand educational experiments', *Medical Education*, 37 (7), 2003, pp582-584'.

Notes

1. <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/press-releases/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-improving-but-shortages-persist-in-some-subjects/>.
2. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/693bdc426a12691d48491e9b/Working_lives_of_teachers_and_leaders_wave_4_summary_report.pdf.
3. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, volume 1, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge, Mass, The MIT Press, 1996, p42.
4. Michael Armstrong, 'Recognising Imagination: agenda for a new generation' in *Another Way of Looking: Michael Armstrong's writing for FORUM*, PSW (Educational) Publications and Symposium Books, 2019, pp157-159, p157: <https://lwbooks.co.uk/product/another-way-of-looking-michael-armstrongs-writing-for-forum-free-e-book>.
5. See: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-67-issue-2/abstract-10103/>.
6. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/green-party-leader-zack-polanski-headline-neu-teachers-union-conference>.