Editorial

The moment of 1976

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Fifty years ago, a Labour government first enshrined in law the comprehensive principle. As set down in the Education Act 1976: 'local education authorities shall … have regard to the general principle that education is to be provided only in schools where the arrangements for the admission of pupils are not based (wholly or partly) on selection by reference to ability or aptitude.' Half a century later, to the month, articles in this number of *FORUM* celebrate that moment and consider its aftermath.

Only weeks earlier in the same year, prime minister James Callaghan spoke at Ruskin College, Oxford, about education policy. Some in the audience heckled. This speech, and not the passing of the Education Act, has come to be seen as a decisive moment for the comprehensive movement, presaging an era of 'accountability' in formal education which we are still striving to move beyond.[1]

The struggle to democratise our education system's structures and processes, and to reclaim a renewed understanding of comprehensive education as 'a democratic project concerned with curriculum, pedagogy and professional life', is explored by Daryn Egan-Simon. Democratisation, he says, is 'the unfinished promise of 1976'. The Education Act crystalised in law the hard-won expansion in popular support for non-selective education for which the comprehensive education movement had worked over decades. It staked what Egan-Simon calls the movement's 'democratic claim'. But the fragility of that claim, and of the political alliance supportive of a fully comprehensive education system, stood exposed when, not quite three years later, the incoming Conservative administration repealed Labour's law.

Egan-Simon rehearses the antidemocratic nature of selective education. In our stratified society, and within a hierarchical and differentially funded education system, children are selected for different kinds of schooling and hence tailored for different kinds of future. He notes how policy has too often rendered the education available in today's notionally comprehensive schools neither rich, wide, varied nor enabling enough to live up to that designation. He draws on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse to remind us that 'democratic education depends on enquiry, teacher judgement and resistance to the reduction of teaching to instrumental technique'. And he echoes Caroline Benn's watchwords: we must 'keep the moral and political meaning of comprehensive education in view'.

Caroline Benn and Lawrence Stenhouse were born 100 years ago. This number includes articles about both. Jane Martin, who is writing Caroline Benn's biography, details Benn's leading contribution in the 1960s and 1970s to the campaign for a fully

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comprehensive education system. Martin describes the sustained hostility the political right wing exhibited (and still exhibit) towards that system. When, in pursuit of it, the protections afforded private education were challenged in the mid-1970s, their animus burned white-hot. Witness the succession of attacks on Holland Park School carried out by certain Conservative-supporting elements of the media, not to mention the personal targeting of Caroline Benn, the school's chair of governors. Martin traces all this. She writes of the symbolic significance of the school, and argues Benn was hounded because she made the case 'that intelligence could never be separated from the social and cultural conditions in which it was recognised, encouraged and developed. What appeared as merit was therefore inseparable from [social] advantage'.

The social, political and educational terrain struggled over since 1976 is surveyed by Eddie Playfair. He was part of the struggle as teacher, local councillor, union activist and college principal. For Playfair, the period is characterised by retreat in the face of capitalist restructuring and the defeats inflicted on organised labour. Weaving contextual description with personal reflection, he highlights the role played by widespread privatisation of public services and the collapse of leftist local councils in the face of ideological and legal attacks from central government. Playfair suggests how alternative futures – and in his view more progressive ones – were always possible, and might conceivably have been secured even in such reactionary times.

An essential element in any education honestly dubbed democratic is (as Daryn Egan-Simon points out) the co-creation of curriculum. We reprint from the *FORUM* archive an article in which Michael Armstrong, *FORUM*'s much-missed former chairperson, and his colleague Lesley King, explain, justify and reflect on an approach to curricular co-construction as developed between student and teacher at Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire in 1976. The school has been much vilified, often on the basis of misinformation. Here, the thoughtfulness, intellectual rigour and pedagogical care which characterise the work of these teachers at the school is abundantly evident. Theirs was an educational world very far from our own, but formal teaching and learning still requires practitioners, now as then, to decide what to teach this very day, in what order, how and to what purposes. Fundamental questions abide, and teachers must live with their answers. Armstrong and King remind us that ways of teaching and learning have been found which may be more enabling of students, and more nurturing of democratic citizenship, than some currently promoted.

Such ways continue to be found. The present educational climate is a harsh one for those who would foster cooperation rather than competition as an educational good. Schools must survive in the performative environment which neoliberal conceptions of education create. Results in high-stakes public tests are decisive. The attendant policy-framework serves to prevent cooperation between schools, and inhibit it between students. This, Lisa Tyler argues, is dehumanising. Her article describes the work of

a school standing against these divisive pressures by 'espousing, but also enacting and embedding, values such as equity, collectivism and trust'. Humane values. The school has created what Tyler terms a 'participatory relational environment', naming the reality of trust and cooperation which she finds there: a collaborative ethos consciously chosen and sustained within the school and the academy trust of which it is a part. She finds that openness, trust and a stance of mutual support are deliberately cultivated between staff to create a culture of equity and solidarity. This culture supports students to enjoy learning, and engage more fully in it. Cross-curricular connections and projects play a significant role, as does the small size of the school – an echo of the experience at Countesthorpe. Tyler also notes practices which appear to run counter to this ethos, suggesting the degree of compromise – the extent of the sacrifice – which hyper-accountability extorts from those in education.

Supportive as they are of 'progressive' pedagogy, Joe Hallgarten and Sarah Seleznyov might well applaud the work of such a school. But warily. In the first part of a two-part article, they review the failings, as they see them, of many aspects of 'progressive' education across recent decades. They do so in the same spirit as Eddie Playfair: to face reality squarely and learn from the mistakes of the past. They argue that hyper accountability, and what Tyler would call the neoliberal paradigm, have certainly prevented or undermined much progressive practice and such advances as were made for example at Countesthorpe College or Stantonbury Campus. But progressive practitioners must also shoulder responsibility for the reaction and its success in recent decades. Reactionaries (my word, not Hallgarten and Seleznyov's) recycled certain Black Paper tropes about comprehensive education (themselves caricatures of actually existing practice) in the cause of deriding practitioners. This helped drive many out of the classroom in the 1990s, especially in the primary sector. 'Traditionalist' reforms or approaches, for example to the teaching of reading, were deemed successful well beyond the capacity of the evidence (as with the weaponising of the Clackmannanshire study of reading approaches). High-handed treatment of those who argued against the dominant orthodoxy helped entrench it, shutting down space for discussing alternatives. Hallgarten and Seleznyov outline their own experiences of working in 'progressive' ways across the period in question, but their list of 'errors' resonates beyond any personal mea culpa. It implies a line of march for 'progressives'. The authors will amplify and justify that line in the second part of their article, to appear in the next number. *FORUM* invites responses.

Young people, meanwhile, must deal with school as they find it. Francesca McCarthy deploys Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'ordinary suffering' – surely that rare thing, an academic concept whose truth anyone will recognise – to consider the damage which continues to be done to those 'selected' for this or that educational pathway at 11 in the areas of England which retain the 11-plus. How do young people themselves recognise

the reality of this segregatory experience? How do they explain it and deal with it? McCarthy argues it is important to attend to the ways in which pupils and students interpret the experience of passing the 11-plus, or not passing it, in the light of their later living. She places accounts by three young people at the centre of her reflection. These stories, she makes plain, 'suggest that ordinary suffering is not characterised by exceptional events but by the cumulative significance of ordinary ones'. They also underscore something of great significance to progressive educators at least: that people always look to make sense of what happens to them. Rather than merely undergoing it, people interpret their experience and respond to that interpretation. For McCarthy, 'understanding academically selective education requires more than documenting the inequalities it produces. It also requires listening to how young people recognise, interpret and negotiate those inequalities in everyday life'.

The educational paradigm, divisive and data-driven, which would render education more and more transactional, holds no appeal for the million or so young people now designated NEET (not in education, employment or training). They vote with their feet. Doug Martin has researched the complex issue of NEET over several years. His article is forthright in its criticism of the educational policies which have helped create the NEET generation. Only a return to policies rooted in the comprehensive ideal, which is to say in an ethic of 'everybody', can offer a way forward. This entails a refusal of the idea that people should be directed on to discrete educational pathways in school. Martin presents telling extracts from interviews with young people, and with practitioners struggling inside a system set up to 'fail' a certain proportion of pupils and students. He writes: 'The modelling of our comprehensive secondary schools has been diverted from its original intentions by government policies concerning interschool competition and parental choice. School leaders are pressured to meet targets with the aim of continually increasing the volume of pupils entering higher education'.

He ends his article with a quotation from Callaghan's Ruskin College speech. For Martin, the speech articulated an understanding of education as preparation for work, but also for 'a place in society', in the sense of a life to be lived richly beyond the workplace: education in the wider sense. What Martin (drawing on the work of Michael Fielding and Peter Moss) calls 'education in the narrower sense', learning only for earning, can be seen as an outcome of the retreat from the moment of 1976.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a phrase more commonly heard in the USA than in this country. Simon Gibbs shows that it is entirely apt for England. His measured consideration of school exclusion, alienation and the nature of the prison population is a calm and weighty rejoinder to the advocates of stricter school discipline. He points out that 23 per cent of young offenders handed custodial sentences of less than 12 months have been permanently excluded from school. Of these, almost half were eligible for free school meals, and a similar proportion were recognised

as having some kind of special need. Feelings of alienation, isolation, powerlessness and resentment follow for significant numbers of young people from impoverished and marginalised communities. Gibbs looks at what 'appropriate, theoretically and empirically warranted interventions' might be tried, from the early years onwards, to help address this chronic problem.

Reversing the erosion of what used to be called pastoral care in schools may have a role to play in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. In another contribution to the series 'departmental mythologies', K. David argues pithily that awareness of 'pastoral' issues and how to approach them was at one time more holistic – and more widely-shared – within school than it is today. The 'pastoral' has been fragmented. Policy documents speak today in 'a more differentiated vocabulary organised around safeguarding, well-being, attendance, inclusion, mental health, SEND provision and family support.' This indicates (and enacts) a reconfiguring of the way in which 'institutional responsibilities are named and put into practice'. The upshot is a pastoral system which, David shows, 'can process a problem through its systems without resolving it'. In David's view, the situation speaks eloquently of a loss of shared meanings, and an attenuation of shared educational values and purposes.

A further consequence of preferring to impose on teachers bureaucratic structures and processes rather than extending them trust is explored by Rebecca Clarkson. Her article addresses the workings of the moderation procedure for assessing pupils' writing at Key Stage 2. That procedure allows groups of teachers, guided by a moderator, to assess against national standards samples of writing by pupils. The intention is to better prepare teachers to judge the writing which their own pupils undertake, and to strengthen consistency of assessment between schools and across the system. This vital work sits, Clarkson says, 'at the intersection of curriculum, accountability and professional judgement'. The moderation process is regarded officially as a technical exercise to guarantee fairness. Clarkson shows how that official view evades the social dimension inherent in the work of moderation: the discussion, negotiation, refinement of judgement and deepening of interpretation. She traces the power dynamics at play in a moderation group, and the implications these dynamics can have for fairness in assessing a pupil's writing. Policy documents present teachers as autonomous and trusted; Clarkson's analysis reveals how, in reality, policy drastically limits the space in which teachers may work. There is no scope for teachers to offer alternative interpretations, or make the case against the framework but in favour of the work of the pupil. Clarkson draws on testimony from practitioners to illustrate how the process evades what is at the heart of reading and evaluating pupils' writing: the work of interpretative response. She suggests that teaching is misshaped by a process which denies the qualitative core of assessment.

Ostensibly a critique of an assessment practice, Clarkson's article goes to the heart of

what's wrong with the entire high-stakes testing regime. That regime inevitably displaces the work of the pupil, filtering it through the mesh of pre-codified and ungainsayable sets of sanctioned assertions to render it cognisable by the system and so acceptably graded. Teachers cannot discharge their real duty: that of assaying the quality of the pupil's work on grounds that are coherent, justifiable, available for challenge, defensible in reason and admitting of rethinking, while always informed by the experience of reading work by other pupils of a similar age, and by discussion with peers. Clarkson concludes: 'assessment systems must align more closely with their underlying values. This requires listening to the profession, trusting teacher judgement, and recognising writing as a creative, meaning-making practice rather than simply a checklist of technical features'.

Misrecognition of teachers doesn't end with their consignment by the assessment system to the role of rubber stamping the grounds for judgement; grounds which teachers themselves can minimally shape or revise. David Lewis Thomas draws on Hegel's seminal lord/bondsman dyad to show how recognition of a teacher's being and quality also depends on their conforming to what Ofsted decides makes for a good teacher. Professional identity is reconfigured by exposure to the pressures and constraints which a framework of hyper-accountability forces upon practice. Ofsted polices that framework. Perhaps permitting himself a wry smile, Thomas sets Ofsted in the role of Hegel's 'absolute'; Ofsted is truth or ultimate reality. His article shows how the current inspectorate 'shapes teacher subjectivity through processes of acceptance, coercion [and] refusal'. Practitioners everywhere will know what Hegel is getting at … Thomas suggests that 'an Ofsted inspection is looking for itself manifest in microcosm, with recognition reduced to a tautological self-affirmation'. He shows how a better conception of the ways in which teacher accountability might be framed can develop from the kind of solidarity embodied in trade unions. He calls for systems of accountability 'that empower teachers and pupils beyond the compliance demanded by Ofsted'.

The pressures on teachers, and especially on early career teachers, are different in Scotland than in England. At a time of crisis for teacher supply in both countries, Fiorella Lazarte draws on research she has conducted in Glasgow this year to consider what is needed to ensure schools are, so to speak, habitable for teachers as well as pupils and students. What conditions make teaching sustainable rather than unsustainable? In particular, she asks what can make comprehensive schools work for teachers as well as pupils and students? The lineaments of the system need to be improved to help solve the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. Lazarte's research speaks of the vital importance of a relational culture of the kind Lisa Tyler outlines in her article. It also underscores the need for labour protection: limits to class-contact time, and protection for non-contact and planning/preparation time. As she puts it: 'Unionised collective labour protections are not separate from educational quality. They are part of the infrastructure that allows teachers to remain professionally alive'. Her article is mindful

of the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (the subject of the last article in this number) and in particular his advocacy of teachers as researchers of their own classrooms. 'Teachers who can think, not merely implement', as Lazarte puts it.

Nick Gibb, erstwhile minister of state for schools, would judge the quality of the school he was visiting by whether or not a copy of Henry Fielding's great novel, *Tom Jones,* sat on its library shelves.[2] Here at *FORUM* we too have a Fielding test. Confronted with yet another damaging educational policy, we ask what our former colleague on the board, Michael Fielding, might say about it. We commend to Nick Gibb, and readers everywhere, Michael's new book about Alex Bloom, head teacher for a decade after World War II of St George-in-the-East Secondary Modern school in London's East End.[3] Bloom abolished corporal punishment in his school, ensconced cooperation rather than competition, established democratic school structures, encouraged a degree of curricular co-construction and forged close links with the community the school served. Bloom died before his time. At his funeral the people of Stepney lined the streets to pay their respects.

Bloom knew that children learn what they live. Our colleague Mary Jane Drummond, who died in July, knew it too, and knew besides that children love to learn. This understanding prompted her always to weigh the effects of education policy from the viewpoint of those directly affected by it, especially the very young. How incisively could she illuminate what fell short or wouldn't do! Mary Jane joined *FORUM* at the end of the 1980s, a time when Brian Simon and Roger Seckington were still actively involved in the journal. She stepped away during the Covid-19 pandemic as our longest-serving board member. We remember happily her editorial verve and acumen, her imaginative sympathy and incisive intellect, and her unwaveringly principled commitment to the comprehensive ideal.

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The spring 2027 number will take stock of Labour's education policy.

Notes

1. See Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters, *About Our Schools: Improving on previous best*, Crown House Publishing, 2022. For an alternative view, see James Silverwood and Peter Wolstencroft, 'The Ruskin Speech and Great Debate in English education, 1976–1979: A study of motivation', *British Education Research Journal*, 2023: https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3868.

2. 'I heard you had a test for visiting school libraries…', Tom Bennett in conversation with Nick Gibb for Research Ed in September 2018, see: https://researched.org.uk/2018/09/26/tom-bennett-speaks-to-nick-gibb-2/.

3. Michael Fielding, *How Alex Bloom Built Radical Democratic Secondary Education in Post-war London,* London, UCL Press, 2026: https://uclpress.co.uk/book/how-alex-bloom-built-radical-democratic-secondary-education-in-post-war-london/.