

SCHOOLS, AUSTERITY AND NEOLIBERALISM: A DISCUSSION WITH SHARON GEWIRTZ AND DIANE REAY

with Jeremy Gilbert and Rebecca Bramall

Jeremy How would you characterise the main trends in education policy and practice in recent years and who benefits from them?

Diane Well, we're talking about the dominance of neoliberalism, aren't we? And I think the main trends have been privatisation and hyper-competitiveness, which has resulted in a lot of focus on performativity, individualism and de-professionalisation. But at the same time, I think there's been an obsession with leadership, which has led to a lot more hierarchy and a growing authoritarianism. In the process we've seen metrics become more and more important as a way of compelling certain kinds of behaviour. The dominance of economics hasn't helped, and it's sanctioned the prioritisation of measurement and the preoccupation with preparation for the labour market which has led to the neglect of some really key, important, immeasurable aspects of education: collegiality, compassion, empathy, care, creativity.

Jeremy Sharon, would you go along with that analysis?

Sharon Yes, completely. I think what I would add into that mix is neoconservatism and authoritarian populism. The effects of neoconservatism, like those of neoliberalism, have been very powerful, transforming the curriculum in schools and young people's experiences of school. It's resulted in a sort of recreation of a 1950s grammar-school type curriculum that focuses on a very narrow range of traditional academic subjects and relies on more didactic pedagogies and rote learning. It prioritises delivery of content over depth and criticality of understanding, and has squeezed the space for more creative and practical subjects like music, dance, drama and design and technology. And even within the teaching of those subjects, it has squeezed opportunities to actually do much practical work in them; so even practical subjects are made very theoretical and exam based. This all contributes to school being such a miserable experience for huge numbers of young people. At the same time, the authoritarian populist dimension of conservative politics has definitely intensified in recent years, with an increasing number of edicts, dictats, advice and guidance coming from central government ministers and other influential politicians: including attempts to ban the teaching of particular things. So in English schools now,

1. 'Schools in England Block Lessons on Middle East over Fears of Bias Claims', *The Guardian*, 5 November 2023.

2. 'Top sets' are the highest-ability classes in UK schools that stream students according to ability and attainment.

you can't use resources produced by anti-capitalist organisations or teach critical race theory. These kinds of edicts contribute to a culture of fear in schools around the teaching of controversial issues. For example, according to a recent report in *The Observer*, many headteachers are blocking attempts to teach about the Israel-Palestine conflict.¹ Within the national curriculum, there is an available history module on Middle East politics and very few – I think only twenty seven – schools in the whole country actually teach that. And, according to the report, that's at least in part because school leaders are scared of bad publicity. So, at a time when there are young people in schools who want to talk about these things and learn about these things, they're not learning them in schools, and that's partly linked to the marketisation that Diane talked about; so much now is about publicity and communications and that can get in the way of proper education.

Diane So adding to that, there's a real focus on branding now, particularly for academy chains. And if we talk about who benefits from all this, well, it's certainly not the children and it's not their teachers in the state sector. There could be seen to be a small cohort of educational winners who come from more affluent families and are sending their children to the state sector. But they're in middle-class schools and they're in the top sets,² and even those children are hyper-anxious and afraid of failure. But education policy in England has always been about rewarding the rich who send their children to schools in the private sector. And that just hasn't changed at all. And they've got far better resources and funding as well as a much broader and balanced curriculum that focuses on creativity and critical thinking skills. I mean, two years ago, I went into a private school and I was shocked at how the rich were being rewarded for their wealth. The space they got to talk and discuss in the classroom was remarkable, because you don't see that in the state sector anymore, particularly in predominantly working-class schools.

Sharon I completely agree with that point. There are state schools in more middle-class areas that are better resourced, that do come closer to that kind of private school-style education, which is broader. They still do the music and philosophy and creative subjects in those schools because they're better resourced and also have to worry less about league tables. Because the league tables are biased in favour of middle-class schools, they can afford to not always stick to the Gradgrind curriculum. So they have more scope to offer their students a much richer and more fulfilling education.

Diane There's some really interesting research about how much money from parents is going into those more affluent state schools. I mean, there was a school in north London – actually, a primary school in an affluent area – and when I spoke to the year six teacher, she said that the average contribution from parents was around £1000 per year, which staggered me. Contrast this

with a school, say, in a white working-class area in Cumbria where parents don't even have enough money to pay for school trips. It's very stark.

Sharon Absolutely, and I think it's also important to bear in mind that the curriculum is quite ethnocentric and white and there's brilliant work going on to challenge that, but it means that school can be a much more alienating experience if you're black and don't recognise yourself in the curriculum.

Diane Yes, that's very important. I examined a PhD last year that was set in a very multi-ethnic working-class sixth form³ in East London, and it included really telling quotes from very high-achieving, ethnically-diverse, working-class young people who said that they were grateful for doing really well in their exams, but that in order to do well, they have to become white and middle class, which I thought must lead to an awful lot of internal conflict.

Jeremy That's very interesting. I wonder if I could pick up on this question about the relationship between neoconservatism and neoliberalism. I have two questions really. One is about the issue of periodisation: when do you see the current long period of reaction against progressive education as having started? And the second question is about the relationship between neoliberalism proper and simply reactionary, authoritarian conservatism, within education policy in recent decades. It seems that there were elements both of conservatism and of a kind of emergent neoliberalism from the beginning of the backlash against progressive education in the 1970s. For example, there's that notorious Jim Callaghan speech that is remembered as a sort of death sentence for progressive education in the state sector;⁴ which already contained a mixture of these elements, didn't it? From that moment, one could discern something like an emergent neoliberal agenda, but the position was also always informed by this assumption that somehow the 1950s were a sort of golden age. It's normal to understand education policy since the 1970s as typically neoliberal, but there's also this perpetual sense that what a purely neoliberal education system would look like would be something quite mad that nobody apart from far right think tanks has ever really been proposing. So arguably there's always been a kind of balancing act between neoliberalism and a purely backward-looking or authoritarian conservatism. I wonder if you could comment on the relationship between neoliberalism and conservatism here.

Diane I would say the bottom line is that our political elite has never really been interested in educating the masses. Schooling has always been about control and containment. I was a teacher in the ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) in the 1970s, the policies of which were informed by the brief progressive blip of the period. But then we got totally closed down when the Black Papers⁵ came out and suddenly we were pariahs. There was

3. Sixth form is school provision for sixteen to eighteen year olds – the equivalent of senior high school.

4. Fiona Millar, 'Forty Years after the Ruskin Speech, Education Needs Another Moment', *The Guardian*, 13 December 2016.

5. The Black Papers were a series of articles criticising progressive education, published in the journal *Critical Quarterly* between 1969 and 1977 and widely credited with initiating a reactionary turn in both Labour and Conservative education policy.

a level of resistance going on, but it was all about us closing our classroom doors, hoping no one noticed what we were doing: not any sort of public challenge to the status quo or to the emergent reactionary agenda. We're talking about a group of women primary school teachers, trying to teach in progressive ways and quite powerful male academics as well as politicians telling us that we've got it totally wrong. Since then, there's always been a right-wing current coming in the direction of schools and classrooms, which blends elements of neoliberalism with a really powerful authoritarianism. And we can see that now in classrooms.

Going back to the 1950s, when I was actually in school, I remember my schooling as a working-class girl being incredibly authoritarian and punitive. And there's a sort of myth about progressive education, and about how widespread or influential it has ever really been. I was tuned-in to BBC Radio 4 about two weeks ago listening to Julian Fellowes talking about how horrendous it was that teachers weren't teaching children properly, arguing that they needed far more rote-learning, drilling and facts. And I thought, 'well, that's all they're getting, actually'. And so it is an interesting sort of mixture; but I think in the classroom, as someone who's tried to teach in progressive ways, teachers have always felt this sort of heavy-handed authoritarianism.

Sharon I agree with all of that. In terms of periodisation, I think the 1988 Education Reform Act was a real watershed which introduced the national curriculum and changed the way schools were funded, so that schools were predominantly funded on a per-capita basis rather than on the basis of need. And so schools started to be in competition and to behave like small businesses while parents were reconstructed as consumers who were having to make a retail choice. So the neoliberalism is there in this construction and individualisation of parents as choosers, and in the emphasis on schools being in competition rather than collaborating with each other. This itself has led to an increased fragmentation of the system and also to schools having more freedom to exclude students. So we're seeing increasing numbers of students being excluded and disparaged, with disproportionate numbers of black students being excluded; and then it's the local authorities that have to pick up pieces. So that's the neoliberal dimension of the current regime: enforced competition, consumerism and fragmentation of the system. But it's so tightly regulated that what you don't get is the diversity that you're supposed to find in a market. So in fact we see a kind of isomorphism whereby institutions become more and more similar; there might be a bit of diversity around the edges, a bit of diversity in the way schools are branded, but the reality is becoming more uniform.

Jeremy Well, that's really interesting. A point I've made to students many times is that neoliberalism has to have an authoritarian dimension in education, partly just because as a social group and as a professional class, teachers simply

cannot be relied upon to implement neoliberalism unless they're forced to.

I'd like to follow up on this point about modernisation and diversity here. A feature of the distinctively New Labour programme for education was that it would make some attempts to replicate an ideal market, with secondary schools encouraged to develop specialisms, while parents would be encouraged to choose between competing schools rather than simply sending children to the local school. How much of this was actually implemented, and how much of it was just rhetoric?

Diane I think there was a lot of rhetoric around it at the time. I don't think there's been much realisation of it when we look at the current situation.

Sharon I don't want to overstate the level of homogenisation in the sector, because there are still schools that try to offer students a broader education, and a more creative approach, and one more focused on care and kindness and all the kinds of things that we would think are important, such as a concern with social justice and equality. But achieving this is very much dependent upon resources. There are still schools whose work is informed by that kind of ethos, but it's much harder to do that without the resources, and there's a huge amount of burnout amongst teachers who are committed to a progressive, ILEA-style education; they're working against the grain.

Rebecca Sharon, that's really interesting; I wonder whether one of the dividing lines is the extent to which schools are still involved in the local education authority. Obviously there's a real difference with schools that have been brought into the academy sector no longer having that relationship to the local authority.⁶

In a borough like Lewisham, in south-east London, where I live, until very recently we had very low levels of academisation, which meant schools still having a kind of fundamental relationship to the local authority. As impoverished as local councils are, they do still provide schools with a degree of collective support, training, opportunities for networking and other shared resources. So is the dividing line between academies and community schools still significant, or is it really just historic now?

Sharon I think it is important. I had a similar thought because I live in Camden which is comparable and has very few academy schools. The others are still administered by the local authority, which works as a sort of mediating space, to mitigate the worst effects of neoliberalism. In the urban development literature they talk about 'anchor institutions' as having a key mediating role to play in minimising the harms that can come from top-down policymaking. I would say that local authorities can be those kind of anchor institutions, that develop coalitions across different constituencies and communities in the local area to try to work together to counter some of the worst effects of

6. In England, although not in other parts of the UK, 80 per cent of secondary schools have been converted to 'academies' since the 1990s, meaning that they are removed from municipal democratic control and support; this is a precise analogue of the American 'charter school' phenomenon. State schools that are not academies and still remain under the purview of their local education authority are officially known as 'community schools'. Many academies are organised into chains that effectively function as private education providers. Successive governments since the 1990s have bribed or pressured schools into accepting academy status, despite frequent opposition from parents, students, teachers, school managers and governors and from local authorities.

7. Fourteen years of central government austerity have led to several English local authorities declaring bankruptcy since 2020.

8. Federations are groups of schools operating in a collaborative relationship, either under the aegis of a local education authority or as an academy chain.

top-down central government policy; but obviously increasingly that's much harder, and we know a lot of local authorities are now going bust or are at risk of going bust.⁷

Rebecca Yeah, and they can't ultimately stop changes being made within schools and at federation level, can they?⁸

We just went through the academisation of a federation of successful, popular schools. The local education authority clearly indicated that they did not support this, and the concern now is that this is the thin end of the wedge: now that this federation has been academised, all schools in Lewisham soon will be. So we can see that local authorities have very little power. They are the only possible source of democratic accountability for us as citizens in the borough, but they can't stop those changes being made, which are fundamental to the management and governance of such an important local resource.

Diane I think we have to face the fact that less than 20 per cent of schools now are run by local authorities. Most of them are academies. And although the government are not proceeding with the 100 per cent academisation programme, there's still a lot of pressure on schools to become academies and that process is ongoing.

Jeremy It's interesting to think about what the conditions are that enable academisation to be resisted at all. As you say, it's been clear for a long time now that central government wants all schools to become academies. Camden is a good example of a kind of place where this has been resisted fairly successfully. It's extremely affluent but famously has had very low levels of academisation, it seems. My perception, although it's very casual, is that academisation has been successfully resisted in places where you have a very large middle-class, left-leaning parent population who are heavily politically invested in a certain ideal of education, which isn't strictly neoliberal, and isn't compatible with the academisation agenda. Is that right? Or are there other conditions that make effective resistance possible?

Diane I'm a member of the Anti-Academies Alliance and we've had quite a lot of campaigns at local levels, particularly across London, to prevent individual schools being academised, and we've had very active groups of parents. But nearly always, those schools have ended up becoming academies.

Sharon I think your analysis, Jeremy, is spot on, as it's a lot to do with communities having the resources to be able to resist. If you're ground down, if you're a member of a community or school suffering the worst effects of austerity, then it's so hard to keep going, let alone to counter these very powerful forces that are trying to impose academisation, and too many people don't have the resources and time to be able to organise and successfully fight.

Rebecca In Lewisham we saw huge popular protest, massive demonstrations and an overwhelming negative response to the academisation proposal in the consultation – but we’re in a situation in which schools, having conducted some kind of token consultation, can brush aside the result by claiming that their governing board is really the only group of people equipped with the knowledge and expertise to make a decision about how that school will function best in the future. As a parent and a citizen, I’m really unclear about where any opportunity to open up greater spaces of democratic contestation of these decisions might be.

Diane And the problem with the large MATs (multi-academy trusts) – well, even the medium sized MATS – is that there’s hardly any parental or local community involvement in their governance. You can have a MAT of thirty schools with a single governing body including one or two parent representatives; so in effect many individual schools have no local governance or accountability whatsoever. And that’s a really worrying development.

Sharon I’m also wondering whether the fact that there’s so much alienation from schooling, might mean a lot of parents don’t really mind or might even support it when their children’s school is being faced with academisation, if what their children are getting from current provision doesn’t seem worth saving or fighting for.

Diane And I think that relates to the phenomenon of very poor school attendance amongst many student populations after COVID; the sense that many students just haven’t gone back to school. And my initial response is why on earth would they? Why go back for more of the same sort of punishment when they’ve had time to think about that experience and how little they’re getting out of it?

I think the experience of school is alienating for lots of children from less affluent backgrounds. For example, there’s a whole chain of academies where children are made to say ‘silence is my natural state’. We’re talking about diverse, working-class kids told to shut up and put up. And then you look at the private sector where the head of a lower school told me, ‘we like children to talk and it doesn’t matter if they make mistakes or if they get the answer wrong; the most important thing is that they’re allowed to speak and that we listen to them’. The contrast with many of these predominantly working-class academies is remarkable. Lots of them have rules that the children have to be silent at all times in the classroom, unless invited to speak. There’s no respect for their opinion, there’s very little fulfilling engagement. There’s increasing numbers of predominantly working-class academies now where children start working on their GCSEs⁹ from the beginning of year seven. GCSE curriculum used to start in year ten or eleven. The children had a different, broader curriculum for those first few years of secondary

9. GCSEs are formal national examinations, normally taken at age sixteen.

school, but there's now increasing numbers where they start at year seven with this basic drilling for examinations in five years' time. Lots of these schools are asking them to go in at 7am to do additional work on this very narrow curriculum. The poor kids must be bored senseless.

Sharon We've got clear statistical evidence to back up what Diane said about children and young people being alienated. In the project that I'm working on presently,¹⁰ we've surveyed over 10,000 young people in year eleven, so aged fifteen to sixteen, and asked them about their experiences and attitudes to school. One of the questions has been asked in other cohort surveys carried out in previous years and periods, so you can actually compare what's happening over time. This is a very basic question asking how far the respondents agree or disagree with the statement: 'overall, I enjoy being at school'. In 2006 around 84 per cent of young people agreed with that statement, whereas now in our survey it was 55 per cent. So it's still a majority, but it means that 45 per cent are not agreeing that they enjoy school; and then if you look at particular sections of the population, that proportion is much higher. So young people from low-income families, for example, or with special needs or who are trans or identify with minority sexuality categories, a much higher proportion of these young people will report being unhappy at school.

Of course some children have always been alienated from school – let's not romanticise the past – but something has been getting worse. And then we've also carried out qualitative interviews with over 120 young people to delve into why that is and it very much echoes the kind of thing that Diane has been saying: young people just being bored by the curriculum, frustrated that they have no choice, finding the pedagogies they are subject to completely alienating; just being made to sit and copy and listen, without any active teaching and no interactive learning. For those students, school is just a miserable experience.

One thing we haven't talked about is alternative provision and FE colleges and pupil referral units.¹¹ Among the young people we interviewed, those who moved on from school or were in alternative provision because they'd been excluded or they were deemed not to be able to cope in the mainstream classroom, or who had moved on to FE college, they all talked about how much more fulfilling education was in those settings where they were in smaller classes, and relationships with teachers were much more respectful.

That's another thing we haven't really talked about. All of this is having an effect on the relationship between teachers and students. In work that I've done with Alan Cribb,¹² we've talked about a shift from relational to transactional teaching. Relational teaching is where the teacher is much more than a subject expert: they're a mentor and advisor, a critical friend. Their relationships with students are more human and open-ended and they will engage in broader kinds of creative, social and political education that transcend the narrow content of the official curriculum. We're seeing a shift

10. Charlotte McPherson, Sait Bayrakdar, Sharon Gewirtz, Andrea Laczik, Meg Maguire, Oly Newton, Siobhan O'Brien, Alice Weavers, Chris Winch and Alison Wolf, *Schools for All? Young People's Experiences of Alienation in the English Secondary School System*, Young Lives, Young Futures Report, 2023.

11. FE or further education refers to any study after secondary education that's not part of higher education. Pupil referral units are special provision for students with learning or behavioural difficulties that cannot be resolved in a school setting and for students who cannot attend a mainstream school for other reasons.

12. Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb, 'Can Teachers Still Be Teachers? The Near Impossibility of Humanity in the Transactional Workplace', in A. Brown and E. Wisby (eds), *Knowledge, Policy and Practice in Education and the Struggle for Social Justice: Essays Inspired by the Work of Geoff Whitty*, UCL Press, 2020, pp217-232.

towards a more managerial approach to schooling, in which teaching has become much more transactional; so it comes to be exclusively or primarily about delivering on outcomes that are dictated by the performance indicators that schools are working to. Of course, alternative provision and FE also have indicators and managerialism, but there's something about those settings and the relationships between the teachers and the students that's much more freeing and respectful; students feel they have more choice and they often say things like 'my teachers understand me'. This was often because they came from the same social background, so the teachers could relate to their life experiences, and the students could relate to the life experiences of the teachers. So I think there's a lot to be learned from what's going on in alternative provision and FE. I'm not saying that it's all perfect and wonderful, but there's clearly some really good practice in those settings – as, of course, there still is in some schools – that would explain why the young people we interviewed were so much happier in alternative provision and FE.

Diane Yes, it's interesting that those alternatives are also grossly underfunded. And that's a real problem. Last year I did a whole lot of interviews, because I've been doing training work with the NEU (National Education Union), and actually got access to a large number of teachers in schools. So I ended up interviewing a total of thirty academy school teachers in focus groups or individual interviews and I was shocked. One of the teachers told me: 'this is hell'. In her academy chain, she said, it's hell for the teachers, but it's even worse for the children and young people. I think there's an issue if teachers aren't shown respect and given time to think and if they're subject to very competitive environments where they feel they're in competition with fellow teachers rather than seeing them as colleagues, then I think it ends up with these transactional relationships that Sharon is talking about. It's not rocket science, is it? If you've got happy teachers, you often have happy children and students. But it seems to me both groups are very miserable and alienated. I spent ages trying to find an academy teacher who'd been in post for longer than four years, and I couldn't find any at secondary level at all. They're coming in, they're under incredible pressure and they don't know how to manage in predominantly working-class children's schools, with the children they find and the needs they have. And so the schools end up imposing scripted curricula, or systems such as 'teach like a champion'¹³ (I think the corollary to that is 'learn like a servant'). That's what I hadn't realised was going on: some teachers actually have typed notes telling them everything they should say and ask of the children. Who'd want to teach in those circumstances? There's no autonomy, no creativity whatsoever left for a lot of the young teachers that I spoke to.

13. <https://teachlikeachampion.org>

Jeremy One question here is how much this has got worse over the past thirteen years, under the Conservative government, compared to the

situation under New Labour (1997-2010). On the one hand, I think from the broad political, theoretical perspective that we all share here, New Labour didn't ultimately reverse the trend towards neoliberalisation and they were committed to accelerating aspects of it. But they did increase funding, they did reduce class sizes. Anecdotally my impression from teachers that I know is that the situation is quite similar to that in non-elite universities, which is that the later years of the New Labour regime now seem like a sort of golden age compared to the way things are now: partly because more of the residual features of social democratic education were still in place, partly because the aggressiveness of the Tory austerity regime has done so much damage since then. Despite this, I think there's a widespread understanding among parents, even among younger people who've been through the education system over the past twenty years, as to the deleterious effects of an increased focus on things like competition, standardised testing, school-differentiation, school league tables, etc. I would have to say, for example, that the experience of my own daughters, attending community schools (primary and secondary) in a highly-gentrified district of north-east London, is of a context in which teachers are obviously working very hard both to meet the external demands of the regime and to deliver something that still resembles a progressive curriculum and a positive schooling experience. Even in situations like this, the sense that the neoliberal regime is a hostile force against which teachers are often struggling is quite palpable. But this turn to extreme authoritarianism in certain schools I think is less well known because it tends to be very highly concentrated in schools serving less privileged communities. We occasionally read news stories about places like Mossbourne Academy (a notoriously authoritarian academy in a working-class East London neighbourhood), but even those reports are often laudatory, and generally middle-class parents don't have much direct experience of this kind of extreme authoritarianism.

What I'd like to ask you about is when you think this authoritarian turn really started, and how far it's of a piece with a kind of authoritarian neoliberalism, or how far it's motivated by more traditionalist kinds of conservatism.

Diane Well I think it started with the Black Papers!

Sharon But that Mossbourne-style authoritarianism wasn't in the Black Papers.

Diane No, it wasn't, but there was already a very prescriptive focus on a traditional curriculum in the Black Papers. I think Mossbourne represented another resurgence of that same right wing authoritarianism.

Sharon I really think that it was under New Labour that that particular brand of authoritarian schooling started, although it's certainly become more widespread since, taking a lot of inspiration from the United States.

Diane Yes a lot of this is policy borrowed from America: teach like a champion, scripted curricula, etc. Our academies are based on their charter schools. Teach First is based on Teach for America. So I think we've borrowed a lot of right-wing, authoritarian education policies as well, even though they've failed there.

Rebecca In the popular imagination these tendencies are closely associated with Michael Gove's tenure as Secretary of State for Education (2010-14), aren't they? Is that inaccurate, given how long-term some of these trends are?

Sharon I think there was a real shift in around 2015 with the curriculum reforms that Michael Gove introduced, so I'd see that as a separate development, but maybe it was fed and nourished by the authoritarian, Mossbourne-type practices, because those are seen to be the most effective way of drilling young people to be able to reproduce the content, because that's all the curriculum is about, on Gove's model: can they get the content and can they recall the content in an exam? It doesn't matter if they've understood anything; it's just a question of whether they can recall it. That's the measure of the success of the lesson. For example, I spoke to one trainee teacher who had delivered what she thought was a fantastic lesson in her practice school. The students were engaging very deeply and imaginatively with the subject matter. But the feedback from the observer was simply that the students didn't learn anything in that lesson: meaning that they didn't acquire any of the facts that they would need to recall in the exam. So I think there is a link between that Govian shift towards a more narrow 1950s curriculum and the more authoritarian practices we are seeing in many schools.

Diane There's no interest in understanding in classrooms anymore. It's all content, and the paranoid left winger in me feels this is working very well in the interests of the establishment, because if we're producing a whole lot of young people who haven't been helped and given the skills to analyse and critically review the information that they're being fed, then we've all got problems!

Sharon It serves the status quo to have a less politically literate population; but I'd question whether this kind of education actually serves the interests of the economy. I don't think that kind of education does a very good job either in reproducing the economic elite or in making people into more productive workers.

Diane The economic elite are going to private schools and there they're very focused on critical thinking, skills and creativity and thinking outside the box in a way that I was really surprised by when I started looking at it.

Sharon I also wanted to add something about how the whole Gove thing happened because it was supported by some educators on the left who saw this as a sort of social justice move: the Govian rhetoric was around the idea that this was about democratising access to the elite cultural knowledge that you need to succeed in life. Some progressive educators bought into that and agreed that this was a sort of social justice move because now all young people would get access to this knowledge, rather than it being confined to a small elite.

Diane Don't you think, Sharon, that embedded in that and intrinsic to it is a very condescending view of the masses, the working classes and the knowledges that are integral to their communities?

Sharon Oh yes; please say more about that!

Diane I just think it's endemic to the education offer that we get, the idea that children have got to learn cultural capital. They've got to do character education. It's all fundamentally based on a deficit model of the working classes and their culture.

Sharon Absolutely.

Jeremy I'd say it's also based on a kind of hegemonic dynamic according to which a very specific way of relating to the world and to the whole field of human knowledge is normalised, and a situation is maintained whereby what you will get rewarded for is being able to reproduce knowledge in a very specific way. So the Oxford curriculum in some subjects has historically been criticised for training students in a very superficial ability to demonstrate familiarity with certain kinds of canonical knowledge, but without any kind of critical engagement with it. It's not like the people running the banks are brilliant critical thinkers, is it? They have a particular way of relating to the world and to things like canonical knowledge, and essentially the system is set up such that the extent to which you can mimic that will determine your chances of getting into elite universities and getting accredited as that sort of person.

I think you raised a really interesting question as to whether this is good for the economy, Sharon. It's a very interesting issue in terms of how it relates to the way we campaign on this stuff politically. I'd suggest that the most powerful economic and political actors in the UK over recent decades have not actually wanted to create an innovative manufacturing-based economy at all, because they saw what happens when you have one of those in the 1960s: what you get is a highly-empowered industrial working class, which is an absolute nightmare for them. If they really wanted what they say they want – a dynamic, cutting-edge world-leading capitalist economy – then, indeed they would be funding education in a very different way and they would be trying

to produce very different kinds of citizens. But that's not what they want and it's not what would be in the interests of the leading sections of the capitalist class in this country. Those people are basically speculators and landlords: they're not in tech, they're not in manufacturing. So what they want indeed is a largely docile population of workers. If you're someone who makes all your money out of rents, then on some level, the last thing you want is a dynamic economy that hands too much power to people involved in the process of making and selling actual things.

Sharon I don't know. That all sounds very logical, but I'm not sure whether the ruling elite is so logical. Where's the evidence that that's what they actually think? They're not one homogeneous mass anyway.

Jeremy Maybe the last thirty years of policy is evidence?

Sharon But that assumes that they're competent and that what has come out of their policies is all deliberate and planned.

Jeremy I don't think so. I think it just implies that they're capable of pursuing their own interests and that doing so will have specific outcomes.

Diane And sometimes those interests come across as quite incoherent in terms of policy outcomes. I mean, I think it's interesting here to contrast the UK situation with that in other education systems. I've spent a lot of time in Finland, and there they have quite a strong response to what's going on in the wider economy. They were really worried about fake news and how the population dealt with fake news. So they've got a module on analysing and critiquing information from their primary curriculum upwards, and they've also got a module on critical thinking skills because they think that would prepare their young people better for a very changing dynamic labour market. They have a more responsive educational system. We seem to be preparing young people for a nineteenth century rather than a twenty-first century labour market, if anything.¹⁴

And it's not just the Finnish government dictating the policy, because they actually have much more democratic education and school boards, which include educators, alongside politicians and policymakers. It's far more democratic, the policy making process there: although unfortunately it is changing.

Rebecca Another way into this is through what Diane has written about in relation to the claims about social mobility and meritocracy that get made for the education system, and the fact that those are claims rather than real practices and processes that are being instituted in our education systems.¹⁵ That's another way into thinking about this discrepancy between claims

14. Diane Reay, 'Political Education in an Unequal Society', in H. Tam (ed.) *Who's Afraid of Political Education*, Bristol University Press, 2023.

15. Diane Reay, 'The Working Classes and Higher Education: Meritocratic Fallacies of Upward Mobility in the United Kingdom', *European Journal of Education*, 56, 2021, pp53-64.

and reality and of thinking about the economic interests that are shaping education systems. So, Diane, I don't know if you want to say something about the processes of pseudo-meritocracy that are working through schools and universities at the moment?

Diane I think it's very interesting what's happened. So we've got widening participation and access, which has been a great success because now we have 50 per cent of the age cohort going on to university. But what happens for a lot of working-class students isn't simply that they're socially mobile into university. They've got much higher dropout rates than their middle-class peers, and even if they get a degree, they end up with more debt and lower salaries. I think currently it's £46,500 worth of debt they're often left with, and then socially they're often *downwardly* mobile into casualised, poorly paid, insecure jobs that ten to fifteen years ago would not have required a degree. So what's happening to this young group of people is very problematic. I think there are even problems now if you're from a middle-class background, as you can't secure a position in society any more because a degree is no longer the high-value social currency that it used to be. And that's what's always happened when privilege and advantage is opened up to the working classes. It then gets devalued.

Rebecca Sharon, do you have any thoughts about that?

Sharon Well, this is a complement to that analysis. Around 50 per cent of young people don't go to university, and that's quite a diverse group of people in terms of school attainment and social background. But within that group, you can see the same kinds of reproduction of inequalities and huge intergenerational transfers of advantage and privilege. So, for instance, really good apprenticeships are very few and far between, and you're much more likely to get a good apprenticeship if you have a parent working in that trade or industry who has the connections and the cultural capital to get you into that trade. So even within the working class, there are these fractions of privilege and you can see the same processes of the reproduction of advantage and disadvantage at work within that sector as well.

Diane And I'd just like to reinforce that, because last year I did some work with an economist and he said that his son was not going to go to university: he was going to do a high status apprenticeship because they'd worked out the economic returns would be better.

Jeremy I'm also interested in the issue that you raised there, Diane, around middle-class insecurity. One thing I'm quite unclear about is how far middle-class insecurity is based on legitimate fears of downward social mobility, and how far it's just ideological, given the relatively low rates of social mobility –

including downward mobility – that we’ve seen in recent years. Is it the case that middle-class people really are struggling to reinforce their privilege, or are they just sort of cajoled into certain kinds of behaviour by the belief that they’re in danger of losing their privilege? Of course, this is a question that Barbara Ehrenreich raised decades ago,¹⁶ but I’m not sure what the answer is or if it’s changed.

It often seems to me that this is misplaced, given the statistical reality: which is that children of affluent parents are incredibly unlikely to find themselves outside of the professional or middle classes for a sustained period once they graduate, no matter what primary school, secondary school or university they go to. But it also serves a significant socio-political function in that anxious parents feel they have to participate in this highly competitive system, and try to win it, even if they don’t approve of it in the abstract, because they’re worried that if they don’t go along with it then their children will be punished with the loss of their social privileges.

Diane This partly goes back to Sharon’s point about the incoherence of attitudes. The latest British Social Attitudes Survey¹⁷ shows that 46 per cent of professional people consider themselves working class when they’re clearly not. But at the same time, you’re right: the research I did on parents’ involvement in their children’s education, found that middle-class parents, especially mothers (this is quite gendered) were totally obsessed.¹⁸ My daughter has seen this with some of the parents in her son’s school, who are already worrying about comparing their children’s performance to his, in tests. Fear and anxiety are often very palpable with these social groups, even when the economic circumstances are still quite secure.

Rebecca I think what you’re pointing to, Jeremy, is the way that this mood of middle-class insecurity operates affectively rather than rationally. What will be interesting is what happens when the next generation can’t reproduce the asset ownership of their parents, because of the complete unaffordability of housing. This is likely to provoke a whole new level of insecurity and probably intensify anxieties around whether or not class status can be reproduced via the education system.

Jeremy In fact – and this is purely anecdotal – my sense is that the housing issue is already impacting on how seriously people take the meritocratic claims of the education system. I get the distinct impression that the belief that your merit as a middle-class family will determine your life outcomes has really weakened among people just a little younger than us, because of the increasingly stark reality of the asset economy. It is becoming increasingly obvious to people that what determines your economic outcomes is whether you inherit a house or not; rather than how hard you worked to get into your selective school. So I think what you describe is already happening.

16. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, Pantheon Books, 1989.

17. National Centre for Social Research, *BSA 40: Social Class*, <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/bsa-40-social-class>

18. Diane Reay, *Class Work: Mothers’ Involvement in Their Children’s Primary Schooling*, Routledge, 1998.

Sharon I think on some level the insecurity that people are feeling is real. In the end, these people are competing for scarce resources. A place in medical school or a place at Oxford or Cambridge: not everyone can get one. So if you see that's what your children need to maintain their status, then it makes sense to be anxious and to do all the strange things that those middle-class parents do to increase the chances of their children getting access to these scarce resources.

And maybe it's different for different fractions of the middle class. So if you are first generation sort of middle class and maybe didn't have the elite schooling, you might want that for your children, because you believe you have to compensate for what you feel you can't give them.

Jeremy Yes, I'm sure that's all true. From this perspective, that middle-class fear of falling isn't entirely illusory: it's the product of a carefully-engineered situation of social precarity, even if the threat is one of a loss of status rather than actual poverty (in most cases).

Diane And they're even experiencing the same sense of anxiety in the private school sector, about no longer having the same disproportionate chance of getting your child into Oxbridge.

Jeremy This brings us to one of the questions that we wanted to discuss, which is: who are the winners? None of this would be happening if *nobody* was benefitting from it and arguably even private school children aren't benefitting all that much. It seems that logically, the winners from most of these changes are professional, middle-class parents who are not sending their children to private school but who do want their children to go work in elite occupational sectors. If you're a middle-class parent who doesn't really care that much if your kid's not having a good time at school, and certainly doesn't care whether their poor classmates are, but you want them to go into an elite occupation and you don't want to send them to private school, then this precise distribution of resources and rewards works for you. But of course, that very set of desires has arguably been produced for people by an overall socio-economic system that only seems to reward very specific types of behaviour.

All of this is dependent upon a specific set of conditions, whereby resources within the system are extremely limited overall: so you can't have a more expansive education system that would work for everyone and would achieve different types of cultural and social objectives simultaneously. And this brings us to another topic I wanted to discuss: the relationship between austerity and educational authoritarianism, of the kind that we've already described. It seems pretty clear that progressive education, using relational educational methods, is resource intensive. I'd suggest that there's actually a direct correlation between resource poverty and the turn to didactic, instrumental,

transactional education. It's a really simple principle: if you've got one teacher to 100 students for just an hour or so, then pretty much all you can do with them is give them a lecture and tell them they've got to reproduce it. Anything more interactive needs more teacher hours.

Diane And that's happening in some academies. They've got such problems with lack of staff and absenteeism among their teachers that some of the senior management are actually teaching 100 children at a time in assembly halls. That's the only way they can manage their staffing problem.

I think this relates to an interesting question that was raised when we were preparing for the discussion, about whether schools are still part of the welfare state. I would say that they're now more part of a security state. Rather than the principles of a rapidly receding welfare state, we've got the Prevent agenda¹⁹ and this idea of 'fundamental British values'. As I said before: we're seeing the return of a Victorian idea of character education, and they're more concerned with state security than with prioritising welfare. And of course that's a more cost-effective agenda for managing the working classes.

19. Prevent is a government policy obliging educational institutions to monitor students for signs of political or religious 'extremism' or 'radicalisation'.

Sharon That is definitely a very prevalent strand in schools, but I wouldn't say that there isn't also a welfare agenda in effect. In practice, in many ways, we're seeing an enlarged welfare role for schools with the retrenchment of the broader welfare state. As funding for things like social services dries up, there's less and less support outside of schools, which are having to take on much more of that welfare function. Children are coming to school and they haven't slept properly because they haven't got beds. They're hungry, they haven't got clean clothes, they can't afford sanitary products. Often it's teachers filling the gap, sometimes with their own money, buying stuff for their students. And then there's this whole move towards 'wrap-around schooling', with breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, and more and more being expected of schools, so there is an expectation of a welfare function. How well they can deliver that with the reduced resource is a different question. And schools are also increasingly expected to compensate for the lack of mental health services elsewhere.

Diane I see that as a sort of antithesis to the welfare state. It's an *ad hoc*, privatised response to poverty. It's going back to the charity model, to food banks, clothes banks in schools. Teachers are constantly telling me that they're keeping snacks in their cupboards because they've got hungry children. When I was growing up, we had soup kitchens for us poor people, and that's what we've returned to. I find that such an appalling way to address really dire inequalities of wealth in society.

Sharon But that is a welfare function. I agree with everything you've said, but that is schools being expected to carry out a welfare function.

Diane Inappropriately, without any additional funding!

Sharon Yeah! We're not making a judgement that this is the way things should be, but it's the way things are.

Jeremy Well, I think this draws out an interesting question about the relationship between welfare and security as concepts, doesn't it? I think Diane's appealing to a social democratic ideal of welfare as enabling, in some sense, and empowering. We'd all endorse that ideal, but it's probably more normal historically for industrialised capitalist societies to have welfare functions carried out in more punitive and disciplinary ways.

Diane There's also increasing numbers of police in schools. I remember going on a research trip to New York and being shocked that there were so many policemen in Harlem and Brooklyn secondary schools. We're increasingly seeing that, in predominantly ethnic minority, working-class schools, particularly in our cities.

Jeremy Yes, we are. Sharon, I wondered if you could just say a little bit more about the research project you're involved in at the moment.

20. <https://www.ylyf.co.uk/>

Sharon Yeah. So it's a project called Young Lives, Young Futures²⁰ looking at inequalities in experience, provision and outcomes for young people who don't go to university; so that's 50 per cent of young people. It's a mixed method study. So it's consisting of a longitudinal survey where we're talking to young people at three age points – fifteen to sixteen, seventeen to eighteen, nineteen to twenty – about their experiences and attitudes towards school and their education and work. And that's complemented by case studies of four local areas where we're conducting in-depth interviews with young people – again longitudinally, following them at three points – and also interviews with local policymakers and practitioners so as to try to arrive at a contextualised understanding of the way things might be different according to geography. We have a big focus on intersectional inequalities as well. So we're looking at race, gender, class, but also axes of inequality that are less often looked at in studies of young people's post-sixteen transitions, such as special educational needs and disabilities, attainment, health, sexuality and trans status.

One thing I wanted to feed in from that, that we haven't talked about already, is that one of the things that came out very strongly from our survey is the huge significance of experiences of being treated unfairly or discriminated against based on different identity characteristics: class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, gender identity and special needs. Quite substantial numbers of people that we've spoken to have felt that they're subject to racism, for example, both from peers and from teachers. Young people identifying as trans or non-binary also experience high levels of

feeling or being discriminated against. I don't think all of those things can be explained by education policy, as the factors involved obviously run much wider than education policy. But I think it's an important aspect of young people's alienation from schools that it's both a sort of curriculum-based alienation, but also an alienation based on being discriminated against and not respected in their school settings. So one of the questions that we ask the young people in the survey is: who do you feel encouraged by in your life? And they have a list of people such as parents, friends, peers, teachers etc. Something like 86 per cent of young people will say they feel encouraged by their parents. I think the equivalent percentage for teachers is something like 48 per cent. So fewer than one in two people are saying that they're feeling encouraged by their teachers. That number is lower for people on low-incomes, lower for black Caribbean students, and so on. Those students are also less likely to say that their school respects and values diversity. You can't attribute all those problems to policy. To some extent they are obviously effects of the policies that we've had. The accountability policies and the managerialism and the target setting do detract from an emphasis on issues of cultural and social justice, because that's not what schools and teachers are being graded on. Teachers don't get performance-related pay in relation to that kind of thing. So there is a link with policy, but there's something more going on. I think it's important to add that dimension.

Jeremy And how do you think that could be addressed?

Sharon Well, I think almost everything has to change. We need more democratic approaches to the way schools are managed and held accountable; and that involves young people, teachers, families, local people, local communities coming together and thinking about how we want schools to be and how we could change them. That would involve listening to young people's voices, and making time to actually hear what young people are saying and think about what schools could be doing differently. Young people have got loads of ideas about how things could be different. And we know from other settings where young people have a more positive experience of how things can be different that a fundamental change is required that involves moving to more relational forms of schooling where everyone's voices are listened to and valued and respected. But yeah, easy!

Jeremy That's very persuasive. I think at least three of us in this conversation (Sharon, Diane and Jeremy) have probably written things in the past advocating for democratisation of school governance. I think it's important to remember that this has been a recurring political demand – or at least a proposal put forward by radical educators – at least since the 1940s, and it's still a key idea in radical thinking about both education and public-service management through the radical wave of the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the

reason why I think the turn to authoritarianism is an inevitable accompaniment to neoliberalisation is that they both form part of an alternative agenda to that democratising programme. We reach a point by the 1970s at which nobody is really happy with the mish-mash of paternalism, authoritarianism, liberalism and progressivism that informs the way that schools are managed, and there's increasing pressure for genuine democratisation of many public institutions. But that wave of democratisation is exactly what the turn to both neoliberalism and authoritarian populism from the 1970s onwards is reacting against. And if, at that point, you're not going to democratise schools, then what are you going to do with them? They can't just work like they did in the 1950s. So what are governments going to do, if not democratise them? They're inevitably going to impose this weird combination of marketisation and top-down, centralised control instead; to some extent partially privatising schools, to some extent turning them into boot camps. Because that's the only coherent alternative to meeting the demand for real democratisation.

So I suppose that all brings us to the big political questions. Where are the political strategies that could be employed to challenge all this? What are the political conditions that could change any of it?

I sometimes have the impression – although this is purely anecdotal – that there's not only a much stronger history of teacher militancy, in other countries (the US and France spring to mind), but there's also a higher level of political consciousness around schooling issues among parents. I think in this country, there's a huge pool of latent discontent with this entire programme. I've been having conversations about these issues with people since the early 2000s, including folks who aren't very political, including people whose political orientation would be clearly centre-right and Tory-voting; and routinely people have been shocked by the whole direction of travel. Even people who might well have supported Thatcher's privatisation of public utilities in the 1980s were never signed up to policies like the Private Finance Initiative placing huge debt burdens on schools, or the privatisation of the exam system under New Labour, the imposition of competition and league tables on schools, the increase in standardised testing, or the absurdities of the Gove reforms (which are regarded as embarrassing even by moderate Tories, who would never stand for their kids' private schools running things along those lines). No polling has ever found support for the whole idea of re-modelling social relations in the education system as competitive retail transactions. Even people who might be quite right-wing in their perspectives on some other issues tend to have an instinctive revulsion to the idea that these institutions, that are so central to our children's socialisation, should be run in this kind of way. But the ability to operationalise any of that latent anxiety at the level of public political demands, that can actually put some pressure on electoral politics, seems to have been negligible, really. These are never central issues in elections, and government policy has been pursued in this area with little regard either for public sentiment or for expert opinion

since the 1970s. I wonder what you think about that situation and about what can be done about it.

Sharon I agree with your analysis. There are some chinks of light, but whether they'll get anywhere is another question. There was a recent House of Lords report on eleven to sixteen education that made quite a radical critique, saying all the things we've been saying now: about how education has been impoverished by the contraction of the school curriculum, which Diane was talking about, by the transformation of schools into treadmills and exam factories. There's also the coroner's report on preventing further deaths, after the suicide of Ruth Perry following her horrific OFSTED inspection.²¹

So there does seem to be widespread agreement that this education system we have is not fit for purpose and is positively harmful, that OFSTED needs to be reformed and there needs to be more peer-based and democratic forms of accountability. And there are points of resistance from below; there's some fantastic work going on around some of the other issues we talked about. So The Black Curriculum,²² for example, is a student-led group challenging the absence of black history from the curriculum, and No More Exclusions²³ which is trying to abolish exclusion from school and make school a more nourishing experience for young people. And then there's More than a Score,²⁴ which is a parent-led campaign against standardised testing in primary schools. So there are many campaigning organisations and a lot of really good work being done in pockets. But it's not joined up.

I like the way Michael Apple talks about the political right never sleeping;²⁵ about how the right always learns from its defeats and treats them as temporary setbacks and always goes back to the larger agenda. And we have in the right a very powerful coalition of forces: right-wing media, right-wing think tanks, right-wing politicians. Even though there are differences between them and internal factions, somehow they've been very effective in working together to create this new common sense that we've got. And I think what Michael means when he says this is that the left needs to learn the lessons from that.

Diane Can I reinforce that? I've been campaigning a lot: I'm president of the Socialist Education Association, and still holding on in my local Labour Party in North Islington. But it seems to me that the right has been much braver and far more radical than those of us on the left have been capable of being. We've talked about the incoherence on the right, but there's an awful lot of incoherence on the left. There's also a sort of fragmentation and atomisation that characterises both the left and the right, which is a reflection of our wider society, which I think is quite fragmented.

In the two other countries I know really well – Finland and Japan – there's still a strong sense of the common good. You can't really talk about the common good here any more: it's seen as something that's to do with the last century, really. In those two countries, that sense of the common

21. OFSTED is the government body charged with inspecting and assessing schools. Its practices are widely perceived as highly arbitrary and understood to serve a disciplinary and ideological function of forcing teachers and schools to comply with government priorities rather than fulfilling any useful role in improving the experience of students or teachers. Perry was a headteacher who committed suicide following a highly critical OFSTED report on her school.

22. <https://theblackcurriculum.com>

23. <https://www.nomoreexclusions.com>

24. <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk>

25. M. W. Apple, 'On Doing Critical Policy Analysis', *Educational Policy*, 33:1, 2019, pp276-287.

good has led to two of the narrowest gaps in educational attainment in the world. I know Finland is moving more in a neoliberal direction, but there's very little difference in the educational experiences of the working classes and the middle classes in those two countries. And here there's an incredibly stark, shameful divide.

Jeremy Yes that's definitely true. Another problem I think we have with mobilising politically around school issues is that they tend to be of most interest to parents of young children. But parents of young children are the least represented demographic cohort among political activists, for obvious reasons; they're exhausted and overworked.

Diane And we don't really have any very powerful voices speaking on our behalf.

Jeremy No. I am also feeling now, having listened to both of you talk about the situation at some length, that the political left in England has not been sufficiently robust and self-confident about explicitly defending an ideal of social-democratic and progressive education. We've been far too half-hearted and apologetic about it. This is partly because the way in which education policy worked in the post-war period was so unsatisfactory, with the horribly elitist selection processes in secondary education, then the roll-out of comprehensive and vaguely progressive schooling agendas being so uneven in the 1960s and 1970s, and then the effects of underfunding in the 1980s, 1990s and today having been so disastrous, that for many people there isn't a model of good practice from the past that they can point to with confidence. And there's also this specific anti-intellectualism in English culture that infects even the labour movement left, that makes it hard for people to defend ideas like the right to a critical education, not entirely defined by the supposed exigencies of the labour market. It's really striking that so little of this reactionary agenda has ever been implemented in Scotland or Wales, which I think have quite different intellectual cultures within both the middle-class institutions and the traditions of the labour movement. All of these conditions have made organising any kind of resistance to this very difficult. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep trying. It seems like a very urgent issue and one that it would be possible for the left to build popular support around.

Rebecca There's also this problem that we were discussing earlier, of schools being a kind of frontline institution, meeting basic welfare needs. When you're in that situation, a lot of energies on the left have to go into making demands about those basic welfare needs. And so you get into this situation where you're grateful that Marcus Rashford²⁶ is mobilising the demand for food in schools, and that comes to feel like a win. So there's a lot of energy

26. Marcus Rashford is a professional footballer who led a public campaign against the abolition of free school lunches.

being redirected into really basic forms of provision, which I think is part of the problem. That's partly why we don't have advocates making the big arguments about schooling (apart from people like Michael Rosen, maybe).

Diane Yeah, you're right. We're arguing about the little things that in a lot of other countries would be just taken for granted, like universal free school meals.

Sharon We all also live in a country where it takes an ITV drama to wake people up to the terrible injustice that's happened with the Post Office scandal, even though that's been known about for years. I feel we need something like that: a TV drama about education, so people know what's happening.

Diane We could make a great drama, because there's an awful lot of punishment and hyper-control and children suffering in our state schools.

Sharon And it could make a similar case for this need to democratise governance, which I think is at the heart of the solution.

Jeremy I completely agree that it is, but in my experience, it's been very hard to persuade senior figures even on the left of the Labour Party and the labour movement to engage with that agenda. During the Corbyn years, when Melissa Benn's plan for a National Education Service was the centrepiece of Labour's education policy,²⁷ it was those features of the programme that had a kind of 1945 feel that most resonated with such figures: they liked the idea that it would be a big, centralised, national, universal service. But whenever I talked to anyone about the need to democratise school management, they lost interest: they couldn't quite get their heads around it as a concept.

27. Melissa Benn, *Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service*, Verso, 2018.

Sharon And I think this is crucial. It's also linked to the high levels of demoralisation, depression and alienation amongst teachers, and the persistent attacks on their professional status, amounting to a kind of de-professionalisation. They're increasingly subject to the assumption that being a good teacher is delivering on organisational goals, rather than thinking intrinsically about education and what it means to do it well.

I don't want to disparage teachers or the teaching profession at all, but if we have generations of teachers growing up in the profession where they don't have any kind of autonomy over how they teach or how they relate to students, then any move to a more democratic system would involve a great deal of new learning. And it might be hard for teachers to buy into such an agenda when they don't have any experience of a more progressive kind of education, and don't really know what it would feel like or look like or how amazing it could be.

Jeremy And it's understandable if, from the point of view of the unions and the profession, their immediate concern is that they just want people to leave them alone to do their jobs for a while. Quite possibly they don't want to have to go into some new process of forming all these relationships of accountability and co-production with other stakeholders, but just want to be left alone and stop being harassed.

I did want to ask what you thought about the situation in the teaching unions, because it's not something that has had a lot of coverage outside people who are very interested in this specialised field. Historically, the British teaching unions have been incredibly fragmented; and consequently, incredibly ineffective. The merger of most teachers who are in trade unions into a single union, the National Education Union, only happened about five years ago. It's a new development and it can be seen as part of a slowly rising wave of unionism. So I wonder what we think the implications of that are likely to be. I know you've been actually working with the NEU, Diane.

Diane Yes, I ran some training sessions for NEU representatives last year. They're very young, mostly, because so many teachers leave the job after three or four years. A lot of them have come through short courses or school-based courses.²⁸ So they certainly haven't had any sociology, and not even much psychology, as part of their training. They're ending up in schools where they feel that they haven't got enough professional resources to do their job properly, which is why I think they're so susceptible to these student behaviour-focussed programmes such as 'Teach Like a Champion', and they're picking up on these pre-prepared PowerPoint presentations and scripted curricula because they need that kind of support, simply to be able to do the job. But at the same time, they're angry and upset about the situation. I found them very thoughtful and reflexive. But they've got so little room for manoeuvre. I mean, schools are much more hierarchical places now than they were when I taught in the 1970s. Senior management are much more highly paid, but also more remote. And if you're in a multi-academy trust, your senior management can be based in a totally different school.

Sharon And of course, structurally it's much harder for unions to organise because of academisation. In the past it was easier to organise at the local authority level. Now it's all atomised, so the reps are all in these individual academy schools, so it's much harder materially to organise collectively.

Diane And some MATs are very, very hostile to the union. They don't want their teachers to join unions, so there's been a lot of pressure put on them. But the teachers I worked with were in academies that were more positive, or at least allowed union membership. They all had friends and colleagues who weren't allowed to join a union, and I think that's a really worrying development that's come through academisation.

28. Rather than the traditional full one to two year postgraduate training programme, that the current Conservative government has allowed to be supplemented by 'fast-track' training for teachers.

Sharon And then the recent action²⁹ was sort of successful and not successful, because there was a series of teacher strikes and then the settlement was to give them a pay rise, with no extra money going to schools to fund it. So the pay rises are having to come out of general school funds.

Jeremy A completely sadistic response on the part of government.

Diane There's another practice that's worth mentioning. I don't know how the unions are addressing this really, but I've attended training sessions with a whole cohort of teachers from the Caribbean, because some academy trust that has real problems recruiting in this country has gone and asset-stripped another country's newly-trained teachers and brought them here.

Jeremy That is extraordinary, if unsurprising. My sense from talking to people who work in schools or for the NEU is that there's a great deal of latent dissatisfaction and a kind of immediate understanding of the problems in the system, but not a very widespread understanding among teachers that this is all an effect of a very deliberate political programme, that's been implemented globally and right across the public sector for decades. Of course, if there's a pretty weak sense of that larger historical context among teachers, that would only make them typical of the professional classes in England generally, who all tend to have a similarly limited perspective. Obviously, I'm not talking about the kind of people who become union activists here, but the ordinary members of the professions. But it seems to me there's a real opportunity there for propaganda and consciousness-raising: you don't have to say much to explain to a harassed teacher that the causes of their distress are systemic, political and class-based.

Sharon I also think this goes back to the energy-sapping nature of bureaucracy. Many of us in professional jobs are finding our roles to be increasingly bureaucratised for lots of different reasons. So we'll often be kept busy doing pointless, unproductive work. And this is also true for teachers in schools with all the data-collection, data-analysis and data-reporting demands that are now expected of them. It's a brilliantly effective way to just keep people busy, that leaves you no time even to think, let alone actively resist or to wonder about alternative ways of doing things.

Rebecca Going back to the anti-academisation struggle that I was involved in last year in Lewisham, my sense was that actually, among the members of the local NEU branch and particularly the teachers who went on strike over that issue, the level of political consciousness was really quite high. As parents we were having really engaging conversations with them on the picket. What broke them was that the school turned out to be very happy to allow them to withdraw their labour for such a long time that it broke the parents'

willingness to support the teachers. They dragged out the strike days for so long that parents were no longer happy for their children to be out of school, because they felt that too much education was being missed. That broke the alliance that had been forged between the parents and the teachers and the school were really happy to allow that to happen. In that kind of situation, the unions are still potentially powerful and they can withdraw their labour; but that's all they can really do.

Jeremy Yeah, that is really interesting.

Diane But they certainly don't have control over the curriculum and pedagogy. The teachers that I work with spend endless time complaining about both the curriculum and the pedagogy, but if they try to insist on the right to make any changes in their own practice, then they're told that they can either take the job or leave it. And that's another power that the MAT has: they've got very powerful rights of hiring and firing.

Jeremy That is appalling. Is anybody aware of examples in other countries of successful long-term solidarity campaigns involving parents and teachers and communities? I'm sure it must happen somewhere.

Diane Obviously Finland's a lot better than us. They have full-service schools, so they have doctors and nurses, school counsellors, school psychologists dedicated to special needs, teachers, all working together on the school site. And there's much better joined-up policy than we have here. Within that, parents are an integral part of the school governance in a way that they actually get listened to; although I'm sure they get listened to more in the more middle-class schools than the working-class schools.

Sharon I'm thinking of an initiative in the municipality of Campinas in Brazil, which is an inspiring example of a university, the municipal Department of Education and schools coming together to develop new forms of democratic accountability, involving the school and different parts of the school community – teachers, administrators, students and families – coming together to decide on what success means to them, what their goals are for their school and how they want that to be measured, and then negotiating that with the local authority.³⁰ It's been fairly short lived, but for a period, it seems to have been a successful way of organising. But the conditions were very specific to Brazil: there was a government at the time that had a policy to create room for this kind of work.

Jeremy It seems then, that we need a progressive government.

Diane We're going to be lucky!

30. Sara Badra de Oliveira, Sharon Gewirtz and Mara Regina Lemes De Sordi, 'Is Local Democratic Control of Education Still Possible in an Age of Corporate Education Reform? The Case of Participatory Institutional Evaluation in Campinas, Brazil', in Mara Regina Lemes De Sordi (ed.), *Desafiando a Hegemonia do Campo da Avaliação da Qualidade das Escolas*, Fino Traço Editora, 2022.

Diane Reay is Emeritus Professor of Education at Cambridge University. She is a sociologist working in the area of education but is also interested in broader issues of the relationship between the self and society, the affective and the material.

Sharon Gewirtz is Professor of Education in the School of Education, Communication and Society at King's College London, where she also co-directs the Centre for Public Policy Research.

Jeremy Gilbert is the Editor of *New Formations*.

Rebecca Bramall is the Deputy Editor of *New Formations*.