

Introduction

As Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, says, ‘This book is an important contribution to the debate all teachers want and need to have about what education is for’. And not only primary and secondary school teachers but their colleagues in colleges and universities who seek to articulate alternatives in the run-up to the protracted pre-election period. Many teachers at all these levels share with many parents and students widespread concerns about the current direction in which education is moving.

Already, in little more than three years, from primary to higher education, the Coalition’s policies have set in train far-ranging reforms, part of what can be characterized as a ‘*Great Reversal*’ of state education. The Education Secretary, Michael Gove, has pursued a particularly aggressive offensive. While lambasting Labour for presiding over a decade of ‘falling standards’, he has expanded the previous government’s academies programme so far that local accountability of schools has been almost completely undermined. Gove’s curriculum proposals also seek to undo years of progressive practice, reverting to the New Right philosophy of the 1980s with examination changes designed to halt two decades of rising pass rates – despite a forced U-turn on the Ebacc.

Meanwhile, the Higher Education Minister, David Willetts’ policies have further turned students into ‘consumers’, effectively privatising universities and aiming to ‘price out’ many of the new

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generation of applicants. Yet, with sustained youth unemployment and with more and more of the few new jobs available for young people demanding degrees to get in if not to actually carry out, many school leavers have continued to sign on at uni' for debts they may never repay, despite the new panacea of 'apprenticeships' that government has offered.

Even though opinion polls show relatively low levels of popular endorsement for the Coalition's education policies, Labour has remained largely muted. To a large extent, this is because, key features of Coalition policy are extensions of Labour's previous intentions. Even when a clear change of direction has been instigated, the Party's leaders have offered little by way of a challenge. By contrast, though not having a blue-print or the magic bullet solutions that have been repeatedly foisted upon us, but also recognising that we cannot simply return to a supposed 'golden age', each chapter of this book nevertheless suggests ways forward.

The book's publication coincides with strike action called by the two main classroom teacher unions in opposition to Gove's attacks on their members' pay, conditions and pensions. This, at least potentially, represents the most serious opposition to Coalition education policies so far. As in the 1980s, the Tories know that 'defeating the teachers' is essential if their policies are to be successful. We hope that the teachers' action will both provide the space but also create the urgency for some clear educational alternatives. In fact, this would seem to be essential if the teacher unions are going to be able to rely upon support from parents. For, as Clare Kelly notes in her chapter, 'Michael Gove has positioned himself as a champion of the working class, constantly blaming inadequate teachers and bad schools for underachievement'.

Like Clare, all the contributors to this book have considerable knowledge and expertise within their particular fields. They are also campaigners committed to working outside the university seminar room to develop popular and practical alternatives. The book does not present a coherent project however. All the chapters should be considered as ‘stand-alone’ contributions. As a result, while there may be some overlapping, each offers a unique emphasis.

In **chapter 1**, John Yandell argues that Gove’s obsessions with restoring ‘rigour’ in the curriculum and to assessment, are integral to his restorationist programme – a return to ‘how things used to be done’. As John argues, ‘rigour’ is also being used to ration schooling in response to declining labour market opportunities for young people. This theme features in other contributions, which also recognise a new approach to pedagogy is needed if education is to be transformed in the interests of students.

In **chapter 2**, Clare Kelly heartened by the Cambridge Primary Review and the recent Charter for Primary Education, outlines an alternative vision for primary education which – rather than being just ‘secondary preparation’ penetrating primary education, emphasises personal development and participation in society. In **chapter 3** and focusing on English, Valerie Coultas provides comprehensive alternatives to Gove’s elitism and prescription.

The three chapters that follow are particularly pertinent in that they address the changing relationship between young people, qualifications and the labour market, where, unlike in previous times, it can no longer be assumed that passing examinations will enable smooth transitions to secure employment because reforms to

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education must now be linked to alternative policies for job creation and for the economy in general.

As well as providing a critique of Gove's exam changes and exposing the rationale behind them, Martin Allen in **chapter 4** argues for a general diploma for all school leavers at 18, which can be accessed at different levels but provides a mandatory core while still enabling specialisation. In **chapter 5**, Robin Simmons revisits the 1980 Macfalane proposals for 16-19 year olds and outlines an alternative way forward for FE – invariably the forgotten sector in education but arguably key to its future development. In **chapter 6** Patrick Ainley confronts the crisis in the university sector, arguing that, despite the Willetts' offensive, HE is still an important constituency for generating alternatives.

As the Coalition dismantles Local Education Authorities but with Labour still refusing to confront the implications of the private sponsorship of schools, Richard Hatcher **in chapter 7** sets out clear alternatives for restoring local accountability, increasing public participation to create an all-inclusive local school system by developing proactive LEAs. Finally in **chapter 8** and returning to the changing context in which education operates, Ken Jones provides a broader perspective on the development of alternative strategies.

Martin Allen and **Patrick Ainley**, September 2013.