Always at the crossroads

Progressive education today; a round-table discussion

Melissa Benn, with Robin Alexander, Paula Ayliffe, Madeleine Holt and John Yandell

Abstract

In this edited transcript of the second round-table discussion convened by *FORUM*, four participants explore the nature of 'progressive education' as term, idea and tradition. Robin Alexander, Paula Ayliffe, Madeleine Holt and John Yandell consider whether, in the shadow of currently resurgent traditionalist approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and the purposes of education, 'progressive education' still has meaning and value. Melissa Benn chairs the discussion.

Key words: progressive education; traditional education; de-professionalisation; comprehensive education; Plowden Report; Michael Gove; Cambridge Primary Review

Melissa: Well, we meet at a time of general political chaos merging into near farce. Boris Johnson has just resigned, we have our fourth education secretary within a year, and our third within a week. Looking at the situation more broadly, it seems that the government's education policy is running into the ground. The idea for this particular discussion arose out of a feeling that, after a sustained, and often disingenuous, assault on so-called 'progressive education' by Michael Gove and others, there is now widespread discussion of, and growing acceptance for, more enlightened ideas around assessment, curriculum, accountability and behaviour. New versions of old ideas are beginning to be aired in the public realm, including by some younger teachers who have been driven out of the classroom by the rigidity of neo-traditionalism. At the same time, some schools are pioneering new approaches. But perhaps some of this progressive practice never went away?

These are some of the themes we will explore with our expert panel: Paula Ayliffe, a member of the Learning Without Limits network and co-head of Mayfield Primary School in Cambridgeshire; Dr John Yandell, associate professor at the Institute of Education, University College London and author of several works including *Rethinking Education: whose knowledge is it anyway?* (co-authored with Adam Unwin); Robin Alexander, fellow of Wolfson College Cambridge and formerly professor of education at Leeds, Warwick and York, and perhaps best known for his important work with the Cambridge Primary Review; and last, but definitely not least, Madeleine Holt, parent, broadcaster and

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campaigner, who has set up a number of successful campaigns, including *Meet the Parents*, established to encourage parents to support their local state schools, and *Rescue our Schools,* and *More than a Score*, both of which challenge the arid culture of testing and standardisation. Madeleine also makes films about education with her enterprise, Schools on Screen.

Let's begin by trying to build up a picture of what's been happening, both historically and in more recent years, and what we should make of the current picture. I am also keen to identify elements of hope for the future, because I think that's an important part of what we try to do: to excavate, to describe and to foster radical but realistic hope.

Let me begin by asking all of you if the term 'progressive education' actually has meaning for you? And if you don't like the term, could you try and define what are the elements in learning and teaching, and practice, that you value?

Robin: I see the term as highly problematic. There's firstly a problem of definition. For some people, 'progressive' simply connotes in an unargued way what they do and others don't. For others, it's an articulated, shared and defensible stance on matters like learning, assessment and accountability, which you've mentioned, but also on childhood, knowledge, curriculum and teaching; and beyond these, on human relationships and the good society. So, Plowden – which these days few remember but which was a key document in the development of post-war progressive education– elaborated what it called 'a recognisable philosophy of primary education' covering all these themes but with everything flowing from its opening insistence that 'at the heart of the educational process lies the child'. [1]

But that maxim takes us to the second problem: the extent to which 'progressive' has fallen foul of binary or dichotomous language. So, Plowden's 'child-centred' found itself opposed – by advocates as much as detractors – to 'subject-centred' or teacher-centred', neither of which dichotomies is really tenable because one can of course teach subjects in a way that thoroughly respects and engages with the way children think and learn, and many teachers do just that. While 'progressive' tended to be seen, but not elucidated, as the antithesis of 'traditional', which in turn signalled an amalgam of teacher authority, a curriculum focusing heavily on the 3Rs, a view of knowledge as given and fixed rather than negotiable and fluid, and a pedagogy of transmission. Try replacing the oppositional 'versus' and the binary 'either/or' by 'both … and' and a much richer array of possibilities emerges.

And – here's the third problem – in political hands dichotomisation leads to polarisation and weaponisation. And so, within a year of Plowden, we have the anti-Plowden Black Papers of the late 1960s and early 1970s; then Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech; then growing political intervention in curriculum (under the Conservatives, culminating in the 1988 Education Reform Act and the national curriculum) and

pedagogy (under New Labour); regular pre-election 'back to basics' drives by all parties (including Major's in 1991 which misfired on morality if not on education). And of course, and perhaps most egregiously to date, Michael Gove and Toby Young in 2011-14 with their characterisation of any teacher or educationist who didn't agree with them as 'the Blob … enemies of promise … bleating bogus pop psychology … Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools'. (Toby Young's father Michael Young, we might note in passing, was a member of the Plowden Committee and a notable educational and social progressive.) And now, in 2022, we have Liz Truss pitching for the job of prime minister by claiming that the Leeds comprehensive school that got her into Oxford spent more time teaching about racism and sexism than on the 3Rs, thus implicitly bracketing progressivism with the politics of identity. But if there's one thoroughly researched truth – as opposed to political myth – in all this it's that England's schools have never neglected the 3Rs. It's the rest of the curriculum, especially the arts, that's been at risk and that we should continue to be worried about.

Melissa: That's a fantastic survey of the broad terrain, Robin, and I will return to some particular points in a moment.

Paula, do you recognise the term 'progressive education', or would you also question it?

Paula: I think I would question it, only because I don't think about it very much. I, together with my co-head, run our primary school, which is a community, wearing blinkers. That may seem rather naïve, but what's important to us are the children in front of us and their needs, and the relationship that we have with all of those children and their families. That's paramount; everything else is laid lightly upon that. We're very clear that we what we do because we want the very best for our children, and we make decisions daily to that end.

Melissa: I have heard you talk very eloquently recently about how 'everything starts with the child' and also how you don't 'believe in taking the child to the curriculum, you believe in taking the curriculum to the child'. You have also stated that everything in teaching begins and ends with a sense of trust. Now when I hear you talking of these things, it takes me straight back to the principles of Plowden, which Robin has mentioned, and more broadly your position amounts to an optimistic definition of what progressive education might mean. What do you think about that when I say that? Do you recognise what I mean?

Paula: Yes. I personally don't see how you can operate a school without trust, and so therefore, 'progressive' to me means moving forward, so in that sense, yes, we're always

moving forward, nothing stays the same, and we're adaptive to situations. So, I suppose I'm partway there with you on that, yes.

Melissa: Thanks for helping me out, Paula. Okay, John, do you think 'progressive' is a useful working term?

John: When I became a teacher in the 1980s, a book that was very influential for me was Ken Jones' *Beyond Progressive Education*. And so I remember, starting off as a teacher, having quite a sneery attitude to this thing, progressive education. As Robin said, it's always a contested term, and often it seems evacuated of meaning, and it tends to be applied derogatorily to other people's practice, rather than being, as Paula said, a label that we announce ourselves with. And yet, I suppose, the longer I've spent in education, the more I think it might be a slightly useful term. On the PGCE that I lead we introduce our students, on their first day with us, to what's effectively become a kind of mantra for the course: 'who are the learners, and what do they know?'. And I think that that is, in some sense, a progressive way of approaching teaching and learning, education, curriculum, assessment. It's interesting how often when I've used that mantra in other contexts, it's been misconstrued as 'who are the learners, and what *should* they know?'. And the distinction between those two formulations seems to me to say something significant about what an orientation that might be construed as progressive might look like.

Melissa: Would that be similar to Paula's mantra that you start with the child?

John: Yes.

Melissa: And this is pretty much the opposite in its emphasis to the neo-traditionalism of Katharine Birbalsingh and so on: all those who believe you must deliver knowledge to the child.

John: It's also completely at odds with an approach revealed by a student teacher of mine, who came back from her school placement and said, 'At the beginning of each day, all the pupils in the school where I've been placed have to chant, "My teacher's words are gold dust"'. They might be gold dust, but what that does is to signal a very different relationship between teacher and learner, and a very different relationship to the question of knowledge than the one that is there in 'who are the learners and what do they know?'.

Melissa: Perhaps we should have framed the debate in terms of 'what is traditionalism

and what's wrong with it?' given the heavy emphasis put on that approach by many in government! Madeleine: you, like me, are used to having to deal with/react to the crass, simplistic terms deployed in public debate. Do you think 'progressive education' is a useful label?

Madeleine: It could be, I think it could be. I think it's going to depend on what happens in the next few years because I like the word 'progressive', I consider myself to be progressive. I like the word 'progressive alliance'. I think at the moment it is derided, for all the reasons that we know about. So, if I were to put together a campaign proposal now, I probably wouldn't use it. I would prefer something like 'education for life' or something that's more the language of, for example, the Times Education Commission, which was very much around the economy and skills. I don't personally think obviously it is just about that, but I think it was quite clever, the way that report was written, it did definitely avoid that word. Because I think it's just been so damaged by Gove's very deliberate culture wars in education, which began in 2010, if not before that. So, I like it, and I hope it comes back. I think it all depends what's going to happen politically. But in terms of how I would define it, I think it's more the polar opposite of GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement. So, for me, it's the total opposite of standardisation, it's equity as opposed to equality, it's child-centred, it's the opposite of the Birbalsingh 'empty vessel' stuff. It's seeing the spark in every child and trying to light that, whatever that might be, not necessarily narrowly academic. And taking account of children's lives beyond school, as opposed to Birbalsingh's very harsh perception that it doesn't matter what your background is or if your granny died that morning, you should still be able to get an A*, or whatever she's fussing about.

And I think it's also about preparing children for life in its broadest sense, so not just narrowly economic and about qualifications. And finally, it's about professionalism with teachers, and trusting teachers. So, really, the total opposite of every trend we've seen in the last 12 years.

Melissa: So it seems that most of us can come up with broad definition of what we feel is important in education while also recognising that the term 'progressive' – a bit like the term 'comprehensive' perhaps? – can be unhelpfully freighted in public debate, in part because it's been so degraded by political opposition.

Madeleine: I don't give up on these terms yet. I live and hope that 'comprehensive' is going to come back as a wonderful, magical term, because I think it is. I just think things are in such a state of flux at the moment that it would be eminently possible to revive the concept of progressive education. We talk about progressive taxes, don't we? So, I think there's everything to play for.

Robin: A couple of points. First, dare I suggest that 'empty vessels' reintroduces the risk of dichotomous language? If Gove, Young and now Truss shamelessly parody progressivism, which they did and do, we should take care not to do likewise with what others might hold is a serious account of what a more traditional kind of education stands for. For the equivalent of what one right-wing newspaper called 'Plowden's insane bandwagon … much happiness but little learning' is to wheel out the first chapter of Dickens's *Hard Times* – 'Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts … Little vessels ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim' as if that's where alternatives to progressivism start and end. But Dickens's critique of utilitarianism relied on the crudest parody, as he surely knew. Just as we wouldn't equate Gradgrind's reduction of education to the transmission of 'facts' with Matthew Arnold's plea for induction into the 'the best that has been thought and said', so we should also be careful not to dismiss by association the immense riches of different ways of knowing, understanding and exploring embodied in school subjects. Not all knowledge is propositional, and – as we said in the Cambridge Primary Review[2] – if in the classroom pupils find a subject fact-obsessed, irrelevant or boring, then that may say more about the teaching than what is taught. It is, then, a pedagogical rather than intrinsically epistemic matter.

The other point perhaps worth making here is that we could add a historical perspective to remind ourselves that progressivism has an intellectual and indeed international provenance that is about as far from the petty localism of 'the Blob' as one can get. So, on knowledge, pedagogy and democracy we might invoke John Dewey. Or we might track much further back to the much-travelled Comenius in the 17th century and thence forward to Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori and on again to Hadow and Plowden. Then there are more recent figures like A. S. Neil and the Elmhirsts – perhaps too libertarian for contemporary taste – or those with an arts and crafts bent like Christian Schiller and Robin Tanner; or influential LEA grandees such as Alec Clegg, Stewart Mason, Edith Moorhouse and Marianne Parry – and, I'd add, Tim Brighouse. Or teacher-scholars like Sybil Marshall in her village school, Tim McMullen at Countesthorpe, and *FORUM*'s own Michael Armstrong in Harwell. All these people had a coherent view of what they were trying to do, were highly effective in translating their ideas into practice, and might all have called themselves progressive.

Melissa: Thanks Robin, you have actually anticipated my next question, which was to ask each of you who has inspired you in education. Other teachers, thinkers, writers? Paula who has inspired you?

Paula: Well, probably not world-renowned names, but perhaps they should be. I would

say Dr Holly Linklater, who is on the Learning Without Limits team in Cambridge. She was my kids' reception teacher; I was in her class as a parent helper. I would not be where I am today without her. Currently, I spend a lot of time talking and thinking with Professor Rachel Lofthouse from Leeds Beckett University and CollectivED, and some of the team up there, including Professor Mhairi Beaton. I'm doing a master's by research with them at the moment about our co-headship. So, those are some of the people that have inspired me and continue to do so.

Melissa: Yes. I am glad you have brought significant figures like Holly Linklater and Rachel Lofthouse into our discussion. John, who do you keep going back to, for inspiration?

John: Where to begin? Vygotsky because of the insights he provides into the complexity of learning, and the complexity of the relationship between sign-making and thought. And because he was working in a post-revolutionary context, where it was about refashioning education in the interests of everyone. And his work in what was then called 'defectology' is really significant in looking at what a properly comprehensive system might involve. And then a series of people who I suppose have always been influential for me, James Britton and Harold Rosen, working at the Institute. More recently, Jane Miller and Tony Burgess. But also, I want to reframe your question, Melissa, because I think it's very easy for me to trot out a list of people whose work in writing has been significant. But equally significant have been the teacher colleagues alongside whom I've worked, people like Monica Brady, who was a colleague of mine at the school I used to work at in Hackney. Or Baljeet Ghale, who was a colleague at the school that I started off in in Stepney Green. As teachers we learn as much from our colleagues as we do from people whose work we read. And I think that's an important aspect of tradition that it's worth hanging on to – that teaching is a collegiate, collaborative activity, however much the forces of neo-liberalism attempt to turn it into something else.

Melissa: I think that's really important, to emphasise the seminal influence that colleagues can have. Madeleine: who, for you, has been an inspiration?

Madeleine: I guess my father, Maurice Holt, influenced me very heavily in a visceral way. He wrote 10 books in 10 years and I haven't read all of them. Maybe I should, but I'm a slow reader. But I grew up in a house where we talked a lot about education, and he worked initially in the private sector, and then when the whole beginnings of the comprehensive education movement kicked off in the 1950s/60s, he wanted to be part of it. And so I suppose I had that constant susurration of discussion about the value of educating people together. And if I re-read his book now, probably it would be a bit old-

fashioned. So, I would say that was my first influence. My second influence, because I think I'm really interested in pragmatic solutions, is XP School in Doncaster, because I've been up there on and off for two years, and I just find Gwyn ap Harri and Andy Sprakes, and all the staff there, truly inspirational.

Melissa: What I find really interesting is that nobody has name-checked the same person or source of ideas. At the very least, this indicates that there is such a spread, and depth, of inspiration to draw on. My own list would include the great thinker, John Dewey, and Alex Bloom, the headteacher of St George-in-the-East – a post-war secondary modern that turned all assumptions about secondary moderns of the period on their head. The school was also, incidentally, the model for the school in *To Sir With Love,* the film starring Sydney Poitier. I would also mention the work of Reggio Emilia, the most amazing and sustained experiment in an entirely different approach to the early years.

Let's turn now to what happens when inspiring practice and people collide with the political world? Robin, you are very interesting in your recent book about the way the Plowden report was interpreted and misinterpreted, included how Plowden herself was personally abused.

Robin: Just before that, can I add five figures to whom I owe a great deal: Douglas Brown (a truly remarkable English teacher from my own 1950s schooldays whose intellect, generosity and energy would probably baffle your average Ofsted box-ticker), Jerome Bruner and Brian Simon (whom I presume to call my mentors), that profound dialogist Mikhail Bakhtin whose work has inspired my own on classroom talk, and closer to home, Michael Armstrong. Two *FORUM* editors there. Michael, as I mentioned, ran a wonderful school in Harwell and I had the pleasure of working with him on the Cambridge Primary Review.

Back to your question Melissa. Crossing party lines to an extent that today would be inconceivable, Plowden was commissioned by a Conservative secretary of state, Edward Boyle, delivered to Labour's Tony Crosland and was then welcomed across most of the political spectrum. Yet within barely a year it was bizarrely accused by the right of creating the lax moral climate and low academic standards that supposedly fuelled the 1968 student unrest (the students in question would have been still in nappies and were of course products of post-war 'traditional' education). And Lady Plowden, a Conservative member of ILEA [Inner London Education Authority], was vilified by her own party and its media cheerleaders up to her death in 2000. Thus the *Daily Telegraph* on 7 November 1991: 'Look on your works, Lady Plowden, and despair'.

Leaving aside the tortuous politics and vicious media assaults, Plowden was remarkable not just for its progressive hue but perhaps more importantly for what it successfully recommended about early years provision and ways of tackling social and

educational disadvantage: it is to Plowden that a long succession of interventions from educational priority areas to the pupil premium can be traced.

It was also the first major research-based account of primary education, though its research coverage was patchy: strong on children's development, but idealistic rather than empirical on pedagogy, which was unfortunate as several generations of teachers were advised or even instructed to treat Plowden as their pedagogical prospectus, even after Maurice Galton and his colleagues had demonstrated the limits to the patterns of teaching that Plowden advocated. Now of course we have a much safer evidential basis for effective teaching, whether from a succession of major research projects, the randomised control trials commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation, or meta-studies like those of John Hattie. We've also shifted from a vaguely Piagetian account of children's development and learning and the idea of the teacher as mere developmental 'facilitator' to the Vygotskian argument for teaching as a necessary intervention in the development process and for the pivotal place in that intervention of cognitively challenging classroom talk. While both learning and teaching have benefited from advances in cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

Another problem that was attributed to Plowden was a view of the curriculum which was really quite hostile not just to subjects and subject boundaries but also to knowledge itself, and this was great ammunition for the right. But the problem was not Plowden – which was actually pretty conventional on curriculum matters – but what people did with it, reductively arguing that a seamless, thematic and fully integrated curriculum was the only way to go and that knowledge was *ipso facto* redundant in the classroom because children could find everything they needed to know on the internet. An epistemological travesty, as we argued in the Cambridge Primary Review.

Then there were the contradictions. For example, the resistance to fixed notions of children's ability and potential, which had informed Brian Simon's successful campaign to persuade Plowden to come out against streaming, sat uncomfortably alongside a widely held professional belief in the idea of age-determined educational 'readiness' on the one hand, and on the other hand a tendency to typify children on the basis of gender, class and ethnicity. The latter was well-researched during the 1970s and few would deny that in some quarters it persists.

As for the so-called 'progressive revolution' in primary schools, that never happened, or rather it happened in some schools and local authorities but not in most of the others. Ten years on from Plowden, HMI found that only 5 per cent of schools were 'mainly exploratory' while 75 per cent were 'mainly didactic', and that ratio, give or take, was confirmed in Galton's and Simon's Oracle project of 1975-80 and the so-called 'three wise men' enquiry of 1991-92 in which I was involved. If we do want to talk about Plowden – or for that matter the Cambridge Primary Review – we should ditch the myths and return to the texts of such documents. For there were three Plowdens: Plowden as

written, Plowden as exaggeratedly beatified by its uncritical followers, and Plowden as distorted and demonised by the right; and members of the last two groups rarely attended to what Plowden actually *said*. Indeed, in 1974 Alec Clegg warned against those 'who have jumped on the [progressive] bandwagon but cannot play the instruments', while in 1979 John Dewey's widow complained that his disciples 'could not see their idol for the incense they sent up.' [3]

Melissa: Fascinating to hear about the many different versions of 'Plowden' that came to exist. John, do you have any thoughts to add on the way that even moderate ideas became subject to distorting interpretations?

John: Well, despite your prompt Melissa, I think I want to go back to Matthew Arnold. Robin's already mentioned him once. Because it isn't just that the right attack apparently progressive documents or research positions, it's that they colonise discourse in ways that are, well, dodgy to say the least. So, Matthew Arnold's 'the best that's been thought and said' then makes an appearance in certain mangled forms, including in the current version of the national curriculum, but what Arnold goes on to say in *Culture and Anarchy* is that 'the best that's been thought and said' is a resource for thinking through our current difficulties. Now, that's not at all the same as the way in which 'the best that's been thought and said' appears in the national curriculum, which is as an injunction for school students merely to appreciate the cultural goods that they're presented with. And that's happened again and again in different forms, with Michael Gove as probably the most spectacular perpetrator of a rewriting of history in such a way as to support very narrow and discreditable sectarian ends.

Melissa: Yes, it's important that people understand the ways in which the political right appropriates complex ideas and uses them for its own purpose. But it is slightly different, perhaps, from a full-fronted attack on certain kinds of teaching or the comprehensive principle itself, which began to emerge from the late 1960s.

John: That attack, which yes you can trace back to the *Black Papers*, has been fairly bipartisan in terms of Labour's record as well as the Conservative party's. The way in which Blair and others traduced comprehensive education, Alastair Campbell's 'bog standard comprehensives', but more than that, Blair's very consistent notion that what he wanted to do, what New Labour wanted to do was to erase a history of progressive developments in education, to create a ground zero with the academies movement, with the national literacy strategy. I suppose one of the differences between New Labour and what's happened since is that New Labour tended to erase history, to simply turn its back on history, whereas what we've had in the last 12 years has been a constant

rewriting of history from the way in which Michael Wilshaw described Hackney Downs [school], for instance, through to Gove's consistent attack on progressivism. He's had a very clear conception of what progressivism is, of course it's a caricature but it's served very clear purposes for him.

Melissa: I often refer to a speech that Gove gave to the Social Market Foundation in early 2013 in which he attacked his caricature of progressive education, invoking both Gramsci and Jade Goody of Big Brother, and suggesting that his was the clearest path to working-class liberation. It's a very skilled but utterly disingenuous piece of rhetoric.

But thanks for mentioning New Labour, John, because that's an important part of the story too. Paula, you must have been teaching during the New Labour era?

Paula: Yes, I started teaching in 1986.

Melissa: I wonder how you experienced that period of government? John argues that this period involved an erasure of history and he is critical, more generally, of Blair and Co.'s conception of education. Did you feel under attack? There are a number of people working in state education who would defend most of what government did for schools.

Paula: I think that for me, I'm talking personally here, I didn't have the confidence to stand up and really understand and properly reflect on what was going on. Teaching has always been a real full-on job as we all know and at that stage I, sort of, ran with it. I just trusted my own headteacher, the people that I was working with, the local authority, and just went with what we were told to do and I think that's the problem that a lot of us are having now, not having that time to question and think through what we're being asked to do.

Melissa: Do you mean that you went along with the literacy and numeracy hours – those sorts of initiatives?

Paula: Yes.

Melissa: And did you feel, on a personal level, that you were contributing to the betterment of the nation's education system?

Paula: On reflection I don't think I was, but at the time most just accepted it. We didn't question it. We just thought somebody more knowing has introduced this for good reasons so we will go with it. It's not until you go with it for a few years you realise, hang on a minute, there are problems here. And then you start to have the confidence to say,

'No, there is a better way. This isn't helping'.

Melissa: Madeleine, what's your take on New Labour – help or hindrance?

Madeleine: Well, with New Labour and in particular Blair, and I'm thinking about his rejection of the Tomlinson Report, I think he – I don't know if this had to do with his background – he was privately educated, but for me, a kind of continuing obsession in education is this very narrow perception of capability. And I don't actually like the word intelligence, but this idea that academic capability is the only thing that really counts and a kind of love of selection, of sorting the wheat from the chaff and, as I would see it, an impoverished view of potential. Winners and losers, the cornflakes rising to the top of a packet, and if you read Cummings – and I think that is a really seminal thing to read actually, his one big essay on education – is that it's the same sort of idea and I don't feel that Blair really was that different. I mean, he recently said he thought that 70 per cent of people should go to university, and interestingly his son sees things very differently. So, I think that's part of the problem which is a really deep cultural obsession with selection and pulling out a few working-class kids and getting them to Oxbridge, and everyone else is just really mediocre. Which is why there's no point putting money into state education as they see it.

I also think it's about communication and language and, I hate to say it, but, academics and progressive academics have been really bad at communicating to a wider audience. But then it's not really their job to do that. I agree totally with Robin: if you're too critical of what some of these more traditional people are doing you're shooting yourself in the foot. And I've watched the Michaela [school] television documentary and I actually thought there were some things about it that were really quite riveting.

Melissa: Ha, I'm watching others reacting on the Zoom screen as you say that!

Madeleine: And to say it's all terrible, handing in of the mobile phones. Well, I personally don't agree with that policy but she has created a kind of cult in that school, which you see at XP as well but it comes from a different place. I met a teacher yesterday who's quite progressive and she said, 'My god, there were some things about what they're doing that are amazing that I really would have wanted to do in my school'. She's not a headteacher anymore. So, I think it's much cleverer to be more subtle in criticism of the Gove onslaught which I totally agree has been incredibly effective.

Melissa: Yes, I was just going to say that perhaps the synergy of the Blair and Gove view is that you need selection, but not necessarily to sort children out into different institutions. According to this interpretation of 'comprehensive' or 'all-ability schooling'

you can have everybody going through the same school gate but that you then select rigidly within the institution. And therefore the mythical social mobility story of the last 30 years, as opposed to the post-war period, has been the comprehensively educated child from a disadvantaged background who gets to Oxbridge rather than the working-class child who arrived there via a grammar school education. But fundamentally it's the same idea: that attention and resources must be concentrated on helping the clever, disadvantaged child to escape their background.

Robin: Back to New Labour. I think it's worth dwelling a bit on teacher agency and reminding ourselves of 1988 and the Education Reform Act, because of course before that England didn't have a national curriculum. You invented it yourself, certainly in primary schools, though there was always consensus about curriculum scope and priorities and a considerable apparatus of professional support from local authority advisers and HMI (who gently steered as much as inspected, and maintained a careful distance from government so that, unlike Ofsted, they could claim to be genuinely independent), and some superb curriculum materials from the Schools Council; while in secondary schools the examination structure, then as now, shaped much of what was taught.

But move on a decade and we find Michael Barber, New Labour's educational *eminence grise*, claiming that before 1997 teachers were professionally uninformed and – with stunning ignorance and arrogance – that 'the era of informed professional judgement is only just beginning'. What he meant was that to be 'professionally informed' after 1997 was to comply with what was dreamed up by SPADs [special policy advisers] and imposed by government – specifically Labour's national literacy, numeracy, primary and secondary strategies of 1997-2010 – no less and, especially, no more. And looking back in 2010 through McKinsey's corporate lenses Barber equated what he called 'the right approach' with 'the system's pedagogical values' – as if an entire national system of education can or should subscribe to a single model of teaching.

It was this mindset that, just before the 2010 election, prompted the Cambridge Primary Review to warn of a 'state theory of learning'.[4] Too late: Gove, Gibb and their Coalition/Conservative successors were only too happy to maintain the Barber line as they stuffed the 2013 national curriculum framework with exhausting prescriptive detail on English, maths and science, left the rest of the curriculum to take its chances, and abused those who dared to disagree with them. This manifest contempt for teacher expertise and agency, allied to a resurgent educational utilitarianism, and the view that it was for government, and only government, to determine what teachers should know, was a major flaw in New Labour thinking. Those who hope for another Labour government will need to ensure that history doesn't repeat itself. That would be absolutely disastrous.

Melissa: I'd like to talk about classroom practice now, because one of the things you say,

John, in your book *Rethinking Education* is that there has always been creative practice in the classroom. And Paula, from what I have read of your work at Mayfield it seems very different from what appears to go in in many primary schools and I wonder if you could say a bit about that? Are you able to teach in the way you want to teach and meet some of the current rigid accountability measures?

Paula: I think that what we're doing at the moment is, I wouldn't use the word unique, but there seems to be very few schools that are operating in the way that we are. I've just been on a headteacher conference and there are a lot of very tired headteachers out there who are so exhausted they cannot see the wood for the trees and they are picking curriculum off the shelves and jumping on the latest fad. They're looking for answers that somebody else has put together because they haven't got the time or energy or space to think of solutions for their school. And that is because of the pressure that's coming from DfE about their golden thread, about how things have to look and that feeling that control is being taken away from us. I am so grateful to work with a co-head who is alongside all the time because we are both full time. I say that because we are currently awaiting Ofsted, literally, at any moment. It feels like something to get through so that we can continue to plough on. Our SATs results this year were excellent, I say that not because I am holding SATs high, but to demonstrate that the children have excelled because of our very broad curriculum, and not because we have not put them through daily SATs practice. The children spend an afternoon outside of the classroom every week, whatever the weather, doing their learning outside. We also use 'spirals of inquiry' which we carry out with all of the children.[5] Every class teacher in the school spends 30 minutes, three times a year, asking the children about their learning. The first question is always, 'Which two people in this school believe in you'. If they can't tell you anybody who believes in them, then that's our starting point. We do that with the children, and we do that with the staff, because everybody in our school is a learner and is recognised as a learner.

Melissa: So, one thing you have been able to do is find a way to value and conserve both teacher and head teacher energy?

Paula: Yes.

Melissa: … which means that you can both meet the system's demands but do what you think is right?

Paula: Yes, because we have each other. We have that space. We've created that space, and that is a protective space as well as a space that's enabling.

Melissa: It reminds me a bit of the buzz around a school like Wroxham primary when Alison Peacock was the head there. For any school that is pioneering or unorthodox (in the eyes of the establishment) to be taken seriously it has to score highly under official measures. Otherwise, people will say, 'Well it's all very well you doing that, but your children aren't meeting expected standards'. Madeleine, isn't that true of XP, the school that you have made a film about?

Madeleine: I think there's a lot of similarities with what Paula's saying. This idea of everyone being a learner and making space to think. Obviously with XP they have a huge advantage: they were a purpose-built school, they had very clear design principles from the start, they had a role in how it was going to be constructed. But I think they have that real discipline in terms of always having space to think, and also having a life outside school. They're just about to introduce something where all staff should be able to leave the premises at five o'clock, and have time with their families or whatever. Because, you know, they're used to the brickbats. This is what I find so depressing, having made this film, getting the profession to engage with it is incredibly difficult. A lot of people I've spoken to, headteachers, seem to spend more time thinking about why they can't introduce any of their ideas than actually thinking about how they could possibly introduce some of their ideas in small ways. So, I find the defensiveness of the profession is one of the saddest things. I mean, maybe Paula can help with this, somebody said to me the other day it's because their professionalism's always being attacked. Unlike, say, medics, or lawyers. That's why they're so sensitive to new ideas.

Melissa: Or they're exhausted …

Paula: I think it's both, actually. I think they are definitely exhausted. Everybody's exhausted, but there are definitely a group of the profession who seem to want to be told what to do, and they don't want to engage and reflect in the way that another group of people want to. We find this in our own school as well, but over time a culture has developed, and that's taken at least five years of work.

Melissa: So what's emerging here is how difficult it can be to do things differently, and that it is perhaps getting harder. John, you've taught teachers for decades; do you think it's more difficult to foster creative classroom practice than it was?

John: Yes, and yes, very straightforwardly. Listening to Paula, I think it's really important to go back to what Robin was saying about teacher agency, and the de-professionalisation of teaching that can be traced at least as far back as New Labour, and effectively back to 1988 and the Education Reform Act. So has it become harder?

Yes, but the other part of this is that, using ‘progressive’ as a convenient shorthand, progressive practice has always been a minority pursuit. Plowden said at the time it was a third of primary schools that could in some sense be regarded as progressive. Ten years later, it’s down to 5 per cent. That’s an indication of things becoming harder, but also the spaces open up in ways that are not necessarily predictable. So when I started as a teacher in the Inner London Education Authority, in the 1980s, it was a moment when because of pressures from outside school, pressures from community groups, from minority ethnic communities, there was a space to take seriously notions of anti-racist education that meant re-examining the curriculum from the bottom up. So it wasn’t to do with centrally imposed directives. It was to do with schools figuring stuff out in dialogue with students and with communities. To say that is to present a false image of London schools in the 1980s, because again it was very variable from school to school, the extent to which schools bought into a notion of anti-racist education, and the extent to which they then practised change because of that. When I started as a teacher, I had the idea that all ILEA schools were the same. I very quickly found out that that just wasn’t the case.

What Paula has described in terms of the development of an ethos within a school over time absolutely accords with my own experience, that it takes times to build that sort of community, to give teachers the confidence to do something more than just implement what somebody else tells them to do, and to figure out what actually is working. Is it more difficult now? Yes, but even if you leave aside the outliers like XP, there is within schooling such massive variation because school cultures are so individual. Yes, there are huge pressures, pressures that are unprecedented in the extent to which they determine, or attempt to determine, the work that teachers do. But classrooms remain incredibly complicated places where lots of different things are happening simultaneously and where, however much central government or anyone else seeks to curtail the agency of teachers and learners, learners still behave in ways that create the possibility of more interesting things happening. That, again, can sound hopelessly romantic or idealistic, but it’s true. I spend a lot of my time sitting in classrooms, and what goes on in classrooms isn’t reducible to what appears on a spreadsheet. Part of the difficulty with neo-liberalism is it is a reductive account of what are hugely complex and unpredictable activities. Can I just say one other thing? One of the things that I really like about Madeleine’s work in documenting what goes on in a school like XP is it is capturing something of the complexity, of the idiosyncrasy, of what goes on in schools.

Madeleine: This is a really obvious point, but I think basically, looking at this whole theory of freedom for teachers, the forces that are at work, right since going back to the *Black Papers* and Blair, the issue is control. You know, Blair, New Labour, was a very controlling ideology, wasn’t it, on many levels? We saw that in education, and of course

Cummings is a control freak, and Gove is a control freak. I've got some quote in my study about how education's always been, for politicians and governments, a means of social control. It's not a very radical thing to say. I do think the other factor is, and I don't know what you think about this, Melissa, because we've both had experience – I don't know about you, Paula and everyone else – of comprehensive education. I hate to say it, and I used to have this discussion with my dad, and he didn't like to hear it, but I think a lot of comprehensives were not particularly well thought through pedagogically. That was obviously something he was trying to address, but a lot of schools weren't great. In my school most of my classmates, many of whom were highly capable, left school at 16, went into crappy jobs and have not fulfilled their potential. So it was ripe for first of all Blair, then Gove. It was so vulnerable to this kind of ideological assault.

Melissa: I often wonder here about the difference between primary and secondary education.

Madeleine: I'm talking about secondary.

Melissa: Yes, because one so rarely hears people say 'My primary education was a disaster'. And could that partly be because primary education is more genuinely comprehensive? Selection, choice and all those other class and market related mechanisms largely kick in at 11, leading to a whole new set of problems and limitations. Robin, do you want to reflect on that in relation to the work of the Cambridge Primary Review?

Robin: May I address this obliquely again? Teaching is self-evidently an amalgam of the personal and professional. So every account of what constitutes good teaching, or for that matter truly progressive education, has to allow for a wide range of ways in which educational and pedagogical quality can be manifested. Which means, for example, that there are some teachers who are more comfortable operating in a way that others might deem 'traditional' but is in its own way and take on learning and knowing, progressive. As to whether teaching has become more difficult, that may well be true if we consider the pressures and demands from the likes of DfE and Ofsted, the decline in resources and rewards, the competing values that schools have somehow to reconcile, and the economic and ecological conditions to which education is expected to provide a convincing response.

But there's another way to look at this. During the 1980s I did a piece of research with mid-career teachers who had all been commended for the exceptional quality of their thinking and practice, using video and the technique of progressively refocused interviews. As we jointly viewed and discussed the teaching we had filmed, and our

teachers talked about their development and decision-making, it became clear that for teachers who care and think deeply about what they do, the job may become not easier but more difficult. Not so much in relation to the day-to-day routines that they had mastered long ago, as because the more deeply they pondered and discussed what they were teaching, to whom, how and why, and the more their reading and discussion revealed alternatives, the more they recognised that their work was infinitely perfectible. I don't know what John thinks about this, as someone recently out of the classroom, or Paula who is still in it. Our teachers said, 'Yes, of course I know what I'm doing, and there are many ways in which the job is easier than when I started teaching 20 years ago, but the confidence of routinised practice creates space for reflection, reflection generates doubt and the standards I set myself become higher and higher. So in this sense the job never becomes easier'.

Melissa: Can I put that observation directly to Paula? Paula, are you finding the job ever harder, but only because you are, in fact, becoming more skilled and more experienced?

Paula: Yes, but that's a choice as well, because I, along with the staff that I work with, teachers, teaching assistants, everybody in school, we all want to get better at what we're doing. We're more reflective, and so we fine tune. What I have to do as a leader is to help structure or scaffold that for them. So instead of them, for example, trying to improve in 101 areas all at the same time, our appraisal process, our professional learning process, helps them to focus in on one or two things that they've chosen to improve upon at one time. We will do all we can to help them do that. So, for example, if they're having a lesson observation they will tell us what they want us to look out for, because that's part of their process of trying to improve.

Melissa: So you have found ways to concentrate on what is challenging for a particular teacher at a particular time?

Paula: Yes, and I think that it's not necessarily a bad thing that they're finding it harder, because actually I don't really want anyone to say, 'I've got this sussed now. I don't need any more professional learning. I've got it, I know where I'm going'. I want them to be able to say, 'Oh this class is different from the one I had last year. Although my lessons might look the same, I've actually had to rethink them, because I've got these children in front of me now, and I need to adapt my teaching for their needs and where their gaps are and take their learning further'.

Melissa: I want to turn now to the ways that public debate is shifting, possibly for the better. I've noticed in recent times a flurry of publication and discussion around more

progressive approaches. For example, there is the recently published doorstopper of a book by Mick Waters and Tim Brighouse which reflects a lot of what we've talked about here; there is Rethinking Assessment, an alliance of private and state school heads, trying to scale back on reliance on exams; there's the Voice 21 project which picks up Robin's work on dialogic teaching in a slightly more reductive form. More broadly, I've interviewed and talked to many people over the years who began as keen young teachers in the Gove years but who very quickly thought, 'No, this is not for me'. And some of them have gone off and written books about alternative approaches – I'm thinking of books like Alex Beard's *Natural Born Learners* or Lucy Crehan's *Cleverlands.* Add to that, a lot of work being done around the possibilities of new technology and artificial intelligence, and those pioneering schools that attract positive interest, such as XP in Doncaster. Is the neo-traditionalist narrative finally being seriously challenged?

Madeleine: Sorry. I don't like talking about negative stuff, and that's why I make the films about the alternatives, because I want to be optimistic, and I am pragmatically optimistic. I just wanted to share the experience of having the first public screening of my film this week. I invited loads of secondary heads, none of whom turned up, and there were a few primary heads, but there were a huge number of parents. I think what was so interesting about it was this incredible emotional response to the film, and enthusiasm for seeing a different way of doing things. There were people crying. It was a bit like being at some, you know, Billy, what's that guy called?

Melissa: Billy Graham?

Madeleine: Yes. A woman just made a statement saying, 'I just think this is such an amazing thing, to see the connection between the school and the community' and then she started almost crying. So, for me it was a validation of what I had always suspected which is that, number one, the media cover education in a very superficial way. They don't really look at progressive models for all the reasons we know about. Number two, I do feel, although I'm bound to say this as an ex-TV reporter, that showing happy kids is an unassailable, powerful thing to do. I don't think the camera lies, and I think with the Michaela programme, its weakness was that the kids didn't look very happy. Whereas you can't fake it when you film it, and that for me was the most powerful thing about XP. So, I'm feeling very optimistic, and I think we are at an absolute crossroads. I went to the Wellington College festival of education thing yesterday, and even there, they're drifting away from the trad model. The very fact that they invited us to show our film there was really significant. I think parents are going to drive it. Ken Robinson always said, 'The change will come from the grassroots'.

Melissa: Now, Ken Robinson, there's an interesting figure. Completely derided by the Tory education establishment, but whose ideas endure nonetheless. Robin, do you think we're at a crossroads?

Robin: Aren't we always at a crossroads? To pick up Madeleine's point, the very first exercise we did on the Cambridge Primary Review, back in 2006-07, was to travel around the country to take what we called 'community soundings' with groups of teachers, heads, parents, LA representatives, faith and community leaders, marginalised groups such as Travellers, and of course children themselves. We got them to talk about their hopes for children, their education, and the society and world in which children are growing up. In relation to Madeleine's concern that we need an optimistic perspective, I might mention that although we repeatedly heard of anxiety about matters like children's physical and online safety, climate change, environmental degradation, geopolitical instability and democratic decline, not to mention government fixation on the 3Rs, testing and inspection, there were also two recurrent and very positive features. First, the children were far and away the most upbeat of all our respondents. Second, to bowdlerise Yeats yet again, the local primary school was widely viewed as the centre that held when everything else fell apart. Schools were highly valued for what they did and what they stood for, especially in difficult times. We are certainly in difficult times now, so we should hang on to both of these positives.

Melissa: And of course, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have intensified that sense of schools being the vital heart of so many communities. Would you agree with that Paula?

Paula: Absolutely. It feels like we are the first point of contact for pretty much, well everything.

Melissa And do you think we are at a crossroads?

Paula: Yes. And maybe I'm just more aware of things, you know, the bigger picture now, than I have been previously, but my biggest concern at the moment is the future of teacher education. Because it feels like people are trying to impose a one-size-fits-all model and we're going to potentially lose some institutions that have been educating teachers for years and yes, that's a real worry. We've managed to recruit, we've had plenty of applicants for posts this year, we've got a full team for September, but the schools surrounding me haven't. We're fortunate, but there are others not able to recruit, there are empty classrooms, well there are classrooms full of children in September but with no adults in front of them.

Melissa: So perhaps we are also at a particular crossroads in terms of the profession just saying, 'enough'. Which is not quite the same as saying, 'Let's do things differently'. It's back to that sense of exhaustion we were talking about.

Paula: Yes, and a feeling of the government trying to take back control, without really knowing what they're trying to take control of. This fear of, I don't know, progressives taking over again, finding a niche, having their voice heard, you know, it does feel as though sometimes we're being squashed.

Robin: One of the candidates for Boris Johnson's job said yesterday that what she wants is an end to all this 'woke rubbish', so there's a word of warning about one of the battles that lies ahead.

Melissa: John, what's your sense of the future? I framed the question positively but the range of answers has been interesting. Robin believes that there has always been a struggle of perspectives, at any given historical point. Paula's saying we're at a bit of a crisis. Madeleine's an optimist. What do you think?

John: I think it's too early to say. Let me explain that a bit more. I'm not sure crossroads is quite the metaphor that does it. I think the conditions of the pandemic are really significant. What the last two years have done is to open up again the question of what schools are for. And that's precisely Paula's point about an expanded notion of the school's relationship to the community, and the research that Gemma Moss and other colleagues at UCL have done, particularly about primary schools through the pandemic and the extent to which teachers and other staff were reconfiguring the nature of their work to cope with the conditions of the pandemic. This opens up the possibility of a much more progressive view of the relationship between schools and society. But the right are quite clear that they want to close that down as fast as possible and their forces are considerable. It's absolutely right, as Paula has done, to raise questions about the future of teacher education. They are going for teacher education in a way which, in some ways, feels like history repeating itself, this time as farce, but in other ways feels much more serious than the attack through the Centre for Policy Studies in late 1980s, early 90s, in that they are serious about it and they've got a much better worked-out plan of how to completely reconfigure teacher education.

Likewise, I think one of the other things that means this is a critical moment in education is the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the outpouring of emotion, the anger of Black Lives Matter, and the demands for a decolonised curriculum. That opened up a space again in which, what the curriculum is, how it functions, was problematised. It opened up space for debate, for people to be involved, again from

the grassroots. But the right are very clear that that debate needs to be closed down as fast as possible. And we've seen that in relation to, in effect, the two versions of post-pandemic education that are on offer in different schools. There are schools that have worked really hard to fashion a recovery curriculum. And one of the things that I was most heartened by, just over a year ago, when I started being able to visit schools again, was my sense, in school after school, of how colleagues there had worked out how to cope with the pandemic, with no help from above, no help from the centre. But schools had done so in humane and really impressive ways. And that is a reason to be optimistic about the future, the extent to which people have used their own resources collectively to figure out solutions that worked for them.

But the negative side of it is the notion that what schools must do is to catch up and what they must do is to enforce on students an ever-more reductive notion of what catching up might look like, which is coping with the loss of learning, as if learning were reducible to something so straightforwardly linear as is presupposed by this notion of catching up. It isn't as if everyone's lives were on hold in the pandemic, it's that they had different experiences; where schools have constructed recovery curricula, it has been on the basis of taking seriously those experiences and seeking to incorporate them in the formal taught curriculum. So, it's too early to tell because these things are still in play, but I think it would be a real mistake to underestimate the seriousness with which the right are seeking to close things down. If on the one hand teacher education is at risk, the other thing that the DFE are floating in a very serious way is this notion of arms' length building on, in their view, the success at Oak Academy. What that does is to impose a central model on everyone. It's the absolute polar opposite of what goes on in XP for instance.

Melissa: This brings me to my last question. We've talked about governments of all parties in terms of the past. But what would we want from a progressive administration – for example, a future Labour government? Madeleine, I suspect your loud chuckle suggests you think there's something problematic in the question?

Madeleine: Yes, I do, I am. I am very worried that they won't have any ideas and won't do anything, even if they get in.

Melissa: Of course, politicians are always tempted, or pressured, to present their ideas in a somewhat reductive 'education, education, education' kind of way. What could Labour say that was truthful and progressive and that stopped all this right-wing counterattack? Madeleine?

Madeleine: I think that anything can be simplified, and it doesn't mean to say that you're

being dishonest and not being true to the content. But it is about communication and that's what the Tories have been brilliant at. So you could push for a more sophisticated system but you can describe it in simple ways that I think people understand: not all children are the same, they all have different talents and capabilities, we need a system that reflects that. And I think most parents, whatever their walk of life, would go for that, because they've had children and they've all been very different. And there's so much low-hanging fruit that Labour can talk about. Mental health for example, they can say we're going to have a whole proper systematic national survey every year, to find out why our young people have poor well-being and what was the source of it. Which we used to have actually under Labour. I think they ditched that in 2004. So I just think there's things they can say that are actually expressed in quite simple terms, but that doesn't mean to say you're diluting what you're planning to do.

Melissa: Robin, what would you like to see from the Labour frontbench?

Robin: A genuinely open debate about the curriculum – which we tried to encourage through the Cambridge Primary Review when we came up with an aims-driven framework that combined national and local elements – abandoned the neo-elementary divide between the 'basics' and the rest, and insisted on a minimal notion of educational entitlement that required every curriculum domain to be taught to the highest possible standard regardless of how much or how little time was allocated to it.[6] That debate was closed down first by Labour's pre-emptive strike against our framework in the form of the Rose review, and then by Gove appointing a national curriculum 'expert group' that was expected to recommend what he had already decided. The problem is that too many education ministers arrive at DfE with a pretty atavistic view of the curriculum and see no reason to change. They're still stuck in the 19th century. You know, the basics, the three Rs, numeracy having parity with literacy, literacy excluding spoken language (which one minister dismissed as 'idle chatter in class'), the arts clinging on by their fingertips or rejected by another minister as likely to hold pupils back, imperialist history, white male novelists and so on. Gove talked, as they all do, about Arnold and 'the best that has been thought and said' but this, surely, is not what Arnold had in mind.

So we've a real problem of political incapacity or unwillingness to think radically, imaginatively and intelligently about a curriculum that is meaningful and useful for our times, and that for every child is genuinely educative.

The curriculum challenges today are, if anything, even more complex than they were when I started teaching in 1964. The canvas for Plowden was essentially local and to a degree consensual: child, family, community. Now it's culturally contested and global: from diversity, identity, voice and rights to democracy, sustainability and

indeed human survival. Colossal themes, but all demand an educational response of some kind. And I think the debate has to be organised differently. No more expert groups with compliant chairs.

Melissa: Brilliant stuff. John, how would you like to see Labour talk about education?

John: The trouble is, if you say, what would I like them to say, it assumes in some sense business as usual, it assumes the same sort of relationship between the centre and schools. And that's the problem. What I would like to see is a return to a more dialogic relationship between politicians and teachers and parents, a more devolved system, and just as I think schools thrive best when they are dialogic, semi-democratic organisations, where different people's voices are heard and listened to, so the relationship of a centre in terms of the Department for Education, and schools, should represent a dialogic relationship not a command and control one. Listening to teachers a bit would be a nice start.

Melissa: Let's just pretend for a moment that you're on the *Today* programme, John. Are you proposing a 'back to the local authority model' which was of course a patchy system, in many ways.

John: The problem is that there has been a kind of recognition that an atomised system where each school is a separate autonomous business entity doesn't work. So then you have multi-academy trusts that don't have any sort of geographical coherence necessarily. They don't serve a particular community. So do I think a local authority that is based in a particular community, that has an accountability to local people, is a better way of organising education? Yes, I think it is.

Melissa: Paula?

Paula: Pretty much what John has just said to be honest. I want them to come and, before they make any decisions about what it should look like, they need to come and see what schools are like from the inside out. In the communities. Understand them for what they are. See what they're already doing, what they're trying to contend with. And look at the positives as well, take and learn from those too. Yes, we need a national framework, absolutely. Yes, we need a curriculum that is global, national and local. What Robin did was tremendous, but it wasn't recognised for what it was and that's a great shame. Our local MP comes to visit us every half term. He rolls his sleeves up, he gets on the floor with the kids and he asks us what's it like on the inside, and he takes that away with him. I'd like to see more of that.

Melissa: It's interesting. Local MPs tend to be very involved with their local schools but I'm not sure that they feed all their understandings into effective, alternative policy-making.

Madeleine: I just want to say really quickly: Ofsted. I think reforming Ofsted would immediately have the most transformative effect.

Melissa: Yes – could we fine-tune our proposals down to some key offers? Reducing competition, rethinking the curriculum, reforming Ofsted. It is doable isn't it? I mean, having those headline proposals, while still able to reflect the complexity of what's going on.

Madeleine: It could easily be done. You could change Ofsted's rules so that they judge schools in terms of how effectively they're working together as a partnership. That would be one very simple way of forcing collaboration.

Melissa: Also recognising the connection between poverty and education and not reducing the reconnections to a series of simplistic social mobility slogans. Anyway, you can see my inner politician is taking over.

Paula: Maybe remove the word 'judgement' as well.

Melissa: Definitely.

We are at the end. Can I thank you all very much for tackling such complex issues in such a succinct and engaging manner. I am sure *FORUM* readers will learn a great deal from your reflections.

Notes

1. CACE (England), *Children and their Primary Schools,* London, HMSO (the Plowden report), 1967.
2. R. J. Alexander (ed.), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, London, Routledge, 2010.
3. For a discussion of the treatment of the Plowden report by its supporters and detractors, see Alexander, *Education in Spite of Policy*, London, Routledge, 2022, pp13-26.
4. On some of the educational claims and policy interventions of Barber and Adonis see *Education in Spite of Policy*, pp93-5, pp310-12, and pp324-31.

5. H. Timperley, L. Kaiser, J. Halbert, *A framework for transforming learning in schools: innovation and the spiral of inquiry*, Centre for Strategic Education (CSE) Seminar series 234, April 2014, ISBN 978-1-921823-53-4.

6. See Alexander 2020, pp237-78; Alexander, 2022, pp105-22.