

Standing up for education

Cliff Jones

Louise Regan and Tom Unterrainer (eds), *Standing Up For Education*, Spokesman Books, 2016 ISBN 978-0-85124-858-5

Education, Education, Education. Tony Blair pinched his famous triple-charged priority from his Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell. He hired Michael Barber to tell him what it meant: teachers shooting arrows at rapidly moving targets in a changeable crosswind and being blamed when they missed. Michael Gove loved Blair and admired Barber who now influences so much educational policy and practice across the world.

In the 50s and early 60s Secretary of State David Eccles, though suspicious of professionals, was excellent at getting money for education from the Treasury. His Secret Garden was hardly Gove's Blob. Gove wanted neither evidence nor experts (nor resources from the Treasury) and like Blair referred to his deforming changes as 'reforms', a once noble word from our school history books that we associated with the end of slavery, the extension of the franchise, greater fairness, equality and Gladstone's Act of 1870.

Instead of reform we have had the deformity of what I think of as social fracking. To witness education and educators being directed to disconnect from local democracy, betray professional values, promote social division and hurt young people is deeply depressing. As this book reminds us, the problem is international.

Regan and Unterrainer have brought together seventeen people who stand up for education. Combining knowledge and commitment their writings provide perspective, insight, evidence and hope. The first seven letters of professional give us profess. Books like this remind us that we have the

power and the duty to articulate and offer for discussion the public values of professional educators. What do we profess? And are we not also learners integral to society?

All the contributors inform, stimulate and are good to read. The themes and specific subjects include: education as a right; the tensions of inspection; the suppression of creativity; mental health and well-being; the misuse of statistics; social control; and the refusal of government to perceive education as a social good rather than a commodity. They are not confined to one country and we are provided with perspectives beyond the classroom.

The contribution to the book of Jeremy Corbyn is significant because of the disconnection of policy makers from participants in education. For example, educators write many millions of words for masters and doctoral degrees in which they make critical sense of the purposes, concerns, anxieties, interests, joys, fears and values of education. Those professional voices are also a conduit for the voices of learners. I am willing to bet that no politician has read one of those words or the reports evaluating their impact. That has not stopped them making and imposing policy. Gurus and consultants may gain the ears of ministers but participants in education struggle to do so.

The book is part of a fightback that is not confined to schools. Reading, for example, *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses* (2015) reminds us of the inspiring transformational part that further education can play in education despite government indifference. There was a time when it was possible to bring together people from all phases of education within an education authority to exchange experience, expertise, views and arguments. Now the emphasis is upon competition

rather than co-operation. The word 'community' remains in use but hardly in the sense meant by John Dewey. Together with 'reform' it needs to be recaptured. And, clearly, so does 'education'. Dewey was born almost one hundred years before Michael Barber. His vision of education and society was humane, fulfilling and shared by many. Our politicians have, too often, gone instead for Barber's deliverology, which comes with what we might call measurology.

Among those standing up for education are the Symposium for Sustainable Schools <http://www.soss.org.uk/> and Reclaiming Schools whose masthead you may recognise if you go to their website <https://reclaimingschools.org/>. They are not the only ones. My concern is that while anti educational groups take action pro educational groups are insufficiently cohesive. Buying and reading this book will help.

The types and classifications of schools (and colleges and universities) multiply. There remains a mainstream but the number of 'Oxbow Schools' is growing. As we lose social and professional coherence we are held together by inspection in a game of blame.

This is not inspection as contemplated by Lawrence Stenhouse who encouraged educators to see themselves as researchers supported by Her Majesty's Inspectors. He was writing in 1975 at the same time as Denis Lawton was proposing a national curriculum that would emerge from professional discussion of social values.

Seven years later a group of teachers in Australia led by Stephen Kemmis and others put forward the notion of the Socially Critical School that was not confined to preparing young people for society or for an individualistic life. Why prepare to join something of which you are already a part? With a socially critical approach the emphasis moves from teaching as instruction to learning as a collaborative and socially related activity.

We are told to close the gap. What gap? The gap between us and Finland? Why not the gap between rich and poor? It comes with a privilege gap. Today many politicians have convinced themselves that such gaps are irrelevant when it comes to obtaining high scores, which have become the official signifier of a good education. We also have a creativity gap, an enjoyment gap, a health and well-being gap and a gap between policy makers and participants.

The campaign for genuine education needs to extend across all phases. Buy this book. Argue about it. Allow these voices to speak to you. Answer them back. Stand up for education. Don't sit down. And when you encounter a policy maker, never kneel. Shout education, education, education.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.