September 2025 Volume 1 Issue 2

ISSN 2977-8387

THE FEPG REVIEW

Contents:

FEPG Review Editorial team.

EDITORIAL:

We hope you enjoyed a lovely summer, and we welcome you back with our second edition of the FEPG Review. We are delighted by the response to our first edition.

It is a seemingly very challenging time to progress radical ideas for our education system. Fiscal rules and budgets born in the most part by profligacy from the last government, allied to an increasingly rabid right-wing press who see perfectly reasonable and sensible policies like a renewed National Curriculum for all schools as extreme ideological attacks are major factors. There is also a general malaise about mainstream politics and politicians and moving that particular dial is proving difficult. These are significant problems and something I have explored in a piece for the recent Fabian Review: Lessons Learnt: (Summer 2025 Edition) where I argue that despite some very laudable positive first steps by the government more progressive policies will eventually need to be tabled.

As Fabians it is important we explore further far-reaching solutions for the DFE and the Education ministerial team to consider. The excellent articles we are publishing in our second edition do just that. Daniel Kebede explores the current state of the education system and assesses the main improvements that need to be made for the Government to deliver their goals. Graham Donaldson argues in 'Rediscovering Ambition: Avoiding the School Improvement Trap,' that in the drive to improve effectiveness, education policy has had an undue and unhelpful focus on improving metrics without sufficient questioning of the value or the effects of what is being measured. Ian Davies argues that to re-energise political education we need a broad based, conceptually framed, clearly stated, research-based teaching and learning programme. Andy Sprakes explains why designing a curriculum to inspire activism in our students is so important.

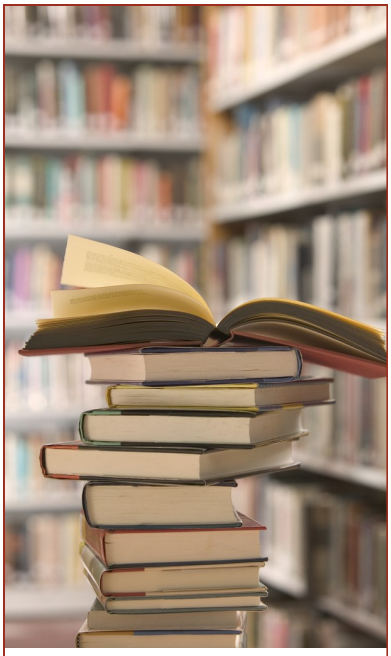
We are delighted, too, to include five educational book reviews in this edition from: Brian Hudson, Brian Matthews, Nikki Booth, Michael Reiss, and James Sloan. We also include our bi-annual newsletter.

We hope you enjoy our second edition of the Fabian Education Policy Group Review.

Chris Harris, Editor.

IN THIS EDITION:

- Participation in the Fabians' Opportunity Mission Summit.
- Inspiring Keynote speakers at our monthly Zoom Meetings.
- Articles by: Daniel Kebede, Graham Donaldson, Ian Davies and Andy Sprakes.
- Reviews by: Brian Hudson, Brian Matthews, Nikki Booth, Michael Reiss and James Sloam.
- AGM notes.



FEPG NEWSLETTER . AUTUMN 2025.

Welcome colleagues old and new to this Autumn 2025 Fabian Education Policy Group newsletter. This edition gathers news and notices that we are sure you will find interesting and useful.

As well as our round up of recent activities, the 'dates for your diary' and highlights section gives a flavour of exciting events that are coming up in the remainder of 2025
This newsletter also contains our regular reminders about how you can share your ideas- whether it's writing a short essay or a blog piece or producing something longer for our new Fabian Education Policy Group Review publication. We really do want to hear from you and can provide a platform for your work.

Here's hoping you had a great summer and are looking forward to the autumn term.

The Progressive tradition in Education– Melissa Benn

Melissa Benn's features, opinion pieces, essays, and reviews have appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Times Educational Supplement, Mslexia, Financial Times, London Review of Books, Schools Week, Women: A Cultural Review, Public Finance, Teach Secondary, New Statesman* and many others.

THE ROUND-UP FROM JANUARY- MARCH.

We held Zoom meetings in January, February, and March.

In January Melissa Benn author, journalist and novelist presented to us. Melissa said her focus would be on the progressive tradition in education, past, present and future. She referred to her article in 'Forum' which warned of the danger of Labour being influenced by the rise of Trump and the Reform Party in UK.

Regarding the past, there is worrying amnesia about what Labour has achieved, e.g. Labour figures today don't mention the introduction of comprehensive schools by their predecessors in the 1960's. In 2013 Gove said, 'progressives have 'betrayed working class children' and suggested Tories have those children at heart. It is not true, but Labour now leans towards the dominant mind-set established by Gove.

Turning to the present, Melissa said it was significant that the entire Labour front bench is state educated. Both Bridget Phillipson and Rachel Reeves are strong supporters of state education, but they seem to be influenced by malign social and legacy media ('The Times', 'Daily Telegraph') who support Gove. There is no sense of commitment to a more liberating education system and streaming is not questioned. All Labour MP's are agreed that Grammar Schools should go but there is no move towards this. Research shows that Academies do not get better results but statements to the contrary are not rebuffed. A powerful right-wing establishment has come to control education during the Tory years which is not sufficiently well challenged at the highest political level.

There was a free flowing and excellent discussion after Melissa's address including the difficulties of managing a more radical agenda with DFE civil servants in situ. Education should be about liberation, human flourishing, a public good.

The Power of Activism in the curriculum– Richard Pountney and Andy Sprakes

.

In February we welcomed guest speakers Richard Pountney and Andy Sprakes, respectively Chair of XP Trust and Chief Academic Officer and co-founder of XP School in Doncaster, who addressed the meeting on the subject of 'The Power of Activism in the Curriculum'.

A visit to the USA was the catalyst for starting work on building an XP School community based on activism, leadership and equity.

The success of the curriculum is measured along three dimensions: beautiful work, character growth and academic progress. By inspiring activism in pupils, they become agents for positive change. Local expeditions deepen learning, make knowledge more powerful, enhances knowledge through purpose, authenticity and creativity. Pupils love coming to school and attendance rates are high. We seek to actively contribute to making a better world - from school, town, country, to protecting our planet, seeking social justice and diversity. We encourage pupils to work hard, be smart, and aim high. An excellent discussion ensued around XP's relationship with Ofsted and the Education team. Andy has written an article for this edition of the review.

Re-energising Political education: Ian Davies.

In March we welcomed our colleague Ian Davies, Professor Emirutus at the Department of Education, University of York, who addressed the meeting on 'Re-energising Political Education.' Ian said he intended to cover principal perspectives, key ideas and initiatives in political education in England since 1975. The interim report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review body states that education plays a crucial role in preparing young people to fulfil their responsibilities in civic and economic life but makes no mention of political education. Ian divided the years 1975 to the present in five periods.

(i) 'Neglect - 1970's (ii) 'Political Literacy' (iii) 'Global Education' (1980's)

(iv) 'Education for Citizenship' (1989 - 1997) (v) 'Citizenship Education' (1997 onwards)

Today, citizenship education comprises knowledge of how UK is governed, the role of law and justice, a commitment to participation through volunteering: a ragbag of incoherent elements. Political education in any explicit form is neglected and implicitly denied.
A clear, straightforward characterisation of the meaning of political education is needed, together with approval of policy makers, and specialist teachers in every school. The curriculum needs contemporary content, public context, and relevant concepts.

There was an excellent discussion around placing political education at the heart of the curriculum. Ian has written an article for this edition of the review.

FEPG's Meetings in 2025

Monday 27th January: **Melissa Benn**

Monday 24th February: **Richard Pountney and Andy Sprakes**-The Power of Activism in the curriculum.

Monday March 31st: **Ian Davies-**Re-energising Political Education.

Monday April 28th: **Valerie Bossman-Quarshie-** SEND provision-audit and next steps.

Monday May 19th: **Graham Donaldson-**The improvement Trap.

Monday 23rd June: **Tony Breslin-**Time for a new language for school improvement?

Monday 29th September**: Mary Bousted-**The Teaching Commission.

Monday 20th October**: Stephen Gorard-** Addressing disadvantage at school: evidence from a range of studies.

Monday 24th November: **Marilyn Leask-**The Mapping Educational Specialist knowHow (MESH)initiative;

.

House of Commons

Seminar:

Finalised date to follow.

FEPG'S NEW CHAIR: BRIAN HUDSON.

We are delighted to say that Brian Hudson who has been responsible for external liaison and guest bookings for FEPG is our new chair. (Please see our AGM report for our vote of thanks to outgoing chair, Brian Matthews.)

Brian is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Sussex and Guest Professor at Karlstad University, Sweden. He was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2004, honorary membership of EERA Network 27 Didactics – Learning and Teaching in 2016 and is a Fellow of the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications. He will be awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Karlstad University in October 2025. Before working in higher education, he was a secondary school teacher of mathematics for fifteen years working in comprehensive schools.

Currently he is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Curriculum Studies. He has edited and written widely for a range of publications and educational books.

SEND Provision– Audit and next steps– Valerie Bossman Quarshie.

New Fabian General Secretary **Joe Dromey** joined us for a discussion in May. It was most fruitful, and we are increasingly linking in with the Fabian society office team

THE ROUND-UP FROM APRIL TO JULY.

In April Valerie Bossmann Quarshie, and classroom teachers Arlette Bibula and Oki Okwebeguna addressed current SEND provision. Valerie said the situation regarding SEND provision was getting worse with children coming from very diverse backgrounds. The Curriculum Review was welcomed, but there are so many constraints: a shortage of specialist teachers, insufficient funding, lack of attention to SEND in initial teacher training. A universal service is required, covering children both in and out of school, to ensure proper support for all.

Arlette Bibula, said she qualified in 2001, and her teacher-training course contained only one week on SEND. The situation is similar now - teachers cannot be expected to address children's needs on this, and they struggle to survive. Non-specialists are expected to cover SEND work. Therapists are sought through advertisements, but no-one replies. In her school there are 107 EHCP's funded by £6k from central government and £5k from the LEA but learning support assistants' cost £30k per pupil.

Oki Okwebeguna, said that in her school some children in the reception class never get to see a specialist. Children arrive and nothing is done to identify their needs, which takes time - some children should not be in a classroom at all. Behaviour can change very quickly to screaming, crying, lying on the floor. You have to think from the top of your head - what do you do?

There was a very interesting discussion regarding changing a fragmented system, training, labelling and definition– don't think SEND but PEND (particular not special) the use of technology for personalised learning, and open schools. Teacher training could encompass a term in a special school.
Three Key areas to improve
1 - invest in mainstream resources; 2 - put more adults in classrooms; 3 - one-to-one attention and training.
4- Smaller classes essential. Agreed.

The Improvement Trap– Graham Donaldson

Graham Donaldson joined us in May who is a former Head of HM Inspectorate of Education Scotland (2002 -2010). His subject was 'The focus on metrics should be replaced by a focus on purpose of schooling in the context of a highly volatile environment .

Our present-day problems arise from James Callaghan's speech in 1976 in which he said that education is too important to leave to the professionals - they should put into practice what government demands, which has led to a focus on 'delivery' accompanied by detailed testing and metrics. Metrics has become purpose with a focus on the margin - marginal gains, at considerable cost, are considered 'success'. There is now, post-pandemic, uncertainty about what schools are for with a fast pace of social and economic change. Assumptions underpinning our education system - what is learned in schools, how, and what for - are breaking down.

The curriculum needs to be re-imagined to relate to a world that children will live in. AI is a reality - what is the role of the teacher in this context? Graham led an insightful discussion about what a reimagined curriculum might look like. He has written an article for this edition on this topic.

Tony Breslin—A new Language for school improvement.

In June we welcomed Tony Breslin, Honorary Professor in Centre for Teachers and Teaching Research at UCL IoE, who spoke on 'Time for a New Language for School Improvement?'. Tony said that at the moment there is a deficit analysis of education. A completely new methodology is needed to turn things round with a focus on classroom practice.

The wrong targets have been chosen, measures are too narrow, and the social curriculum and vocational learning have been marginalised; we degrade vocational learning by throwing 'naughty' children into it. The covid lockdown accentuated problems but did not cause them - it brought them to our attention. A current myth is that there is an 'attendance crisis'; no, the problem is with educational engagement. The idea that if we get an extra 5% of children back into school then all will be well is wrong - some children may need something different to what is offered now. Lockdown showed how much children could learn when not in school; a drop in learning did not happen, most children caught up rapidly. But schools are vital for social development, and we must see this as just as important as academic learning.

Tony suggests we find ways of judging school success against three measures: (i) academic attainment; (ii) curricular experience, including enjoyment; (iii) personal development. A new language is needed, moving away from control, monitoring, compliance and inspection, and towards creativity and quality assurance.

There followed an excellent discussion around the impact of school performance tables, the joy of learning and the impact of the ideas presented by Tony on school improvement on the current government.

Remaining Zoom Meetings in 2025

Monday 29th September:

Mary Bousted-Why is there a teaching supply crisis and what can be done about it?

Monday 20th October:

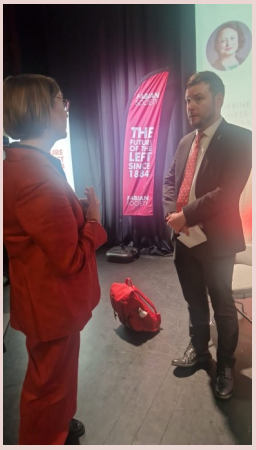
Stephen Gorard- Addressing disadvantage at school: evidence from a range of studies

Monday 24th November:

Marilyn Leask-The Mapping Educational Specialist knowHow (MESH) initiative;.

Pictures From The Fabians

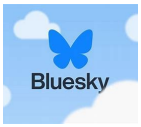
Mission Opportunity Summit.



SOCIAL MEDIA AND PROMOTION

We continue to post promotional material for our seminars and zoom meetings on X. However, like many progressive groups we are mindful of the way this social media company is promoting values that are at odds with our core principles.

We have therefore set up a Bluesky social media account where we are migrating posts apart from essential information. Our handles are detailed on the back page of the review.



WEBSITE and BLOGSITE

Our website continues to have good analytics and updated content. Please log onto the members' area with your email for recent minutes, policy documents and other key responses. Home | Fabian Education Pol

FABIANS MISSION OPPORTUNITY SUMMIT

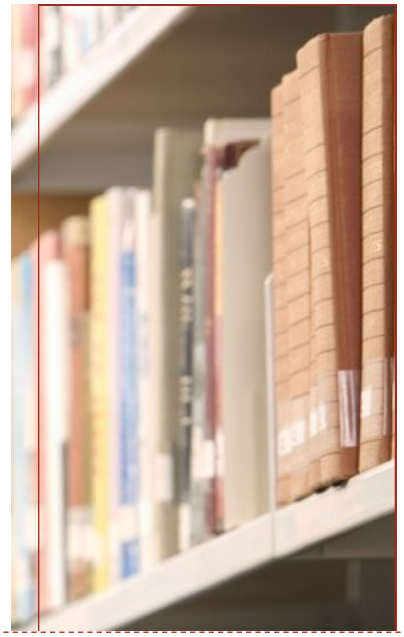
The purpose of the Conference was to look at one of the five markers the Government had laid down relating to its aims, namely 'Opportunities'. It is disappointing that none of the five are directly on education. Hence this conference was not specifically on education but was relevant to education. Topics included Lifelong Learning: Making education, skills support and training work at every age, and Mind the Skills Gap: Putting further education and apprenticeships at the heart of growth. There was also Schools Under Strain: Staffing, Standards and Support that was chaired by Deb Outhwaite of the Fabian Education Policy Group.

There were many good speakers at the conference who had significant government roles. It is positive for the Fabians that such speakers were willing to take part. These included Stephen Morgan MP – Minister for Early Education, Helen Hayes, Chair of Education Select Committee, and FE Minister, Jackie Smith. There was also a presentation by Catherine McKinnell MP – Minister of State for School Standards. She closely followed a traditional view of schooling and what 'standards' meant. It illustrated the gap between what the government are doing, and what the conference covered.

Overall, it was a very interesting conference that we were pleased was arranged, and that we were invited to participate in. The conference was well organized and was very welcome as education had not been much in evidence as a topic with the central Fabians .

OUR NEXT HOUSE OF COMMONS SEMINAR

Our next House of Commons seminar is set for later in the year or early in the new Year. The topic will be SEND and Inclusion practice. It promises to be a very interesting evening with key guest speakers and excellent opportunities for discussion where participants can raise questions from the floor. We will promote this event on Eventbrite as soon as plans are finalised.



HOUSE OF COMMONS CURRICULUM REPORT

FEPG Curriculum working group convener Professor Brian Hudson and colleagues responded to the call for evidence in relation to the recent government review of the existing national curriculum and statutory assessment system in England. This is to ensure it is fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people.

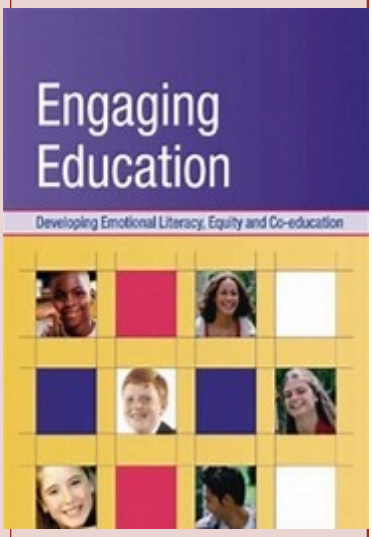
The team produced a very detailed, carefully argued and reasoned response that convincingly explains the fact that the language currently used to describe the English National Curriculum is too narrowly focused on knowledge.

This was followed by a highly successful House of Commons seminar last November with Mick Walters, Tony Breslin Sarah Younie, Brian Matthews and Valerie Bossmann Quarshie as guest speakers.

The report of this seminar is included in this edition

'The Fabians Mission Conference was a very interesting day that we were pleased to participate in' Brian Matthews.

THE FEPG AGM: VOTE OF THANKS TO BRIAN MATTHEWS.



At our AGM Brian Matthews stepped down from the chair role after nine years at the helm. Brian Hudson our new chair delivered a vote of thanks

'I would like to propose a vote of thanks to Brian Matthews as the outgoing chair.

We wish to record our sincere gratitude to you Brian, for your dedication and leadership of the group these previous years. We are where we are now as the FEPG because of your commitment and work.

You have led the group through a very difficult time because of the pandemic. Without any doubt it has become much stronger because of the regular monthly online meetings over recent years.

You should be proud of everything that has been achieved under your leadership and of the effective succession planning that you have put in place for the future.

Thank you from us all and we look forward to continuing to work with you as a member of the FEPG Committee.'

This vote of thanks was strongly supported by all members.

Brian responded by saying 'I feel sad stepping down after 9 years, but I am confident that the FEPG is in a strong position with a great team to take over and develop the group. I feel things are in place to make a leap forward. The publications are gathering momentum. The website and communications are brilliant. The links with the central Fabians are improving.' A full list of the elected committee appears at the back of this review.

All Children should be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. How to make this a reality.

Daniel Kebede

Daniel Kebede is general secretary of the National Education Union.

Abstract

The Government have committed to giving all young people the opportunity to fulfil their potential, an admirable goal but how far away from this are we currently? This article looks at the current state of the education system, both for pupils and for staff, and assesses the main improvements that need to be made for the Government to get towards delivering on this goal.

I want young people to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, wherever they're from, whatever their background. That's what really matters to me." (Sylvester, 2025) These were the words of Rachel Reeves just a few days before she delivered her recent comprehensive spending review. Words expressing a sentiment that I think all of those with an interest in education would be supportive of. It cannot be dismissed how positive it is to have a Labour Chancellor in power with such a clear focus on the education sector and a commitment to improving it.

I want to analyse these words further though, to use this goal as a benchmark to look at how well our education system is delivering right now and what more needs to be done to get us to this point. As those who attended my recent speech to the policy group will attest, I do think there are many problems amounting to a very real crisis in our schools currently. But I am also hopeful for the future, I think there is a real chance for a change and an opportunity to make this goal a reality. It is something that I am committed to campaigning and working towards as General Secretary of the National Education Union and so I want to set out my vision for how this could be.

Let us start with the empirical evidence. Data shows that the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils has grown since the pandemic for all phases of schooling (Hobbs, 2021). Shockingly, the gap for 11-16-year-olds is the widest it has been in a decade (Education Policy Institute, 2024), and for those finishing primary school, it is wider than it was a decade ago (Education Policy Institute, 2023).

All of this can be confirmed by experience. It should be no shock that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are being held back when the support that should be available to them is being withdrawn. When over 800 libraries and two thirds of council-run youth centres have closed since 2010 (Unison, 2024).

One of the obvious solutions to getting to the bottom of this issue is to follow the money, and it can provide us with certain answers in this situation. Nowhere is the impact of more than a decade of Tory rule more felt than the deep-rooted underfunding of education. 70 per cent of schools in England have less funding in real terms than in 2010.

The impact of this is obvious, with cuts to funding leading us to have the highest class sizes in Europe (OECD, 2024) and over a million children taught in classes of 30 or more (Department for Education, 2025). At the same time, vital SEND provision is insufficient, leaving thousands of children with special educational needs and disabilities without appropriate support.

It is striking that the comment at the beginning of this article was given just before the spending review, a clear indication that schools would surely be getting extra investment over the next few years. To some extent this was correct. The Chancellor did announce that the Core Schools Budget would be rising by over £4.5 billion over the spending review period, and that there would be an extra £2 billion investment in capital investment.

However, the actual impact of this is likely to be very limited, and must be seen in the context that the previous Government had baked in significant cuts over the next few years.

Due to the crisis in SEND funding, which has seen numerous local authorities pushed to the brink financially as they struggle to cope with rising costs, it is likely that a significant chunk of this investment is to be swallowed up by high needs funding.

In addition, the possibility for any real terms growth in school funding relies upon very conservative estimates for inflation over the coming years and a very significant predicted drop in pupil numbers. We have all seen how volatile inflation can be over the last few years, and it is still quite a bit above the 2 per cent figure the Government are relying on it dropping to.

Our analysis predicts that in reality there will not be any real terms growth in school funding over the next few years. Instead the extra investment will allay a steep decline that was on the way, and keep per pupil funding at about the level it was in 2024/25 – still significantly below 2010 levels.

This is also taking into account the cuts that schools will face next year, with the Government still refusing to fully fund pay awards for teachers next year. This will result in the vast majority of schools facing cuts, 75 per cent of primary schools and 92 per cent of secondary schools. In total there will be a £630 million real terms cut to school funding, equivalent of salaries for 12,400 school staff – 5,700 teachers and 6,700 support staff.

My view might be deemed simplistic, especially in times of Government cost-cutting schemes and the open arms senior ministers are welcoming big tech and AI into the classroom with, but I do not believe that you can give all young people the opportunity to fulfil their potential whilst continuing to cut funding. It is essential that we get funding back to at least 2010 levels in real terms. This will not be an easy task, especially in the current economic climate, but the extra money provided at the spending review is simply not enough. Back in 2010 we were spending 5 per cent of GDP on education. That figure is now down to just 3.9 per cent – a simply indefensible drop. The Government must commit to returning school funding to these levels.

The Department for Education has for a few years identified that the most impactful thing on a child's education is having a good teacher in the classroom. I'm sure that all of those of us who have worked in schools would agree this is a correct assessment and very welcome.

The question then moves on to consider what we need to do to get the best teachers possible in our classrooms. This must start with looking at why teaching has become such an unattractive career.

There is still a huge recruitment and retention crisis in teaching. One in four teachers left the profession within three years, and one in three within five years. More teachers left the profession for reasons other than retirement between November 2022 and November 2023 than at any other time on record (Department for Education, 2024). Recruitment against target has dropped to catastrophic levels in secondary and continues to be below target for primary. Almost all secondary subjects fail to hit their recruitment targets.

These are damning statistics that show how far we have got to go. With recruitment targets being missed by huge amounts, teacher shortages across the curriculum and experienced teachers leaving the profession in droves, the Government must act quickly to restore the pay lost and repair the competitive position of teaching against comparable graduate professions.

The huge real terms cuts to teacher and school leader pay since 2010 are clearly the key factor in the damage done to the competitive position of teaching. Teacher and school leader pay was cut by around 25 per cent between 2010 and 2023 – much bigger real terms cuts than were seen in comparable graduate professions.

We have seen some limited progress in this area, with the Government accepting the recommendations of the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) in the last two years to provide pay rises of 5.5 per cent and 4 per cent. However, this must only be seen as a first step towards restoring the value and competitiveness of teacher pay. Teaching is a graduate profession, but it is becoming harder to convince a graduate that they should go into teaching when they could easily be earning substantially more in other fields and have more possibilities for flexible working. These are just the realities that we have to face.

The situation is even more dire for our support staff members. Many are choosing to start new jobs in retail, where the pay is now better, and the working conditions and expectations are more tolerable. A reverse of the situation a decade or more ago.

It used to be common to see a teaching assistant for every classroom in a school. Now more and more of their time is being taken up with 1-1 support for children with SEND. While this work is crucial it means that more children are missing out on the support they could be getting from having a teaching assistant in the classroom with them.

Pay restoration for both teachers and support staff must form a key part of any ambitions to upgrade our education system and provide the best possible education for all children. If it is our educators who really do have the biggest impact on our children's achievements, it only makes sense to invest in them.

Despite this, pay is not the only reason that we are seeing thousands of teachers leave the profession every year. Workload remains a major problem for teachers. Our members told us it is commonplace for them to work evenings (62 per cent), weekends (55 per cent), and a third of respondents frequently cancel plans with family and friends in order to get on top of their workload (36 per cent) (National Education Union, 2025).

All of this is causing greater stress that is leading more and more teachers to make the decision that the job is no longer worth it. I regularly speak to members who would love to keep teaching, but either they cannot balance it with the family life that they want or the job has just become too stressful that they want to get out of the classroom. Almost two thirds of teachers believe that stress affects them more than 60 per cent of the time (National Education Union, 2025).

Educators do not mind working hard when that work is having a positive impact on their students – preparing and delivering exciting lessons. But so often, teachers tell me, the bulk of their work is about ticking boxes and 'evidencing' what they have done for Ofsted. The inspectorate is one of the major drivers of workplace stress for teachers and an Ofsted inspection – or the prospect of an Ofsted inspection - adds to the working hours of 78 per cent of teachers (National Education Union, 2025).

This is a problem that the Government do recognise and have tried to change, particularly through the proposed new grading system. Unfortunately these attempts have not all been positive - we are concerned that inspectors categorising ten areas into five boxes in two days will exacerbate existing issues of inconsistency and unreliability. Ofsted judgements currently are telling us more about the measure of disadvantage in a school than anything else.

In February, Ofsted launched a consultation outlining a new approach to inspect education in schools and other settings, including early years and further education and skills. Some would take this as a positive sign, showing that times are changing and that the body is keen to engage with the profession to implement positive change. However, since the announcement of Ofsted's consultation, and despite the sector's best efforts, there has been little meaningful attempt at resolving ongoing systemic issues that cause catastrophic harm to education staff. Ofsted's proposed reforms will make the new system even less reliable, and the lack of any plan to create an independent, robust complaints and appeals process for schools is a huge concern.

Ofsted has completely lost the trust of the profession. There is no faith that the inspectorate will improve when they are still being allowed to mark their own homework, despite consistent evidence of serious failings and no clear marker of success in improving school performance. What we need to see is transformational change, which must begin with abolishing Ofsted in its current form. That does not mean that we are anti-inspection as a union, but that the system is so broken it is now necessary to start again from scratch so that we could imagine what a supportive, cooperative and successful inspectorate could look like.

The other significant driver of workload and workplace stress for educators is the current assessment system. Statutory assessments are our way of measuring children's progress against agreed criteria. Proponents say they provide educators, children and policy makers with valuable data about their attainment and inform what interventions and practices are working. Too often they make young people anxious, place great stress on educators, and encourage narrowing the curriculum. 82 per cent of teachers said pupils were distressed by SATs tests in 2023 and only 5 per cent of school leaders think SATs tests accurately reflect academic achievement (More Than A Score, 2024).

Similarly, 63 per cent of 15-18-year-olds said they struggled to cope in the lead up to and during GCSE and A Level exams, with 15 per cent stopping going to school and 13 per cent having suicidal thoughts as a result (Young Minds and MTAS, 2024).

The announcement of the Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) presented a real opportunity for change and for reversing some of the most worrying trends of the last decade - curriculum narrowing, ever more burdensome assessments, and eroding teacher professionalism. We have consistently engaged with the Government during this process and believed that positive outcomes were a realistic possibility. Our hopes were raised when the interim report acknowledged that the curriculum is too narrow and too full. Of course, this is an indisputable fact when primary teaching hours are dominated by English and maths. Out of 20 and a half teaching hours reported weekly on average, 12 hours were taken up by English or maths, or 58 per cent of the total hours taught (National Education Union, 2025).

This rises even further when looking at Year 6 in isolation, the year in which students sit SATs tests, where an extra 14 minutes of English per week and 20 extra minutes of maths are taught compared to the average across all year groups. This reflects the additional focus that SATs demands teachers put on these two subjects in order to achieve the best results for the school.

However, the general direction of travel for both the review and wider Government policy in this area does not seem to be going far enough. It has become clear that the Government launched the review without a clear articulation of a vision for what education should be or its purpose, leaving the space open for a continuation of more of the same. Moreover, revelations that written evidence to the commission is being analysed by AI and commitments made to retain statutory primary assessments before the consultation period had even closed has seriously undermined any trust in the process or that this would genuinely be an open process to radically change our assessment system.

There are clear changes that fundamentally need to be made if we are to reverse the negative developments of the last decade. To deliver on an education system that is engaging, inclusive and relevant, and one that rises to the challenges of disengagement, poor attendance, and worsening behaviour, the government must begin by scrapping the Ebacc, develop assessment methods diverse enough to develop the breadth of skills needed to allow students to show what they can do and ensure that the curriculum is representative of all communities.

As was pointed out by Dr Marlon Lee Moncrieffe in a wonderful essay written for our Thinking Beyond the Box collection of "The statutory aims and contents of the national curriculum for teaching and learning about the history of 'nation building' and 'national identity' speak only about white people arriving and settling on the British Isles. All other non-white people of ethnic groups in their histories of mass migration and contribution to nation building and the making of national identity are absent from the curriculum." (Moncrieffe, 2025)

The success of the review will be judged partly on the ability to change this. In a changing environment young people need to be engaged in an education system that reflects them. We require a teaching

philosophy that taps into the diverse range of knowledge and experiences of pupils as a means of making classrooms and curricula inclusive, and which draw on home and school cultures in a culturally responsive pedagogy.

All reforms that are made to the assessment and curriculum must have those who will be delivering this content at the centre, as without meaningful engagement with the profession, these reforms will simply fall flat.

One clear area of progress recently has been the Government's commitment to extending free school meals to all children whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit. The impact of this cannot be overstated: over 500,000 children will now be receiving a hot, nutritious meal every day that they are at school. When we are still in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis this will be essential to ensuring that more children do not go hungry.

Unfortunately this is still not enough to eradicate child poverty from our society – a goal that is entirely realistic. In 2023, over 3.7 million children experienced food insecurity (School Food Matters, 2023) and one in five schools in England is now running a food hub or pantry to support pupils and their families (Gaunt, 2024). These are numbers that should shock us all. Every educator will know from experience that when children are hungry they are unable to learn, and so it is only logical that by not tackling child poverty we are not allowing those children living in poverty to achieve their potential.

Expanding the offering of free school meals to make it universal, so that no child misses out on the healthy meal they need because of circumstances beyond their control, would be a simple but effective method to tackle this.

In its child poverty strategy, to be published later this year, the government must also be bolder in its actions to tackle the effects of 14 years of Tory austerity and to support working families, and scrap the two-child benefit cap, which the Resolution Foundation estimates would lift 471,000 children out of poverty (Resolution Foundation, 2025). Disadvantage has a huge effect on children's achievement in school and a Labour government should be doing a lot more to support schools to close this gap.

Children and young people's lives are becoming dominated by social media. Excessive reliance on social media, can interfere with several of children's basic rights. They may miss out on the right to play, to rest, and to take part in creative and physical activities that are crucial for their development. The average UK 12-year-old spends 21 hours a week – equivalent to a part-time job – on their smartphone. One in four children and young people use their smartphones in a way that is consistent with a behavioural addiction (Sohn, 2019).

The prevalence of safeguarding issues that emerge online is having a major impact in schools. It is creating additional workload for teachers who are having to deal with issues that are taking place outside of the school gates and because they are having to address extreme views that young people are holding because of content they have seen online. This increase in extreme racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic views are interrelated as ideas from fringe corners of the internet bleed onto mainstream spaces.

We must hold big tech accountable for the harm that they are causing by ensuring that they make the processes around how algorithms are constructed transparent, implement sufficient reporting procedures so that misinformation and offensive content is removed quickly and have proper protections in place for data protection. We need to ensure mandatory content reporting procedures are obvious and easy for young people to access and demonstrate what will happen after a report is made. This is a clear public health issue that requires state intervention to solve. We cannot trust social media giants to dictate the content that children and young people see online.

All of these are necessary steps that must be taken if we are to start to build an education system that truly does deliver for every child across the length and breadth of the country and allows them to achieve their potential.

We must also consider that education is about more than just helping a child to fulfil their potential. Of course, the economic benefits of a well-educated society are important, but there is something much more fundamental about the necessity of an education system that can improve the lives of all, not just their earning potential. I think that this is even more crucial in the fractured global climate that we are entering in the second quarter of this century.

Both domestically, where anti-immigrant rhetoric, blatant misogyny and rising homophobia are all fuelling the progress of the far right at the ballot box and on our streets. But also internationally, where the uncertainty of our future has seen a return to militarism and a total disregard for our planet's future as climate pledges are routinely scrapped or downgraded.

It is easy to feel hopeless in this climate. That despite the successes of social democratic parties in some crucial elections, not least the Labour Government's landslide victory little more than a year ago, we are collectively pushing against a force much stronger. This is where I believe that education is the answer.

So I would argue that while agreeing with the sentiment of the Chancellor's statement, there is a much more fundamental purpose to the reforms that I have proposed above. They are about delivering an education system that best matches the needs of every child, that equips them with the skills they need to grow mentally and socially. Ultimately this is about using education as one of the strongest tools that the Government has in its arsenal to fix the social problems of the day. These might sound like lofty ambitions, but I think that in these times of great challenges it is only right for us to be ambitious.

Bibliography

Department for Education. (2024). *School workforce in England*. Retrieved from https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england/2023

Department for Education. (2025). *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Retrieved from https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25

Education Policy Institute. (2023). Annual Report.

Education Policy Institute. (2024). Social Mobility and Vulnerable Learners Annual Report 2024.

Gaunt, C. (2024, April 17). One in five schools on the 'frontline' of supporting families with food poverty. Retrieved from https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/news/one-in-five-schools-on-the-frontline-of-supporting-families-with-food-poverty/

Hobbs, A. &. (2021). Inequalities in education and attainment gaps. *Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology*.

Moncrieffe, D. M. (2025). Cultural diversity in the national curriculum to prevent racism. *Thinking Beyond the Box*.

More Than A Score. (2024). *School Leaders Vs SATs*.

National Education Union. (2025). *Primary curriculum survey*.

National Education Union. (2025, April 16). *State of education: Ofsted*. Retrieved from https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/state-education-ofsted

National Education Union. (2025, April 14). *State of education: teacher stress and wellbeing*. Retrieved from https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/state-education-teacher-stress-and-wellbeing

OECD. (2024). *Education at a Glance*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024_5ea68448.html

Resolution Foundation. (2025). *Limited ambition?*

School Food Matters. (2023, March 2). Child food poverty doubles, voters want more free school meals. Retrieved from https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/news-views/news/child-food-poverty-doubles-voters-want-more-free-school-meals

Sohn, S. R. (2019). Prevalence of problematic smartphone usage and associated mental health outcomes amongst children and young people: a systematic review, meta-analysis and GRADE of the evidence. *BMC Psychiatry, 19*.

Sylvester, R. (2025, June 7). Rachel Reeves: I did well at school but I'm here for the girls who didn't. *Observer*. Retrieved from https://observer.co.uk/news/national/article/rachel-reeves-i-did-well-at-school-but-im-here-for-the-girls-who-didnt

Unison. (2024, June 15). Closure of more than a thousand youth centres could have lasting impact on society. Retrieved from https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2024/06/closure-of-more-than-a-thousand-youth-centres-could-have-lasting-impact-on-society/

Young Minds and MTAS. (2024). *Suicidal thoughts and self-harm*.

Biography

Daniel Kebede has been general secretary of the National Education Union since 2023. He is a former primary school teacher and rep in North Tyneside. Daniel has previously served on the NEU (and formerly NUT) National Executive, and was elected Senior Vice President of the Union in 2020 and National President in 2021. He has represented the NEU on platforms in the UK and abroad and in 2017 was awarded the national Blair Peach Award for outstanding contribution to anti-racist work.

Daniel Kebede

DANIEL.KEBEDE@neu.org.uk

Rediscovering ambition; avoiding the School Improvement trap.

Graham Donaldson

Graham Donaldson CB is an honorary professor at the University of Glasgow .

.

Abstract

'Rediscovering Ambition: Avoiding the School Improvement Trap', argues that in a drive to improve effectiveness, education policy had an undue and unhelpful focus on improving metrics without sufficient questioning of the value or the unintended effects of what is being measured. It suggests that this limited vision is already underestimating the impact of global turbulence and social upheaval for the curriculum. It goes on to argue that the digital revolution will fundamentally change the nature of schooling and that education policy is failing to respond to the urgency and depth of this challenge. It calls for an immediate reimagining of the purposes of school education and suggests a more imaginative and inclusive approach to reform.

Over the last fifty years school education has moved from the periphery of political debate to become one of the central tests of a government's success. That increased political focus on education has contributed to tangible improvements in aspects of the learning of many, but not all, young people. However, in the search for simple measures of value, it has also undermined breadth in the curriculum and failed to address the complexity of teaching and learning processes. Current social, economic and geopolitical turbulence and the pervasive impact of the digital revolution demand a more ambitious approach to education policy. There is now a compelling and urgent need to go beyond incremental improvement and address fundamental questions about how school education can remain relevant and engaging in what seems likely to be a world characterised by rapid and profound change.

In many ways, James Callaghan's fabled 1976 Ruskin College speech signalled the start of a growing loss of confidence in the teaching profession's willingness or ability to meet government expectations. Ministerial attention has progressively moved from securing the resources to extend education across the population to active engagement in both the what and the how of schooling. The resultant political emphasis on effectiveness and delivery has narrowed the focus of what it means to be educated while often overplaying their impact on real improvement.

An undue stress on performance metrics has redefined school education as serving the transactional purpose of performing well in tests and examinations at the expense of breadth of experience and an intrinsic motivation to learn. This pursuit of effectiveness has inhibited necessary questioning of the value of what is being measured

The politics of education has become about proof of improvement wherein marginal shifts in metrics are lauded or decried depending on your political standpoint. At the same time, our young people need and deserve an educational experience that is fulfilling and stimulating, that instils an intrinsic desire to learn, that challenges them to engage with complexity and that allows them to develop the knowledge, ethics, values and dispositions that will drive them as individuals and as citizens. Many schools already subscribe to these broader purposes, but for too many young people their school experience fails to equip them to flourish in an increasingly uncertain and complex world.

Even more worryingly, a continuing emphasis on narrow performance measures now risks diverting education policy from addressing fundamental new challenges. Immediate issues include growing concerns about absence and behaviour in our schools as well as longstanding concerns about the negative impact of disadvantage on school success. Economic, social and geopolitical turbulence affects how our young people feel about their lives now and in the future. In addition, there is concern and uncertainty about the direct implications of artificial intelligence for society, the economy and even democracy itself. The disruptive but potentially liberating impact of the digital revolution is happening at a pace that outstrips established approaches to policy development and change management.

Governments can take some steps to mitigate potential harms arising from these challenges, but the medium to longer term health of our society, economy and democracy will lie with the young people who are now in our school systems. Their school experience must equip them to engage confidently and creatively with that future. This will require a fundamental examination of the purpose and nature of school education. We need to be much more ambitious and bolder if education is to fulfil its vital role in meeting the challenges of our collective futures.

If we are to break out of a narrow focus on effectiveness, we need to reconceptualise the purpose of schooling. The knowledge, skills, values and dispositions that future generations will need will not be the same as those that have hitherto been taken almost as read. That will require a willingness to challenge longstanding assumptions about education that have underpinned policy and practice since their introduction in the Victorian era of school education for all. We need to develop a curriculum that relates directly to emerging economic, social and geopolitical realities.

Hitherto, we have assumed that the school determines when, what and how a child will learn. That is no longer the case. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) together with other significant digital developments can create opportunities for more engaging and tailored teaching and more independent learning. These will increasingly provide an alternative source of learning largely or even completely independent of the school. Although access to high-quality AI could help to combat inequity based on young people's circumstances, it could equally significantly widen such disparities if access is uneven. Schools must therefore be very clear about their unique and inescapable contribution to individual and societal success and wellbeing.

Policy has largely assumed that the central purpose of school education is the acquisition of subject knowledge and that performance in tests and examinations is the main test of success. In the current context it is essential to challenge these assumptions. It seems likely that traditional subjects will remain at the heart of the curriculum, but they need to serve much broader purposes than simply demonstrating mastery of subject knowledge.

The ability to apply knowledge creatively and to think critically, including by using the potential of AI, are already vital but will be even more essential attributes for future generations. In particular, oracy, digital literacy The ability to apply knowledge creatively and to think critically, including by using the potential of AI, are already vital but will be even more essential attributes for future generations. In particular, oracy, digital literacy and high levels of interpersonal skills will be vital for the future economy.

Our young people will need to be skilled and confident in these skills if they are to compete in an increasingly competitive workforce. We need to be clear about what it means to be educated in a world where there are digital answers to almost any question.

Among the key challenges facing society is the threat to democratic values posed by social media that often privileges belief or assertion over fact. Citizenship is taking on new meanings in the digital age. Questions about the place of citizenship have ebbed and flowed in debate about the curriculum for many decades. By and large the conclusions have been to recognise its potential importance while falling short of creating the space for it to take its place alongside traditional subjects. A curriculum that focuses too heavily on the acquisition of subject knowledge leaves little space for young people to develop the insights, values and ethical stances that must be the hallmark of citizenship in a liberal democracy.

The different jurisdictions across the United Kingdom have each adopted their own approaches to citizenship. In England, citizenship education is a statutory requirement at key stages three and four but not for academies and free schools. In the other countries, there is an overt commitment to citizenship through, for example, responsible citizenship as one of four fundamental capacities in Scotland or ethical and informed citizenship as one of Wales's four curriculum purposes. In Northern Ireland, citizenship education is part of the statutory curriculum for post-primary schools and delivered through an area called Local and Global Citizenship. While there is a welcome and explicit recognition of the importance of citizenship in all four countries, the reality is that it can be relegated to the fringes of the curriculum and its very existence can be left to chance.

Whatever the current arrangements, there is a need to recognise the pivotal role that schools can play in helping young people to engage with the complexities of the emerging world. We have, particularly since the implosion of the Soviet Union, been complacent about the need to constantly reaffirm our commitment to liberal democracy. Schools are the single most important place where young people can develop the values and understanding necessary for a healthy democracy.

Of course, experience tells us that any attempt to reform schools is fraught with difficulty, not least in the challenge that rethinking practice poses for educators at all levels. Our educational cultures and related infrastructure are built on assumptions that may no longer apply. Reform has too often failed to engage teachers directly in ways that secure their direct involvement and recognise the value of their insights and expertise. Given the radical nature of what is needed, we need to involve a re-imagined teaching profession directly in the policy process and recognise the full implications of asking them to realise educational purposes that may challenge their sense of professional identity. We also need to harness the potential of AI to relieve teachers of mundane tasks and allow much greater face-to-face interaction with young people. The essence of schools lies in being a community of learners and educators dedicated to providing a safe and stimulating environment in which young people develop and learn successfully, safely and enjoyably.

.

We also need an approach to accountability, including inspection, that reflects the complexity of the educational process. Current accountability mechanisms and measures have been central to the drive for effectiveness. Improvement in performance measures including the OECD's Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) and inspection gradings have been seen as the measure of value.

The result has been to create a kind of improvement trap wherein improving metrics becomes the arbiter of value without sufficient questioning of the worth of what is being measured and of the unintended consequences of such an approach. Many young people can be left behind as schools respond to pressure to improve overall figures; at its worst young people can come to serve the reputation of a school rather than the school serving the needs of all of its pupils. Equally, teachers can become frustrated as their professional expertise seems to be undervalued. In a world in constant flux, we need a much more flexible approach to improvement and change. That suggests an approach to accountability that is based more on a 'trust and verify' approach: a culture of shared responsibility within which evidence is used to reflect on purpose and to drive related improvement rather than simply to judge performance.

The current scope and pace of change poses challenges to longstanding approaches to both the policy process and professional practice. Education policy is rightly highly contested and ultimately government must set the direction and take responsibility for the result. However, the decision-making process needs to be better informed about the realities of school cultures and the wider experience of young people if we are to avoid slipping back into a new, simplistic improvement trap. We need an approach to policy making that balances the national and the local and that engages educational professionals much more meaningfully in setting the policy agenda. Clarity about purpose lies at the heart of successful policy. Equally, purpose needs to be supported and preferably co-owned by those who will make it reality.

Extraordinary times require extraordinary responses. In retrospect, history may view the period since the second world war as, a time of episodic reform of school education that barely touched accepted assumptions about why, how and what children should learn. However, we now need to challenge these assumptions and answer fundamental, difficult questions about how education can best serve young people for a very different future. Schools will undoubtedly change significantly, no matter what governments do. The question for all involved in policy is how to shape that change proactively and positively. The alternative is that education and our collective futures are left vulnerable to the vagaries of chance.

Graham Donaldson CB

A former teacher, Graham Donaldson headed Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) from 2002 -10. As chief professional advisor to successive Scottish Ministers on education, he took a leading role in education reform. Following retirement from HMIE, his reports 'Teaching Scotland's Future' (2011) and 'Successful Futures' (2015) led to major reform programmes in Scotland and Wales respectively. He has also undertaken an independent review of the education inspectorate in Wales (A Learning Inspectorate). During this period, he worked internationally, including as a member of OECD reviews of Australian, Portuguese, Swedish and Japanese education. Graham is an honorary professor at the University of Glasgow and advisor on educational reform to the Minister for Education and Skills in Wales and to the First Minister of Scotland.

Re-energising political education

Ian Davies

Dr. Ian Davies is Professor Emeritus, University of York, UK.

Abstract

This article has four main sections. Firstly, I briefly refer to relevant contextual matters including the official 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review (https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/curriculum-and-assessment-review) and the influences and experiences that have helped me to develop my perspectives on political education. Secondly, I describe and comment upon the key ideas and initiatives in political education in England since 1975. Thirdly, I refer to a number of "friendly arguments" (Crick 2000, p.123) that are currently taking place about the nature and purpose of political education. Fourthly and finally I refer to some possible futures, making a number of recommendations for action.

I will argue that in order to re-energise political education we need a broad based, conceptually framed, clearly stated, research-based teaching and learning programme that is reflective of a dynamic partnership-based consensus.

A brief reference to contextual matters

In 2024 the recently elected Labour government announced that there would be a Curriculum and Assessment Review. It would "ensure that the curriculum appropriately balances ambition, excellence, relevance, flexibility and inclusivity for all children and young people" (https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/curriculum-and-assessment-review#terms-of-reference). For those interested in political education, there are several very encouraging comments in the interim report that was published on 18 March 2025 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-interim-report). It suggested that:

> The national curriculum .... plays a crucial role in providing the knowledge and skills required to build a prosperous economy and flourishing civil society, as well as promoting social cohesion and sustaining democracy ....Education ... plays a crucial role in preparing young people to address the civic and economic needs of our country and the wider world (p.5).....
>
> the Review applies a social justice lens throughout its work, applying high aspirations for all (p.18).

However, it seems that these extracts from the report are not meant to be interpreted as providing the rationale for highlighting political education. Rather, there is only a very broad statement about the general purpose and nature of the curriculum and its association with social justice. There is no mention of the national curriculum subject citizenship education and no mention of political education. I view the approach adopted by the Curriculum and Assessment Review team as only partially helpful.

At a time when it is likely that young people of 16 will be eligible to vote in the next general election it is a mistake to neglect political education (British Election Study 2021; Eichhorn and Bergh 2020; Franklin 2020; Mycock 2014). I would prefer a more explicit consideration of political education in which I could work with others to "empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies" (UNESCO 2020). Throughout this article I will argue for an explicit approach to political education, following a very practical approach as recommended by Crick in his classic work *In defence of politics* (Crick 1962) and based on my experiences as a teacher in comprehensive schools, my roles in teacher education, MA and PhD teaching and supervision and research and development work within and beyond the UK.

The different approaches to political education

We live (or, want to live) in a democracy and so people should understand and be able to engage in a socially just society that is characterised by equity, inclusivity and diversity. I see that as the fundamental purpose of school. Nandy (2022, p.44) reflects the nature of what is at the heart of a Labour Party approach to education by quoting Wolf: "if as the ancient Athenians believed, participation in public life is a fundamental aspect of human self-realisation, huge inequalities cannot but destroy it". We need to educate people in relation to this ambition. There have been various approaches to this goal of achieving political education. I show below six different approaches. I indicate the dates when they emerged or had particular prominence but I wish to emphasize that I am using this framework to show what is happening now and what choices we currently have about what we decide to develop.

Aspect 1: Neglect (principally, up to the 1970s and at various times thereafter)

Fears of teacher bias, student boredom, the supposed inability of young minds to understand politics and the lack of career structure for citizenship teachers meant that, generally, if anything was done for political education it consisted of upper 'P' politics (constitutions and institutions) for future leaders, and on the other hand, civics for those perceived as followers who, supposedly, needed to be told the rules. This is divisive, boring for teachers and learners and leads to misunderstandings about how politics actually works (Heater 1977). Prior to the 1970s, official reports largely ignored political education and/or referred to it in terms that are not helpful for the development of an informed and participatory citizenry. For example, a Ministry of Education 1949 publication asserts: a "healthy democratic society" can be encouraged if schools develop "the old and simple virtues of humility, service restraint and respect for personality" (p.41).

Of course, it is important not to overdo the emphasis on neglect. Policy makers, professionals and others are always interested in the political aspects of schooling and education more generally and there was important work done by individuals from different points on the political spectrum such as Dewey (1916), Laski (1933, Oakeshott (1956) and organisations within and beyond the UK such as the Council for Education in World Citizenship and the League of Nations Union. There has been work on political socialisation since at least the 1930s and there have been numerous attempts made at key junctures to build stronger democracies in part through education (e.g., immediately after world war 2).

Aspect 2: Political literacy (principally, 1970s)

Research and wider political shifts led to a dramatic shift in the attention paid to political education in the 1970s. When the age of majority was lowered from 21 to 18 it meant that people still at school would vote in the 1970 and subsequent general and local elections and there was a feeling that something must be done to help explain the nature and practice of politics, especially in light of levels of ignorance that were being revealed (Stradling 1977) That there was confidence that this could be done was in part based on political socialisation research by many including Jahoda (1963), Greenstein (1969), Connell (1971) and others and work that was published in outlets such as the International Journal of Political Education (1977-1983). In light of this work, it could no longer be argued that children are innocent of politics, especially when textbook research revealed the inclusion of political messages (Gilbert 1984). At a time when radical voices being heard (e.g., Illich 1975, Freire 1974), mainstream schooling was being democratised in the form of comprehensives and the knowledge that they dealt with was being transformed through projects in the so-called new science, new history and others. In this context it was enormously helpful to those who supported political education for a key statement to be made by two influential school inspectors. Slater and Hennessey who argued that:

> Those who claim that politics ought to be 'kept out of' whatever it may be are being ingenuous (or, on occasions disingenuous and politically skilful). Wherever there is disagreement, there lies a potential for politics; for aggregating issues, organising support, arguing, participating, settling difficulties. There is 'politics' in this wide sense in every club, society or classroom if we did but see it (Slater and Hennessey 1978, p.255).

If politics is always present, then it is better to approach it explicitly and professionally, rather than allowing it to develop implicitly in ways that accord with dominant norms. The approach developed by the Programme for Political Education became known as political literacy (Crick and Porter 1978). In this there would be an emphasis on studying issues in everyday life as well as in parliaments. The debate now shifted away from civics and Politics and into the politics of everyday life in which the discipline of political science was the inspiration rather than history (Osborne 1980). As a result, it was anticipated that a politically literate person would have:

> Learnt what the main political disputes are, what beliefs the main contestants have of them, how they are likely to affect you and me. It also means that we are likely to be predisposed to try to do something about the issue in question in a manner which is at once effective and respectful of the sincerity of other people and what they believe (Crick and Porter 1978, 13)

Of course, political literacy and the push for it were not without problems or challenges. There were weaknesses with this approach, including an incomplete characterisation of politics and a feeling of disempowerment by young people who were faced with a seemingly never-ending stream of crises about which they could do little. Teachers were not guided about key matters such as assessment and generally little attention was paid to issues regarding implementation. And, by the end of the 1970s, Thatcher was elected with a very different agenda.

She would soon be making speeches in which she claimed that teachers had a responsibility to teach not just the three 'rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic) but also an additional two 'rs' of right and wrong. The active educational debate and engagement in politics that had been a key part of political literacy was to be replaced by telling young people what they need to know and do

Aspect 3: Global education (principally, 1980s)

It took Thatcher's government some time to pay serious, sustained attention to education. In the meantime, many teachers favoured an affective and holistic approach that emphasised the personal, local and global (which, for some, was too emotional and/or too connected to particular political campaigns) (see Pike and Selby 1988). Very distant from an official view of what schools should be doing, this was also a source of some tension with those who had promoted a political literacy approach. Towards the end of the 1980s, a new official - and very different approach - was developed.

Aspect 4: Education for citizenship (principally, 1989-1997)

By the late 1980s several voices within the Conservative government were calling for action relevant to political education. Interestingly, some of the most influential voices were not based in the Department for Education but instead were working in the Home Office which was responsible for law and order and immigration. Hurd, who was Home Secretary at the time, declared that:

> Active citizenship is the free acceptance by individuals of voluntary obligations to the community of which they are members. It cannot be conjured up by legislation or by political speeches – although both can help. It arises from traditions of civic obligations and voluntary service which are central to the thinking of this government and rooted in our history (Hurd, 1988).

In the context of a neo-liberal state that expected young people to volunteer as the welfare state was attacked, citizenship education took on a particular meaning. In this context, we need to be aware of fundamental principles and political realities when choosing to use the phrase 'citizenship education'. Some policy makers are, at times, deliberately more content to refer to citizenship which is a legal and political status held only by some, instead of arguing for universal human rights. Citizenship, at times, signals an interest principally in national contexts (and at times in a form of nationalism that allows us to identify who does not belong).

T. H. Marshall's work on the growth of rights was influential at this time (and later). There were positive aspects to Marshall's work in that it explained his view of the growth of rights (civil in the 18th century; political in the 19th century; and social in the 20th century) but there were many problems with his framework and there was no real connection made by him to education. I was writing articles at that time with titles such as 'whatever happened to political education?' (Davies 1994). I saw citizenship education as exclusive, nationalistic, emphasising volunteering and economic 'enterprise'. It was, of course, highly (party) political. The National Curriculum included citizenship as a cross curricular theme which was largely ignored but was framed in a very particular way. The key publication is 'Encouraging citizenship' (1991, HMSO) which emphasized "the 4th dimension" (i.e., volunteering)

Aspect 5: Citizenship education (principally, 1997-2010/2014)

In 1998, the Crick report (QCA 1998) was published. It included the following:

> We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves (pp.7-8).

There were said to be three key aspects of citizenship:

> **Firstly**, children learning from the very beginning self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour both in and beyond the classroom, both towards those in authority and towards each other. **Secondly**, learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community. **Thirdly**, pupils learning about and how to make themselves effective in public life through knowledge, skills and values – what can be called 'political literacy', seeking for a term that is wider than political knowledge alone (p.11).

Crick made a landmark contribution. Of course, as with every initiative, there were some problems with his approach and the development of a curriculum was not without significant challenge. It insufficiently valued a diverse society, with the report including the following controversial statement: "Majorities must respect, understand and tolerate minorities and minorities must learn and respect the laws, codes and conventions as much as the majority" (pp.17-18). It under-valued political literacy, some felt that it promoted a morality-based Blairite communitarianism and it was under developed in terms of educational approaches.

It was a difficult decision to support it. I believed that to do so was an indication of the realism necessary in the service of idealism and, as a result of very careful political enterprise and impressive academic and professional work by huge numbers of people within this country and beyond, there was from 1998 a high priority for citizenship education and from 2008 to 2014 an excellent curriculum was officially in place with *some* very good work in schools. The framework for that curriculum which allowed students to learn about the essence of politics and to learn how to be politically active, using content as appropriate, is shown below:

> Key concepts (rights and responsibilities; democracy and justice; identity and diversity)
>
> Key processes (critical thinking and enquiry; advocacy and representation; participation and taking informed and responsible action)
>
> Range and content

Until at least 2008, very significant practical support was in place for schools, and to some extent this continues. The Association for Citizenship Teaching was developed (and is still doing good work). A wide range of NGOs were (and are) doing good work (e.g., the Citizenship Foundation which is now called Young Citizens). There was significant European and wider international co-operation (including research, see https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs). Teacher training programmes were active (and various networks exist, e.g., https://www.cicea.eu/). A longitudinal research project was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in England (https://www.nfer.ac.uk/citizenship-education-in-england-2001-2010-young-peoples-practices-and-prospects-for-the-future-the-eighth-and-final-report-from-the-citizenship-education-longitudinal-study-cels/). There were very many local initiatives by individuals, universities and others. There were impressive outcomes in England:

> citizenship education had a positive impact on three key components of civic engagement: efficacy, political participation and political knowledge. (Whiteley 2014, p.513

> In nearly all of the primary schools… citizenship was thriving…. The quality of citizenship education in the secondary schools visited in this survey was stronger than in the schools that participated in the earlier citizenship survey, which was published in 2010**.** (Ofsted 2013, p. 4).

Aspect 6: A return to neglect and the fragmentation of the education system with splintering within those arguing on how best to educate young people to understand and take part. (principally, from 2010/2014)

Despite all the very many successes of citizenship education, immediately following the 2010 election it became clear that it would be 'developed'. There are several reasons for these changes in the nature and status of citizenship education in schools:

1. Citizenship education remains a National Curriculum subject but most schools now do not have to follow it. Schools are given a spurious form of autonomy in that they have to achieve in areas set by the central government (and the power of local education authorities and university departments of education is reduced)

2. Perceived need for greater discipline and increased individual volunteering (Cameron's (2011) reaction to the riots was a strong demand for people to accept their responsibilities)

3. Citizenship education was seen as party political property (i.e., if Labour promoted it; the coalition government led by the Conservatives must deny it – Crick's attempt to build a cross party base for citizenship education largely failed with Kenneth Baker's involvement being an exception).

4. Uncertainties about Britishness (and a populist desire to do something about that in the form of Brexit and not to support an international approach which is seen by some as being suspiciously global). Gove (2010) declared he would "remove everything unnecessary from a curriculum that has been bent out of shape by the weight of material dumped there for political purposes". This meant, he said, without any admission of irony, that he would be promoting "the glories of our island story" (Gove 2012)

5. There are official preferences for traditionally framed forms of knowledge (i.e., history is preferred not citizenship)

6. Research and inspection evidence has not been persuasive. The elected government discounted what had been revealed by researchers, research organisations and Ofsted

Although the national curriculum which includes citizenship education is still in place, it is (as above) not formally required in most schools and in any case, the current citizenship education curriculum is now incoherent. It has four elements that are largely about the need to understand the political system and to emphasise the need to volunteer. In other words, it takes us back to civics and Politics with the emphasis on constitutions and institutions and towards a moralising approach (together with a bolted on final bullet point shown below which confuses more than it clarifies). The key elements of that curriculum are:

- acquire a sound knowledge and understanding of how the United Kingdom is governed, its political system and how citizens participate actively in its democratic systems of government
- develop a sound knowledge and understanding of the role of law and the justice system in our society and how laws are shaped and enforced
- develop an interest in, and commitment to, participation in volunteering
- think critically and debate political questions, manage their money on a day-to-day basis, plan for future financial needs

Despite the unchanging significance of politics in schools, the excellent work of many individuals and groups, the positive data associated with more than 20,000 entries to GCSE citizenship each year (in the context of the total number of GCSE entries being approximately five million) and wider formal opportunities (see https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/citizenship-gcse/), there are clear indications that citizenship education in any explicit form is now less of a priority than it once was (see House of Lords, 2018). In a system that has been fragmented in which evaluation of citizenship education is not a priority, there is now much we do not know about explicit programmes of political education in schools. It is reasonable to assume that schools continue to do their best to be caring active communities and that co-ordinators of personal and social education whose programmes may include many things including health education, careers and much else and who may not be specialists in citizenship, are doing their best with limited support

There are many significant pressures on schools in a context shaped by contradictory forces shaped by populism, nationalism, activism and many other things. In this confusing position it is not enough for us simply to argue for participation – we need to know what sort of participation for what sort of purpose and how connections are being made with education. Most official, policy-related emphasis has, since about 2010, been on education for character and virtues. This is not necessarily problematic. Harold Wilson famously declared that "the Labour Party is a moral crusade or it is nothing" and Starmer (2021) has come close to restating this position. Recent and current work for character education includes contributions by Tristram Hunt (BBC 2014) when he was shadow secretary of state for education and, more recently, by various high-profile people including Jon Cruddas (University of Birmingham, 2021). Character education emphasises many good things:

perseverance, resilience and grit

confidence and optimism

motivation, drive and ambition

neighbourliness and community spirit

tolerance and respect

honesty, integrity and dignity

conscientiousness, curiosity and focus

Although, generally, my preference is for another approach, it would be inappropriate to dismiss current work on character education as being simplistic moralising. The key centre for the development of character education in the UK (and beyond) is the Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham. Some very good things are being done. However, the rise of character education and some reactions to it (Jerome and Kisby 2019), reveals some very unhelpful developments (especially in the US but also closer to home). The diverse consensus that had been established until about 2010 is no longer present and there are some indications of significant organisational fracturing.

Friendly Arguments

What then is being currently discussed? What is understood about politics and citizenship and how should we educate? It is important to pay attention to a series of areas which allow us to see the perspectives that are in play and the choices that we have.

Perhaps the key perspectives are related to what might be termed the fundamentals of citizenship. Citizenship is made up of two distinct traditions: the liberal perspective that emphasises rights and the primacy of the individual and, at the same time, the civic republican perspective that focuses on duties and responsibilities in a collectively framed society. At times, these perspectives are – wrongly in my view – presented as being in conflict. It is only when we see their positive interaction that there is the potential to develop political education but it is, at times, a challenge to do so.

Once we have considered the key traditions, a more direct and immediate focus on education is possible. There are debates about the area that should be emphasised including the perceived importance of the political, the moral and the nature of the community(ies) to which these things apply. There are preferences about the general approach to be taken by educators, whether it is their job to generate critique or attempt to move people towards consensus. There are discussions about the emphasis to be placed on the cognitive and/or the affective. It is not entirely straightforward to refer to place in debates about political education as, of course, the 'local' may well be the key element in any consideration of the 'global' but, generally, it is important to consider where we put our emphasis in relation to the local, national, international and global. And finally, of course, we need to join those debates in which we consider what it is that we wish young people to do and whether we should focus equally or differentially on thinking, speaking, and acting. In my view, consideration - and to some extent inclusion - of all these strands are necessary.

In terms of developing political education so that it forms part of a curriculum, there are arguments about the purpose of schooling which are presented at times as if they are necessarily in conflict. The 'liberal' (the study of the best that has been thought, said and done) emphasises an academic approach; the 'developmental' (personal growth of the child) with a progressive approach to natural growth; the 'scientific' (individual and societal economic prosperity) leads to vocationalism of various types (hairdressing, engineering, medicine, languages for business etc); the 'meliorist' (social justice) leads to forms of political learning. Again, there is no reason why these perspectives cannot be promoted together but some will see that as not being possible and, in any case, there will be debates about what, principally, schools are for. In light of these debates, the introduction of an explicit form of political education will always be challenging but an awareness of the significance of political education in all these areas and the need for a discrete approach to political education is vital

The existence of these discussions is not unhelpful. It is a positive indication of the sort of focused debates about the sort of education we want. Discussion allows us to generate clearer thinking and action. If I were to focus these discussions directly and immediately into academic and professional form I would draw attention to the following areas with attention to be paid to the questions I have highlighted for each:

.**Knowledge** – Do we emphasize substantive knowledge, focusing on particular 'contexts' and views AND/OR procedural knowledge in which key concepts (e.g., justice) are practised.

Pedagogy – Most seem to favour a form of constructivism but what is the extent to which we provide information, context, 'right' answers, emphasise the affective or cognitive and whether to promote a particular climate/ethos

Assessment – Most support the need to assess (although this area is often uncertainly characterized) and we need to decide whether we should emphasize 'of learning' and/or 'for learning'

Support mechanisms – The political process of forming alliances with powerful bodies (including teacher training; subject associations; research) is debated and we need to ask ourselves if we can realistically avoid engagement in that process if we are to have any chance of implementing something that is worthwhile

Evaluation – The need for evaluation is accepted but the nature and purpose of it and the link between research and teaching is discussed and we need to ask if we are currently content with a situation in which political education is neglected

Possible Futures

So, what do we want and what do we need to do in order to get it? In the current (rather woeful) state of political education I think we need to consider three key areas:

Articulation – can we explain what we want?

Legitimation – can we persuade powerful individuals and groups to endorse what we want?

Implementation - can we ensure that we get things done?

We should realise in the quest to develop valuable forms of political education that we do not need to go back to 'square one'. There are already established forms of thinking and potential ways forward. We know what has been tried and what 'works' (Kerr and Hoskins 2023). We know, in addition to high status support (in schools and elsewhere including policy makers) and working in collaboration with researchers and inspectors, that we need education that emphasises:

Contemporary content (including, for example, digital citizenship, sustainability and global citizenship with the likelihood that discretely organized lessons and activities are likely to be more effective than infusing citizenship through a range of school subjects)

Public context (expansively framed, so that the political that is so obviously present in personal contexts is not ignored)

Relevant substantive concepts (e.g., power, authority, justice) developed in accordance with procedural concepts (e.g., enquiry, advocacy, participation) that indicate what learners should (and actually) know, understand and can do

Participative processes (an open classroom climate, engagement with political activities for learning – e.g., school councils – and reflection on participation including learning about and with local and other communities and with appropriate emphasis on assessment)

But, more important than what I think, is what key players in the field are suggesting. Some insight into their positions may be gained by reviewing their responses to the Curriculum and Assessment Review. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham suggest that:

> the overarching aim of the new curriculum should be to promote individual and societal flourishing, with character education being an explicit and core component of all schooling....
>
> 'character' refers to the reason-responsive, morally evaluable, and educable part of human personhood. Positive traits of character have traditionally been called 'virtues'; and those are standardly divided into moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues. 'Character education' then covers all systematic educational efforts to cultivate the virtues, through 'caught', 'taught', or 'sought' methods'

This should be read alongside other publications which do the very important work of clarifying their position in relation to citizenship education. The highly impressive discussion of neo-Aristotelian character education as given in Kristjánsson, Peterson and Harrison (2025) includes summaries of their work to distil the democratic possibilities of character education, to identify the virtue based foundations of citizenship education and to recognize and support teachers working in moral and civic character education.

The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) is also, obviously, a key player in any possible regeneration of political education. Their submission to the Curriculum and Assessment Review included the following recommendations:

a universal entitlement to Citizenship KS1-4;

GCSE in Citizenship Studies to be updated;

post-16 pathways to include Citizenship as mandatory;

ITT and CPD

teachers to work with curriculum experts to strengthen the citizenship offer;

emphasis on rights, human rights and social rights; how democracy changes; role of the UK in Europe and the wider world; media and information literacy; climate change; citizenship skills; and updating teaching relevant to identities, diversity and representation

Both ACT and the Jubilee Centre, in my view, share quite a lot. We need now to decide what we want and how best to proceed. There is currently a very obvious degree of official neglect of political education. It would not be at all difficult for that to continue.

References

BBC (2014). Character can and should be taught in schools, says Hunt. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-26140607

British Election Study (2021). Age and voting behaviour at the 2019 general election. **https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/age-and-voting-behaviour-at-the-2019-general-election/**

Cameron, D. (2011). PM's speech on the fightback after the riots. **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots**

Connell, R. W. (1971). *The Child's Construction of Politics*. London, Melbourne University Press.

Crick, B. (1962). *In Defence of Politics*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Crick, B. (2000). *Essays on Citizenship*. London, Continuum.

Crick, B. and Porter, A. (eds.) (1978). *Political Education and Political Literacy*. London, Longman.

Davies, I. (1994). Whatever Happened to Political Education? *Educational Review*, *46*(1), 29–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013191940460104

Davies, I., **Ho,** L.-C., **Kiwan,** D., **Peck**, C.L., **Peterson**, A., **Sant**, E., **Waghid,** Y. (eds.) (2018). *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Citizenship and Education*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacmillanDewey, J. (1916/1966). Democracy and Education. London, Free Press, Macmillan.

Eichhorn, J. and Bergh, J. (eds.) (2020). *Lowering the voting age to 16. Learning from real experiences worldwide*. Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan.

Franklin, M. N. (2020). Consequences of lowering the voting age to 16: lessons from comparative research. Pp. 13-42 in J. Eichhorn and J. Bergh (eds.) (2020). *Lowering the voting age to 16. Learning from real experiences worldwide*. Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan.

Freire, P. (1974). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Gilbert, R. (1984). *The Impotent Image. Reflections of ideology in the secondary school curriculum*. London, Falmer.

Gove, M. (2010). *Speech. Michael Gove to the National College Annual Conference, Birmingham.* **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-the-national-college-annual-conference-birmingham**

Gove, M. (2012). *Education Secretary Michael Gove's speech to Brighton College* **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-michael-goves-speech-to-brighton-college**

HMSO (1991). *Encouraging Citizenship. The report of the commission on citizenship*. London, HMSO.

House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement (2018). *The Ties that Bind. Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. London, Houses of Parliament, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldcitizen/118/11802.htm

Hurd, D. (1988). Freedom will flourish where citizens accept responsibility. *The Independent*, 13 February.

Illich, I. (1975) *Deschooling Society*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Jahoda, G. (1963). The Development of Children's Ideas about Country and Nationality. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 33, 143-53.

Jerome, L and Kisby, B. (2019). *The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, Dragons and the Myths of Character*. Bristol, Palgrave.

Kerr, D. and Hoskins, B. (2023). The evidence on educational methods for political engagement. Pp. 147-162 in H. Tam (ed.) *Who's Afraid of Political Education?* Bristol, Policy Press.

Kristjánsson, K., Harrison, T., & Peterson, A. (2024). Reconsidering the 'Ten Myths' about Character Education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *73*(1), 49–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2378059

Laski, H. (1934). Democracy in Crisis. London, George Allen and Unwin.

Ministry of Education (1949). *Citizens Growing Up*. Pamphlet No. 16. London, HMSO.

Mycock, A. (2014). The UK isn't ready to lower the voting age to 16. *Guardian Comment Network*, 10 October. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/10/uk-voting-age-16-youth-politics

Nandy, L. (2022). *All In. How we build a country that works*. Manchester, HarperNorth.

Oakeshott, M. (1956). Political Education. In P. Laslett (ed.) Philosophy, Politics and Society. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Ofsted (2013). *Citizenship consolidated? A survey of citizenship in schools 2009-2012*. http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120314

Osborne, K. (1980). Civics, Citizenship or Politics: what should we teach? *Contact*, number 46. Ontario, Canada Studies Foundation.

Pike, G. and Selby, D. (1988). *Global Teacher, Global Learner*. London, Hodder and Stoughton.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1998). *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*. London, QCA. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4385/1/crickreport1998.pdf

University of Birmingham (2021). *Jon Cruddas MP becomes honorary professor of university and Jubilee Centre*. https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/media/news/article/6858/Jon-Cruddas-MP-Becomes-Honorary-Professor-of-University-and-Jubilee-Centre

Slater, J. and Hennessey, R. A. S. (1978). Political Competence. Pp. 252-256 in Crick, B. and Porter, A., eds. *Political Education and Political Literacy*. London, Longman.

Starmer, K. (2021). *The Road Ahead*. Fabian Ideas No. 657. London, The Fabian Society.

Stradling, R. (1977). *The Political Awareness of the School Leaver*. London, Hansard.

UNESCO (2020). Global Citizenship Education https://lifelonglearning-toolkit.uil.unesco.org/en/node/244

Whiteley, P. (2014). *Does Citizenship Education Work? Evidence from a Decade of Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools in England*. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 67 (3), pp. 513-535. DOI https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss083

Acknowledgements: An earlier version of this presentation was made to the Grimsby Fabians. I am grateful to them fro the invitation and especially to their convenor, Dr. Pat Holland.. I used this material in a presentation to the Fabians Education Policy Group (FEPG) on 31 March 2025. I am grateful to FEPG for their kind invitation and for their valuable feedback

Author bio

Dr. Ian Davies is Professor Emeritus, University of York, UK. He is the author of many books and articles, principally about citizenship education. His experience includes being Director of the Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice at the University of York (2007-2021); Visiting Professor at The Education University of Hong Kong; Fellow of the Society of Educational Studies; Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science; and, "expert on education for democratic citizenship" for the Council of Europe.

Appendix

Further information about political education

Links to a range of interesting organisations and publications

Association for Citizenship Teaching (https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/)

Council of Europe **https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/home?desktop=true**

ICCS/IEA **https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs**

Jubilee Centre https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/

Oxfam **https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/who-we-are/what-is-global-citizenship/**

Political Studies Association – young people's politics **https://www.psa.ac.uk/specialist-groups/young-peoples-politics**

UNICEF https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/partners/unicef/

Young Citizens **https://www.youngcitizens.org/**

The above organisations produce many policy and practice publications, as do many individual project groups (e.g. file://userfs/id5/w2k/Downloads/ Taking_action_for_change_youth_civic_engagement_an.pdf)

Some links specifically about Votes at 16

Electoral Reform Society Votes at 16 (https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/votes-at-16/)

Vote 16 Canada **https://vote16.ca/**

Votes at 16 in Scotland 2014-2021 by Jan Eichhorn and Christine Hubner **https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/doc/Votes%20at%2016%20in%20Scotland.pdf**

Vote 16 Wales **https://senedd.wales/visit/education-and-youth-engagement/vote-16/**

The importance of activism in the curriculum

Andy Sprakes

Andy Sprakes is chief Academic Officer and co-founder of XP School, Doncaster.

XP is a school by design.

As such, we have crafted and use clearly defined design principles that underpin everything we do, and we express these simply through the following sentence:

'As stewards of XP we build our community through activism, leadership and equity sharing our stories as we go.'

To fully realise these principles, at XP, we deliver our curriculum predominantly through cross disciplinary learning expeditions. These are standards-based projects that are specifically designed to make connections between, and across, subjects and subject concepts to encourage deep, purposeful and memorable learning experiences for our young people. These 'expeditions' are tightly structured through careful mapping of standards, skills and content and designed by teachers to ensure that all students:

produce **beautiful work** and through this are agents for positively improving themselves, their community and the wider world;

grow their characters in readiness for the challenges they will encounter in the world;

and make better than expected **academic progress** to allow them to access next steps in their learning

We call this our three dimensional curriculum. Our students strive to produce beautiful work, grow their character and, as a result, they achieve academic success. It is important to note that each dimension is reliant on and symbiotic with the others.

Teachers at XP Trust, as clearly stated in the principles outlined above, are designers of the curriculum. Staff work collaboratively, each bringing subject specialism and their love of their subject to bear in a blend with other curriculum subjects, to create a curriculum overview that is highly engaging, purposeful and authentic. We don't underestimate our students, so we ensure that learning is academically challenging and rigorous, too. At the heart of our curriculum is creativity - students craft beautiful products such as books, films, information boards, and campaigns so that our young people acquire knowledge that is then applied to bring about social change by compelling curiosity. In short, the power and compelling nature of our curriculum is in its alignment to the concept of powerful knowledge. (Young, 2014)

It is essential that we carefully craft the sequencing of our curriculum to align with curriculum documentation so that students are well prepared for public examinations and can achieve academic success. However, to view our curriculum in such a limited way is to serve an injustice. We fervently believe that knowledge is increased in its power, and deepened in its resonance, through its connectivity and contextualisation and this is evident in the cross-disciplinary learning expeditions that staff design, to facilitate the beautiful work that students create and their subsequent growth of character.

Clearly, our curriculum is much more ambitious than a narrow pursuit of public examination success. Therefore, our ambition, and emerging reality, is that:

students develop as agents for positive social change;

students are independent, inquisitive, curious and creative;

students lead their own learning;

students are empowered so they can question perceived truths and challenge injustice;

students achieve well so that increased opportunities are open to them and

students can grasp and build knowledge and the application of knowledge (as skills), which is powerful knowledge because it can affect their place in the world and enables them to become the best version of themselves

More than anything our curriculum is inextricably linked to, and is a key driver of, our culture. Therefore, when we are designing and constructing our curriculum the following factors need to be deeply considered.

The purpose of our curriculum is founded on engaging our students with powerful knowledge that affects positive social change. Indeed, the power of our curriculum is that it shows students their place in the world and compels them to question this, and thereby unleashes their ability to bring about positive change. Learning at XP is experience rich and we are committed to utilising the community around us to develop passion in our students. The basis of their work is that through the curriculum, their learning and expeditions they produce something that has purpose and contributes to making our school, community, town, country and world a better place.

Working in this way, with purpose and authenticity leads to students investing in learning standards across subjects and developing an investment in and love of subjects. For example, they are not just learning Science or English separately to achieve examination success, but their work is elevated to have greater impact. Our students are making the world a better place by connecting subjects through expeditions by establishing links within and between disciplines, deepening learning, and as a consequence, producing work that has agency and purpose beyond themselves and the school. This is evident across our Trust in the many learning expeditions that have been co-designed and co-constructed by our staff to realise this end.

Our curriculum enables students to discern the difference between the narrow definition of social mobility, and the pursuit of individual gain, by promoting the pursuit of the common good and the need for social equity in our world

We encourage and create the climate for our students to be compassionate citizens: we do this not through merely developing their cultural capital so they individually improve but through expanding opportunity so that they can impact positively on others both in the school and in the wider community. As such, we nurture and develop an understanding of how kindness, empathy and concern for others must define us, as both individuals and as part of society, if we are to create a more just and compassionate world.

A word on 'Connectivity' and 'Contextualisation'

We have found that teaching through cross subject expeditions not only connects the learning across and between subjects but also has enhanced and deepened learning. For example, in Year 7 linking the civil rights movement with the triangular trade increases the depth of knowledge about second order history concepts and builds the schema around class struggle and racial prejudice over time. By building this learning around a challenging anchor text, such as To Kill a Mockingbird, further enhances and embeds contextualisation. Students, by making such connections, are better able to understand significant concepts and how key ideas bind disciplines together, are interdependent and correlational.

Using these organic and conceptual connections to view knowledge contextually, inevitably leads to a deepening of learning and understanding. This learning is ultimately expressed through the creation of a product that has been inspired and instigated by this learning is, by definition, 'powerful'.

Equity of opportunity is important, and we are mindful of it so that all students, regardless of background, are provided with opportunities that they might otherwise be denied because of social barriers. Indeed, we made a pledge when we first opened our school that fieldwork, including visits to museums, art galleries, theatres and universities which features in every expedition, as well as engaging with experts, is funded by the school. We actively construct our curriculum to address any deficit in knowledge and experience that might exist because of disadvantages in our community.

Expeditions are **usually** cross-disciplinary and include subjects from both HUMAN and STEAM combined. This ensures that students see connections between subjects and standards and thereby deepen their learning experiences and understanding. If expeditions aren't combined, then they are delivered through either HUMAN or STEAM expeditions. This allows students to dive down into related subject areas like Maths, Science and Engineering to strengthen their understanding of key concepts and skills and learners are not limited by the curriculum to what they 'are allowed' to learn at any stage of their school career - in fact there are many instances where learners exceed the expected knowledge to be acquired - this happens naturally, driven by children's love of learning and we do not prevent it from happening - why would we?

On occasion, expeditions can be delivered through a single subject in a 'slice'. This often occurs when a specific skill or content needs to be explored and does not have a natural home in either a combined, HUMAN or STEAM expedition.

As previously noted, our curriculum is broad and, through learning expeditions, is designed to be flexible, responsive and exciting. This does not mean we compromise on subject standards and knowledge but that we make the learning in subject disciplines more powerful by integrating, connecting and immersing them in academically rigorous, sequenced learning expeditions comprised of engaging guiding questions and case studies which bring the standards to life and together, challenging texts and authentic products which connect with the world and encourage craftsmanship and quality.

Ilife and together, challenging texts and authentic products which connect with the world and encourage craftsmanship and quality.Indeed, our curriculum empowers our students to question, challenge and empathise. There is a clear and resolute link between academic subjects, learning expeditions and the pursuit of character growth. As stated, we believe, and we are convinced, that the purpose of learning is not just to pass exams but to facilitate a positive contribution to the world and positively encourage student voice in this active discourse. Consequently, the purpose of our learning is:

to help students discern and question - we enable students to know 'why' and 'why not'

to be able to see through dishonesty and to strive to live their lives based on integrity, respect and with empathy for others.

To be engaged in a curriculum that promotes activism.

To represent our lives through the crafting of beautiful work defines our common humanity and resonates across boundaries. By focussing on creativity this lifts us beyond the ephemeral and the transient and provides us with a sense of value, meaning and worth. As such our curriculum has at its heart an imperative that students create beautiful and carefully crafted work. This creates a legacy of significant work that transforms not only their lives but the lives of others. This is the area that we still need to focus our attention on most. Whilst students habitually present and represent their learning to a number of diverse and authentic audiences we need to do more to consciously plan for students to utilise their learning to have much more of a positive and active impact on the world. We have compelling examples of the above but making, designing, expressing and creating still need to be customarily embedded in our culture and we are determined to make this happen with increased frequency and significance by building more agency and activism into our curriculum.

That said, the impact of our curriculum on our young people, their families, their neighbourhoods, and their communities is palpable and is further explored here.

As previously stated, and realised through our three dimensional approach, our relentless focus is to ensure that our students grow their character, create beautiful work and achieve academic success. Therefore, we develop our curriculum so that learning is relevant, purposeful and authentic. By making authentic work, such as the carbon footprint of a school, pupils realise they have a voice and that their ideas matter. Their findings lead to a better world. A graph they create of waste water usage is powerful and beautiful in its simplicity and in its message. This manifests into a number of key strands that we use as a focus for realising our design principles through our curriculum.
Our three rich curriculum strands at XP are:

Protecting Our Planet (Stewardship of our world) - this is an existential threat, so this is an imperative part of our curriculum. If we want our students to change the world, they need to save it first and they need the skills to lead this action. Our students make the knowledge they acquire around this seam powerful by actively making a difference to our world.

Standing for Social Justice (Stewardship of our community) - the world is filled with inequity, and this is sustained by systems, structures and governance that -protects the interests of the few and neglects the many. We uncover, confront and challenge inequities of race, gender, identity and class through our work and use the knowledge we acquire to affect social and cultural change. We want our students to understand this, to question it rather than take it for granted, and if they want to, enable them to be leaders of change.

Cultivating Diversity and Belonging (Stewardship of ourselves and each other) - at XP we understand the power of crew (Berger, Vilen and Woodfin, 2020) and we know our community is stronger because of our differences. This is, therefore, a key strand that runs through many of our expeditions and case studies allowing our students to deepen their empathy and understanding of the value of difference and non-conformity. We strive for equality at XP by promoting equity so this is reflected in our curriculum design.

The thread of understanding what justice is and what human rights are, and to recognise when these are denied, runs through our curriculum design process and is connected to the concept of community. Our students explore and understand what justice is and what human rights are, and to recognise when these are denied and where necessary be able to right injustices. Our students are challenged to see the world as it is and question whether this is how we want it to be and what we need to do to bring about positive social change and social equity. This creates agency in our students.

A compelling and recent example of this, was evident in a Year 8 expedition that focussed on the challenges and difficulties faced by refugees and migrants who arrive in our local community. The expedition was entitled, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?' and is outlined below:

Should I Stay, Or Should I Go?'

In Autumn 2019, students from Year 8 studied a Humanities and Arts Expedition called 'Should I Stay or Should I go?' As well as covering the curriculum subject topics of English, History and Geography the expedition addressed migration as a focus for learning and to bring to life the notion of people being displaced and the reasons for this. Students had to answer the guiding question:

'Why should we care about migration?'

The immersion experience for the expedition included the analysis of an extract which enabled learners to explore unfamiliar language choices which was developed into an artistic piece showing what students could infer from the text. In addition to this, students engaged in a Gallery Walk, closely observing images which represented examples of discrimination, inequality, identity and racism. In addition, they watched a variety of 'Mystery Piece' film extracts based on the movement of animals and people and slavery. To get a taste of the final product students were joined by an expert who .

The expedition was organised into three case studies.

Case Study 1: Why do people Migrate?

The expedition began with students exploring and understanding the differences between geographical terminology related to migration, such as immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker. Students addressed the push and pull factors which lead to migration before looking at a case study focusing on India and the rural -urban migration and rapid urbanisation that is taking place there.

In addition, they looked at historical reasons for migration, focusing on the 1930s Great Depression era in America and how this led to the rise in migrant workers. The context and setting of the anchor text, 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck, was explored, and allowed an understanding of the key characters to develop simultaneously. Students analysed the significance of the Dust Bowl in the Great Depression and made links with 'Grapes of Wrath' before answering the learning target focusing on the cause and consequence of the Dust Bowl and relating this to 'Of Mice and Men'

Case Study 2: Is the grass always greener?

During Case Study 2, students continued to read 'Of Mice and Men' exploring the move made by George and Lennie in more depth thereby making distinct links to the realities of migration. The introduction to push and pull factors and urbanisation was developed further in Case Study 2 linking the study of 'Of Mice and Men' to focus specifically on the realities of migration in India, looking at the social and economic opportunities available to people and the reality of this.

Students also took part in some drama activities for us to begin to prepare for Case Study 3.

Case Study 3: How can we show compassion towards migrants?

The final Case Study focused on how migrants are viewed in society, both historically and in the present day. Alongside this, students finished reading 'Of Mice and Men' and then devoted time to exploring the major themes presented in the text, linking this to their learning from previous case studies. Throughout the expedition, footage was captured of the range of experiences students enjoyed particularly their work with the charity organisation, the Conversation Club to create a documentary for our final product. The aim of the documentary was to raise awareness of migration and educate and challenge the audience to prevent the spread of negative stereotypes and ideas.

The expedition culminated in a Presentation of Learning at CAST Theatre in Doncaster, where the film was screened to parents, guests and the migrants who had so kindly shared their personal journey with the students

The screening of the film, produced by our students in partnership with the community, sent a compelling and authentic message about inclusivity and empathy. Student perceptions were fundamentally challenged and changed in light of this learning experience, and they saw and felt the impact and relevance of their

In very small groups, some of the students were able to attend the Conversation Club, the charity in our community that supports migrants and refugees. These students then fed back what they had experienced and learned to the class on their return. In addition, a large group of migrants came into school and worked with the students on many different occasions. These sessions were pivotal in allowing relationships to be formed and for students to understand and empathise with the difficulties others face. During these sessions, migrants were interviewed by the students, played games or simply just enjoyed each other's company. There is clear evidence of students and migrants having a great time in the film. This is an example of students acquiring powerful knowledge and translating this into powerful learning by realising positive social change. This was a humbling expedition and one which will remain in the head, hearts and hands of students, staff, parents and the wider community.

You can watch the film by following this link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZwDzYoESqM

When you consider some politicians and institutions in the UK seem intent on demonising, criminalising and provoking racial hatred towards some of the most vulnerable human beings on the planet, this is imperative, important and timely work.

It is also the compelling reason why we will continue to design our curriculum to inspire activism in our students.

References

Berger, R, Vilen, A and Woodfin L. (2020) We Are Crew. A Teamwork approach to School Culture. Chapter One, pp 1 - 6 EL Education

Young, M. (2014). Powerful knowledge as curriculum principle. In M. Young, D. Lambert, C.R. Roberts, and M.D. Roberts. Knowledge and the future school: Curriculum and social justice, pp. 65-88, 2nd edition. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Aims, Values and the Curriculum: Report on the meeting held at the House of Commons on 19th November 2024

Brian Hudson, Valerie Bossman-Quarshie, Tony Breslin, Peter Lacey, Brian Matthews,

Mick Waters and Sarah Younie

Abstract

This is the full report on the meeting held at the House of Commons to discuss the aims and values that should underpin a revised curriculum for young people in England. It includes a summary of the inputs of the panel members together with the outcomes of the discussion and debate on the evening of the event. It builds on the initial report of the discussion and debate on the evening that was published in the FEPG Review Volume 1, Issue 1.

Introduction

The meeting was hosted by Catherine Atkinson MP and organised by the Fabian Education Policy Group. Catherine opened the meeting by welcoming all the participants and panel members. In her introductory remarks she expressed her appreciation of the work of the Fabian Society. In opening the discussion as chair of the meeting, Brian Hudson thanked Catherine and her team for hosting the event and for her support in organising it. He also thanked panel members for agreeing to contribute to the event and to all those attending. He noted that the date for this event was fixed well in advance of the General Election and before the decision to undertake a Curriculum and Assessment Review was announced by the Secretary of State for Education on 18 July 2024. Therefore, it was seen as particularly timely to consider the aims and values of a revised curriculum for young people in England at that point in time. The Review was welcomed as was the decision that all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum. It was noted that this development was flagged up in the Labour Party manifesto with reference to reforms that "will build on the hard work of teachers who have brought their subjects alive with knowledge-rich syllabuses, to deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive, and innovative". Furthermore, it was pointed out that this statement is reflected in the Aims, Terms of Reference and Working Principles of the Review (p1). However, in turn it was observed that this raises several questions, including what is the meaning of "knowledge-rich" and what is the difference between a syllabus and a curriculum? In considering the meaning of curriculum, the term is defined in the Call for Evidence as concerning "all of the content (both knowledge and skills) that pupils study during key stage 1, key stage 2, key stage 3, key stage 4 and 16-19 education". (p13). However, it was stated that this is a very restricted view of the intended curriculum and given its focus on a mere list of content to be covered that it would be more accurate to define it as a national syllabus. Brian explained that, because of the emphasis on factual knowledge that there is in an over-emphasis on memorisation in the enacted curriculum by teachers and that experienced by students in school. Regarding the term "knowledge rich", it was also noted that this is a widely used term but that it is ill-defined and does not appear in the National Curriculum documentation. Rather it was seen to reflect the preoccupation of the former Schools Minister with the cultural literacy approach of E. D. Hirsch that emphasises factual knowledge and a narrow basic core curriculum.

The panel was made up of the following speakers: Mick Waters, Professor of Education at the University of Wolverhampton and former Director of Curriculum at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA); Valerie Bossman-Quarshie, Vice-chair of Islington's Children's Scrutiny Committee and teacher; Dr. Tony Breslin, Director of Breslin Public Policy; Brian Matthews, teacher and lecturer at Goldsmiths and Kings College and Professor Sarah Younie, Chair of the International Council for the Education of Teachers (ICET) and MESHGuides representative on the UNESCO International Teacher Task Force panel. In addition, Peter Lacey made an extended contribution from the floor of the meeting. Peter is former lead professional officer at the National Curriculum Council and was a member of the team at the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, which had responsibility for revising the National Curriculum. Each panel member spoke for five minutes followed by 15 minutes discussion time in small groups of participants with time to record comments, feedback and recommendations for the final report. This was then followed by questions and contributions from participants and responses by the panel. Over 150 participants applied to join the meeting which resulted in the meeting being held in a larger Committee Room than originally planned.

Summary of presentations

A focus on curriculum development essentials, **Mick Waters**

The first speaker was Mick Waters who argued that a good place to start would be with a clear statement about what the experience of childhood and youth should be in our nation. Within that statement, there would be clarity about the role of the school. He noted that this generation of children will have more opportunities than ever and at the same time face challenges that will need to be addressed in the way we support them through their growing years. None are immune from the risks posed by smoking, drugs, alcohol, poor diet, lack of exercise, weaponry, gangs and the internet. Added to that a growing proportion is at risk from poverty, poor living conditions and hunger. Yet almost all are loved though access to rich experiences varies enormously. From a statement of commitment to children and young people should come a consideration of what role schools can play through the curriculum offered. We must move away from the curriculum being seen solely as the timetabled lessons or the route to national exams. The curriculum should state what we want children to learn while at school: in lessons, of course, and in the routines of school life along with events such as visits, performances, work experience and charitable involvement. The concept of 'extra curricula' needs to end and instead we should envisage the entirety of the learning offer for all children. To determine our aims for the curriculum, we should turn to a civic conversation, involving those working in education of course, but also consulting with the public, including employers, parents and pupils. The consensus would be stronger than many imagine, and the debate might help to rid ourselves of a tendency to lurch to polarities when we discuss children's learning. It is possible to have academic as well as vocational excellence. Imagination and creativity can exist alongside scholarly pursuits. Specialism in subject disciplines can harmonise with integrated learning opportunities. Our aims will point us towards children becoming competent and confident people, able to think for themselves and act for others. They would understand how to look after their own bodies, contribute positively to their community and protect their planet. They would learn to work in teams, at times as a leader and at others as follower. They would learn to appreciate the sensitivities, orientations and differences in others and value culture and identity.

They would be fascinated by the natural world and intrigued by humankind's efforts to expand and improve, while at the same time making mistakes and creating unintended consequences, taking them into the realms of science, geography and history. They would learn the basics, poetry, dance, art, music, drama, cooking, gardening and fitness. 3 Fabian Education Policy Group Review Volume 1 Issue 2 September 2025 (Online in advance) Learning how to read, write and manage mathematics would serve that learning well while opening doors to the vast world of high-quality literature and the intrigue of mathematics at a level many adults would find beyond them.They would learn the basics, poetry, dance, art, music, drama, cooking, gardening and fitness. 3 Fabian Education Policy Group Review Volume 1 Issue 2 September 2025 (Online in advance) Learning how to read, write and manage mathematics would serve that learning well while opening doors to the vast world of high-quality literature and the intrigue of mathematics at a level many adults would find beyond them. Tests and exams would be available, used to inspire children to extend themselves. The metronomic anchor of norm-referenced exams that see a quarter of our children destined to failure could be replaced by criteria-based assessments. These could be available on a 'when ready' basis, using micro credentials in the way that business does nowadays, valuing what people can do, rather than pitching one person against the next in a bizarre competition. Artificial Intelligence and nanotechnology are already changing the potential for how we offer opportunities for learning. We should make them work for us rather than try to suck them into the old story of schooling. In concluding he asked that surely, we would want our children to experience a curriculum that will help them to embrace the opportunities and address the challenges of the world they will inherit and influence? He finished by arguing that we can achieve this through consensus with the recognition that learning needs to balance purpose and rigour with intrigue and joy.

Local Authority values and relationships with schools**, Valerie Bossman-Quarshie**

The second speaker was Valerie Bossman-Quarshie who began by outlining Islington Council's Education plan "Putting Children First" which sets out missions, goals and priorities for Islington's children and young people. The education plan is based on a vision whereby every child and young person in Islington must feel safe and thrive, leading to a fulfilling life. Education is seen as key to achieving this vision and transforming outcomes for children and young people. The plan recognises that education empowers successful and confident school leavers to shape both their individual and their communities' prosperous futures. The mission is to ensure that by 2030 every child, whatever their background, has the same opportunity and ambition to reach their educational potential in a good Islington school. She argued that the plan aims to equip and empower every child and young person with the learning and skills for life and the future world of work. The plan sets out an ambition to reimagine education and consider what might be possible for future generations. She stressed that this cannot be achieved by schools or the council in isolation and that putting children first is everyone's business, which includes all regardless of background.

She continued by outlining the more specific aims of the plan which aim to ensure that by 2030 exam results for all pupils are in the top 25% within London; to create a sense of belonging so that every 4 Fabian Education Policy Group Review Volume 1 Issue 2 September 2025 (Online in advance) pupil wants to attend school and does so; to guarantee there are good local school places for all children; to work in partnership with schools and settings to make the best use of and share good practice; to use data to target support

to children and young people who are not doing as well as they should; to make sure no child feels discriminated against in any school or setting; to increase the number of two-year olds in free early education; to reduce the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions from school; to ensure every young person has the option of going on to further education, an apprenticeship, or work when they leave school; to make sure that full advantage is taken of Islington's unique access to digital, cultural and music organisations and to ensure that every child quickly gets any necessary additional support from whichever agency. In conclusion Valerie outlined the six immediate priorities for Islington's young people in its education plan. These are to reduce the number of Fixed Term Exclusions (FTEs), levels of Persistent Absence (PA) from school and levels of young people aged 16-19 not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Further they are to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups, increase take-up of Islington's Free Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) for two, three and four-year-olds and to improve attainment at KS4. The link to Islington's Education Plan 2023-2030 can be found here.

Beyond Subjects and Grades: Towards a new approach to curriculum and assessment, **Tony Breslin**

Tony Breslin was the third speaker who argued that a review that just produces tweaks to what is a conventional traditional subject timetable will not address the challenges facing young people, the education system or wider society at this time. Nor will replacing one set of subjects with another: "more of this and less of that" or "one in, one out", whatever the mix, address the challenge. He continued by arguing that any proposed outcome should be objectives-led and, with reference to the late Richard Pring, posed the question "what do we want the educated child/young person/adult to look like, whatever their presumed or actual ability, at 11, at 19, at 30?" Tony contested that taking an objectives-led approach, one focused on the purpose of schooling - and education more broadly - while giving professionals the agency to innovate and be creative in pursuing these objectives, offered the best way forward. He continued by arguing that while we need to be clear about what we expect from our publicly funded education system, we should resist the temptation to detail exactly how educational institutions and education professionals must achieve this. To borrow a phrase from the (slightly hackneyed) manuals on educational governance, policymakers should focus on the strategic, not the operational. 5

Against this background Tony offered the following five steps as a starting point. First, trust schools, colleges and the profession and produce a Review that establishes curricular principles and a direction of travel, rather than one that simply sets out a tweaked body of curriculum content to be delivered from a certain date. This would give schools and colleges the obligation to develop (and trust them to create) a broad and balanced curriculum around a much more focused core, one that seeks to develop the enabling competencies of literacy, numeracy and oracy in all learners. Second, signal the intention to end the dominance of GCSE at 16 (and the resultant 'fail and retake' culture) and acknowledge that eight, nine or ten GCSEs does not amount to a curriculum that is either broad or balanced – it merely offers a series of variations on a narrowly academic theme. Third, utilise the potential of online assessment to evolve towards a model of just-in-time examining, with assessment opportunities across the 14-19 continuum, rather than at the current pre-post-16 cliff edge, a shift that would enable and require, over time, a much greater level of collaboration between those in secondary and further education.

Fourth, move towards a model that exposes every young person to a suite of academic subjects, a genuine taste of appropriately accredited 'vocational and technical' (or professional) learning, and the opportunity to engage in an accredited - and much richer - personal and social development programme, including opportunities for community engagement, volunteering and the development of political literacy – themes that were emphasised in Bernard Crick's landmark report on Citizenship Education in 1998. Fifth, re-establish a QCDA-type agency: these proposals rely on the (re-)establishment and strengthening of a culture of curriculum thinking and development system wide, with change evident in classrooms by the close of this Parliament, and transformation embedded by the time those currently in Reception reach the middle secondary years. Such an agency is necessary to drive, support, oversee and share the lessons from this transition as we work through it.

Tony concluded by highlighting that behind all of this is a belief that, at any level and in any phase, a curriculum is more than a list of subjects, more than a timetable. It is the complete learned experience of the child or young person in the school or college and, as such, it needs to be underpinned by clear principles about educational purpose and informed by a sense of what we want and need the educated person to look like - an approach that Richard Pring had advocated when launching the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education over two decades ago. It was needed then; it is vital now.

The relationship between education and democracy: the need to avoid promoting right wing values, **Brian Matthews**

The fourth speaker was Brian Matthews who started by drawing attention to the way in which we are seeing a rise in far-right governments across the globe, such as Giorgia Meloni in Italy and Donald Trump in the USA. This shift is often accompanied by narratives focused on traditional gender roles and nationalism, frequently based on distortion and misinformation. He argued that education plays a significant role in supporting democracy, but that our current educational system reinforces right wing values. To support democracy in schools, students need to develop essential skills such as self reflection, respect for others' viewpoints, critical thinking, compassion, and a passion for learning. Education should promote diversity, challenge sexism and racism, and encourage active citizenship. Students must also be equipped to analyse information for bias and falsehoods, honing their ability to detect misinformation. The English National Curriculum, however, is focused on a narrow range of subjects, with little emphasis on creative thinking or personal development. It prioritizes content knowledge and exams over process and skills. This exam-driven focus can lead to stress, anxiety, and feelings of failure among students, particularly when the curriculum is rigid and leaves little room for exploration beyond academic subjects

He continued by arguing that the National Curriculum does not foster the skills necessary for active, engaged citizenship. Historically, the curriculum has excluded key subjects such as Media Studies, critical thinking, and social studies, all of which are crucial for understanding democracy. For example, when the National Curriculum was introduced in 1988, it removed these subjects and focused more on traditional, conservative values. Additionally, the reduction of university input into teacher training further diminished the emphasis on critical thinking and reflective practice in education. The increasing marketization and central control of education is seen to have contributed to a fractured school system, alongside an over emphasis on memorisation rather than the development of critical thinking skills. As a result, students are not encouraged to think critically or engage deeply with ideas and understanding, which is vital for fostering a democratic society. For schools to better serve the democratic process, he argued that we need a curriculum that is explicit in

its purpose and aims. The focus should be on helping students think critically, develop subject knowledge across diverse fields, and cultivate social and creative skills. This approach would not only benefit students academically but also encourage them to become active, thoughtful participants in society. In turn, it would help reduce feelings of alienation and encourage lifelong learning and democratic engagement.

The need to create a holistic, compassionate, and inclusive educational experience for young people in England, **Sarah Younie**

Sarah Younie was the fifth speaker who argued that the principles reflected in the title of her talk emphasize the need to address both cognitive and emotional growth in students, with a focus on their well-being, identity, and overall sense of achievement. One of the central concerns with the current curriculum is its emphasis on subject content, and with respect to values, the focus is on British values. The existing model tends to reduce students to target grades, overlooking their individuality and unique potential. To address this, the curriculum must shift toward a more holistic approach, valuing each student as a human being beyond their academic output. Teaching should not only engage the mind (the cognitive aspect) but also nurture the heart, helping students develop emotional intelligence and a sense of belonging in society. This broader, more inclusive vision of education challenges the reductionist view that only certain academic skills and knowledge are valuable. So, a critical aim must be to move beyond an overly academic focus. The current system measures success through academic exams, which can diminish the life chances of students who do not fit into this narrow framework. This is especially concerning when we consider that a significant proportion of students—around 40%—are disengaged with the traditional educational model. The recent rise in the number of children considered 'missing' from school after the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those labelled as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), illustrates the consequences of this limitation. Expanding assessment methods to recognize a wider range of competencies and aptitudes can help to ensure that all students experience a sense of success in school, not just those who excel in traditional academic subjects. Such an approach would empower students with a stronger sense of self-worth, self-identity and understanding of a broader range of what achievement can mean, preparing them for life beyond school.

A compassionate curriculum also demands an emphasis on arts and creativity. Sir Ken Robinson famously argued that education should not reduce students to mere "memory banks." Instead, it should engage students' senses and emotions, providing them with aesthetic experiences that foster creativity, self-expression, and personal growth. The arts—whether through music, drawing, acting, cooking, or gardening—offer students an opportunity to experience the world more fully, with all their senses engaged. These experiences should not be relegated to optional subjects but should be valued as essential components of a well-rounded education. Creativity is not just about producing art but about developing the capacity to engage with the world in a meaningful, authentic way. Furthermore, to truly support students' well-being and identity development, the curriculum must incorporate socio-emotional learning. These skills—such as emotional regulation, conflict resolution, bullying prevention, and cooperation—are essential for students to navigate the complexities of modern life and society. The challenge is that soft skills, though recognized by organizations like PISA, are often difficult to measure and assess. However, this should not be a reason to neglect their importance. Teaching these skills can be just as vital as academic knowledge because they contribute significantly to students' overall ability to conduct themselves in their life beyond school, navigating the challenges of increasingly complex living in contemporary advanced capitalism and a volatile world.

In conclusion, Sarah argued that a revised curriculum must prioritize both cognitive and emotional growth, create a broader definition of success, and foster compassion and creativity. This shift in focus will enable students to develop a strong sense of self-worth, a deeper understanding of the world around them, and the skills necessary to thrive in society. It is time to wake students up to their full potential—intellectually, emotionally, and creatively—rather than anesthetising them with a narrow, overly academic curriculum.

The language and purpose associated with the curriculum, **Peter Lacey**

In his contribution from the floor of the meeting, Peter Lacey began by holding up two visual aids in the form of sculpted heads. The one on the left is carved and the other is moulded.

He continued by informing the meeting that the woodcarver had told him that the carved head had always been inside the wooden branch from which he carved it. What he had done was to reveal it. There were other heads, similarly carved, on the pavement. Each was different. On the other hand, there are thousands of these moulded heads. All identical because they were cast in the same mould. This is a metaphor here for a purpose of education.

He emphasised his belief that a purpose of education, as it applies to the individual, is to reveal, realise, sustain, and develop possibility. By this is meant to realise the poet, the historian, the scientist, the engineer, the artist, the mathematician, the musician … or whatever latent talent might exist. And this applies to each and every learner. This lends itself to a culture of curiosity and learner agency. He also emphasised his belief that it is not a purpose of education to cast the individual in a predetermined mould. By this is meant the teacher being the deliverer of knowledge, in sequence, from a curriculum warehouse to form the learner's mind. This lends itself to a culture of teacher control and conformity, with the possibility that some learners' minds will not fit the mould.

He asked, "does all this matter when designing a curriculum?" His answer was yes, because a curriculum should be designed and expressed in a way that reflects educational purpose. The point he was making is about how the curriculum is written. Given the woodcarver's explanation, could a national curriculum be expressed in terms of "journeys of becoming" rather than "content to be transmitted"? So, for example: a curriculum for mathematics is rewritten as a curriculum for becoming mathematicians: a history curriculum is rewritten as a curriculum for becoming historians, and so on. And, whilst we are looking at language, can we repurpose assessment to ascertain not how 10 Fabian Education Policy Group Review Volume 1 Issue 2 September 2025 (Online in advance) learners perform, but what they achieve? In these ways 'delivery' and 'performance' can be purged from the education lexicon, and replaced with 'teaching', 'learning', 'becoming' and 'achievement'

Key points from participants:

This opportunity for small group discussion was very well received and there was a buzz in the room when it was evident participants were engaged in and thinking about the issues. The speakers and contributions from the floor addressed the issues from a wide variety of perspectives and written comments were received from around eighty participants. There was considerable agreement about the key issues although the terminology varied as listed below.

- The present National Curriculum of England is content led with an emphasis on discrete subjects and norm-based assessment. It is leading to a significant proportion of pupils feeling an increased level of anxiety and fear of failure.
- It is important that the National Curriculum has a clear set of aims. Ultimately, we need a curriculum that engenders and develops democracy and compassion. It should recognise all aptitudes and abilities. Assessment should be in line with the aims and involve more criteria referenced approaches.
- Pupils should have a richer personal and social development programme including the development of the skills of collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity (the 4Cs). Also, ITE is hamstrung by Ofsted and can do little to address such learning. Pupil voice is important and should be valued more.
- There should be a breadth of learning that values the arts and vocational learning with appropriate value placed on cognition and understanding rather than on just learning 'about'.
- There is a lack of women's representation in elements of the current National Curriculum. • All pupils should engage with aspects of vocational, technical and professional learning. 11 Fabian Education Policy Group Review Volume 1 Issue 2 September 2025 (Online in advance.)
- The role of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) is important, but they are finding it difficult to help schools because of funding and the structure of education provision, especially for SEND. The involvement of LEAs is imperative in creating a cohesive and locally responsive education system with a curriculum that also reflects local concerns and needs.
- There is a need to focus on the needs of Afro-Caribbean and White working-class boys with a curriculum that is relevant for them. The workforce needs to reflect the diverse nature of UK society with greater inclusion of black and ethnic minorities and genders.
- Education is political because the National Curriculum does not support pupils in developing the social skills necessary for a democracy.
- Parents' partnerships are needed with school connectedness and a sense of belonging.

Recommendations from the participants:

- Move to an aims-based curriculum with pupil-development and democracy at its heart. Look at the Labour NC of 2010 as a model. The curriculum should educate learners to become empathetic citizens.
- Relationship building should be at the centre of the aims for the curriculum and be integral, not bolt-on. Include compassion and acceptance of diversity.
- Learning to be based on social cognitive/constructivist learning theory, incorporating activities such as problem solving and investigations.
- Introduce a curriculum that includes Arts and vocational aspects. Cross-curricular lessons, which would also include some Maths and English. 12 Fabian Education Policy Group Review Volume 1 Issue 2 September 2025 (Online in advance)
- Wide range of types of assessment, including criterion referenced, to be used. All abilities and aptitudes need to be recognised.
- Set up a Qualifications and Curriculum Authority type organisation. • Change ITE to prepare professional teachers, not deliverers, be reflective practitioners, critical reflectors, be evidence-based. Consider making teaching an M level profession as in other countries and in line with Labour values under the previous Labour administration.
- Trust teachers and educators to develop their practice so they are not denied the chance to use their professional judgement, their knowledge of their learners and their context to inspire learners rather than instruct using a prescribed set of lessons.
- Introduce a Sure Start type intervention that works with pupils and parents.
- Redesign accountability models to allow for positive reform and development of Ofsted and the promotion of creativity. Schools need to be bastions of democratic thinking.
- Understand all the elements that support ideas to introduce policies, processes, structures and curricula that defend democracy.
- It is vital that there is large-scale change under Labour over a period of time.

Recommendations from the Fabian Education Policy Group

Finally, we conclude this report by focussing on the recommendations of the Fabian Education Policy Group itself which are based on our response to the Call for Evidence from the Curriculum and Assessment Review. The closing date for submissions to the Review on 22nd November coincided closely with the House of Commons event. The Fabian Education Policy Group recommends that the principles and purpose of the curriculum can be clearly stated in relation to four areas:

• Firstly, a clear statement of what our country sees as a good childhood and youth is vital. Within this statement we would expect there to be a strong commitment to well-being in the context of secure, free, responsible, happy individuals and communities.

Secondly, we recommend that the seven principles emphasized by Education Scotland in 2016 should provide an overarching commitment to what the curriculum should be characterized by: i.e., challenge and enjoyment; breadth; progression; depth; personalization and choice; coherence; and, relevance.

- Thirdly, we recommend that there should be an acceptance of the importance of the three main drivers of curriculum (i.e., the development of understanding across areas of knowledge; an objective led approach which allows for matters to do with citizenship, social justice, the economy and other matters to be fulfilled; and a commitment to child development which allows for personal growth).
- Fourthly, we recommend establishing a curriculum that will enhance for all cognitive, affective, creative and practical knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions. It will be vital to embrace the valuable approaches taken by others including the OECD who have called for an emphasis to be placed on the 4 Cs (i.e., critical thinking; collaboration; creativity and communication).

Finally, we recommend the establishment of a representative and authoritative body to oversee these developments in the future with a stature that is comparable with the former Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA).

Authors:

Brian Hudson, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Sussex and Guest Professor at Karlstad University, Sweden.

Valerie Bossman-Quarshie, Vice-chair of Islington's Children's Scrutiny Committee and teacher .

Dr. Tony Breslin, School Improvement and Governance Development Consultant, and Chair at West Herts College Group and Trustee at Agora Learning Partnership.

Peter Lacey, former lead professional officer at the National Curriculum Council, and a member of the team at the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, with responsibility for revising the National Curriculum.

Brian Matthews, teacher and lecturer at Goldsmiths and Kings College.

Mick Waters, Professor of Education at the University of Wolverhampton and former Director of Curriculum at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA).

Professor Sarah Younie, Professor of Education at De Montfort University and Chair of the International Council for the Education of Teachers (ICET).

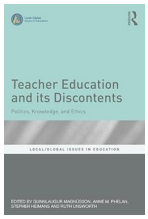
Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of Chris Harris, Marilyn Leask and Deb Outhwaite for their help in organising the event at the House of Commons and of Ian Davies and Chris Harris for their feedback in finalising this report.

Reviews:

Magnússon, G., Phelan, A., Heimans, S. and Unsworth, R. (Eds.) (2025), *Teacher Education and Its Discontents: Politics, Knowledge and Ethics (1st ed)*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, pp. xviii+208, ISBN 978-1-032-72750-9, pbk, £35.99.

Reviewed by Brian Hudson, B.G.Hudson@sussex.ac.uk, http://www.orcid.org/0000-0001-5457-6513



This is a significant, timely and thought-provoking book which illustrates common themes and problems in the politics of teacher education such as standardisation, marketisation, governance and policy, with both country-specific cases and generally formulated theoretical discussions. It has three primary aims: to illustrate and critique the ethical, epistemological and political discourses shaping teacher education; to identify and unravel the entanglements of politics, knowledge and ethics in teacher education in a range of international settings; and to revitalise teacher education by proposing and exploring alternative modes of thought and practice.

The book is one in a series based on a partnership between Routledge and the Australian Association for Research and Education (AARE) which is particularly interested in the interplay between local and global forces in education. It begins with an introduction that addresses the background context associated with "Teacher Education and its Discontents" and outlines its theoretical framing and overall approach. This is followed by nine chapters that reflect a range of country-specific cases, a chapter which aims to set a direction for future work and an Epilogue.

The content and approach on which this book is based has emerged from the collaboration of the authors in the International Teacher Education Research Collective (ITERC). In their introduction the editors describe the "emerging signature" (p. 2) of this group of scholars and teacher educators as their experience of 'contemporariness' and the insights gleaned from that experience. In doing so they reflect a very novel and interesting approach towards research in the field inspired by the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and his notion of 'the contemporary'. Central to being contemporary for Agamben (2009) means to neither perfectly coincide with one's historical moment nor adjust to its demands.

Contemporariness involves a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. The editors argue that to be totally immersed in the present, "that is to be absolutely up to date like a devoted follower of fashion", is blindness (p. 40). Agamben asserts an understanding of the deeper currents of our time requires us to be critical contemporaries. Furthermore, any effort to understand or grasp the present must engage with history as 'the shadow of the present' Acknowledging the obscurity of the present leads on to an explanation of the second characterisation of being contemporary as knowing how to recognise the light in the darkness of the present.

Finally, there is a section on the essay as form in which the editors justify the essay as the genre of choice for the collective writing in this book

Readers of the Fabian Education Policy Review are likely to be especially interested in the two chapters that focus on the context in England. Both focus on the highly contested and controversial introduction of the ITT Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework. In chapter 5, Mathew Clarke and Ruth Unsworth frame their contribution as "Teacher education, agency and knowledge: Conditions of epistemic (in)justice in teacher education". The current English education reform is also the focus of chapter 8 by Lisa Murtagh and Louisa Dawes and their case study of the associated "managerialism, performance and marketisation" (p. 143) should be required reading for all education policy makers in England at this time. They outline how recent policy changes in pre-service teacher education have led to a narrowing of curricula with highly prescribed, scrutinised and authorised pedagogic practices. Against this background the work of teacher educators has become subject to homogenized, generic and narrowly conceived knowledge-led practices. In their summing up, they draw attention to the current recruitment and retention crisis in England and turn to the significant work of the education philosopher Doris Santoro (2018) in arguing that the adoption of such techno-rational practices that are premised on the measurement of performance and student outcomes will lead to 'demoralisation' across the profession. Demoralised teachers believe that education practices and/or policy mandates enforced on the profession are harmful to students and education in general, including the teacher profession. In turn this can lead to 'principled resistance' and to teachers leaving the profession as they hold on to their moral and ethical principles.

The final chapter of the book is entitled "Towards a new standard of dissensus: Notes on de-standardising teacher education". The argument is made that professional standards can be seen as part of a trend to turn teaching from a moral, ethical and politically informed practice to a technical matter of implementing official knowledge in the shape of formal, government-delineated curriculum and with reference to the work of Gert Biesta thereby de-contesting, de-intellectualising and de-educationalising education. This statement stimulated me to reflect on my own experience of contemporariness and to think about where to find the light in the darkness of the present. It prompted questions concerning what exactly is meant by professional standards and whose professional standards are being referred to? My reflections led me to think about my time working at the University of Dundee from 2009 to 2012 and to the very constructive collaboration with colleagues at the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). The GTCS was set up in 1965 and in 2012 it became the world's first independent professional and regulatory body for teaching. It is governed by a Council of 37 members, the majority of whom are elected teachers or college lecturers. The Standard for Full Registration is the foundation of the Professional Standards and is the benchmark of competence required of all registered teachers in Scotland. In the introduction it stated that The Professional Standards, with professional values at the heart, support and promote partnership, leadership, enquiry and professional learning. They describe teacher professionalism in Scotland, our "way of being" (p. 3). The Professional Standards are organised around Professional Values and Professional Commitment, Professional Knowledge and Understanding and Professional Skills and Abilities.

The Professional Standards describe what it means "to become, to be and to grow as a teacher in Scotland" (p. 3). A distinctive characteristic is the Professional Commitment to upholding the Professional Values of social justice, trust and respect and integrity which are at the heart of the Professional Standards, and which underpin relationships, thinking and professional practice in Scotland. My reflections took me back to the paper that I

the Standard for Full Registration of the GTCS and the national goals of Higher Education (the Examensordningen) in Sweden. The latter are structured around the three broad areas of Kunskap och forestalls, Färdighet och förmåga and Värderingsförmåga och förhållningssätt. The first two terms correspond to "Knowledge and understanding" and "Skill and ability" in turn, whilst the third goal is composed of terms that are difficult to translate. The concept of värderingsförmåga can be translated as "values ability", indicating a student's ability to value and evaluate aspects of their learning and experience, including self-evaluation. Regarding the concept of förhållningssätt, this concerns values and attitudes, including the ability to relate to others and to knowledge itself through the development of a "praxis of consideration" (ibid, p.32) which resonates with the work of Ernest Boyer concerning an extended meaning of scholarship. In contrast there was no dimension in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) at that time which addressed professional values in this way.

Accordingly, it is proposed that in its future work the group distinguishes between a *restricted* conception of professionalism as is the case in England or an *extended* conception in relation to the case in Scotland as we discuss in Hudson and Outhwaite (2025). Furthermore, it is proposed that group takes account of the governance of the professional standards e.g., governed by the teaching profession itself, as is the case in Scotland or by the Secretary of State for Education as is the case in England.

Finally, from the book under review I must make a comment about Figure 10.3 which is one of seven figures that are used to exemplify professional standards across a range of international settings. The figure is presented as an example standard of Professional Standards for Teachers (Scotland). However, the representation is partial and thereby very misleading as it outlines only the Professional Knowledge and Understanding required without any reference to the Professional Skills and Abilities or most crucially to the Professional Values and Professional Commitment that are at the heart GTCS Professional Standards. Furthermore, it is both surprising and puzzling to see that the source is listed as the "UK Government, Department of Education, 2021" (p. 182).

References

Agamben, G. (2009) *What is an apparatus and other essays*. (trans. D. Kishik and S. Pedatella). Stanford University Press.

Hudson, B. and Outhwaite, D. (2025) Addressing the crisis in the professional education and development of teachers in England, *Fabian Education Policy Group Review*, Vol. 1., Issue 1, 25-30.

Hudson, B. (2011). Reclaiming scholarship as an integrating dimension of academic work for the impact of research on teaching and learning in Higher Education. *Scottish Educational Review*, *43*(1), 24-40. https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-04301003

Brian Hudson is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Sussex and Guest Professor at Karlstad University, Sweden. He was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2004, honorary membership of EERA Network 27 Didactics – Learning and Teaching in 2016 and is a Fellow of the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications. Before working in higher education, he was a secondary school teacher of mathematics for fifteen years working in comprehensive schools.

Hopkins, D. (2024). *Unleashing Greatness. A strategy for school improvement*. London, John Catt from Hodder Education. 352 pages. ISBN 9781398389090. P/bk, £16.

Reviewed by Brian Matthews, King's College London and Chair, Fabian Education Policy Group.

briancmatthews@yahoo.co.uk

David Hopkins is an expert in school improvement and has been involved in a great deal of international research in this field. All of this is evident in this excellent book. The main themes include a focus on pupil learning through a moral purpose, a concentration on classroom practice involving enhancements to teachers' professional development and the cultivation of positive distributed leadership. A key point is that these areas should be fostered together.

Following a clearly written introduction in which arguments are made against ineffective and unnecessarily bureaucratic educational systems in favour of a more positive vision, the book has three main parts. The first part, *Why school improvement?*, lays out the central arguments and the background before establishing a 'greatness framework' and arguing for the importance of forming an educational narrative. Part 2, *All the moving parts,* focusses on establishing a moral purpose and strategic action that advances classroom practice and staff development. Part 3, *Moving to scale,* concerns leadership.

There are many aspects of this book that are very good and schools would benefit from using it.

A great deal of evidence is used to support the argument that students benefit when their learning is supported by means of a strong aims-based narrative and a plan of action that will be evaluated on the basis of data and personal reflection. Teachers are seen as the key to success and so their professional development is vital. There is a welcome emphasis on peer coaching, which is seen as essential. Similarly, collaboration between schools is recommended for school improvement initiatives where the schools are actively interdependent in mutually beneficial relationships. Hopkins argues for teachers developing powerful learning experiences for students, making positive use of formative assessment and enhancing cognitive and social skills.

Hopkins references a range of key thinkers. I welcomed the reference to Habermas and critical theory to suggest that change should be transformative, emancipatory and authentic. Genuine school improvement, rather than initiatives based on fads, is difficult and requires a co-operative and distributive leadership that is both top down and bottom up, while based on pupil learning. School development requires a development of a culture in the school that is positive to change where each person feels they can contribute. Pink's ideas on intrinsic motivation are mentioned (Pink 2011), including that people can take some ownership of their development and use their teaching to achieve a moral purpose. Hopkins refers to Stenhouse as being a strong influence on him. There is a good section that discusses the objectives model of curriculum, where behavioural objects are stated, taught, and then evaluated. This is compared with Stenhouse's process model where objectives are not specified, but 'describe an educational encounter'.

That is, the teacher organises the classroom and students so that they go through the process of engaging with a problem, learning a variety of skills as well as academic knowledge. The process model, it is argued, links with the moral purpose of 'Unleashing Greatness'. There is then a lovely section on 'Fertile Questions', and associated skills, such as metacognition, enabling students to become inquirers, creative, reflective and team workers.

Perhaps some of the language used is not entirely appropriate for those based outside the US. An excellent chapter on learning relies on ideas and practices about 'instruction'. Of course, many teachers commonly use teacher directed teaching – instruction – and some may intend to deliver knowledge to students as if they were blank slates and to lead by issuing directives. A clearer and more inclusive elucidation of key ideas is needed.

Another example of the need for better explanation may be seen in the section of the book on *Models of Teaching* in which whole class teaching is emphasized prior to a discussion of inductive teaching and co-operative group work. Unfortunately, group work is seen mainly in terms of improving academic learning, not as the means by which a broader set of skills may be generated. It would have helped to connect arguments about pedagogy with the work of Vygotsky in which students work collaboratively, using language to gain understanding. It is unfortunate that understanding is not prioritised over memorization. There could be greater recognition of the social and emotional skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration and empathy that are essential components for helping pupils become citizens in a democracy. There could have been much greater reinforcement of the ideas that could emerge from a 'process model' and the 'fertile questions' that have been mentioned above.

The language used in the highlighting of key areas that are emphasized is very important because to be a citizen, one of the aims in this book, one has to, for example, be an enquirer, to be reflective and a problem solver. It is doubtful that these things can always be taught explicitly. The teacher needs to change their role and provide situations where students can develop these skills. Much greater discussion about the need to change teachers' roles is needed, with more emphasis on processes and pupil-voice.

It is to be welcomed that Hopkins wishes to promote what he refers to as a critical paradigm. He wants education to be transformational, emancipatory and authentic. What a pity that this great message was not more evident in the central chapters. It is possible that Hopkins has erred on the side of caution and has, perhaps unintentionally, reduced the impact of an argument that could have been made more explicitly for social justice, equity and diversity. Those who read this book will have to decide if there is too much caution.

In brief, this is a useful book, and I urge people to read it.

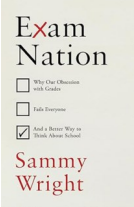
References

Pink, D. H. (2011). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. London, Canongate.

Brian Matthews taught in London schools. He worked at Goldsmith's college and ran the PGCE science ITE course. He researched ways of developing pupils' emotional literacy/intelligence in the subject classroom. At King's College he was involved in EU research on assessment (SAILS). His publications include *Engaging Education: Developing emotional literacy, equity and co-education* (Open University Press). He considers the present curriculum reflects right-wing values and has written about education and fascism.

Wright, S. (2024), *Exam nation. Why our obsession with grades fails everyone, and a better way to think about schools* London, Bodley Head, pp. 288, ISBN 978-1-847-92752-1, hbk. £22.

Reviewed by Dr Nikki Booth, Birmingham City University, UK, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4765-0196, nikki.booth@bcu.ac.uk



Exam Nation by Sammy Wright is a compelling exploration of England's education system, delving into the pressures and challenges faced by learners and educators alike. Wright, a veteran teacher, Head of School, and former member of the government's Social Mobility Commission, provides a nuanced perspective on the impact of examinations and the broader implications for society.

The central theme of the book is the critique of an education system that prioritises grades and rankings over more holistic learning and personal development. The book begins by delving into the algorithm fiasco during the Covid19 pandemic. This is a prime example of how an assessment system, such as England's, can fail learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Wright critiques the infamous grading algorithm (used prior to Teacher Assessed Grades taking precedence) and highlights that it was this incident that greatly exposed serious flaws in the system, thus prioritising rankings over individual potential. This, in turn, led to reinforcing systemic inequalities rather than seeking to address them.

What sets this book apart is that it is structured around the experiences of several learners and teachers navigating the high-stakes environment of examinations. Wright skilfully weaves together their stories, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll these examinations can take. The narratives themselves are both engaging and thought-provoking. They are highly relatable and multidimensional, with each highlighting individual struggles and aspirations. The learners' diverse backgrounds and personalities add a welcome depth to the narrative. Teachers are also portrayed with empathy as they grapple with the demands of the examination system and their unyielding desire to support their learners. These narratives help shape a powerful critique of the education system. Although Wright does not shy away from the harsh realities of the system, he does highlight moments of hope and triumph. He raises important questions about the purpose of education and the 'true' measure of success. Through learners' and teachers' journeys, readers are invited to reflect on their own educational experiences and consider the broader societal implications of an exam-centric approach.

Exam Nation is not merely a lament of the current system in England. Wright offers plausible suggestions for reform, advocating a shift from rigid grading structures to a more holistic 'Passport Qualification', which has the

potential to assess personal development alongside academic achievement, ensuring that young people are prepared for life after school, not just for university entrance. His vision for schools as community hubs rather than examination factories is inspiring, practical and sensible

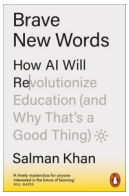
.

This book is a must-read for anyone looking to understand the complexities of the modern education landscape and the urgent need for change. It challenges readers to rethink the role of examinations and the 'true' purpose of education. Whether you are a policymaker, educator, parent/carer, a learner, or simply someone interested in the future of education, this book offers valuable insights and a compelling call to action.

Nikki Booth is a Visiting Lecturer and Researcher in Education at Birmingham City University. He previously taught for 15 years in secondary schools in the English Midlands, holding leadership roles, including Head of Assessment. His research interest explores how educational assessment can enhance teaching and learning effectiveness.

Khan, S. (2024). Brave New Worlds: How AI will Revolutionize Education (and why that's a good thing), Allen Lane. xxxiii + 237 pages. ISBN 978-0241680964, h/bk, £25.00

Reviewed by Professor Michael J. Reiss, m.reiss@ucl.ac.uk, University College London, UK. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1207-4229



Sal(man) Khan is best known as the founder of Khan Academy, a free online non-profit educational platform that I can recommend. Like many successful companies it has its 'origin myth'. In 2004, after he had graduated from MIT, Khan was working in his 20s as a financial analyst. He began tutoring his cousin, Nadia, in mathematics over the internet. When friends and other members of his family sought his tutoring too, he moved his tutorials to YouTube. Today, Khan Academy has produced over ten thousand video lessons and has over 150 million users.

In *Brave New Worlds*, Khan looks at the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education. As one might expect, the book comes with over-the-top accolades from Bill Gates ("No one has thought more about these issues – or has more interesting things to say about them"), Francis Ford Coppola ("Salman Khan is the leading thinker about education in the age of AI"), Sam Altman, Tony Blair, George Lucas and others.

As an academic who works on education, including on the use of AI in schools, my judgement is that this is, overall, a fine book. The downsides are, first, that the field is moving very rapidly, so that even though the book was published as recently as May 2024, parts of it are beginning to show their ages, and, secondly, that, as one might expect, Khan is more inclined to see the likely positives ("Whether playing games, telling jokes, or having silly conversations, a family that uses large language models in a positive and constructive way can help strengthen its relationships and create lasting memories", pp.117-8) than the possible negatives. Nevertheless, there is quite a bit in here about the possible downsides of AI in education and I found the book on the whole to be much more

balanced than much that I read on this issue for a general audience. (For a hyperbolic prophecy about the benefits of AI for education, see Seldon with Abidoye 2018.

One of the great things about this book is that it is very readable. For example, in the Introduction, Khan relates how when he came across the Large Language Model ChatGPT, he asked it to write the Declaration of Independence in the voice of Donald Trump. The resulting text begins:

> Folks, let me tell you, it is time for us to declare our independence from this failing government and this terrible leader, George III. I mean, this guy is a total disaster. He's been taking way our rights, he's been ignoring the will of the people, and he's been more interested in lining his own pockets than actually helping the people. It is sad, really, really sad. (p.xxv)

There's also a version in the style of Dr Suess.

Khan is at his best when he gives examples of how the Large Language Models that Kahn Academy now employs are used to act as tutors, providing personalised teaching to students, with rapid feedback. When I compare Khan's account of the use of AI in history teaching with the terrible history teaching I received as a child, I know which I would prefer – and learn more from. Furthermore, Khan is not someone who believes that AI will replace teachers. Rather, he sees the best teachers as working with AI. It's a bit like how robots are increasingly used in surgery. My father was an obstetrician and gynaecologist and always keen to incorporate new technologies. He would have loved to work with a robot to facilitate, for example, tubal reconstruction as a way of tacking blocked fallopian tubes. For myself, I have been encouraged at the range of ways that many of my doctoral students are using AI – to draft interview schedules, to speed up qualitative analysis, to improve their written English, and so on.

Brave New Worlds has just been produced in paperback (RRP £10.99). If you are interested in the potential of AI for education, I can recommend this book with few reservations.

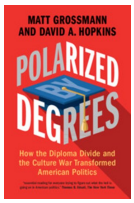
Reference

Seldon, A. with Abidoye, O. (2018) *The Fourth Education Revolution: will Artificial Intelligence liberate or infantilise humanity*. Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press.

Michael J. Reiss is Professor of Science Education at University College London and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. The former Director of Education at the Royal Society, President of the Association for Science Education, and President of the International Society for Science and Religion, he has written extensively about curricula, pedagogy and assessment.

'Polarized by Degrees: How the Diploma Divide and the Culture War Transformed American Politics', Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins (2024), Cambridge University Press, 386 pages, ISBN: 1316512010, £25 (p/bk).

Reviewed by Professor James Sloam (Royal Holloway University), james.sloam@rhul.ac.uk



The great American philosopher John Dewey (2016) wrote that education is not only important for democracy. He argued that 'education is democracy'. The point he was making was that how we learn and understand society, as well as the democratic values schools embed in their young people, is vital for a healthy and pluralistic democracy. So, what effect has the dramatic expansion of higher education over several decades meant for our democratic societies?

Grossmann and Hopkins, in their sweeping investigation of the impact on American politics, provide strong evidence to show that this change has greatly contributed to the polarization of politics in the United States and the so-called culture wars. The general argument – that the presence of an increasingly highly-educated electorate increases the prevalence of progressive values – is not new. The great political scientist Ronald Inglehart (2015) and colleagues found that this had led to a 'silent revolution' – a growth in support for liberal values that led to efforts to address discrimination against women and a range of minoritized groups.

In the book, Grossmann and Hopkins, showcase plentiful evidence of how this has happened in the United States and how it has transformed support for the two main political parties. More highly educated people have become increasingly supportive of the Democratic Party, whilst those with lower levels of educational attainment have become more supportive of the Republicans. They show how this has fed into culture wars on issues such as gay marriage and support for diversity and even abortion rights for women – with the highly educated holding progressive views and the less-well-educated holding much more socially conservative views. The book plots the mass migration of highly-educated citizens to the Democrats and less-well-educated citizens to the Republicans over several decades.

The analysis of how these changing values have led to a realignment in political support – a seismic shift in the political landscape – is both comprehensive and convincing.

However, the depiction of culture wars and political polarization in the United States offers a popular account of recent political changes that does not bear up to scrutiny. Whilst Grossmann and Hopkins show how those with high and low levels of educational attainment have become much more likely to identify with the Democrats and Republicans, respectively, they (rather strangely) ignore the fact that (according to opinion polling data) the proportion of Americans who identify with either party has declined significantly since the turn of the century. Yes, the diploma divide marks a key fault line in support for the two parties and their candidates. But the polarization in American politics is not nearly as clear-cut as they describe.

What the authors portray as polarization by party identification, masks a broad disillusionment with democratic politics in the United States. This is a consequence of the expansion of higher education that the authors do not adequately discuss: the increasing prevalence of what Pippa Norris (2011) calls 'critical citizens', who are less aligned with any one party, and are more likely to vote on the basis of *issues* and *identities* rather than economic class. This explains the reality of low voter turnout in US elections and historically low levels of trust in democratic institutions.

In times of economic crisis, the lack of attachment to political parties – which has increased significantly over several decades – can be exploited by populists. So, the candidacies of Donald Trump were as much about the mobilisation of anti-establishment sentiment – against the Bushes and Mitt Romney as much as against the Clintons or Obama – as they were about the conservative cultural backlash that the authors describe. The populist narrative is that political and economic elites, who supported economic globalisation and immigration and supposedly benefitted personally form the process, are betraying the 'left behind'.

On this last point, the authors also do not address the importance of political communication and narratives. Trump's success, and the success of other populist campaigns (including the Leave campaign in the 2016 UK Brexit referendum) was founded on an ability to characterize the economic problems people were facing in the everyday lives as the consequence of immigration and *economic globalisation*. In reality, a large majority of Americans wish to see tighter gun controls, women's right to choose over abortion, irrespective of their level of educational attainment.

Another problem with the book is that – by focussing on the diploma divide – they under-emphasize, some of the other great changes in voting patterns. The proportion of younger voters, women, and those living in urban areas, who support the Democrats has increased to unprecedented levels in recent elections, as has the support of older voters, men, and those living in rural areas for the Republicans. In my forthcoming book on youth voting with colleagues (Sloam et al. 2025), we show that – amongst young Americans at the 2024 Presidential Election – educational attainment was very important in determining voting patterns, but not as important as gender, ethnicity, or urban-rural residency. Thus, the authors do not pay enough attention to the intersectionality of education with identity politics, or place-based voting and other demographic factors.

Economic inequality and religiosity are two further factors that drive political attitudes in the United States and were worthy of greater attention. The high levels of poverty and economic inequalities in the US allow populists to exploit the fears of the have-nots, and high levels of religiosity (compared to the UK and most of Europe) make cultural conservatism more appealing.

What can we learn in the UK from this analysis of the diploma divide?

In a strange way, the diploma divide may be more of a feature of changing voting patterns in the UK than in the United States – given that both religion and race are less important political cleavages. Educational attainment has become a much more important indicator than class in recent elections – since the 2016 EU referendum. But we should also remember that the UK offers more political choice. So, young graduates are as likely to vote Liberal Democrat or Green as they are to vote Labour.

The importance of education for democracy is not only about the shaping of values (which Grossmann and Hopkins focus on), but – more importantly in my opinion – about its effect on political participation. University graduates and those who have a greater understanding about politics are much more likely to vote in elections and trust in democratic institutions. In the 2024 UK General Election, less than 40% of 18-24-year-olds turned out to vote – and the figure was close 20% for young people from the lowest (DE) social class.

In this sense, citizenship education (to accompany to the introduction of Votes at 16 in UK general elections), allowing opportunities to learn about and practice democracy and increase political literacy (Henn et al. 2025), can help to address the real threat – which is not polarization, but a lack of trust in democratic institutions and low participation amongst young generations and groups of low socio-economic status or with low levels of educational attainment.

List of References

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Columbia University Press.

Henn, M., Sloam, J. and A. Nunes (2025) *Young people and citizenship education: The impact of studying GCSE Citizenship Studies on young people's democratic engagement and participation*. Association for Citizenship Teaching.

Inglehart, R. (2015). *The silent revolution: Changing values and political styles among Western publics*. Princeton University Press.

Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.

Sloam, J., Henn, M. and A. Nunes (2025, forthcoming). *Youthquakes and Aftershocks: Youth Political Participation in the UK, Europe and the United States.* Palgrave/ Springer.

Reviewer Biography

James Sloam is Professor of Politics at Royal Holoway University. He has published extensively on issues relating to youth participation in democracy, and worked extensively with civil society, civic authorities and international organisations to empower young people from traditionally marginalised groups through civic and political engagement. James' forthcoming (2025) books focus on youth voting in the UK and the US (with Matt Henn and Ana Nunes, Palgrave/Springer) and on amplifying youth voice to improve the quality of public policy (Bristol University Press).

FABIAN MEMBERS

EDUCATION POLICY GROUP

Join the Fabian Education Policy Group

Opportunities to develop educational thinking for a leading think tank policy group and affiliate of the Labour Party

Regular online meetings with guest speakers.

Opportunities to write papers on your interests/expertise for our FEPG review or submit blogs to our website.

Regular House of Commons discussion events with leading practitioners.

Liaison with other progressive groups and educational stakeholders in the field.

A unique opportunity to engage with recent developments in key educational research worldwide.

For more details please contact:
fabianseducationsecretary@gmail.com
fabianseducation@gmail.com

Web: https://www.fabianeducation.com

Delegates at this year's Labour Conference are invited to the following Fabian Society events:

Mind the Skills Gap

Monday 28th , 13:45 - 14:45

The Bluecoat, 8 School Lane, Liverpool, L1 3BX

Apprenticeships and training are vital to unlocking growth and helping people access opportunity. This session will explore how we can tackle the skills gap, from reforming the levy to supporting lifelong learning.

The College Convention

Tuesday 30th September, 9:30 - 12:35

The Bluecoat, 8 School Lane, Liverpool, L1 3BX

FE colleges play a vital role in local economies across the country. They are central to delivering the government's key missions: from upskilling workers and driving growth, to enabling access to green jobs as we transition to clean energy. From training the construction workers required to build the homes we need, to supporting people into essential roles in health and care.

This keynote event - held in partnership with the Association of Colleges - will bring together around 80 college, industry and union leaders, alongside policymakers and education experts for two interactive discussions on the future of FE colleges. Each session will start with contributions from leading politicians and stakeholders, before we move into breakout discussions.

Session 1: The Role of Anchor Institutions in Delivering a Mission Led Government 9:30 - 10:50 (refreshments and networking from 9:00)

This session will discuss what mission-led government should look like in local places, and explore how we can empower colleges to deliver on the missions locally. You can sign up to attend this session **here**.

Session 2: Unlocking the Potential of a Tertiary Education System, 11.05 - 12.35

This session will explore how a reimagined tertiary education system can drive social mobility, build skilled communities and support economic development. You can sign up to attend this session **here**.

Grateful if you could share these with the Fabian Education Policy Group. And hope you might be able to join for these if you'll be in Liverpool.

Our full programme is available here.

FABIAN SOCIETY
LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE 2025

FESTIVAL
OF IDEAS

The Fabian Education Policy Group Review.

All FEPG publications are produced with the intention of assisting in the development of an excellent education service based on the needs of learners, professionals, academics, policy makers and all non-professionals, especially those with particular interests in education including parents and carers and community members. All our work is informed by ambitions to achieve equity and social justice and is presented accordingly.

HOW TO WRITE FOR THE REVIEW AND FEPG

If you would like to write for the FEPG Review, we would welcome your pitches, and we are seeking articles for our New Year 2026 edition.

The scope of our work is, deliberately, broad and inclusive. All ideas and issues regarding education within - but not restricted to - the UK are relevant to FEPG publications. This means that we are interested in theory and practice, in academic, policy and professional contexts and in developments and processes involving experiments, evaluations and other perspectives. We are interested in all age-related phases of education, within and beyond formal, informal and non-formal contexts

Articles for the review should be of between 1000 and 6000 words, double spaced and include the title of the contribution, the name(s) of the author(s) and the name to be used for correspondence together with an email address. Each article should be accompanied by an abstract of 100 words, and a short note of the biographical details of the author(s). The material submitted to the Review will typically be longer than blogs or book reviews.

For more details on how submit work for the FEPG Review or a blog for our website please contact Chris Harris Email: Chrisharris55@hotmail.co.uk. To submit a review of an educational publication please contact: Ian.Davies@york.ac.uk

If you would like to write a blog for our website, send your blog to Chrisharris55@hotmail.co.uk