

Foundation stones and steps to success

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About our Schools: improving on previous best

Mick Waters and Tim Brighouse, Carmarthen, Crown House Publishing, 2022.

680pp, paperback, £24.99, ISBN: 978-1-785-83586-5

During lockdown some of us took up gardening, learnt to cook or tried to home school the kids. Not Mick Waters and Tim Brighouse. They set about examining in detail education policy and practice from the late 1970s to the present day, looking at the history and political decisions made, and setting out what policy-makers and education leaders can do now to ensure that our schools improve on their previous best. The authors set themselves the lofty ambition of interviewing all of the secretaries of state for education that they possibly could. They managed 14 in total. This alone would have made an interesting read, for those taking part included Kenneth Baker, the divisive Michael Gove and the much-maligned Gavin Williamson. But the authors did not stop there. Many interviewees suggested they speak to other leading figures in education, and eventually the project ballooned into a 680-page tome. Daunting at first to pick up, it is very difficult to put down.

The book is split into four parts. The first part covers political influences and the state's involvement in education. Part two covers what the authors call 'the confused and disputed arenas' (p?), with topics such as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment explored. Part three looks at overcoming barriers to success, whilst the final part looks to the future and sets out the authors' foundation stones and steps to success.

The book is an overwhelmingly optimistic one. It places the child at the very centre of everything. One phrase which stood out to me at the very start was: 'The best teachers treat children as they might become, rather than as they (sometimes infuriatingly) are' (p9). In this, the authors are themselves paraphrasing William Temple, a public school headteacher and former Archbishop of Canterbury, who said that morality requires that a man should be treated 'as what he might be, as what he might become' (p10), stating that the work of education is to raise the 'level of what he is to the level of what he might be' (p10). In the passage, Temple goes on to say that education is essential to free us from mental slavery, for 'if you want human liberty, you must have educated people' (p11). This is of course the point of comprehensive education, a point blunted by the existence of selective education in this country.

One thing I would have liked to have seen more of in the book is a focus on the destructive nature of selective and private education on social mobility in this country. The authors barely touch on it, though in a footnote they do state that they believe there

is ‘no case for selection ... especially at 11’ (p?). Later on, they describe grammar schools as ‘the equivalent of a hospital for the very fit and healthy where you are only admitted as long as you can prove you are well’ (p?). They fail to point out, though, the pernicious effect grammar schools have on the educational eco-system of the surrounding area, and on the children who, at the age of 11, are branded as failures.

The final part of the book deals with the cliché of ‘building back better’, and considers what a reconstructed system would look like and how it could improve upon the current one. In this section, Brighouse and Waters offer six foundation stones and 39 steps to success. They begin with a list of questions, prompting readers to consider what we want from a future society. Is it writers to delight us, for example, or good journalists to inform us? By doing so, Brighouse and Waters prompt us to think again about the purpose of education, and to consider not the children in front of us but the men or women they may become. The authors make us take stock and weigh up whether we need a banking model of education, in which a child is viewed as an empty vessel to be filled with a set of knowledge dictated by a narrow group at the top, or a model which can enable critical thinkers. They believe the system must maximise the talent of the young people in our care, for ‘so great are the challenges we face that we cannot afford the human waste we have tolerated in the past’ (p?). The book reaffirms the duty we have as educators not only to the young people under our care but to society as a whole.

The book ends with a manifesto of sorts for dealing with the challenges in education. The main theme is hope. The authors warn against a poverty of hope: ‘without hope people perish’ (p?). They correctly surmise that young people deserve to have hope. Although the authors state that there should be ‘no limit on our ambition for learning’ (p?), there seems, nevertheless, to be very little that is truly radical in their ambition. This is not to say interesting ideas aren’t presented. The concept of open schools, for example, is an exciting proposition which would certainly have provided a more democratic and sustainable system than the one offered by Oak National Academy and supported by the government during the early stages of the pandemic.

The idea of an open school is based on the success of the Open University, and Brighouse and Waters see it as playing a major role in raising educational standards. Open schools already exist, we are told, in Canada and Australia, where they serve isolated communities. With the technology available now, it is interesting to think about how a new model of education may emerge which can offer a ‘parallel but interlinked school programme’ (p?). The open school could provide bespoke timetables for individual pupils, and it is theorised that such an approach could solve the problems faced by schools in terms of behaviour management and exclusions, whilst allowing pupils to join in group discussions with pupils located geographically elsewhere, with the teacher acting as a guide. How this would work in reality need to be much more fleshed out, of course. My main question would be how to motivate pupils in an age where independent

learning has been crushed by knowledge-based rote learning models.

The authors quote Judith Little's observation (p?) that you know a good school because it is a place where teachers engage in talking about teaching, and also work collaboratively, observing each other, planning, organising and evaluating together. This is unfortunately not the case in a lot of schools, where the fear of Ofsted has led to senior leadership turning towards more quantitative forms of observation and monitoring. An idea put forward in this book is for expert consultant teachers. This really piqued my interest, for it would involve having a route of career progression for teachers separate from the current leadership pathways on offer, and in some ways similar to the route for consultants in a hospital trust, 'working on the most challenging agendas, pushing the boundaries of practice' (p?).

Another idea which will make the authors popular with educators and school leaders everywhere is that Ofsted should be overhauled, with the aim of 'reducing its enormous scope and function'. The authors quote National Education Union joint general secretary Mary Bousted, who rightly points out that 'accountability is out of hand. Workload is excessive ... leadership in schools feels huge pressure to provide evidence' (p?). Nick Brook from the National Association of Head Teachers has similar opinions, saying that 'high-stakes accountability is doing more harm than good' (p?). He points out that it creates perverse incentives and puts off good teachers from teaching in schools where they are most needed.

I must confess I read this chapter in the hope that the authors would call for the complete abolition of Ofsted. Instead, they call for a league table of sorts where parents would be given score cards for schools, an approach which shows that the authors are unable, sadly, to break from the false ideas and values which inform neo-liberal marketisation of education. This again is reflected by the acceptance in their plan of the continuation of academies and free schools, though the authors do talk of these institutions coming under the remit of new 'local partnerships' (p?).

The section of the book that interested me most began as follows: 'In the interests of securing a schooling system based on equality of opportunity for all pupils, and therefore an equitable system that will bring social inclusion closer, we need six changes to the funding system for state-funded schools' (p?). Even so, the suggestions here seem slightly lacklustre compared to the radical ones put forward over the past six years by organisations such as Comprehensive Future, who are campaigning for a secondary school system with fair admissions and no more 11-plus, and Labour Against Private Schools, who made headlines when their motion to abolish private schooling was passed by the Labour Party conference.

Brighouse and Waters point out the deleterious effects of private education, noting that social mobility is not compatible with privileged schools that dominate access to well-paid careers. They list the vastly better funding private schools enjoy, their smaller

class sizes, old-school-tie networks and so on, advantages secured ‘all at the expense of the 93 per cent of children’ at state schools (p?). There seems to be cognitive dissonance here, in that whilst the authors see the many problems caused by private education, they confirm that they ‘are not among those who would seek to abolish private schooling’ (p?). They call instead for technocratic solutions such as RPI-linked increases to fees of schools attended by members of the cabinet. Other ideas are included, such as private school equity taxes, and there’s a confusing discussion about using artificial intelligence in schools, which, while laudable, will do little to solve the problems entrenched in our inequitable system.

Overall I did enjoy the book. I found it easy to read and informative. The authors point out that it is not meant to be read cover to cover but rather dipped into and out of as a reference book, and I will definitely keep it close to hand when I am writing about education. To have collected the views of so many of the greats of education from the past 70 years is indeed an accomplishment that should be celebrated and, whilst I feel some of the ideas put forward are not radical enough to have the impact needed, I hope that this book is read by those in positions of power. Even if a fraction of the ideas presented by Brighouse and Waters are taken on board, we could see vast improvements to the educational landscape.

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