

About Our Schools

Improving on Previous Best

Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters



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For over 150 years, Barnardo's has worked to protect and support children and young people facing a range of issues from homelessness, drug misuse and disability to sexual abuse and domestic violence. In 2020, Barnardo's supported over 350,000 young people across the UK.

The Compassionate Education Foundation exists to bring compassion into everything we do in education by engineering innovative collaborative projects designed to enhance the processes, practices and products of individuals, schools, colleges and universities as well as the varied organisations that support them.

Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters thank you for buying this book and, in doing so, supporting two very worthwhile causes.

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Part One

**Political influence
– storms, showers
and sunny periods ...
and the realities of a
changing climate in
schooling**

Chapter 1

School climate changes over the years

The state's involvement in schooling and how 1976 was a turning point from one educational age to another – a brief synopsis

What sort of climate should we want?

The teacher is the most important influence in the schooling system.

We have each spent a lifetime in state-provided education, first as pupils, then as teachers and finally in various leadership positions both in and out of schools. We have never stopped learning or making mistakes from which we like to think we have sometimes learned. We know that the best teachers use pupil mistakes as a positive opportunity to learn, and we believe that the same is true of ourselves and the other professionals with whom we have worked and to whom we owe so much. Our endeavour has always been to improve on previous best.

This book has been born out of a shared passion for education as it occurs in schools, where it can so often be transformative of children and young people's lives. Teachers at their best – and we have witnessed myriad examples of this – change for the better the attitudes and future trajectory of young lives. We agree with the wisdom and judgement of Haim Ginott when he famously said: 'I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.'¹

1 H. G. Ginott, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 15–16.

Nor do we disagree with Robert Fried's judgement:

Of some of our teachers, we remember their foibles and mannerisms, of others, their kindness and encouragement, or their fierce devotion to standards of work that we probably did not share at the time. And of those who inspired us most, we remember what they cared about, and that they cared about us, and the person we might become. It is the quality of caring about ideas and values, this fascination with the potential for growth within people, this depth and fervour about doing things well and striving for excellence, that comes closest to what I mean in describing a 'passionate teacher'.²

In our experience as pupils, we were each fortunate when we met such teachers and the ones who, as Fried says, 'inspired us most', and know of their effect on us. In our adult lives, in and around schools, we have witnessed the sometimes profound impact of a teacher on pupils and sought to spread it and improve the chances of it occurring more often and more widely. Dylan Wiliam is surely right when he reminds teachers in workshops that their individual effectiveness is the most significant influence on pupil success and that this can explain why variations in quality and outcome within a school are greater than that between schools.

But we also think that the school is powerfully influential too. It creates the 'climate' within which the teacher has a better or worse chance of making the best 'weather'. That is why consideration of school improvement, which only surfaced as a concept with research by Michael Rutter at the very start of the period we have chosen to examine, is so important in the improvement of pupil experiences and outcomes that has occurred in our lifetimes.

To extend the search for improved schooling and pupil outcomes, we must also look beyond the school itself. The climate and the weather are affected deliberately (and indirectly by many other factors, such as the community and the socio-economic background of the individual families that the school serves) by two further agents: first, by the MAT and/or the local authority within which the school operates and, second, and most insistently, by central government through the secretary of state for education, the DfE and other central agencies such as the Office for

2 R. L. Fried, *The Passionate Teacher: A Practical Guide* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 17.

Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual).

That is why we sought to interview some of the key civil servants and special advisers (SpAds), as well as the former secretaries of state who were available, since the Ruskin College speech by Prime Minister Jim Callaghan in October 1976, which launched what was described as the 'Great Debate' about education and the schooling system.³ We chose 1976 as the starting point for our story because it punctuates the period from 1945 to the present day. Before 1976 was an age which might be dubbed one of optimism and trust (probably misplaced), and afterwards one of markets, centralisation and managerialism, while the speech itself was given during a period of doubt and disillusion when the developments in schooling set up at the end of the Second World War were called into question.

We have focused on what we might learn from this second period – as well as acknowledging what the early phase taught us – because we feel that the time is ripe. We also want to take the best of 'what is' and speculate about 'what might be' to improve on our 'previous best' – always the quest of successful teachers, whether in respect of their own practice or that of their pupils. In short, it is time to move towards a new age, just as happened in the 1970s as we transitioned from optimism and trust to markets, centralisation and managerialism.

Despite its undoubted successes, there are similar doubts gathering now about the effectiveness of this present age in meeting present and future needs in what is a world of accelerating change. That change comes in many forms – social, technological and natural – and it will be confronted and solved or harnessed by the present and future generations of educated citizens. Our schools and schooling system need to be sure they are preparing all our present and future pupils to live confidently as fulfilled citizens in a world affected by climate change, the global shift of populations, the application of artificial intelligence and robotics refined by nanotechnology, as well as the changes ushered in by the creation and expansion of the World Wide Web, meaning that use of the internet and its associated technologies will have profound implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and how to handle the revolution in human communications. All our practitioner witnesses were profoundly

3 J. Callaghan, A Rational Debate Based on the Facts. Speech delivered at Ruskin College, Oxford (18 October 1976). Available at: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html>.

worried about the impact of social media on children, adolescents and parents.

We will therefore explore the elements external to the school which influence how successful teachers and schools can be in raising the competence, learning and horizons of all their students, whatever their talents, challenges, advantages or problems. In doing so, we try to be led by the evidence, although we are aware of the pitfalls of ‘evidence-based policy’, even though it is now a phrase widely used by decision-makers at all levels of the schooling system.

What should we expect schools to be achieving, and what are the values that underpin those purposes?

Hovering in the background, however, is another powerful influence on policy-makers and those in leadership positions – namely, the values and beliefs we all hold, together with what we think the aims of schools and the schooling system should be. Let us therefore be explicit: if we had to create agreed aims for our schooling system, which surprisingly are not set out for England or the United Kingdom as a whole, we might start with the list below.

We want our children to understand through their schooling that:

- It will be their duty as adults to guard and participate in a representative democracy that values national and local government. To that end, schools will progressively involve students in many aspects of school life and the community in which the school and the families are located.
- Their religious faith and beliefs will be respected and they will be encouraged through their schooling to respect all faiths and the humanist position.
- The many differently rewarded jobs and careers, which are vital to the well-being and practical operation of our society and

others elsewhere in the world, are open to them. These include producing our food, construction and manufacturing, providing energy, medicine and care, logistics, information and entertainment, defending us, making and upholding our laws, cleaning up our mess and doing the tasks that only few can face, caring for our world and working to support less fortunate people and causes, offering solace and helping others to learn, perhaps in classrooms, libraries, galleries or museums. This kaleidoscope of employed and self-employed opportunities, available in the private, public and voluntary sectors, is ever changing and expanding under the influence of accelerating political, economic, social and technological developments.

- These careers require differing talents and schooling experiences will be based on valuing them as individuals and equipping them with the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills to make a successful and rewarding contribution to society as adults, in and out of work.
- They will be encouraged and expected to think for themselves and act for others through their life at school and in the community. They will be aware of how decisions are reached and how actions can work to solve or create problems. In doing so, they will explore and understand the range of obligations, contributions, rights and choices open to them in our own and other societies.
- They will build a desire to learn and a love of learning by being offered a range of learning opportunities that will reap more benefit if they commit to learning and seek further learning experiences in other positive contexts.
- They will encounter through their schooling experiences expert help in acquiring a foundation of skills and knowledge which will allow them to survive and flourish in our own and other societies.
- They will be thirsty to learn about the way civilisation has sought to solve its problems and made incredible discoveries and achievements, while also, at times, making mistakes.

- They will have the ability to navigate media, including social media, and become critical and discerning users of developments in this field.
- They will be equipped to make good arguments for a just cause by understanding the views of others and thereby influencing their social and political environment.
- They will understand and appreciate that our world is comprised of people from different cultures, races and orientations and be aware of the ways that power can be exercised with care or can be abused and that people can be respected and valued or exploited and persecuted. Their actions in the present and the future will reflect an understanding of our civilisation's past accomplishments as well as acknowledging that some of those achievements have come at the cost of prejudiced and flawed thinking.
- They will recognise their responsibility to protect the planet and contribute by living sustainably with the aim of preserving biodiversity and limiting global warming.

Our experience tells us that there would be a broad consensus of agreement about these purposes. Some might wish to question specific wording or terminology, to add or amend, but what we want from our school system will be largely acceptable albeit with different emphases. It is when we come to values that the tensions seem to arise. Some of our values are implicit in this list but not all. Some will be contested but it is important to be explicit, so here they are.

We believe that:

- Pupils need different approaches and experiences at different times, and teachers are in the best position to judge the approach and, with support from the school, secure those experiences.
- Teachers are at their best when pupils are persuaded to be striving always to see their previous best work as a marker

against which to improve, develop or extend, while giving due consideration to making sure their recent learning is secure.

- We therefore need to make it a top priority to secure and then continuously support high-quality teachers and support staff.
- What works for one teacher may not work for another, be they equally good, but some practices are better than others and research should provide the evidence.
- The context in which teachers work will vary their approach to teaching.
- The best teachers treat children as they might become rather than as they (sometimes infuriatingly) are.
- Schools should be seen by pupils and their families as inclusive places where they are keen to spend their time.

And of the system (beyond the school) we think that:

- Admission of pupils to school should be managed to ensure that the entitlements of all children are preserved.
- Schools should not be selective, at least not until the later teenage years when the practical reality of existing resources and buildings may require some separation for differing pupil paths and destinations.
- Accountability arrangements for schools are essential but need to be intelligent. (We will explain what we mean by this in Chapter 11.)
- We should judge and recognise achievements in young people in ways that are helpful first to the pupil and second to enable their achievement to be helpful in the future, with this being separate from the accountability arrangements for our schools.

This list of beliefs (or prejudices) is not meant to be exhaustive, but they are central; others will be detected as we proceed with this book.

We elaborate on one of the beliefs set out above – namely, that we should treat pupils not as they (sometimes infuriatingly) are but as they might become. Skilled teachers in inclusive schools know how to do this. It is not achieved easily, however, and the dilemma lies at the heart of one of the issues we expose later in this book – that is, the frequent and, in our view, unhelpful use of fixed-term and sometimes permanent exclusion.

We only have to think of the need of some distressed children – for example, with Asperger’s syndrome or disassociation disorder – for the space and time to go somewhere and cool down as they wrestle with impulses for fight or flight to realise just how complex is the teacher’s task. Yet, the justification for their approach is the teacher’s knowledge that children grow and change. The justification for their approach lies in one aspect of the first age that inspired Rab Butler, and was arguably only partially realised, but now deserves a more prominent place in the schooling firmament after the coronavirus pandemic and as a guiding principle in what we argue should be the new age of hope, ambition and collaborative partnerships.

William Temple – who, as well as being a writer on matters theological and social, was at different times the head of a leading public school, president of the Workers’ Education Association (WEA) and Archbishop of Canterbury – wrote a passage on the purposes of education which appealed to Butler (we know because he quoted from it in his autobiography) as follows:

Until Education has done more work than it has had an opportunity of doing, you cannot have a society organised on the basis of justice, for this reason ... that there will always be a strain between what is due to a man, in view of his humanity with all his powers and capabilities and what is due to him at the moment of time as a member of society with all his faculties still undeveloped, with many of his tastes warped, with his powers largely crushed.

Are you going to treat a man as what he is or what he might be? *Morality, I think, requires that you should treat him as what he might be, as what he might become ... and business requires that you should treat him as he is.*

You cannot get rid of that strain except by raising what he is to the level of what he might be. That is the whole work of education. Give him the full development of his powers and there will no longer be that

conflict between the claim of the man as he is and the man as he might become.

And so you can have no justice as the basis of your social life until education has done its full work ... And you cannot have political freedom any more than you can have moral freedom until people's powers are developed, for the simple reason that over and over again we find men with a cause which is just ... are unable to state it in a way which might enable it to prevail ... there exists a form of mental slavery which is as real as any economic form ... We are pledged to destroy it ... if you want human liberty, you must have educated people.

We are writing this book during a pandemic when most of our schools have performed heroics, often going well beyond their normal remit, and when some of our best school staff have been lost, not to mention the losses that pupils and their families will have experienced. Much has been said of the disadvantages being suffered by already disadvantaged youngsters – even of a 'lost generation'. While not denying or minimising the significant, if variable impact, we think the latter risks being overstated. Most schools and teachers will find a way to unlock the minds and open the hearts of their pupils and inspire them to realise enough of their limitless potential to live fulfilled lives and help our society solve the many issues that COVID-19 and other developments have thrown in our path. We think we can increase the number comprising 'most schools' if we can persuade enough people that the time is ripe to establish this new age of hope, ambition and collaborative partnerships and to adopt some of the changes we have outlined in Chapter 13, which focuses on some improvements which, if adopted, we think will make a huge difference to the number of youngsters whose school experience creates a quest for learning and leads to a fulfilling life.

The Temple quotation, never realised for more than a few in the first age and many more in the second, deserves to be the guiding principle in the period following on from the disaster of COVID-19.

First, we focus on the ambition we have for children to express their talents, drive, individuality and skills. We make proposals for six foundation stones which will reveal genius and unleash commitment in children to make a difference to their society and their world.

You can hear the passion, the decency, the anger, the compassion, and the hope in this insider–outsider story about England’s education policy over the past 45 years. *About Our Schools* is the most exciting and exacting book I have read in a long time.

John Hattie, Emeritus Laureate Professor, Melbourne Graduate School of Education

All who read *About Our Schools* will gain an enhanced contextual understanding of how our education system has evolved.

Rachel Macfarlane, Director of Education, Herts for Learning, and author of *Obstetrics for Schools*

A treasure trove of the past, and a treasure map for the future.

Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus, OISE/University of Toronto

Through sensitive and revealing interviews with a range of politicians, policy-makers and practitioners, Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters argue for a new era in our education system – moving away from the past 30 years of centralisation, marketisation and managerialism.

Melissa Benn, writer and campaigner

Full of anecdotes, balanced critiques and a surprisingly compassionate appraisal of politicians. *About Our Schools* is a masterpiece, and I shall be returning to it again and again.

Mary Myatt, education writer, speaker and curator of Myatt & Co

This work, from two living legends of British education, brings forward extraordinary levels of candour and insight from political figures as ideologically disparate and strategically different as Estelle Morris and Michael Gove.

Andy Hargreaves, Director, CHENINE (Change, Engagement and Innovation in Education), University of Ottawa, and Honorary Professor, Swansea University

Education in England is in a mess – we are in desperate need of cool, wise, experienced thinkers who can share their good, deep, well-informed common sense. Hoorah, then, for Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters, two battle-scarred warriors of educational reform who can rise above the fray, remind us of the long view, and talk truth to power. Let us pray the powerful are listening.

Guy Claxton, author of *The Future of Teaching: And the Myths That Hold It Back*

The authors say this is a book to be dipped into. I say it is much more than that. It is a book that will keep our ‘reservoirs of hope’ full at times when we most need it.

Maggie Farrar, education consultant and former director of the National College for School Leadership

Publications like this are few and far between. I cannot remember the last time I read a book that so skilfully sets out its historical context in an analysis of our current educational landscape and its optimistic vision for the future.

Andy Buck, founder, Leadership Matters, creator of the BASIC coaching method, and former teacher and head teacher

