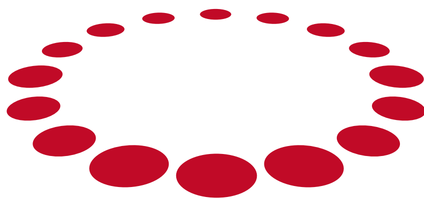

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School Wars: Is State Education in Europe at Risk?

Melissa Benn

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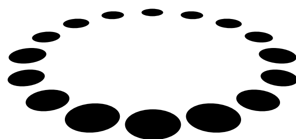

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Introduction

The first thing I want to do in this lecture is to paint an impressionistic picture of the changes that have taken place in English education over the last 30 years and particularly in the last 5 years. I hope you will find some of this relevant if you are at the point at looking at your own public education system and thinking about what kind of reforms might make it better. However, the brief summary of my message this evening is: please don't look at England because England is not a model of where you want to go!

I want to locate what's happened in England in both a national and a global context because although we're looking at England here, we're also looking at this in a wider context. Broadly speaking, I would argue that we in England have more in common with what has been happening in America over the last couple of decades, changes that have in many ways been quite shocking.

I don't know if any of you follow the work of Diane Ravitch, but if you don't –yet– please do. She is a wonderful writer with an interesting and unexpected political trajectory. She started out as an adviser to George Bush the First –the slightly taller, thinner, possibly more astute elder of the Bush clan– whose policies on education she then rejected. In recent years, she has become surely the most prominent spokesperson for a good quality public education in the United States. Many of her arguments apply to the situation in England, and her vision is appealing.

Tonight, I will largely be discussing what has happened in England, not the UK as a whole, largely because Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different education systems, overseen by their respective parliaments and assemblies. In common with all education systems around the world, they too have problems that relate to both quality of

provision and inequality in their own societies, but they have not gone down the route of marketisation and competition as we have here in England.

My second aim this evening is to challenge the narrative regarding educational reform that has been propagated by our government. At the moment we have a Conservative government ruling with a narrow overall majority in May 2015, but this same government, or certainly the leading group of political players, have, in effect, been in power from May 2010, which is when the revolution in our school system went into overdrive. Certain changes and reforms inaugurated by New Labour from 1997-2010 were intensified and overall this has led to a worrying picture of fragmentation of provision, unhealthy competition, a narrow conception of learning and a widespread demoralisation among the professionals in our system. For all these reasons, I believe that this story will end badly. It's already not going that well.

So although I am going discuss what has gone wrong, because I think it might be helpful to you to understand the various steps, and missteps, England has taken, I also want to offer you some hope, to point to some of the work, done by many within the UK, concerning possible alternatives and a different vision of public education.

To take one example; over the last few years, a group of head teachers, known as The Heads Roundtable, frustrated by the lack of input into the policy process by professionals, have been working independently to come up with ideas for reform. Our teacher trade unions are also active in promoting reform, despite being frozen out from the centre of decision making by successive governments over recent years. Not only have the unions been involved in protecting their members from the consequences of the break up of national pay and conditions and broader changes in schooling system, but they have worked hard to create and support alternative visions for reform.

And, of course, we have seen another huge political change recently with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party. Now who knows where that is going to lead, not just in terms of the Labour Party itself but in terms of future government policy? I've been a member of the Labour party for longer than I should, and like many have often

remained out of a kind of tribal loyalty, rather than with much enthusiasm. Now, thanks to Jeremy Corbyn's campaign, which has brought thousands of people into the party, it looks as if politics will be developing in an interesting new direction.

In terms of our subject tonight, Corbyn and his team are committed to an alternative vision of public education and one of the things he has talked about is setting up a National Education Service (NES) similar to our National Health Service (NHS) –providing cradle to grave high quality, free education. Those of us who broadly support this idea now need to turn our attention of the changes in education policy that might emerge under this new, radical leadership, and how such ideas can be shaped into an electorally credible policy.

Where have we gone wrong and how might we think about public education in a different way?

So let's tackle my two main themes in detail: where have we gone wrong and how might we think about public education in a different way?

Over the last 5 years there's been a really tremendous and, in some ways impressive, in other ways, frightening, level of energy involved in educational policy making in England: again, rather like the US. As a result, a rather strange alliance has been forged, between top down centralising government of the centre right and a whole range of third sector, voluntary and, increasingly, private interests.

I call this very loose group the "new educational evangelists" because they do indeed have an evangelistic energy! We must credit them with sincerity, in that they genuinely believe that they (and possibly they alone) can transform what they believe was, and possibly remains, an ailing and rotten public state education system.

They're also called the "new school revolutionaries" because a key part of their strategy has been to consolidate and create a new form of state school: the independent state school, known either as an academy or a free school. Over half of all English secondary schools are now academies (most of them converted from "maintained" status); free schools still number in the low hundreds, but many more are planned. These schools are funded by government, accountable to government but run by semi-private interests.

There are two fundamental origins to the new school revolution. One is national and one is global. The national one is rooted in the rise of economic neoliberalism over the last 30 years that began with Thatcherism and continued, in very different ways, with Blairism.

Looking back, Thatcherism had what now looks like both an old

fashioned, and unduly negative view, of state education. Historically the Tory party was, in practice, not much concerned with, or interested in, large swathes of state education. The Tory leadership have tended to come from the elite private schools, that educate the most affluent 7% of our nation. There's an interesting story about how, during the second world war, after mass evacuation of children from the capital, a million children were left roaming the capital, not in education. When the Tory leaders of the day were questioned about this they had no idea of what had happened because they had no idea about what went on in state education, having had no experience of it themselves! Post war, a new generation of Tory leaders were drawn not just from the private schools but from the state selective grammar schools, and again, the party's focus was on these (comparatively) elite institutions, not on the education of the mass of young people.

Many in the Tory party opposed the national shift comprehensive schooling in the 60s and 70s (although many municipal Tory councils, and councillors, supported it). There were moves by the Thatcher led governments of 1979-1997 to inject a more competitive, market-led approach to state schooling while at the same time failing to resource a large part of the school estate. By the mid to late 1990s there was a sense that education had been left to languish by an uncaring government of the elite.

At first, New Labour sought to rectify this, with promises of more resources and positive reform of the system. I remember voting for Blair in May 1997; it was an incredible moment, politically: a moment of great hope. And in terms of education, it started very well. The government cut class sizes to 30. It abolished the Assisted Places Scheme: state subsidies for private education for the (largely down at heel) middle class. Blair himself spoke in a positive way about teachers in our state system, which felt fresh and hopeful at the time. The government also tried to tell teachers what to do, in terms of literacy and numeracy teaching, which did not go down so well.

The Blair government also introduced the academy programme, an attempt to improve our inner city state schools in areas where there was tremendous poverty, conflict and tension. This was supposed to be a

limited programme, a fresh start for schools that many believed had lost hope.

What is clear, in retrospect, is that Blair's government did not believe that the public sector could reform itself. He placed his faith in the private sector. So in terms of running these new schools, he asked people who ran carpet warehouses or mobile phone companies to bring their entrepreneurial energy to our schools. These schools were given lavish resources, new buildings (often designed by famous architects) and the government trumpeted their achievements, while playing down the steady achievements of other parts of the state sector. That has been pretty much the story –in terms of government approach to education– ever since!

But digging a bit deeper, the trouble with Blairism in relation to education was that he best believed that he could improve state schools by rejecting (a large part of the) experience, knowledge and expertise of those who worked in state education.

So, to pause for just a moment, I would say this to all of you: that if you are discussing how to improve your state schools anyone who is leading or shaping that discussion should draw on the expertise of the people who know. Talk to the trade unions, talk to the municipal authorities. Talk to the teachers. Talk to the head teachers. Give them the respect of your serious attention, even if you don't agree with what they say. Have the debate before big change.

That is precisely what did not happen in our country. And the process of top down rapid change, without consensus, has continued, in a far more dramatic fashion, since the Conservatives, dominant in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, came into power in 2010. The overriding view was that all local authorities were terrible, although their crimes were apparently contradictory. Either they were deemed to over-control schools or they did not control them enough.

The teacher trade unions were also considered both an obstacle, and an irrelevance, to reform; again we can see such attitudes running through Thatcherism, Blairism and now the Cameron years. The general consensus is that the trade unions are guilty of what is called "provider capture" rather than consumer awareness. At the same time, parents have been

recast as savvy, "aspirational" consumers rather than part of any collective project. The Coalition also decided to dismantle our teacher training system, which had been officially judged as largely very successful. For the Conservatives in particular, universities were full of Marxist, progressive, child-centred educators, and this wholly exaggerated picture was put forward as one of the big problems of state education.

However, to truly understand an important part of the English story, we have to go back to the comprehensive reform of the 1960s and 1970s. This had dismantled a system that divided children down the middle, largely along lines of social class, at the age of 11, with a few going to the elite, academic grammar schools (although these schools were not as good as they were made out to be) but with most children sent to the under resourced secondary modern schools where it was often not possible to gain many important qualifications. There was a powerful parent led popular movement against this form of narrow, definitive and unfair selection and, as I say, most of the country moved towards (often nominal) comprehensive education.

Even so, comprehensive education remains one of the most politically contested reforms of the post war period. There continues to be a strong belief that children need to be sorted into different educational institutions, according to so called "ability" or, in recent years, by faith; a fear of and distaste for the "common school". All of these tensions have fed into the neoliberal consensus and the new school revolution.

Before I say a bit more about that revolution, I would like to look at the other side of the "school wars" for a moment. For those of us who believed in the possibility of high quality non selective comprehensive education and who didn't, in general, subscribe to the idea that teachers (and their unions) were the root cause of all school failure, perhaps a bit of self criticism in is order here, too. Looking back, I wonder if our movement wasn't smart enough, or quick enough, to come up with our own plans for improvement of neighbourhood schools. Or perhaps we simply weren't powerful enough to put such changes into practice. Either way, that weakness opened up a space for a powerful mix of government and new economic interests to come in and transform our system.

For me, possibly the most worrying part of the new schools narrative

is its own certainty that it is progressive and egalitarian, its insistent argument that historically state education let the poor down. (And yet this is the same tradition that supported the secondary moderns!) Nowadays, the debate has shifted to one about knowledge, and the curriculum. Many of you will have heard of the work of E D Hirsch, an American academic who has argued for a common core of knowledge to be taught in schools, one that all children need to draw on, in order to more successfully participate in civic and professional life. It's an interesting idea that could be deployed for progressive or non-progressive ends: but in England, over the last few years, it has been hijacked by the new educational evangelists. Their argument, essentially, is that England education has become knowledge-weak and skills-heavy. (The popular caricature here is that children were given unchallenging project work instead of being taught hard facts about the world around them.) This debate has probably now resolved itself to the sensible conclusion that all schooling should be a mix of knowledge and skills, and that the two are indivisible.

More broadly, the claim of the new school revolutionaries is that their policies will not just transform our schools but will raise children out of poverty through education; poorer children will have access to a knowledge-rich curriculum, will therefore get good exam results and then go onto to higher education. Leaving aside the fact that schooling risks becoming a rather dull business under the new changes, what this scenario doesn't allow for is the fact that our higher education system is fast become as socially stratified as our school system, and that the economy itself cannot provide jobs for all the graduates it produces. So there are a lot of things that don't quite add up.

The final key element of the new schools revolution is privatisation: the most worrying part of the jigsaw. It began, as I said, with the introduction of a few private companies and also third sector, voluntary and religious groups, and this process has now greatly accelerated.

You can't make a profit in English schools but there is an enormous amount of money circulating around our school system. The National Audit Office recently found that many of the early sponsored academies (set up under Labour) were under pressure to buy services from their

sponsors, while more than half of these sponsors later reneged on their financial pledges to the schools. More recently, documents obtained under Freedom of Information requests revealed that state-funded academy chains have paid millions of pounds to closely associated businesses, directors, trustees and their relatives.

Over half of our secondary schools are now outside municipal “control” (although “relationship” would be a truer word, as local councils have not controlled schools for years) and are now being run either by religious organisations, charities, trusts or consortia.

The basic idea is that schools will compete, particularly on results, and that parents will “choose” on the basis of these league tables. But what’s the educational vision behind it? Unesco’s recent report on the purpose of education spoke of the need for citizenship education, the need for children to understand about what’s happening in the environment, the need for tolerance and understanding of others. That completely contrasts with the vision that underpins the English system because if you have a highly competitive, results-based system, how can your vision be anything other than highly individualistic?

So much of the emphasis in English schools is about getting students to university but our university system is, as I have already said, ever more hierarchical and stratified. You can pay up to 50 to 60k to get a university education in England. If you go to a university like Oxford or Cambridge, or one of the more selective universities, you’ll come out and have a good chance of getting a job. By contrast, poorer children, who tend to go to the lower ranking universities, are still coming out owing thousands, straight into a market where there is a glut of graduates. Some schools rank children individually –they put their names up in the hallways– and there has been talk recently of ranking children nationally so that we would supposedly know exactly who was the cleverest high achieving child in the land and who was the dunce to beat all dunces. What a terrible idea!

If you think of education as being about imagination, encouragement, hope, learning how to fail successfully (if that makes sense) how can telling children from the age of 8 or 9 or 14 “Well, you’re the best” or “You’re the worst” how can that be a good idea?

Now I've talked about the national context, but I want to talk briefly about the global context before I come on to ideas for change.

The global context can be summed up by the acronym, GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement. Given that germs are unpleasant things that circulate around the body… well, in England those of us who oppose it think GERM is a very appropriate term for these problematic ideas!

In reality, of course, GERM is a powerful global movement reflecting a worldwide shift to competition and standardisation. Pasi Sahlberg, the leading Finnish Educator, has talked about the five key elements of the global education reform movement and I think they are worth mentioning in detail, as they represent such a threat to the idea of public education and the common good.

The first element is standardisation of education: centrally prescribed curricula with detailed and often ambitious performance targets, frequent testing of students and test based accountability.

The second feature is focus on core subjects in school. In other words, on English maths and science. Basic student knowledge and skills in reading writing and mathematics are elevated as prime targets and national systems are now judged by how well they do in international tests such as PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS.

The third characteristic is the search for low risk ways to reach learning goals that minimise experimentation, reduces alternative pedagogical approaches and limit risk-taking in schools and classrooms.

The fourth globally observable trend is the use of corporate management models. Education policies and ideas are lent and borrowed from the business world and this limits the role of national policy development and enhancement of an education system's own capability to foster renewal. It also paralyses teachers' and schools' attempts to learn from the past.

The fifth global trend is the adoption of test-based accountability policies. School performance, especially raising student achievement, is closely tied to the process of accrediting, inspecting and ultimately rewarding or punishing schools or teachers. Success or failure of schools is often determined by standardised tests or public exam results. That is

certainly what is happening in America, where things have moved much faster than have here in England. It's very frightening and it's also narrowing what children are learning, so that you have in some places virtual schooling where children are just sitting in front of computers learning how to master tests.

All this is very far from the idea of education as a public good or even a social experience, but all these ideas have come to England. We have seen the narrowing of what children are encouraged to learn. Schools are judged on whether their students at 16 have done 5 academic subjects. Now that's fine, on one level: nobody is against students opting for academic subjects, but I don't think a school should be judged on it because it depends on the students they're taking in. As a result of the change, there has been a 20-30 % drop in the take up of art and drama and music.

Once upon a time teachers and education professionals wrote curricula. In England the politicians write the curricula! Michael Gove, our education secretary until the summer of 2014, in effect supervised the rewriting of the history curriculum. As a result, many elements of world history were removed, and a traditional view of our island's history restored. An Oxford professor said that the history syllabus risked being reduced to a kind of pub quiz, that it was a really lean and mean curriculum.

The teaching of reading is now prescribed, or perhaps proscribed, through the phonics method. Those of you in primary education will know more about what this means, and the arguments about phonics. The bigger point is: in England teachers no longer have the option to decide the best way to teach reading to their students. As for teacher training, I think this is one of the most depressing developments, for an old, largely successful system has been abandoned, and most teacher education, if we can call it that, shifted largely to the classroom. I have a 21 year old daughter, some of her peers and friends are going into teaching through a programme called Teach First, which was modelled along the lines of Teach for America in the US. This encourages students from elite universities to go into teaching or to give it a try for the first few years of their careers.

I have a problem with this, partly because teaching is a profession, and teachers part of a public service, and I don't like the "sample it and see" approach. Training itself is inadequate. Trainees are offered 6 weeks of training in the summer and then they go into the classroom. I believe this development is taking our system in the wrong direction.

Is public education at risk?

So let's return to the question that I've been asked to answer. Is public education at risk? At one level, I would say no. Or not yet. Education still remains free at the point of use and that is very very important. However, the rising cost of university fees is a huge problem.

We also need to ask, in relation to England, how long education will remain free. There was an interesting case recently concerning the school that the Prime Minister and the former Education Secretary have sent their daughters to: a highly selective London state school. Following investigations by a schools newspaper, it emerged that every parent that got a place was asked to write a cheque for a hundred pounds. You can see how charges creep in; we have had similar discussions within the National Health Service. Should people who don't go to their doctor, who miss an appointment pay a set fee and so on. I think once you let go of the idea that this is free for everyone you're going down a dangerous road.

The second reason why we can say state education is not, yet, at risk is because the government still decides the direction of education. Our local educational authorities have been cut away, but government is still deciding: so that's a link, of sorts, to democracy.

However, there's a third reason why we might remain optimistic. And it is this; while the Tory Party has traditionally not been interested in state education, as I argued earlier, there is now more of a sense among many on the right that state education is an important national project, even if it has been taken over in recent years by the new educational evangelists. One small marker of the change: the fact that a Conservative Prime Minister sends his daughter to a London state school. That would have been unthinkable a generation of two ago.

The other thing I want to say is that although there are all these negative changes, schools are, of course, human institutions and there are, in England, still hundreds, indeed thousands, of wonderful state schools and inspiring teachers, everybody working together to do their best. My children went to a local comprehensive they absolutely loved. They did well; they've come as good, rounded citizens; state education served them very well. (Obviously as their mother, I'm completely biased!)

Alternatives

I want to end now by talking about alternatives, different ways of thinking about state education and this is really to get a debate going with you. It is also a reflection of the fact that our own new school revolution is running out of steam. We've got problems with teacher recruitment, there's a huge problem of teacher workload. When the new education secretary recently asked teachers to tell her if they were feeling overloaded 40,000 teachers replied to her email. I don't think she's actually done anything about it, but anyway she asked them.

Then there are problems about recruiting teachers in core subjects and so on. There are more and more scandals about financial mismanagement and corruption within schools. Many schools that were offered autonomy under the new system are now struggling to survive and a lot of the academy chains, which we were told were going to make schools really efficient, are not doing very well and actually when you look at the results of the academies and free schools, these new schools that have been so heavily promoted by government are not actually doing any better than schools that come under the aegis of the much maligned local authorities.

So how do we fight back? What, if any, new ways do we have of thinking about education? For surely when the inherent weakness of the current schools revolution comes to a head, we need to have a richer and more positive vision to offer.

So four key ideas for the future

Firstly, I would like to see, both nationally and across Europe and the globe, a different quality of conversation about our schools. I'd like to see it start with a simple, humble and human recognition that there is a limit to what schools can do. Schools cannot solve inequality and it's not fair to ask teachers to do so. People talk about Finland, a successful European system on the whole, although facing fresh challenges as every single nation is. But Finland's school system has enjoyed what you would call a virtuous circle. It started with lower levels of inequality and its comprehensive school system has helped sustain that relative equality.

England is a deeply unequal society and becoming more so. You can't understand English society if you don't understand the class system. People say the class system has ended, but that's nonsense. I'm here to tell you the class system is alive and well, it's just glossed over with a kind of consumerist American sheen, but it's still there. For the new school revolutionaries to say to teachers and schools that the old state education system promoted inequality and it's up to them now to close that gap is an impossible pressure; so we need to accept the limitations of what schools can do and be more honest about it.

Secondly, we need to develop a broader conception of education itself. This may, in some ways, return us to earlier ideas about what "quality" in education means, or earlier "progressive" initiatives, but earlier ideas enriched by recent experience. That's the dialectical process isn't it? We have all, left and right, teachers and parents, heads and politicians, learned a great deal over the past decade or more. Some of the changes that have been brought in we may choose to retain; others we may not be able to get rid of. But we need to start thinking again about quality

instead of quantity, the means as well as the ends. Education is not just about a series of outcomes, it is vital experience for every child.

This means restoring a broad and balanced and arts-rich curriculum. I have talked earlier about the Heads Round Table group. They have come up with an interesting Baccalaureate idea. This proposes that every school should offer both a common programme of learning within each school but provides more diverse, individual paths of learning for the upper secondary years, incorporating both vocational and academic development but without, necessarily, rigidly dividing the two areas: so that, for example, a young woman who eventually wants to be a plumber could continue to take philosophy classes as well.

Students would also be encouraged to do voluntary service (work out in the community) and there would be more individual projects, catering to students' growing, individual interests. The Baccalaureate proposal would not measure a student's achievement in terms of raw exam results; individuals would put together "credits" to create more of a "portfolio" approach. It's a much more imaginative way of creating a high-quality rigorous school system, that allows different learners to study together, while meeting individual need.

In England, we are always being told by government ministers and pundits that we, in the state sector, should learn from the elite private schools. Apparently, what's good about private schools is that they are independently run, they are not controlled by government. But I believe that we can learn different things from private education. To me, one thing that private education demonstrates is the importance of small classes: of individual attention. If there's been a criticism of state education and a fair one is that teachers haven't got the time and energy to give individual attention to pupils.

To do that, we need to have resources. Private schools have lovely buildings; some even look like luxury hotels. For my book, *School Wars,* I visited a famous public school (in England, we call top private schools "public schools"; crazy but there you are!) I soon lost count of their luxurious facilities. Over a dozen football pitches: its own drama studio: two concert halls… it was just the epitome of luxury. And one of the things the school had decided to do was teach its students emotional

literacy, part of which was learning how to “defer gratification”. Looking round their grounds, peering into their classrooms, eating in their canteens, one could see no evidence of any need to defer gratification: the place was so fancy! These schools cost 35K a year and, of course, few people can afford to pay that kind of money.

What I’m trying to argue is that money matters, resources count. Another more subtle feature of recent Tory radicalism in education has been the suggestion that resources don’t matter; it’s all about the quality of teaching or the nature of the curriculum, or the ambition of the teachers and pupils. I disagree. New Labour’s period in office showed the difference that well designed buildings could make to the experience of learning. That’s about resources. Paying teachers well: that’s about resources. Having the latest IT equipment and books in a well stocked library: that’s about resources.

Talking about the “quality” of education, another element that is important, and not discussed enough, concerns the skill of “oracy” –the ability to speak well, to learn to talk. “Oracy” is just as important an element as “Literacy” in my view. But in the past few years, government has cut back the element of talk in our classrooms. They have removed the need to make public presentations as part of the GCSE exam. One government minister, talking about the need to return to a “fact based” curriculum, criticised the idea of young children being encouraged to discuss their findings and views in classrooms as “idle chatter”. However, I believe that the more children are encouraged to express what they know, and explore what they don’t know, the deeper learning becomes. I believe we should be doing this throughout our state system.

Thirdly we need to return, but in contemporary conditions, to the idea of the good neighbourhood school. A friend of mine who is very involved in education politics in the United States wrote to me very late last night. He was talking about the way that schools should be about developing the next generation, introducing the individual to the other, supporting strong communities and maintaining democratic values.

In England, we are fast moving away from this conception of education. There has always been a long held, if not always explicitly stated, idea in the UK that education is best if you pay for it or you travel to access it or

you compete to win it or you defeat someone else in order to access it. Surely, it is time to return to an idea of education as more of a right than a choice, about ensuring, through the public purse and public administration, a rich educational experience as a human right: the conception of good state education that Diane Ravitch proposes in the States and which seems to have worked in Finland?

To achieve this we need a well educated, sensitive, highly skilled workforce. We need to trust our teachers: to trust that they are well equipped to give our children a good educational experience, and without constant monitoring or punishment. We've travelled far in the other direction, as I have indicated. In England we have a growing number of unqualified teachers, many of our trainee teachers go into the classroom after only a few weeks training –so of course we don't trust them!

Fourthly, we need to bring schools under some form of democratic control. This means we have to reverse the tide of semi privatisation that I have talked about at some length earlier in this lecture.

Final observations

A few final observations before I end. In recent years, government has cut back on adult and further education programmes. This has made our system much more of a "one chance system" than it was previously. If you don't get your exams at 16 or 18 it's very hard to access education after that, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds.

To me, education has to be about lifelong learning. I came out of university realising how little I knew and that began 30 years of learning. It is crazy to say that education is finished at 16 or 18. We have to have institutions and practices in place so that people can enter education at any point in their lives. I have long believed that university is wasted on young people. I often wish I could now go back to university at the age of 58 but I can't afford it!

We've got a big battle on our hands in England trying to get all the ideas I have been talking about accepted once more as common sense. One way we are going to do that –and this may be a helpful observation when you are thinking about what reforms you want to implement– is to think more in terms of sensible well tested practical reforms that embody, and take forward, our values: like the baccalaureate idea I mentioned earlier, or proposals for reform of teacher education and so on. In other words, the challenge for the future may involve less talking about abstract values, less discussion of education as a public good (important as such discussions are) and more discussion of the concrete ways in which we can embody these values in a contemporary setting.

As I said earlier, Jeremy Corbyn wants to set up a commission to look at the establishment of a National Education Service and I hope that he will not only look at the funding questions and the importance of free education, but will look at some of these really imaginative

ideas that can take our system back to one that works for everyone and makes school an enjoyable and rich experience which is what it should be.

Questions

Do you agree that renewal in schools comes from the grassroots, from teachers themselves?

I'm going to repeat myself here, in saying teachers are not trusted at all, there is no respect for teacher agency. What I do see are people on the ground coming up with ideas about self-improving systems. For instance, there's a group called Research Ed, a group of teachers who have got together and meet to share ideas about teaching a learning. So there is this new emphasis on what educational research can tell teachers in the classroom.

There's another group called Northern Rocks, which is, in effect, an annual meeting of teachers in the North of England, a gathering with incredible vibrancy which has generated a lot of excitement about doing things on the ground. Then there are groups like the Headteachers' Roundtable, school principals who have come up with this baccalaureate formula and of course there are the trade unions, like the National Union of Teachers, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. They are all putting forward practical ideas for collaboration, system improvement and reform, in part as a response to being frozen out by successive governments. So how all those ideas and initiatives might be incorporated by a government that was more respectful of teachers on the ground is an interesting question.

Going back a little further, there used to be a range of professional bodies that would look at research on education and ideas about leadership and teaching that would then disseminate them to the professionals. But many of these "quangos" have been swept away; it's all very top down at the moment, but it doesn't mean that there aren't

lots of good ideas around and also that there are groups of schools that collaborate and share ideas. Inevitably, there are all sorts of things happening within the system, good as well as bad. But it's also very atomised. Unless you're one of those people who try and keep on top of what's going on, it's very easy for exciting ideas not to be spread further and utilised, system wide.

Another feature of this period is that a lot of unofficial discussion and policy making is done on Twitter. I mean that seriously. A lot of the leading thinkers in education are now people with blogs and have huge followers on Twitter and I think that's a bit odd because you have to spend your life on Twitter to understand what's happening. And it's rather an "in group".

What represents success in state education?

If I'm allowed to be a utopian for a minute I think the purpose of public education is to give every child the best chance at self development, according to their innate talents and not to let background and prejudices about where they come from get in the way. Of course, this is the aim of the new evangelists, but I just don't think it's happening. Many schools are now passing on knowledge in a very reductive, arid way that may be putting a generation of children and students off education. That cannot be considered "success" in the system!

We need to go back to the early years as well. There is strong consensus in England now, a recognition that inequalities begin in the early years, particularly with inequality of access to language and knowledge. So that if you come from a certain background you've learned hundreds of thousands of words by the time you're toddling, whereas children from other kinds of families, where your parents may not talk to you or you may not be encouraged to talk to your parents, less informal learning is done at home, and this creates a big gap between children's easiness for more formal learning, even by the age of 4 or 5. I've seen that demonstrated in many classrooms. You will get a group of children in a reception or year I class; some will know who Gaudi is by that age, others won't know how to write their own name.

If the purpose of public education is to bring out the talents of all children, however different the starting points, clearly that's a huge demand on state education. But we need to make that at least a starting demand of our system, to recognise that the child who can't write their name at 4 or 5 has immense talents and latent possibilities and ideals, and schools should work hard to provide all backing that is needed. Of course, given the lack of resources in the state system, that's really really difficult to achieve. But, as a starting point we need a broad curriculum, which gives children a mix of knowledge and skills, access to the arts and music, and small enough classes that teachers can see everyone as an individual and genuinely work with them.

How can state schools be considered as "the best"?

I have always believed that if local parents supported the local school we could help transform it and to some degree that has happened in many parts of England. If you have a core of committed parents who care about education then, within a school, within an area, within the national conversation, it helps raise everyone's spirits, and encourages everyone to work towards improvement.

One of the reasons I believe so passionately in public (state) education is that it creates different kinds of citizens. In England according to traditional, more conservative, views, if you go to a private school, that's a good school and if you go to a state school it probably isn't.

But I believe that those who go through the state school system have a far greater understanding of the wider world, of their own society. Obviously, it is important that they learn, and get their qualifications, and that they can go on to do interesting work and be happy.

In contrast, private schools in England are all about separation, segregation and superiority; too often they produce the people who then run our country and bring those often unconscious values to bear on their political decision making, often with disastrous results.

So how we do we go about breaking down those barriers?

Well, we have to stop subsidising private schools for a start. In

England private schools are treated as charities for tax purposes. How can you be considered a charity when a parent using this service is able to pay 35k –or even just 12k a year? I'd like to see money taken out of that and put into the public (state) schools. You also have to put the best teachers into public schools. You have to persuade parents to send their kids to the local school and support it. You have to constantly be improving it.

We must not forget the importance of political action in the broadest sense. In order to improve schooling, we need trade unions, parents, teachers and head teachers to act together.

But let's end on a more optimistic note. There is in England quite a strong belief in the continuing potential of our state education system, similar to our health service. It is this we need to develop, the sense that our (free, universally available) school system is something we're proud of, but it needs consistent attention and political action.

The commitment to state schools should not be politicized

We talk down state schools, but actually there's a lot of state school success and that needs to be celebrated and shared. In Finland I heard Pasi Sahlberg talking about the origin of the Finnish system and it's really interesting because they had a system that was very like the one in England in the 1950s and 60s, with private, elite, selective schools and then local schools that were struggling, because they existed on such an uneven playing field.

Finland inaugurated a long conversation about its own faltering, segregated system. As a result they abolished their private schools and their selective schools and they introduced a common system, based on good neighbourhood schools. The rest is history: a high quality comprehensive system, which has been the envy of the world, and which has won the support of those on the political right and left.

Surely this remains our goal in 21st century Europe.

When Pasi Sahlberg came and told us about this process, at a lecture a couple of years ago at the House of Commons, it was absolutely

magical, because the House of Commons is the very heart of our democracy, but it's also the home of our elites. So for such an expert to explain how another government abolished their private schools in order to create a high quality European system –oh it was marvellous! As I looked round the room, at the faces of the politicians and chief inspectors present, I wished I had a camera to record the moment. And I couldn't help myself, I stood up and said if someone tried to do the same in England, it would probably result in murder. (And it would!)

But the more serious point is this; if we are really serious about creating a high quality state system, then we will probably have to do something similar.

About the author

Melissa Benn, a British writer and campaigner for high-quality inclusive, comprehensive and state education and the benefits it offers society as a whole.

She was educated at Holland Park School, a pioneering British inclusive education school. She graduated with a degree in History from the London School of Economics.

Her early jobs included working at the National Council for Civil Liberties as an information assistant for Patricia Hewett, later Secretary of State for Health, and as a researcher for Professor Stuart Hall, at the Open University.

She is a writer and journalist, known for her articles on education in *The Guardian* and *Public Finance* magazine. Her books include works such as *Education and Democracy*, co-edited with Clyde Chitty (2004); *A Comprehensive Future: Quality and Equality for All Our Children*, co-written with Fiona Millar (2006); *School Wars: The Battle for Britain's Education* (2011) and *School Myths* (2015), which has been widely reviewed and provoked much discussion. Hers is one of the most critical voices of the British education system, highlighting the huge contrasts that exist: inspirational and depressing, egalitarian and elitist, selective and non-selective, secular and religious, multicultural and monocultural, centralized and anarchic, under-funded and splendid, worn-out and brilliant...

She is the founder of the United Kingdom's Local Schools Network, which promotes local state schools in the United Kingdom and corrects the myths and lies spread in connection with these schools, underlining their successes. The four cornerstones that this network seeks to promote are:

1. All children have the right to go to an excellent state school, enabling them all to achieve their absolute potential.

2. Every state school must have a fair admissions procedure.

3. Every state school must be aware of the needs of its students and what parents want for their children and also be accountable to the local community.

4. State schools that are in difficulty must be helped to improve and its users not attacked or demoralized.

Melissa is also involved with the Queens Park Community School, a comprehensive school that her daughters attend, founder of a writing project at the school and a member of the parent-teacher association (PTA).

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