

Really useless knowledge

When I was training to be a teacher, ten years ago, one of the texts which was given some prominence in the course was Peter Medway's *Finding a Language*.¹ I want to start by quoting from the book. Barry, a nineteen-year-old miner, is talking to Medway, who used to teach him:

I didn't like being pushed around when I was at school, mainly because I felt I was too old or felt I was a man or something. I didn't like bloody teachers just walking up, "You're going to do this, you're going to do that, and you must do this, that and t'other." ... I used to think, Aw, bugger this, why should I do six pages full of writing when I could be flicking spit at somebody with my ruler?

I couldn't give a toss about school. I only went mainly because of t'humanities. You were the main reason why I went there. ... You didn't force nowt on me, not like t'rest of t'teachers

I think a teacher's a person that wants to put intelligence into someone like a bloody factory animal. I think the perfect teaching system would be to have kids there with built-in impulses to be sat in rows, take it all in, write it all down and remember it for ever. I mean they're trying to make them like ruddy little computers.

Teachers wain't come true wi' you, never, and it's the same at t'pit, bloody management 'll never come true to you. They're allus behind t'bloody door, up to summat, they wain't tell you, there's always that doubtful feeling there, you know.

...

If we do get married, do have kids and that, we're going to be happy and content. We might never have any money but we're going to be happy with each other in what we've got, 'cause that's the way it's always been in our family....

I've always thought of myself as somebody different. I've always thought to myself, well, I am what I am and chuff all t'rest ... [pp. 30-31]

The world represented in Medway's book now seems an impossibly distant one. The educational experiment which the book records happened in a school still in the process of becoming comprehensive, and in the shadow cast by the raising of the school leaving age. The novelty of having the full cohort of students still at school at 16 perhaps made it easier to recognise the fact that the relationship between schools and working class students was problematic. The question of class and education has not been magically resolved in the intervening period: it has just become rather unfashionable to pose it.

What Medway and the teachers with whom he worked did was to question, in the organisation of teaching and learning, the rigid separation of "English" from other disciplines (if English is a discipline). Medway challenged the notion that secondary school students learn most effectively about the world outside when they are confronted by a timetable which compartmentalises knowledge and when schools impose upon the students a language and a set of intellectual assumptions and procedures which are not necessarily shared by — or valid for — the students. The set of practices which Medway describes are, in effect, an attempt to work through the practical implications of the Bullock Report's dictum:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.²

Medway called it *Finding a Language*, but equally central — of course — to the process of discovery and dialogue which it recounts is the relationship established between on the one

hand, the culture of the school and the teacher and on the other, the culture of the students. (There is, perhaps, an irony in the fact that Bullock's oft-quoted comment was made in reference to the experiences of black students, whereas Medway was exploring the relationship between the culture of the school and forms of indigenous, white working class culture.)

As Medway recognised, the world was already moving on. The forms of progressive education which *Finding a language* represents were already under threat — from “the climate of insecurity introduced by the Great Debate and the reactionary pronouncements of HMIs and others, for streaming and separate subject teaching” [p.94]. From our current perspective, it is possible to trace a direct line from the first stirrings of the great debate through the whole of the Tories' assault on progressive education up to — and including — the Dearing Report.

But the sense of historic distance is not simply a matter of what has been going on in education in the past two decades. The school in which Medway had been working was located in a mining community in Yorkshire. If Barry did go on to produce children, their expectations of adult life are likely to be very different. When first I read Peter Medway was the time of the Miners' Strike. Then there were 170 pits open. Now there are seventeen.

It's hard to escape nostalgia in looking back at what Medway did. Because of the absence of constraints on him and on his students — because, to put it bluntly, nothing was expected of them — they were able to create a meaningful curriculum. And yet, to express the possibilities in these terms is to recognise part of what is problematic about this moment. With its admittedly piecemeal approach to the organisation of learning, it did not seek directly to confront questions about the reproduction of inequality. Nor did Medway ask any difficult questions about the culture of the students.³ In a sense, therefore, it was an experiment which was defined by its own marginalisation. Rather than seeking to challenge the cultural premises of the curriculum, it operated in the spaces which a fortuitous set of circumstances had created within a particular institutional framework. It suffered, as so much of what can be described as progressive education has suffered, by its romantic attachment to a model of asocial, individualistic virtue. Such an ideological foundation, built on the sand of bourgeois notions of the integrity of the self, was never likely to last long against the Thatcherite army already preparing to trample down the walls around education's secret garden.

What, I think, we have to accept is that the Great Debate and its aftermath keyed in to real discontent with the education system. I'm not referring here to company directors' moans about an illiterate workforce, still less to Prince Charles's complaints that he has to correct his secretaries' spelling. But all those, from Callaghan through to Major, who have made political capital out of the notion of falling standards have found a resonance among ordinary people for many reasons — the enduring myth of a golden age in education; the underfunding of education, and the grossly inequitable funding of education, for example — but also because of the tendency of teachers to operate within the bounds of an exclusive, unaccountable professionalism. This has meant that progressive practices have been particularly vulnerable to specific criticism; it has also been a failure which the Tories have exploited very successfully in their claim to have made state education more accountable. However specious it may be, it is a claim which derives its power precisely from the real failures of the education system.⁴

The rhetorical attack from the right on the comprehensive system and on progressive practices happened at the same time as much more searching critiques were being made from other quarters. Here I am thinking particularly about the sharp points made by sections of the black community — the focus on the extent to which the school system systematically failed black students. Within this, there has been the movement against segregated forms of provision — for example, in the provision for bilingual students.⁵

It has, quite clearly, been convenient for the right wing to present their attack on state education as an attempt to dismantle an establishment of vested interest, in the interests of those for whom the education service exists. Their biggest ally in this has been the tendency of teachers to retreat into a shell of professionalist exclusivity. Slogans such as “If you can read this, thank a teacher”, which the NUT used in the mid-1980s, are symptomatic of the problem, and invited, as the rejoinder, “If you can’t read this, blame a teacher.” On the question of standards, the reality of teacher low expectations as a factor in the underachievement of black students has been used to divert attention away from less subjective factors — such as the under-resourcing of education.

What happened, then, in the decade following the publication of Medway’s book, was not all bad news. In response to demands from black students, the formal curriculum in many schools became, if only patchily, less eurocentric. The development of SMILE maths in London, for instance, attempted to make explicit the contribution of different cultures to mathematical understanding, and equally was concerned to challenge the ideological assumptions of much existing maths education.⁶

The texts which students read in school began to reflect something of the cultural diversity of the school population — or even of the society in which students and teachers lived. Inevitably, one of the things which changed along with this was the relationship of teacher and student. The teacher may be able to maintain a credible pose as the fount of all knowledge if what is being read is Wordsworth or Dickens; this isn’t so likely if it’s Nurunnessa Choudhury or Grace Nichols.

Such changes did happen, in significant ways, in schools and classrooms, because of the realisations of groups of students and teachers. But there were, in the early 1980s, powerful institutional factors which had a positive influence as well. It mattered, for instance, that the ILEA developed anti-racist and anti-sexist policies, and that the curricular significance of these policies was disseminated in practical ways through the English and Media Centre. (And, to continue the autobiographical strand, this was for me a powerful motive in my wish to work for the ILEA.)

In some instances, even the developments initiated by Tory central government seemed to give added impetus to progressive developments. Section 11 funding is one instance where the government’s desire to cut public spending, and its deep suspicion of grant earmarked for ethnic minorities, led to a series of measures designed to tighten up on the way that the money was distributed. Because, in fact, the money had often not been targeted at the needs of black students, but rather, in the spirit of the 1966 Act, had been used to compensate local authorities for the presence of immigrant communities, the changes could sometimes have beneficial effects. The irony was that the one authority which most conspicuously sought to use Section 11 money in an accountable way was Brent. And it was Brent’s Development Programme for Race Equality which attracted the most savage attacks from the right wing media: “Race spies shock,” as the Mail on Sunday put it back in 1986.

Now, of course, things are different. Section 11 funding is simply being cut at such a rate that thousands of teachers face redundancy.

In English, at any rate, the effect of the introduction of GCSE was also beneficial, in that it marked the culmination of the movement towards a unified, coherent system of assessment at 16 plus which had been gaining support throughout the previous decade. This doesn't mean that Keith Joseph, the then Secretary of State for Education, should be installed in the hall of fame. The reason why the Tories agreed to the GCSE has much more to do with the centralising tendency in Tory education policy which was to result in the 1988 Education Act. In other subjects, in any case, the consequences of the introduction of GCSEs were much less positive.⁷ The point is, though, that the system of assessment imposed on teachers and students through the GCSE marked, particularly in dual certification and 100% coursework syllabuses, a continuation of existing progressive practice (back to Medway and beyond). There was no attempt to impose a canon, nor to intervene in the content of any aspect of the English curriculum, while the assessment procedures were sufficiently flexible as to enable teachers to pay attention to what students had actually achieved.

I am not saying that the introduction of a relatively user-friendly system of assessment was ever going to compensate for the structural inequalities inscribed on the education system. But what it did provide was, somewhat in the manner of Medway's experiment, some room for manoeuvre. There is a sharp difference between the GCSE as a form of central government intervention in the curriculum and anything which has happened since.

Much has been written in the past couple of years on the virtues of coursework. One feature is that it tends to have a demystifying effect on the assessment process. Grades, rather than being conferred by the mystical workings of an unseen exam board, without any apparent connection with the efforts of a student, are arrived at by the teacher, through procedures which can be rendered explicit, according to criteria which can be justified — and challenged. It may not be accountability, quite, but it may make it easier for students to avoid feeling like flies, pursued by wanton boys.

The point about all the versions of the national curriculum with which we have been confronted over the past six or seven years is that none of them have started off with the idea that the culture of school students has any relevance to the learning process. Back in 1987, it was made clear that the national curriculum was intended to ensure “that all pupils, regardless of sex, ethnic origin and geographical location, have access to broadly the same good and relevant curriculum and programmes of study”.⁸ What is envisaged, therefore is a curriculum which, universally applicable, can be simply transmitted to all. A curriculum which is, in essence, the traditional grammar school list of subjects (with Latin removed and “technology” — whatever that means — nobody still seems to know — inserted). It is precisely the model which Peter Medway's Barry had complained about: “I think a teacher's a person that wants to put intelligence into someone like a bloody factory animal” [p.30].

What is significant about this notion of a curriculum is both what is excluded from it — namely any notion of difference, of the specific cultural experiences of any student or group of students — but also what, by implication, is to be included. If nostalgia for the moment of *Finding a Language* is misplaced, how much more so is any notion that a working consensus had been achieved through the national curriculum, mark one, as it existed before the Centre for Policy Studies took over at the DfE. The Cox version of English in the national curriculum may have been a broader church, but it was one with its own rigid hierarchies. There may have been small side chapels where attention could be paid to dialects, to media

texts or to cultural diversity, but there was no doubting the central objects of veneration: the canon, presided over by Shakespeare (the only compulsory author) and Standard English. No awkward questions here about language and power, or about cultural materialism. Subtler maybe, but this was always a nationalist curriculum, domesticating those forces which had threatened to challenge the dominant culture.⁹

It is also vital that the national curriculum is seen in the context of the whole of the Tories' programme in education. Even before the 1988 Education Act had become law, it was clear that the sharp edge of the offensive on the curriculum was to be through its assessment. That was how the business was to be policed, and that was how it was to be related to the other aspects of the act. It was through the results of the assessment, presented in the form of neatly processed numbers, that the drive towards the marketisation of education could be conducted. League tables are an essential element in telling the customers what they need to know if they are to shop around for the best deal. They are the other set of accounts, alongside the balanced books of each locally managed mini-education enterprise. (We don't have moderation procedures for the SATs — we have auditing.) And therefore it was not a surprise that the opposition to the national curriculum was focused on and through the tests — coming to a head last year in the mass boycott.

The move to resist a key facet of the Tory education programme cannot be seen in isolation from the material conditions affecting teachers. As the international economic crisis worsened, the Tories' ideological offensive had deepened, in a desperate attempt to justify the cuts in the public sector. In education, the threats of a return to streaming, the imposition of crude tests, the closure of off-site facilities, the increase in class sizes, the introduction of performance related pay are all means to achieve cuts in public spending at the same time as they constitute an attack on progressive forms of education, union organisation and collective action.

When Heseltine attempted, eighteen months ago, to close 31 pits, he was confronted with a massive show of solidarity with the miners. Those who marched in October were very clear that they were engaged in a struggle not just for the pits but also for their own jobs and for the continued existence of the public sector. They also laid to rest the fashionable canard about the death of the working class.

The massive support for the miners provided a context in which teachers began to gain confidence to fight back. It was not coincidental that the first clear call for a boycott of the English SATs came hard on the heels of the demonstrations in October, 1992. Nor should it surprise us that the move came from ordinary teachers, through a meeting of the London Association for the Teaching of English, rather than through the leadership of the teacher trade unions. For teachers, whose pay had been cut in real terms, whose conditions had been worsened, with class sizes rising, appraisal looming, and the curriculum mapped out by the Centre for Policy Studies, it was small wonder that the cry of "Enough is enough" resonated across the country.

What the right wing's offensive on assessment has done is to pose very sharply questions about the choice of text, but also about the way in which these texts should be read. Last year, this appeared at its starkest in the key stage three English anthology.¹⁰

As things stand at the moment, my relationship to the texts which I read with students has already changed. In the days before the national curriculum if a student asked why we were

reading *Romeo and Juliet*, I would have been obliged to offer an answer which included my accepting some sort of responsibility for the choice. Nowadays, it's all too easy to cut short the discussion with the statement: "It's in the syllabus." It is not my text any more — let alone the student's: it is the property of SCAA or the exam boards. In this situation, it is easy to have some sympathy for the student who wrote on a desk in the classroom next to mine: "Tybalt can kiss my arse." (Though it's less easy to see how this response to the text can be assimilated within the national curriculum statements of attainment.)

As part of this process, literacy itself is being redefined, to exclude students and to ensure the reproduction of failure in the school system. In ways which sometimes seem surreal, it would seem that SCAA, through the GCSE boards, has decided that writing is coterminous with the ability to form letters using a pen, while reading is decoding the letters on a piece of paper. So much for new technologies, so much for psycholinguistics. The sooner we get back to slates and copperplate, the better. I wish I were making this up, but I'm not. There are two students in my school who will not be able to gain GCSEs in English this year because the exam board has decided that they cannot read and write. Both students, I should explain, have statements of special educational need. Both, in the opinion of their educational psychologist, have specific literacy needs, which are not related to motor function difficulties. Both students are highly intelligent readers, able to respond with wit and sophistication to a wide variety of stimulus materials, able to write in a wide variety of styles. Because decoding print is very difficult for them, the exam board says they cannot read; because certain "secretarial" aspects of writing are very difficult for them, the exam board says they cannot write. I have just been reading some coursework produced by one of these illiterates: Francis wrote this, then read what he had written to an amanuensis, who simply scribed a correctly-spelt version of it.¹¹

Aesop's fables and the Anansi Stories

As a black person my interest in Aesop's Fables grew when I discovered that Aesop's fables may have been written by a black man, a slave, who lived in the sixth century B.C. His fables became popular throughout the whole of Greece. Many people told their own version of the fables and so pronounced them as the originals. So we never know for certain who actually invented the original stories.

I have always enjoyed Anansi stories. One of the reasons why I am so interested in Anansi is because they are all old African folk tales, which have been told for generations by young and old.

I was attracted by the way animals have intelligence, and act the role of people.

...

Anansi stories were told by African people not only to entertain but to project the beliefs, views and the way in which these people lived. The animals' ability to communicate was a symbol of the belief that all things have intelligence similar to man, and face similar trials and tribulations, which Anansi has to confront (like gaining a friend through a crisis).

Assessment procedures are not an esoteric issue. That's why the boycott campaign has had such resonance amongst parents and others. Indeed, as far as the campaign against the SATs for seven year-olds is concerned, the campaign was largely kept alive by parents' groups. And of course it was, to a very large extent, parents who ensured the demise of the 11 plus — and who have vociferously opposed its return.

But if last year's boycott is to have any lasting significance, it has to be part of a much bigger campaign, in which the left cannot afford to cede the argument over the curriculum.

If the Dearing Report was about a compromise — and in some, very limited, senses it clearly was — one aspect of the task of squaring the circle was the reconciliation of two quite contrary strands in Tory thinking on education — the cultural heritage and the technologising tendencies.¹² It may not have done enough to pacify Sheila Lawlor, but the resuscitation of the tripartite system effectively carves up the school population between the two wings of the Tory reformers. And it does so by harking back to that most discredited arrangement, the tripartite system. This trajectory is most apparent in what is being proposed for key stage four. Fourteen-year-olds are to be sent along one of three pathways. The bright (sc. grammar school) students will follow an academic curriculum; the rather less bright a “vocational” one; while the secondary modern kids will have an “occupational” route. Wha the last pathway means is that the students will do things with their hands — painting and decorating, bricklaying, catering.

The white heat of a technological revolution it ain't. What it is, of course, is a solution to the problem which the Tories have themselves created. The attack on coursework-based GCSEs has meant that GCSE courses can no longer be the universalist, fully comprehensive system of assessment and accreditation which they were, perhaps, threatening to become. The distinction between academic and practical, never particularly close to the reality of classrooms — or to anything that has been learnt this century about cognitive development — is to be revived.

Francis's fate is not unique. It is hard not to make a connection between Dearing's curricular proposals and the increasingly overt movements towards the return of a fully-fledged selective school system.

Meanwhile, recent events have made it very clear that the local education authorities, targeted for demolition by the right wing, are themselves no longer prepared to defend the set of educational practices which might, for want of a better word, be described as progressive. For the light it sheds on the relationship now emerging between local authorities, the Labour Party and education, I want to turn now to the Jane Brown story.

In the same week that the story broke, the Mail on Sunday ran a double-page spread on Birmingham City Council. Almost with a sense of nostalgia for the good old days of loony left local government, the paper announced that it had found a worthy successor to Liverpool and Lambeth. A series of bizarrely twisted non-stories created an image of a city where political correctness ran riot. And that, of course was the point of the coverage — just as it helps to explain the timing, and the ferocity, of the attack on Jane Brown. Major's “back to basics” campaign, which from the start teetered on the brink of farce, had been blown apart by wave after wave of Tory scandal. What better way could there be to divert attention from this humiliating implosion of empty rhetoric than to revive that favourite bogey of the Tory tabloids?

“Romeo, Romeo, where art thou homo?” asked The Sun (20 January, 1994), following up two days later with “I watched as the Romeo ban head kissed woman pal in garden.” Today riposted with “Romeo and Julian” (20 January), the story run alongside a still of Julian Clary in Carry on Columbus. The Mail, meanwhile, investigated “The politically correct world of Ms Brown” (21 January), and spelt out the dire consequences of pc: “She barred nativity plays ... she ended tradition of caretaker playing Santa ... she ordered pupils to use teachers’

first names.” The broadsheets had less interesting headlines and lay-out, but were just as strident in their condemnation.

(I read the press reports with a group of sixteen-year-olds. They recognised that it was the voices of the media, rather than Jane Brown, who had insisted on a deficit model in their representation of Hackney as a cultural desert, in need of whatever drops of art the Royal Opera House might care to sprinkle on it. The students were incensed at the patronising nature of this coverage — the more so when they realised that the tickets on offer were not free, as had been widely reported. What was also interesting was what happened when groups of students tried to improvise the phone conversation between Jane Brown and Ingrid Haitink which triggered the whole witchhunt. The first role plays went something like this:

IH: D’you want some tickets for Romeo and Juliet — they’re dirt cheap?

JB: No — that play’s blatantly heterosexual [puts phone down].

Very quickly, the students realised that such a conversation — the dialogue which the press reports had suggested — was simply not credible. Their subsequent improvisations worked towards an understanding of the kind of discussion about culture and education which might plausibly have taken place.)

None of the media coverage should have been surprising — though the viciousness of the personal attack on Jane Brown, the merciless hounding and the vitriolic homophobia which has been showered on her remain deeply shocking. It is clear where the responsibility must lie for the death threats which have been issued against her.

What is unprecedented in this affair, however, is the intervention of the Hackney Council leadership. It is not simply that they have failed to give any support to Jane Brown, but rather that they, taking their cue from the media, have appointed themselves witchfinders-general. This is not the place to give a detailed account of the way in which Jane Brown’s employers — a Labour-controlled authority — have treated her. What I want to focus on is the way in which their actions reveal a capitulation to the Tories’ ideological agenda._

A press release entitled “Council chief slams cultural philistinism,” which was issued as soon as the story broke (19 January) and before any consultation with Jane Brown, announced that: *Council Leader John McCafferty, who is himself an English teacher, was quick to back the views expressed by those responsible for Hackney’s education. “I am currently teaching this great play to my 13 year old pupils. It is one of Shakespeare’s best-known and best-loved plays. The children of Hackney will not be deprived of access to this work whatever the personal views of any individual head.”*

As an English teacher, Mr McCafferty might have been expected to be able to distinguish between a play scripted by Shakespeare and a ballet scored by Prokofiev. Although this is not the central issue, neither is it splitting hairs. In a debate about culture and the representation of sexuality — which is precisely the debate, so far as one can tell, which was enacted in the telephone conversation between Jane Brown and Ingrid Haitink — it is perfectly legitimate to pose questions relating to the sexuality encoded within a particular cultural form. As the dance critic of the Financial Times argued, in a piece entitled “Why ballet is blatantly heterosexual” (30 January), classical ballet operates within and communicates through absolutely rigid heterosexual roles. In a whole variety of Shakespeare plays, on the other hand, the issue of sexual identity and orientation is far from straightforward.

More alarming, though, is the manner in which McCafferty stakes out a position on Shakespeare which is indistinguishable from that of the Centre for Policy Studies. The Shakespeare who is the author of “best-known and best-loved” plays is not the problematised focus of cultural analysis but the colossus who bestrides a monocultural heritage, the quintessence of Englishness. To caricature the debate as one of whether teachers allow children “access” to Shakespeare is to accept the right’s topsy-turvy view of equal opportunities — as if posing questions about the representation of cultural diversity were the same thing as “banning” the canonical texts of European elite culture.

These are not abstract points of debate. Cultural politics has an absolutely fundamental connection both with the Tories’ curricular project and with the resistance to it. The relationship between culture and education has been contested most successfully in the SATs boycott. It mattered a year ago that the tests — and the revised English orders which they prefigured — were designed to inscribe on the curriculum a narrowly-defined, monocultural and exclusive notion of literature. And it is very significant that Gus John, Hackney’s Director of Education, supported the SATs on the grounds that the teachers who wanted a boycott were denying their students access to “the kind of literature contained in the key stage 3 anthology.”¹³

The words are significant. For Gus John, equal opportunities would seem to be nothing more than a question of access. There is nothing to be said on the forms of knowledge, on questions of curricular content, or on the identities and experiences of particular groups of students. This is, incidentally, precisely the same version of equal opportunities as was presented in Baker’s national curriculum — a colour-blind, gender-blind, resources-blind entitlement. And the logical conclusion of Gus John’s position is that there is only one obstacle preventing such access: teachers.

All students should have “access” to Shakespeare, if only because of the fact of the cultural significance and ideological power which has been located in the icon of “Shakespeare”. The reality, of course, is that no-one in Hackney or elsewhere has founded their opposition to the tests or to the national curriculum, in any of its forms, on an unwillingness to give students access to certain sorts of text. But the model of students being held back by teachers’ low expectations does fit neatly into the Tories’ own attempt to construct a constituency of parental interest, irrespective of class or any other material condition, as a stick to wield in the face of local education authorities, the educationalist establishment and, naturally, teachers.

The very notion of access in this context is problematic. Access: it’s about opening doors. (Is it a coincidence that this is the title of the Labour Party’s green paper on education?) Yes, you may come in. On the other side of the door are many cultural goodies. Once inside, you can have (consume? own?) them. Access is not, however, a matter of developing any kind of critical relationship with the goodies on the inside. And it’s certainly not about anything you might have brought, or maybe just wanted to bring, when you made your way through the hallowed cultural portals. Whereas, of course, what Black students finally made teachers realise was that the Trojan horse of cultural diversity had always been inside the school gates. It would, indeed, be a sad irony if Gus John wanted us to unlearn that lesson.

The simple fact is that the vast majority of (working class) parents at Kingsmead, like all the parents who have given such strong support to the SATs boycott, have rejected this analysis.

Through the backing which they have given to Jane Brown, they have categorically refused to follow either Wapping or Hackney Council's attempt to make Jane Brown a scapegoat.

The point about the really useless knowledge that the Tories are pushing is partly its content — monocultural irrelevant, divisive, teaching students (especially those who are working class, black, female) to know their place and keep their distance from elite culture — but also the offensive on the curriculum and its assessment complements the marketisation of the education service through its attempt to redefine the nexus of relationships within schools. Teachers have, of course, always occupied a contradictory position in the dynamics of class: this was Barry's point in the extract with which I started. Schools have always been sites of struggle. We can't just pine for the status quo ante, for the relatively greater freedom, the room for manoeuvre which we enjoyed with 100% coursework, or whatever. Both the campaign against the SATs and, at a more local level, the defence of Jane Brown, offer a lesson as to what is necessary to move forward. In particular, they offer us a model of the kind of alliances which must be forged, between teachers, parents, students and others who are prepared to take an active part in resisting the attacks of the right.

Transforming the relationships which exist within the classroom, the relationships to knowledge and between students and teachers, cannot be dissociated from the way in which teachers relate to the world outside the classroom. That, by the way, seems to me to be the weakness of the set of relationships which *Finding a Language* represents — the danger of merely validating the institution against which a relatively liberal individual approach defines itself.

There are, of course, important tasks for the left to accomplish in debating what really useful knowledge would look like, and in popularising an alternative vision of education, its forms and its content. But there's no need to start from scratch in this endeavour.

I want to finish by drawing attention to two facets of this alternative perspective, and of the way in which we should work towards its realisation. National curriculum or no national curriculum, retrogressive assessment procedures notwithstanding, students are continuing to carve out spaces in which they can make sense of the world. In the past week I have been reading GCSE coursework by students at my school. It may no longer count for very much in terms of their final grades, but it still matters to them. It's impossible to give a sense of the breadth and the sheer achievement of even such a small group of students, so two examples will have to suffice.

First, Sushma, a girl who analysed the differences between the representation of sexual experiences in teenage novels by Rosa Guy and Judy Blume. If John Patten thinks that sex education belongs in the bit of the curriculum labelled Science (or possibly nowhere at all), Sushma's unsparing critique of the euphemisms and evasions of the adult novelist tells a different story:

I liked the way [Judy Blume] went into detail about how, when and where they made love and what their reactions were before, during and after they had love ... whereas another teenage writer like Rosa Guy doesn't really write openly, she writes on top of things and doesn't express her feelings ... it is like she is scared and embarrassed

Secondly, Chris, who wrote a study of Jamaican poetry. Realising that he couldn't make sense of his subject without testing out literary texts against other forms of discourse, he wrote:

For my open study I have used poems to make an idea in people's heads who aren't Jamaican or have not been to Jamaica or have but are none the wiser about the island and what the Jamaican population thinks about the place. Before I started to look up information on this island I believed that Jamaica is a nice place which has a lot to offer the world and therefore should be well off. I was right that the island has a lot to offer ... but I was wrong when I thought the island was well off. And so I have taken poems that will help people like me to understand the real Jamaica and written about them and used information books to back up my unsure pictures in my mind ... I have also written a poem as if I was a Jamaican.

*This island,
This town,
This place I live.
We are never seen as one that gives,
As we are not seen as one that needs.
Aid we need,
Aid we don't get.
People seem to forget,
We're poor,
We need help,
That person who sits high above,
He knows,
He knows the way we suffer each day,
In the church i go and pray,
this suffering will end some-day.
Church bells ringing,
Church bells stop,
Seashells crashing upon the rocks,
The seashells,
The beaches,
The few resort,
That's the reason why we are poor,
Tourist come and see no more,
Lovely beaches they have for sure,
They simply need no more,
I know the way I suffer each day to make an honest living,
So my children can have a proper meal to eat,
So don't come to my home and say,
Feed my children with lovely beaches.
So when you nasty tourist come
Remember me,
I'm the one,
The one who can show you my home,
JAMAICA.*

What Chris achieved cuts through the neat compartments of the nationalist curriculum to suggest models of literacy undreamed of in the Department for Education.

But I also want to remember another student, whom I taught a few years ago, at another school in East London. Quddus Ali, the boy who was beaten nearly to death by a bunch of white thugs in the week before the election of a BNP candidate on the Isle of Dogs. And I want to look outwards, beyond the classroom, to the TUC-sponsored march against racism which is to take place next Saturday. Because if we are to respond seriously to the understandings Chris has developed about cultural, social and economic forces, the alliances which we need to build must stretch far beyond education.

¹ Medway, Peter, *Finding a Language: autonomy and learning in school* (Writers & Readers/Chameleon, 1980).

² Department of Education and Science, *A Language for Life* ["The Bullock Report"] (H.M.S.O., 1975), p. 286.

³ See Bob Brett's review of *Finding a Language*, "Contradictions: a crossroads in English Teaching," *Teaching London Kids*, 19.

⁴ See Ken Jones, "The Cox Report: working for hegemony," in *English and the National Curriculum: Cox's Revolution?*, ed. Ken Jones (Kogan Page, 1992).

⁵ I am thinking here of a range of published analyses, from Bernard Coard's *How the West Indian Child is made educationally sub-normal in the British education system* (New Beacon Books, 1971) to Maureen Stone's *The education of the Black Child: the myth of multiracial education* (Fontana, 1981) and beyond; equally important, though, is more ephemeral evidence, provided in local, school-based debates over, for instance Section 11, or the role of black governors and parents in relation to the education system.

⁶ See "Long divisions," an interview with Rupee Singh, *Socialist Teacher*, 51 (1993).

⁷ The effect of the centralising tendency of GCSE in community languages was nothing short of farcical. In the interests of uniformity, exams in Bengali, Urdu, Punjabi and Gujarati were closely modelled on the syllabuses for (European) foreign languages. So the oral assessments were made on the basis of role plays in which the student was expected to assume the role of a tourist — coping with the business of hiring skis, for example.

⁸ DES/Welsh Office, *The National Curriculum 5-16: a consultation document*, (July 1987), p. 4.

⁹ See Anne Turvey, "Interrupting the lecture: Cox seen from a Classroom," in *English and the National Curriculum: Cox's Revolution?*, ed. Ken Jones (Kogan Page, 1992).

¹⁰ See "A tale of two anthologies," John Yandell, in *Whose English? a response to proposed changes* (London Association for the Teaching of English, 1993).

¹¹ Francis can read his own writing immediately after he has produced it; after any significant time has elapsed — half an hour or more — he can no longer decipher his highly erratic spellings.

¹² See Ken Jones, *Right Turn: the Conservative revolution in education* (Hutchinson, 1989), for a detailed analysis of the contradictions which exist between these two tendencies.

¹³ An early indication of this marked change came in a speech made by the last leader of the ILEA at the Labour Party Conference in 1987. As the 1988 Act loomed, Neil Fletcher endorsed many of its most retrogressive features, including a return to "formal rote learning."