

One model of a national education service

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Melissa Benn (2018) *Life Lessons. The Case for a National Education Service* London: Verso

In *Life Lessons*, Melissa Benn, a long-time education campaigner, sets out to explore what a National Education Service (NES) might look like. An NES was mentioned in the 2017 Labour Party manifesto and, although initially greeted with some scepticism, it is now gaining enthusiasm, with Labour Party consultations taking place. *Life Lessons* hopes to contribute to this process. Benn stresses that a consensus on a future NES is crucial and this will take time to develop.

She starts by outlining the history of education in the twentieth century, highlighting the achievements of comprehensive education and the principle of 'universal educability' alongside the constant calls for a more traditional approach. Recent demands for a more selective education have re-ignited these debates but the most worrying trend is the semi-marketisation in all levels of education, including higher education.

One of the questions which Benn tries to answer is how shifts in education policy take place. If an NES is to be created, how will more progressive education policies emerge? Accounts of recent initiatives by the NUT/NEU and other trade unions and campaigners in response to some of the failures of the market provide some evidence that a tipping point has arrived.

Benn identifies three questions which need to be answered as part of the development of an NES:

1. 'How do we make good on the widely understood significance of the early years to later educational and life achievements?
2. How do we establish a meaningful and affordable vocational path for those who do not go down the academic route?
3. How do we guarantee greater provision of second, third or fourth life chances to adults who did not benefit from formal education the first time round?' (p60)

They provide a useful framework for thinking about an NES, although much of the subsequent discussion focuses on secondary and higher education.

One starting point for an NES is whether we can afford free education. The book provides an unequivocal yes, and sets out three key arguments: moral - free education gives a strong message to a nation about how it values its citizens; political - free education is of most benefit to low income groups; and practical - charges often increase, as seen in the case of university fees. There is an emerging picture of how schools are increasingly asking for extra financial contributions from parents. Increased fees for adult and continuing education have resulted in a fall in the number of adults involved in further education.

Right

Recommendations for adult education draw on the concept of learning as a right which Tom Schuller and David Watson argued in *Learning through Life*, sponsored by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). As well as seeing lifelong learning as based on age not stage, it recommends that the life course is divided into four phases (up to age 25, 25-50, 50-75, 75+). More resources should be spent on older age groups. 'Learner leave' could be introduced for those wanting to retrain, and 'transitional entitlements' for those moving from another country. More autonomy for further education colleges as well as drawing local authorities, local employers and cultural institutions together to support lifelong learning are also recommended.

An important issue in a future NES will be systems of democratic governance. In recent reforms there has been a lack of defence of school democratic governance. Central government has taken on a strongly interventionist role. The removal

of parent governors from school governing bodies in 2016 was a further move away from local management of schools, along with the growing academy trusts that operate across England. Wales and Scotland have retained much stronger local democratic governance. There is a strong argument for linking education with local democracy. 'It is not too late for us to decide once again to administer public education through a reflective and responsive local state' (p81). This would be dependent on the revitalisation of local government.

Benn is highly critical of successive governments which have been responsible for the erosion of professional autonomy and the de-professionalisation of teachers. The crisis in recruitment and retention is a result of rising workloads, falling wages and a lack of control over the labour process. The devaluing of professional training has contributed to this crisis among teachers. *Life Lessons* suggests looking at how other countries strengthen teacher professionalism. For example, Finland train their teachers to Masters level, provide continuous professional development and allow them professional autonomy. A NES would have a country-wide view of the supply and demand for teachers and so would be able to encourage teachers to move to where there were shortages.

Life Lessons argues that a new NES would not necessarily need new structures but does need a process of renewal. The existing institutions need to be run and funded better, but Benn recommends changing the 'conversation' so that an honest debate can take place about 'overall aims and objectives, including recognition of what education can and cannot do' (p101). What a NES would need is a 'commitment to uncertainty, to open-ended inquiry'.

This book provides a useful analysis of some of the key issues which a new NES would have to address and it makes some suggestions about how to solve some current problems. A proposed short legislative programme is outlined, but it doesn't create a comprehensive vision of what a future NES would do. The three questions set out as a future NES framework are not answered. Although initially there is a discussion about progressive approaches to education, there is no blueprint for how education could be created in a different way. One of the most striking omissions is that there is no mention of what children, young people and adults would like.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.