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# **‘The past no longer casts light upon the future; our minds advance in darkness’<sup>1</sup>: the impact and legacy of Sir Alec Clegg’s educational ideas and practices in the West Riding of Yorkshire (1945-1974)**

Margaret Wood <sup>a\*</sup>, Andrew Pennington <sup>b</sup> and Feng Su <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a,b</sup> *School of Education, York St John University, York, UK;* <sup>c</sup> *School of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK.*

\*Corresponding author: Margaret Wood, School of Education, York St John University, Lord Mayor’s Walk, York, YO31 7EX. E-mail: m.wood@yorks.j.ac.uk

## **Authors’ details**

Margaret Wood is Senior Lecturer in Education at York St John University, UK. She has a particular research interest in educational enquiry in higher education through which she aims to develop pedagogic understandings by creating structures and conditions for genuine dialogue to develop student agency and to embed this within practices. She is co-editor of *Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Academic Leadership in Higher Education* (2017), published by Bloomsbury.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5067-1978>

Andrew Pennington was a senior officer in two local authority education and children’s services departments. Following his retirement, he was chair of governors at a large secondary comprehensive school and chaired the Board of Trustees of a newly-formed multi-academy trust. He is currently conducting doctoral research on democratic governance and community accountability in multi-academy trusts.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2286-8375>

Feng Su is Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University, UK. His main research interests and writings are located within the following areas: education policy, academic practice and professional learning in higher education. His recent books include *Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Academic Leadership in Higher Education* (edited with Wood 2017); *The Reorientation of Higher Education: Challenging the East-West Dichotomy* (edited with Adamson and Nixon 2012); *Professional Ethics: Education for a Humane Society* (edited with McGettrick 2012); and *Chinese learning journeys: Chasing the dream* (2011). He Tweets @DrFengSu.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0317-4033>

# **‘The past no longer casts light upon the future; our minds advance in darkness’<sup>1</sup>: the impact and legacy of Sir Alec Clegg’s educational ideas and practices in the West Riding of Yorkshire (1945-1974)**

This paper examines and evaluates some aspects of the legacy of the West Riding of Yorkshire County Council and its long serving Chief Education Officer, Sir Alec Clegg, who held the post between 1945 and 1974. Against a subsequent political discourse of markets, choice and autonomy which portrays local authorities as the cause of poor educational outcomes and school failure, political developments have led to a

diminution of the role of local authorities, destruction of local democratic accountability and greater centralisation of power and control of education. Drawing on interviews and email correspondence with former pupils, teachers, officers and others of the West Riding, its successor authorities and beyond, we explore the context, tensions, successes and lasting impact of Clegg's ideas and practice, particularly in relation to support for community development and the arts and creativity. The paper also looks at Clegg's influence and legacy with regard to selection for secondary education and the role of middle schools, the development of primary education and the impact on successor authorities to the West Riding and beyond.

**Keywords:** Alec Clegg; education; administration; local education authority; schools; education policy; community.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to examine the legacy and influence of Alec Clegg's ideas and educational philosophy on the development of personal aspirations and professional ambitions of individuals whose lives have been affected by education in the West Riding. We explore the enduring legacy of Clegg through the reflections of our respondents on their experiences in schools, in educational administration in the West Riding of Yorkshire or influencing education in other areas beyond the West Riding. We consider the context in which Clegg sought to pursue his ideals and offer an analysis of the significance of his approach and educational philosophy for the landscape of education at the local level today.

Alexander Bradshaw Clegg (known as Alec) was appointed Deputy Education Officer in the West Riding in 1945 and became its Chief Education Officer after a matter of months, a post he occupied from 1945 until 1974. This was an era before the centralisation of education policy where local power still prevailed, as we examine later with reference to education policy developments in England from the late 1970s onwards.

Alec Clegg's education included both state and independent schools (Long Eaton County Secondary School, where his father was headteacher, and Bootham School in York) and Cambridge university. After graduating from Cambridge, he gained a teaching qualification and became a teacher in London. Before his appointment to the West Riding,

he worked in educational administration in Birmingham, Cheshire and Worcestershire authorities (Darvill, 2000). He had an abiding concern for children from backgrounds very unlike his own and he saw the potential adverse consequences of inequalities and school failure for individuals and for society. He was a member of the Newsom Committee reporting in 1963 on the education of pupils between the ages of 13-16 of average and less than average ability. The Newsom report, 'Half our Future', 'concluded that most children in secondary modern schools were undervalued, a view he shared' (Newsam, 2004, p.1). Clegg was also a member of the Crowther Committee whose report in 1959 on the education of 15-18 year olds 'drew attention to a 'wastage of talent' among working class leavers' (Tomlinson, 2005, p.18). He was concerned about too much attention on measurability and testing in schools. 'It makes us over-emphasize what is measurable and under-emphasize what cannot be measured' (Clegg, 1980, p.19). He was concerned that with such an emphasis, the more important aspects of education 'not susceptible to measurement' would be neglected (Clegg, 1980, p.25).

Drawing on archival sources in the special collections held by Leeds University Library, the National Arts Education Archive and the West Yorkshire Archive, Wood, Pennington and Su (2018) have highlighted some of Clegg's key educational ideas and leadership practices during his time as the Chief Education Officer in the West Riding of Yorkshire. They conclude that his vision was informed by a commitment to social justice and a belief in promoting access to educational opportunities to enhance the lives of working class children, enabling the ability and potential of ordinary children from modest and poor circumstances to be realised. He recognised the role of aesthetic experience in a rounded educational experience and the 'growth of a child as a person', but also that this was 'to a great extent undervalued' in a regime where measurement 'by marks and grading' prevail (Clegg, 1980, p.16).

## Context for the study

Local government reorganisation abolished the West Riding County Council in 1974, breaking it up into a number of local education authorities.<sup>2</sup> Alec Clegg and West Riding staff worked hard to manage a smooth transition to the new arrangements, witnessing the destruction of much of what they had worked to establish caused sorrow:

Personally, these final years were sad ones for Sir Alec and his colleagues. Doing everything possible to save at least some of what they had created over the years was their aim but before long, most of it was destroyed. The complete dispersal of the books in the West Riding County Library, the finest in the north of England, was perhaps the worst single act of vandalism that occurred, but far from the only one. (Newsam, 2014a, p.267).

However, the influence of Clegg and the West Riding have been significant and enduring. Peter Newsam for example, who was his deputy in the West Riding and went on to become deputy and then Chief Education Officer in the Inner London Education Authority, wrote that ‘from Sir Alec, as teacher, as practical thinker, as a historian of education and as a person, I learnt more than I can briefly express’ (Newsam, 2014a, p.248) and what he learnt from Clegg had a ‘lasting effect’ on him (p.253).

Newsam (2014a, p.261) tells us that the West Riding local education authority was ‘far more than an administrative structure, though it dealt well with the day to day management of a geographically large and organisationally complex system. It was itself an educating as well as an educational institution’. We argue that beyond its demise, the influence of the West Riding during the period of Sir Alec’s tenure continues to be a deep source of encouragement for educators today.

Clegg’s time in the West Riding (1945-1974) coincides with ‘the postwar collectivist consensus, also popularly known as social democracy [...]’ (Studlar, 2007, p.1). As Forrester and Garratt (2016) note, there was optimism in the post-war era, ‘a

more interventionist approach by the state in most areas of social life and it was perceived that education could address society's inequalities and problems' (p.12). In the era following the Education Act 1944 'Education policy was largely based on a social democratic consensus that governments should regulate and resource education to achieve redistributive justice, and provide equal opportunity' (Tomlinson, 2005, p.3). However the ability of education to achieve this kind of change is contested, an implication of which, according to Simon (1985, p.142), is that such transformation requires deep changes to the structures of society and the economy and as Tomlinson notes, inequalities continued following the 1944 Act. Simon also suggests that this question of relations between education and society is open to varying interpretation dependent on the prevailing economic conditions: in a time of relative prosperity a more optimistic view of the role of teachers and education to overcome disadvantage prevailed. This optimistic interpretation can be read into educational developments of the 1960s, which saw a Labour government moving towards a system of comprehensive education that, as Lowe points out (2002, p.155), was driven largely by pressure from local authorities. There was also a 'revolution' in primary education, heralded by the Plowden Report (DES, 1967) and championed by Alec Clegg and others (Lowe, 2002, p.156), the expansion of higher education, including the establishment of the Open University (Studlar, 2007, p.7).

The current political rhetoric of 'increased autonomy' and devolved responsibility for schools goes hand in hand with increased monitoring and accountability, what might be characterised as a form of 'coercive autonomy'(Greany and Higham, 2018). A regime of compliance, instrumental approaches and standardisation arguably have dominated school policy reform in recent times and as English and Bolton (2016, p.108) suggest, 'reforms are never neutral'. In the education system in England, power has become increasingly

centralised and local authorities have been starved of resources and divested of many of the powers and responsibilities that previously resided in them for the governance of education.

Brighouse (2016, p.13) noted that the White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere':

marks the end of the post-second world-war consensus about sharing power in education among three more or less equal partners: central government, local government (once called local education authorities) and the teaching profession.

and he pointed to the appropriation of power by the Secretary of State for Education that has intensified and proliferated through a welter of legislation. By contrast, the power formerly invested at local level in the Chief Education Officer and the Local Education Authority meant that local communities could shape provision according to local needs.

Clegg may be considered 'progressive' in his thinking about education, although the term is a broad one and includes a number of different ideas 'at best loosely connected' rather than a single notion (Alexander, 1995, p.278) with affectivity and the arts areas perhaps particularly influenced by progressive ideas (ibid. p.285). Tisdall (2020) identifies what she terms the utopian and non-utopian forms of progressive education suggesting that these movements developed in the years between the first and second world wars. She argues that, though quite different in their conceptions of child development, schooling and social analysis, both shared the view that education should offer a child freedom to develop their innate potential and natural abilities. The utopian progressive movement was particularly active in smaller, independent and often experimental schools such as A.S. Neill's Summerhill. It was the non-utopian progressivism and child centred pedagogy with its accompanying analysis of childhood and child development that gained traction in the years after 1945 with both LEA administrators such as Clegg and central government Department of Education thinking. During Clegg's time 'progressive' ideas about education became contested and politicised. For example, polarised and politicised education debates about progressivism versus standards, were a feature of the late 1960s and the 1970s, although

Tisdall (2020) points out that in its origins 'progressivism' was not a preserve of those on the left or a liberal elite. Tomlinson sets out how 'The demon of lowered academic standards was presented in fearsome and often inaccurate detail in a series of 'Black Papers' published by right-wing academics and policy groups between 1969 and 1977' (Tomlinson, 2005, p.21) which informed education policies of the era ushered in by the 1979 Tory government, an era in which 'central government took substantial and unprecedented control of the school curriculum' (ibid. p.61). A well-publicised element of the 'Black Paper' critique was an invocation of a previous era of traditional education characterised by higher standards and better discipline. Tisdall (2020) questions whether such 'traditional education' had ever existed in the way critics of progressivism suggested and argues that child centred strategies and pedagogy were not recent innovations. The reality of developing educational provision across an LEA such as the West Riding was complicated and challenging, not least because of the quality of the physical and material environment of schools and the need to accommodate the post war growth in population. The impact of implementing child centred pedagogy and progressive approaches are examined by Tisdall (2017, p.35) who sets out how aging and inadequate primary school buildings, large class sizes, changing expectations of parents and children and a refashioning of the teacher's role created stress and pressure for a predominantly female and working class workforce of primary teachers.

### **The study**

The primary data for this study was collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews and email correspondence with former pupils, teachers, officers and others of the West Riding, its successor authorities and beyond conducted in the spring and summer of 2019.

In keeping with a purposive sampling strategy, respondents were selected with reference to our research questions (Bryman, 2008, p.375). There were ten respondents as

shown in Table 1, and these were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. As a means to establish credibility of our interpretations of the data, the accuracy of our understandings of what respondents told us at the time of the interview were reflected back informally to them, thus acting as a form of ‘member check’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.314) and a natural part of the discussions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure that as researchers we had access to a verbatim record of each interview as the basis for analysis. The interview data yielded rich accounts and our understandings of these were discussed by the research team as a form of ‘investigator triangulation’ (Wellington, 2000, p.24). Ensuring ‘intrateam communication’ was important and ‘the fact that any one team member is kept more or less “honest” by other team members adds to the probability that findings will be found to be credible.’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.307).

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Respondent characteristics</b>  |
|------------------|--|
| Respondent 1     | former pupil in the West Riding  |
| Respondent 2     | former pupil in the West Riding  |
| Respondent 3     | former pupil in the West Riding  |
| Respondent 4     | former headteacher and Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) for primary and early education |
| Respondent 5     | former West Riding Officer   |

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Respondent 6  | former pupil in the West Riding                                     |
| Respondent 7  | former Chief Education Officer of a West Riding successor authority |
| Respondent 8  | former Chief Education Officer                                      |
| Respondent 9  | former school teacher in the West Riding                            |
| Respondent 10 | former school teacher in the West Riding                            |

Table 1. Research participants and their connections to the West Riding of Yorkshire

Whilst we believe that to claim complete neutrality and impartiality would be disingenuous, we were aware of and explicit about our own positionalities. One of the team had been a pupil in the West Riding and another had worked as a senior local government officer in a successor authority to the West Riding. Whilst this knowledge and experience within the research team afforded useful insights, we were mindful of the potential for bias to creep into the research process and the need for our account to be ‘fair and balanced’ (Denscombe, 2002, p.158). Researcher reflexivity was one important way in which we remained alert to this. With this prior knowledge and experience of the West Riding we cannot claim that the researchers approached the research without ‘personal stances’ (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). Furthermore, the research design is not aligned to positivist claims that inquiry can be ‘value-free’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.161) for, as a naturalistic investigation using a qualitative approach, it is acknowledged to be ‘value-bound’ (ibid). In

terms of how this was enacted, rather than seeing personal stance and prior knowledge as a 'problem', in our interviews with respondents we sensed that having prior knowledge and shared experiences in the West Riding benefitted the flow of conversation and rapport-building. At the same time, we remained alert to the importance of not 'leading' or 'loading' these conversations, and we mitigated this in terms of safeguarding data trustworthiness through 'member checks' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 p. 314). In our inductive approach to data analysis, there was scope to relate to the data at 'an intuitive level' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p.440) and thus the method included room for personal connections to the data to be drawn on as a resource.

Through thematic analysis of the data, key themes and embedded ideas were uncovered. Whilst Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013, p.439) note that 'there is no clear agreement for what thematic analysis is or how one does it' they also suggest it has uniqueness in acknowledging 'that analysis happens at an intuitive level. It is through the process of immersion in data and considering connections and interconnections between codes, concepts and themes that an 'aha' moment happens' (p.440). One of the attractions of thematic analysis for our purposes was that 'intuition and sensing' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p.440) are recognised to play an important part in the process of analysis. At the same time, the analysis was a rigorous process of immersion in the data and reading, re-reading, reviewing and refining until the final substantive themes emerged.

Ethical protocols were followed in gathering the data and necessary permissions gained from the respondents and University Research Ethics Committee approval from the lead author's institution. Whilst respondents have been anonymised, where it may still be possible to identify an individual then additional permission has been obtained before the

data could be included, together with further approval from the University Research Ethics Committee.

### **Lighting up the future: the influence and impact of Alec Clegg's educational philosophy**

The organisational landscape of local government, education and schools has been remade since 1974. Democratic governance and institutions have been dismantled and withered to be replaced by market-driven, centralised and performative policy and organisational forms such as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) with no local or community accountability. And yet, the impact of the approaches and philosophy forged in the West Riding spread far. From the data gathered for this paper, elements of this legacy can be constructed and examined.

Clegg was opposed to selection for secondary school at age 11 by means of the 11 plus test which he believed was flawed and unjust. The way in which Clegg sought to end selection at 11 and reorganise secondary education in the West Riding provides an illuminating example of his organisational leadership, political influence, clear sighted strategic thinking and ability to achieve change in a complex environment. He researched and discussed widely about plans and practice for secondary schooling both in other local education authorities and internationally (for example North America) and consulted extensively with West Riding colleagues and headteachers. He concluded that the age of secondary transfer at 11 set out in the 1944 Act was not in the best interests of children and represented the biggest barrier to successful non-selective secondary re-organisation (Crook 2008, p.119). Navigating the complicated geography, mechanics of government and politics of the West Riding, he used his local and national political contacts and influence to develop and propose a three-tier model of 5-9, 9-13 and 13-18 schools, building an informal coalition across the education service to support the necessary change. The proposal for flexibility in the age of transfer which allowed the creation of middle schools was incorporated into the

1964 Education Act, which Edward Boyle, Conservative minister for Education at the time, claimed as his own (Boyle and Crossland 1971, p.78). It is a tribute to Alec Clegg's consummate leadership and political skills that Kogan (1971, p.53) suggests that it was the education service, of which Clegg was a leading organiser and spokesperson, that was the real instigator of the change. Gosden and Sharp (1978, p.189) suggest that Clegg's middle-school model 'was probably the West Riding's single greatest contribution to national education in the post-war period'. Crook further argues (2008, p.124) that 'Clegg's vision for middle schools went far beyond utilitarianism. He saw middle schools as places of hope, where strong pupil–teacher bonds would last beyond the traditional primary years, where pupils could experience teachers of specialist subjects earlier than in the secondary phase, and where pupils could be best supported as they experienced early adolescence.'

The West Riding was regarded highly for its practice and approach to education and the way in which it enriched and improved the opportunities and lives of individuals and communities. The continuation of these high standards featured as part of the transition to successor authorities after 1974. A former Chief Education Officer (CEO) of a West Riding successor authority who began his career in educational administration at this time, talked about a process of what he called 'levelling up' whereby former West Riding staff transferred to the new authorities sought to ensure policy and practice matched the high standards they brought with them:

It was about high expectations really because you were encouraged to do things well, I think. There were high expectations of people, high expectations of schools. But I think generally it was about levelling up.

This former CEO, Respondent 7, suggested that evidence of these high standards were witnessed in the collaborative work between schools and local authority staff which underlay the quality of curriculum development, continuing professional development (CPD) or in-

service training (INSET) and in the influential relationships with Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) that persisted in the West Riding's successor authorities as:

There was a huge amount of in-service training that was available. I think the other thing I would say was that there were very strong links that were built up with HMI. I think that was thought important because Clegg could be somebody who HMI respected. There were strong relationships with HMI. I think that was something that was a hangover from the West Riding.

West Riding philosophy and practice can also be traced through the impact on officers who worked with or were influenced strongly by Alec Clegg and who later played leading roles in transforming education in other areas. For instance, Newsam (2014a, p.253) recalls the learning he took from the West Riding and Alec Clegg:

Although I learnt a great deal from Sir Alec's creative approach to management, from his skill in delegation and from his good-humoured insistence on a humane approach to administration, I learnt far more from him about the content and purpose of education itself. Day to day conversation with him on school visits and the content of speech after speech that I dug out of his filing system had a lasting effect on me.

This learning influenced his subsequent work:

...the mixture of theoretical understanding and practical experience I had earlier acquired had identifiable consequences during my time, first as Deputy Education Officer and then from 1977, as Education Officer of the ILEA (Inner London Education Authority). (Newsam 2014b p. 5)

Respondent 8, a former CEO of a large city education authority in the Midlands in the 1990s and subsequently London Schools Commissioner leading the London Challenge, acknowledged the personal impact of Alec Clegg's approach and its contribution to the improvements brought about to education in two of England's largest cities in the 1990s and 2000s:

It was his interest in those who don't get anything out of the system, certainly it hugely affected me. When I went to (city in the Midlands)... I talked about improving on previous best because you are trying to get everybody to improve, you are never going to be satisfied. Because he was a kind of model, that I was thinking, 'well if I can be half as good as that, it would be alright'.

Respondent 4, a retired Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) with previous Chief Inspector responsibilities (mainly for primary and early education), acknowledged the influence of the West Riding approach to primary education led by Clegg:

As a class teacher, I was excited by his book 'The Excitement of Writing'. The writing is authentic: its quality rings through when I share examples with teachers after 50 years and is still uncommon in primary schools today. This emphasis on quality, often hard won was a characteristic of all his work in primary education, in art or nature or in support for children who take longer to learn. -

The West Riding under Clegg's leadership operated in very different times to today. The post war period up until the late 1970's was one in which LEAs had real power to define and organise education provision to meet the needs of their local communities and, as Kogan reminds us (2002, p.336), thereby act as a vital counter weight to the centralising tendencies of national government. However, as McKenzie (2001, p.96) has argued, 'it may be that the relative power of LEAs has been exaggerated in the past because of the variation in how much power and influence has been exerted by Secretaries and Ministers of State for Education since 1944', noting that in the past their control of most of the public spending on education was the source of much of the LEA's power over education (ibid). The central control of the curriculum, school autonomy and other developments in education policy begun in the late 1970s, particularly following the 1988 Education Reform Act, mark a shift 'away from the social-democratic consensus towards neo-liberalism and the market as the main source of resource distribution' (Forrester and Garratt, 2016, p.9). Taken together, these developments represent a shift of power away from teachers, schools and communities. One reflection of this is in the change of emphasis signalled through recourse to the language of business now often used when referring to schools as organisations. Respondent 9, a former school teacher in the West Riding, referred to this and contrasted it with the early days of their career and their original motivation to become a teacher:

It is as though from, I can't tell you exactly when, but schools were required to become like businesses and I am sure that the reason so many of us in that period of the 60's and 70's went into teaching for one reason was because the whole ethos of teaching was the exact opposite of the ethos of business...

### **Supporting the development of resourcefulness and capacity in communities**

A theme in the data is the contribution the West Riding under Alec Clegg's leadership made to social capital and community development. Social capital can be thought of as connections, social ties that bring benefits: 'the central idea of social capital is that social networks are a valuable asset' (Field, 2017, p.2). Respondent 1, a former pupil in the West Riding, talked about the idea of 'vigour' in communities which provides a powerful articulation of one way of conceptualising social capital and, as Field (2017, p.78) explains 'the idea of social capital may help to shift government away from what is often seen as a deficit model of disadvantage'. Thus, social capital can reframe the policy discourse away from approaches that are grounded in well-meaning paternalism and move it instead towards a recognition of the value of harnessing the resources and networks within communities. Hoare's (2019) research on the practice of Muriel Pyrah, an unqualified primary teacher whose work was championed by Clegg, found evidence of some deficit assumptions regarding 'deprivation' in the school community and a lack of sensitivity to the contribution of pupils' informal education. Our research uncovered evidence of attitudes and practices of some teachers that also reflected a deficit model of disadvantage in working class communities and the teacher as positioned to compensate for these. This raised questions about how embedded the espoused philosophy and approaches of the West Riding were. Our data shows examples of middle-class professionals seeing their roles as being to compensate for perceived deficits in working class communities. However, our research also pointed to examples of how school and home experiences of the child were seen as complementary and where the value of informal learning through conversations with children at home in working class communities were affirmed and drawn on at school. For example, in accounts from

respondents in working class south Yorkshire coalfield towns, one referred to ‘a river of encouragement from home to school and back again’ (Respondent 2) whilst another (Respondent 1) recalled how when he first started in the infants, he withdrew and hid under the teacher’s desk refusing to come out. The teacher gave him wooden blocks and he made ‘a city in the sky’, to represent a future that his father had imagined and talked about with him. He remembered how this was admired and the school took photographs of it. The teacher had encouraged and engaged him through drawing on and affirming conversation and ideas brought from home into the school. Our respondents also related examples of schools acting as hubs for community activities and providing facilities as a resource for communities. As Field (2017, p.78) noted, in contrast to a deficit model, the ‘idea of social capital emphasizes resources that communities already have’, and this may ‘turn attention to the ways external agencies work and interact with them’ (ibid). In Respondent 1’s words:

I don’t think we create anything out of ashes. I think we’ve got to keep the bloody fire going. I would rather feed a fire than blow on some ashes, and it’s what happens is, the working class get left behind every time. Obviously, I understand building the new Jerusalem and the phoenix coming up, and I do get it, but I think there’s a vigour in ... I don’t even like the word communities, I think in local towns there’s a vigour that needs looking at, and that vigorousness is what I benefited from ... So it’s not just Clegg’s vision, it’s the support network of where you live as well.

There is a long tradition of schools being involved in the wider health and well being of children which, as Lowe points out (2002, p.151), was a consequence of LEAs, from their very early days, championing the wider responsibilities of schools to their communities. Clegg recognised the responsibility of schools for physical health but wider than that ‘along the borderline of mental and emotional health the doctors and teachers have a joint job to do’ (Clegg and Megson, 1968, p.68). Echoes of this approach can be found in the raft of educational and social policies relating to England of the 1997-2010 Labour government (Peterson and Durrant, 2013, p. 718) with its emphasis on integrating a range of health and other services for children, families and communities centred on schools. Hulme et al. (2015, p. 80) argue that one of the consequences of

the post 2010 austerity and the current fragmented school organisation landscape has been to marginalize the gains from this integration. It has curtailed local authorities' ability to coordinate local initiatives to strengthen vigour in communities and involve schools in local partnerships to promote economic and social development. One dimension of Alec Clegg's approach to engagement of schools in supporting vigour in communities and integrating services, was the development of community education and lifelong learning. The approach he pursued in the West Riding involved secondary schools becoming centres for a range of community activities including adult education, youth work, community development and family support. Resources in the form of staffing such as community tutors and dedicated plant and equipment as well as wider community use of school facilities for sports, arts and drama were developed and funding sought for innovative projects and partnerships. Respondent 6 who was a former West Riding pupil, recalled what this was like as a pupil at a secondary school with an attached community centre:

So it was attached to the school but semi-detached and it was outward looking into the community. These were people who were all just focused on the centre. And it was brilliant. Everybody used to go to the youth club.

Another aspect of the links between education and strengthening 'vigour' in the community apparent in the data is the value Alec Clegg placed on the quality and attractiveness of the built environment and its importance in supporting children and young people's learning. The school library service, the extensive loan service for works of art and the funding for the purchase of art works for schools are well known. Less so perhaps is the importance placed on the professional development of caretakers and their involvement in collaborative professional development activities with teaching staff which promoted consistency in maintenance and upkeep of school buildings and also drew on the knowledge and experience of caretaking staff as a valuable asset. Respondent 7, a former CEO of a West Riding successor authority, drew attention to this practice:

Woolley Hall was the caretaking centre where caretakers went on courses ... Teachers taught on caretaking courses and caretakers taught on some of the teachers' courses for headteachers.

In fact Clegg was only too aware of the influence of physical surroundings and in 1945 when he went to the West Riding, it was after the war and many schools were in a 'lamentable condition' following years of neglect (Clegg, 1980, p.122). Clegg believed caretakers played an important role in improving the physical environment for the better, something he was aware of from the example set by his father as a headteacher. By improving the quality of the environment the caretaker also contributes in 'subtle' and 'powerful' ways to the provision of education (ibid. p.122).

From Newsam (2004, p.1) we learn that 'Clegg had no interest in uniformity' and the approach in the West Riding was to encourage communities to shape schools to their needs (ibid). Linked to this is the need for democratic institutions and a democratic sensibility amongst those who use and are part of those institutions. When reviewing the economic, social and environmental challenges faced by individuals and communities today, Ranson (2018, p.55) stresses that 'the crisis demands strong, collaborative democracy yet even its crucial traditional forms, such as local government and school government, have been weakened.'

Newsam (2014a, p.261) reminds us that this is not a new imperative when he cites the 1969 Redcliffe-Maud Report on local government in England: 'if local self-government withers, the roots of democracy grow dry. If it is genuinely alive, it nourishes the reality of democratic freedom.'

### **Enduring impact of the West Riding focus on creativity and artistic expression**

Clegg's era was influenced by 'the view of the child as inherently creative and ready to respond to good design in everyday life' which as Burke notes 'infused progressive

educational thinking and planning' (Burke, 2018, p.261). The importance of the expressive arts in the curriculum was recognised in the West Riding (Newsam, 2014a, p.260).

That whole movement to make the expressive arts of music, dance, painting, poetry and drama, each in its way so important in the healthy development of children, was a central feature of the West Riding's education service.

The use of expressive arts was widespread across the West Riding particularly in primary schools. The approach was not simply learning about drawing, painting, performing or creative writing. It was used to nurture a way of thinking and doing, which is fundamental to being human. Respondent 8, a former CEO speculated about the wider significance of Clegg's emphasis on the arts and creativity:

Now if you ask well who ... you know the person who has contributed most to the economic wellbeing of this country? I say it's Clegg, because without him you couldn't have had the burgeoning of the expressive arts you have had.

Whilst this is perhaps overstating the case, many contemporary writers, poets and artists were educated in the West Riding schools and it is clear that the focus on arts and creativity had a lasting impact on some participants in our study. Respondent 6 is a poet and a former pupil in the West Riding, and in the interview he recalled that creativity and imagination were developed:

In the classroom, there was tons of art. Lots of art. I was about seven. We learnt about a caveman. It wasn't just about cavemen, but it was about how they lived, and you imagined yourself into the kind of mindset of a Neanderthal.

In the interview, the same participant highlighted how his school experiences in the West Riding helped him develop an interest in creative writing and subsequently he became a published poet.

Another participant in our study, a former pupil in the West Riding and a writer and poet, Respondent 2, reflected on a similar school experience:

It wasn't just that teachers encouraged pupils to be interested in language and art, but some pupils actually were influenced that much that they went on to make a living from it.

For other research participants too, the emphasis on creativity and imagination provided them with space and time to explore who they wanted to be in the future, as illustrated in this quote from respondent 1, a former pupil in the West Riding:

It gives you that space to just think for yourself, in a pocket of time, that it will go beyond any kind of filling you with education. You know, I think Clegg's teachings, all the infrastructure that was set up due to Clegg and his cohorts, is that it allowed lots of space and time for pennies to drop on young peoples' minds.

It also had a lasting impact on their lives. Respondent 3, a former pupil in the West Riding, reflected on this as awakening or 'opening up' the joy of learning:

But fourth year juniors, if that was the West Riding, if that captured the essence of what Alec Clegg was trying to create in the West Riding, then I think it was a liberating experience and it did wonders for me in terms of opening up joy in relation to learning. Particularly in relation to those creative areas, English and art.

I do think the confidence that came from some of that stuff, the ability to tell stories, I think that has helped me throughout my life.

The same respondent stressed that this growth in confidence was not just for able and well-motivated children:

Colin<sup>2</sup> was a lad who really struggled with everything, and he didn't just struggle academically, he struggled socially. And I will never forget Colin being given the privilege of standing up in front of the class and being able to read out his story that he constructed to the rest of the class.

These are of course individual instances and recollections and in the context of questions of how widespread and systematic such approaches were, it would be unwise to make claims of significant societal impact without further evidence. Nevertheless, the findings reported do indicate that the widely acknowledged creative focus in the West Riding, especially in primary schools, had significant influence on the adult life, career choices and directions of some individuals.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks: some critical reflections on the impact and legacy of Sir Alec Clegg's educational ideas and practices**

Alongside the evidence of progressive and emancipatory work in communities, there are narratives in the data which indicate tensions between the progressive approach and reputation of the West Riding and the conservative attitudes and practices of some teachers influenced by connections to local power structures. Respondent 1, a former pupil in the West Riding, articulates Field's (2017, p.78) notion of a deficit model of disadvantage playing out through middle class professionals seeking to compensate for deficits in working class communities in ways which did not recognise the strengths or vigour present and ignored a proud history of working class organisation and scholarship:

But I think there was a group of people who were well meaning, who were do-gooding people ... I appreciate what they were doing, but I just think sometimes, did they really get it as well?

But there's a proud history of it, you know? We often assume working class people couldn't read and write before the 1930s.

Reflecting on his schooling in the South Yorkshire coalfield Respondent 6, a former pupil in the West Riding, discussed the tension between the school culture promoted by the West Riding, the attitudes of some staff and their connection to local elites and power structures and how this affected approaches to working class children:

A lot of teachers at the school ... they were actually plugged into a local elite. And what I increasingly noticed was a network of teachers who taught in a range of local schools, ... quite reactionary teachers. But then from the perspective of now, I realise, you know, two of these teachers were in the local conservative party. Two of them were associated with miners who were scabs during the 1984/85 strike. And it's always struck me that there was a contradiction between the kind of ethos of the school and some of the personal attitudes and opinions of the teachers and how they ran it. I couldn't articulate in the way I'm articulating it now, then, but that's what I saw. I saw snobbery, I saw hypocrisy, I saw manipulation and I hated it.

Respondent 3 who was also a former pupil in the West Riding, speculated about how systemic the West Riding approach really was across schools:

But I do wonder how embedded that was across the system ... it's that year and that year only [Fourth Year Juniors] that stands out in my mind in relation to, wow that was something really, really special ... I can't quite work out whether it was the system or whether it was the teacher.

This prompts the question how, in the organisational culture of the West Riding which valued and promoted teacher and headteacher autonomy and diversity of practice and eschewed centralised control and standardisation, could such approaches be widely embedded? This also touches on the issue of power relations in schools; how could a classroom teacher with such inspirational practice challenge and change the entrenched power structures in a school if their approach and philosophy was not shared by those in the school hierarchy with power to enact policy?

Notwithstanding the significant changes to the role and powers of LEAs that have taken place since the 1940s (McKenzie, 2001 p. 96) and being alert to the need to avoid uncritical praise of Clegg and depicting his era as some kind of 'golden age', it is instructive to examine how this time may speak to us and illuminate some of the concerns of today whilst also recognising some of the tensions and questions raised by our data. For example, the question of the concern for teacher autonomy and the development of 'progressive' pedagogic practices and the extent to which these things could co-exist with settings where power hierarchies and conservative attitudes and practices prevailed. Questions arose too regarding ways of working with local communities which were grounded in recognising and mobilising vigour and steered clear of paternalism, albeit well-meaning.

Although the landscape of educational provision has changed dramatically since Clegg's time, our study suggests there are aspects of Alec Clegg's legacy to which we can relate. One such aspect is the value of strong local institutions which open opportunities to harness resourcefulness and capacity in communities and bring social and economic benefits. Developing such an approach would need to acknowledge the paternalistic and hierarchical

nature of much work with communities in Clegg's era and incorporate the subsequent learning about emancipatory and asset-based practice. This is an important element of what we identify as strengthening 'vigour' in communities. Clegg's focus on the vital role of the creative and expressive arts with potential to enrich lives has an abiding importance for education today, in view of the pernicious effects of a dominant 'measurement' culture and the 'squeezed' place of creative and aesthetic endeavour in the curriculum. Drawing on the accounts of former West Riding pupils in particular, we have argued that the focus on creativity and artistic expression in the West Riding has endured and has had a lasting impact on the life choices and chances of individuals. However, contribution to the growth of the creative economy and the development of new ways for individuals and communities to thrive in the post-industrial era remains an open question. With the centralising tendencies of education policy in a market-led education environment, local democratic governance and strong ties between schools and their communities gain in importance as a counterweight. However, any such local governance initiatives should be developed in close consultation with communities, drawing on the insights from the West Riding's legacy and not simply seek to replicate the structures and practices of the past. The evisceration of local authorities, now divested of many powers and responsibilities they held in Clegg's day, has been the result of the education policy trajectory moving unequivocally towards central appropriation of power. Despite the landscape of school provision now fragmented and disconnected and the weakening of local democratic ties, what has emerged from our foregoing discussion has longevity. It does not provide a model for the present so much as an example of locally-engaged education provision with relevance for capacity-building in communities and strategies to tackle social disadvantage today.

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## Notes

1. Title taken from De Tocqueville's 1840 study *Democracy in America* (2003 p.819).
2. The West Riding County Council covering the West Riding of Yorkshire was one of the largest pre-1974 English administrative counties. It was abolished in 1974 following the 1972 Local Government Act. The northern, more rural areas of the West Riding were transferred to a new North Yorkshire County Council whilst the more densely populated and industrial areas in the south of the Riding, centred on the conurbations of Leeds and Sheffield, were reorganised into nine separate unitary councils acting as education authorities.
3. The name mentioned here has been pseudonymised

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