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## **‘Back to the Future’: thinking with Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Alec Clegg (1909-1986) on the promise of education**

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## **‘Back to the Future’: thinking with Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Alec Clegg (1909-1986) on the promise of education**

This paper analyses, mingles and blends divergent and complementary strands from the thinking of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Sir Alec Clegg (1909-1986), two contemporaneous but different influential public figures and thinkers in the post-World War Two period. The paper uses these strands to construct a critique of the current colonisation of education by neoliberal economic logics and performative architecture. Their ideas emerge as bulwarks against populist discourse, reductivist, authoritarian framings of education policy and the restrictive and prescriptive direction of education practice. Conceptions of pluralism, imagination, the location of children and young people’s perspectives in the adult world, citizenry and engagement with the world are illuminated for their refreshing power to replenish and sustain the conditions for an education that supports human flourishing.

Keywords: education; Hannah Arendt; Alec Clegg; children's rights; plurality; dialogue; imagination; progressive; childhood

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. (Arendt, 2006a, p.193)

Education is inevitably to some extent a tug-of-war between the corrupting values of adult society and the efforts of teachers to help children to withstand them. (Clegg, 1974c, p.25)

In Robert Zemeckis’ film ‘Back to the Future’ (1985), he uses the character of Marty McFly to explore an existentialist conundrum; the consequences of traveling back in time on the future self. Zemarckis choses to interpret Marty’s encounter with the past as a means of guaranteeing the future status quo. In this paper we seek to use our encounter with the past,

in the thinking of Arendt and Clegg, to explore how those ideas can challenge the dominant education discourse of our times. Whilst Clegg's (1909-1986) and Arendt's (1906-1975) lives were contemporaneous, their experiences and contexts differed in many ways - geographically, politically and culturally. In this paper, complementary and divergent strands from the thinking of each are considered. We examine what it means to participate in and contribute to the public sphere and engage with the world. Whilst recognising that Clegg and Arendt were different in many ways, our interest lies in education's ability to build a better society, an outcome we argue, around which their ideas converge.

The themes explored in this paper, which include conceptions of pluralism, imagination, the location of children and young people's perspectives in the adult world, citizenry and engagement with the world, were chosen to illuminate critically important concerns for education today. These generative themes incorporate a nascent, refreshing power to replenish and sustain the conditions for an education that supports human flourishing.

### **Arendt, Clegg and the power of imagination**

Context is vitally important in making sense of past lives, particularly when arguing for their contemporary relevance to educational discourse. As noted above, Arendt and Clegg came from very different and distinct contexts, the English West Riding of Yorkshire being distinctly different from the German and United States contexts of Arendt. As important post World War Two thinkers and public figures, they have left enduring legacies for our understanding of the role of education in engaging with the world and shaping society.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was a Jewish political theorist and public intellectual. She was born in the German city of Hanover, and brought up mainly in the east Prussian city of Königsberg. She escaped Germany as the Nazi's assumed power, firstly to France and then

after its fall to the USA in 1941. America would remain her home for the rest of her life. Arendt arrived stateless in the US and remained so for about ten years before gaining US citizenship. This experience of statelessness was central to much of her writing. As a political theorist, her writings address concepts such as natality, action, freedom, equality, public space, promise and plurality (see Nixon, 2020a). As a public intellectual, she engaged in wider debates through her published work, open lectures and her occasional writing on contemporary affairs for magazines.

Arendt's writing explicitly on education and schooling are presented in two essays - 'Reflections on Little Rock' published in 1959 and 'The Crisis in Education' published in 1961. In the essay 'The Crisis in Education', Arendt identified a diminution of the promise of education to represent and to guide the young, before going on to locate the source of this crisis with the adults who 'refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children' (Arendt, 2006a, p.187). In the same essay, she declared that

And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world (p.193).

We agree with Nixon (2020a) that Arendt's views on education cannot be restricted to these two frequently cited and much discussed essays. Her other writings on conditions for democratic societies also help us rethink conventional notions of education and consider the question of what it is for.

Alexander Bradshaw Clegg became Chief Education Officer (CEO) of West Riding County Council<sup>1</sup> in 1945, on the threshold of the 1944 Education Act and the wider post-war British social democratic consensus. As part of a social and economic reform agenda,

education had an important part to play in creating opportunities. At a time when society was divided on rigid and outmoded social class lines, education 'acquired a significant status within the political settlement for reconstruction: educational opportunity providing the key to social mobility' (Ranson, 2018, p.34). Clegg's reflections convey a sense of the optimism and impetus for change at this time: 'Those of us who worked in educational administration in the years following the 1944 Act were fortunate. We had been held back on the leash of a world war and now it was ended, all of us, members and officers alike, were longing to break loose and forge ahead' (Clegg, 1974c, p.24). This reflects the character of English education policy in the post-war years, to which Clarke (2019, p.31) refers, characterizing it as 'a period in which teachers enjoyed relative professional autonomy and public trust in relation to curricular and pedagogic matters; in which progressive, child-centered approaches increasingly gained acceptance in primary schooling; and in which the comprehensive model of universal education made steady inroads...'. A great supporter of the importance of imagination, expressive work, aesthetic experience, creativity and the place of the arts in a rounded educational experience, Clegg was acutely aware of the damaging effects of sacrificing 'the spirit of what we teach' for the concerns of measurability (Clegg, 1980). Clegg's pioneering middle-school model, developed as an answer to the vexed question of fair and just secondary school re-organisation 'was probably the West Riding's greatest single contribution to national education in the post-war period' (Gosden and Sharp, 1978, p.189). His influence was felt at national level and further afield, through his visits and contacts with other countries including Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA (Burke, 2018).

Clegg occupied the role of West Riding Chief Education Officer from this post-war era until 1974 when the West Riding of Yorkshire was disbanded under local government reorganisation (Wood et al., 2018; 2021). At that time the West Riding education authority was 'the third largest education authority in the country - responsible for the education of over one

and three quarter million, including by the early 1970s some 333,000 children in primary and secondary schools' (Newsam, 2008, p.109). This era of Clegg's tenure in the West Riding was before the centralisation of education policy, a time where local power still prevailed (Wood et al., 2021), and an era when the local education authority was in its heyday (Brighouse, 2008).

In studying Arendt and Clegg, some of the continuities between their ideas and their importance for today reveal themselves. Arendt's experiences led her to a startlingly clear analysis of totalitarianism and the conditions that give rise to it. Today we see these conditions present in the way that the public sphere is hollowed out by populist discourse. Nixon (2020b) identifies ways in which Arendt's work offers a counter narrative to the current rise of political populism and erosion of plurality. Education has a key role to play in developing the capabilities and dispositions necessary for independent minded, thoughtful citizens to flourish and thus provides a challenge to totalitarian tendencies.

For Arendt and Clegg, imagination was something vital which should be fostered and encouraged. This is emphatically not just about idle daydreaming, although we should not forget that this has its place; Einstein as a student was known to spend his time in this fashion (Rovelli, 2016, p.1).

Both Arendt and Clegg prized imagination. For Arendt, it is 'the faculty that allows us to feel and think as if we are in another's place' (Nixon, 2020a, p.31) and for her, imagination was connected to the enlarged mind. For Clegg, the importance of cultivating the imagination could be seen in the place afforded to the expressive arts as a central feature of the education service (Newsam, 2014). He recognised that information and facts are turned into knowledge through interest, excitement and expression (Clegg, 1980, p.26). In the measurement culture which besets education today, creativity, imagination and aesthetic experience are displaced by a market-led, metrics-focused performative environment. Clegg's insights into the

importance of aesthetic experience for personal growth are therefore striking and pertinent. The vocabulary he used in talking about learning is rarely invoked in educational policy or teacher education today. For example, the language of 'zest' 'eagerness', 'excitement', 'the spirit of what we teach' and so on, has a refreshing power and an ability to provoke thinking about the purposes of education and the force of creativity, expression and imagination to enable and enhance learning across the curriculum.

Imagination is central to Arendt's thinking and highly relevant in any attempt to relate her core concepts to education because it enables us to frame a new and different world and visualise our possible roles within it. Tyner (2017, p.524) suggests that for Arendt, this is central to the process of action because the 'broader use of imagination, as Arendt portrays it, expands beyond simply representing the perspectives of others as we make our judgments or take action, toward a capacity to imagine a new world altogether where the actors under judgment could have acted differently or the world as it exists can look differently.'

### **'Sense and nonsense': Arendt, Clegg and the politics of progressivism**

Arendt's ideas about education both contrast with and complement the 'progressive' ideas of Alec Clegg, with Arendt's thought having both conservative and more 'revolutionary' strands (Berkowitz, 2020) and impossible to locate firmly within either 'traditional' or 'progressive' camps. Progressivism 'represented a fusion of ideas from different sources - literature, the visual arts, psychology, humanism, radical politics - all brought to bear upon the challenge of educating young children' (Alexander, 1995, p.285). Progressivism was maligned by right-wing critics in England during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, in the Black Papers (1969-1977) 'a series of publications by right-wing academics and policy groups who condemned child-centred, progressive education and advocated a return to traditional teaching methods and disciplines' (Forrester and Garratt, 2016 :13). The extent of progressive ideas and their hold on

primary practice was geographically 'patchy', uneven and focused on particular areas, one of which was the West Riding, and 'within these areas one could identify many schools whose practice was true to progressive principles' (Alexander, 1995 p.286). The progressivism of the 1967 Plowden Report 'Children and their Primary Schools' 'placed the individual child at the centre and promoted self-expression, discovery learning with an emphasis on process rather than its products, individual autonomy and choice, personal growth and first-hand experience' (Forrester and Garratt 2016, p.67) and Clegg was 'one of Plowden's staunchest supporters' (Alexander, 2009, p.2). However, Clegg also recognised that there were dangers of shortcomings when 'a so-called 'progressive' school may be 'progressive' not out of the conviction of the head and staff but because it is fashionable' (Clegg, 1972b, p.23).

The notion of progressivism is not a simple one and it has taken different forms. Tisdall (2020) identified what she termed 'utopian' and 'non utopian' forms of progressive education which, she argues, whilst differing in conceptions of child development, schooling and social analysis, both shared the view that education should offer freedom for the child to develop their innate potential and natural abilities.

Arendt (2006a, pp.174-175) was scathing about progressive education, describing it as 'an astounding hodgepodge of sense and nonsense' and deriding the manner in which 'certain theories, good or bad' had overturned 'sound human reason'. Tisdall's (2020) typology of progressivism may aid understanding of Arendt's view; utopian progressivism gave no heed to the business of teaching and learning and was instead founded on the complete freedom of the child. In Arendt's terms this is an abdication of responsibility for the world by adults which for her is about introducing children to the world as it is as a prelude to their role in remaking and renewing it. Central to this is the natural relationship between children and adults which she maintains is undermined by the view of childhood inherent in progressivism. She suggests that this view of an autonomous world of childhood hinders children from acquiring the 'habit

of work and of not-playing' which is needed to prepare for the world of adults (2006a, p.180). Arendt was also prescient in identifying the components of the neo-conservative and neo-liberal reaction to progressivism that was to begin in the 1980's. She highlights that what was to come in the name of educational reform would be the restoration of teacher's authority, an end to play in school time and the instigation of serious work, and a shift from skills to knowledge prescribed by the curriculum (2006a, p.181).

Clegg took a different view; for him childhood was distinct and should be accepted as such. He sometimes expressed this in terms of contrasts between opposites, for example, 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament' views. A view that 'education is a preparation for life, the curriculum must aim at adult responsibility, life is harsh and school must prepare a child for its harshness, and it is by obedience that the child's mind and spirit will be moulded to accept adult patterns and traditions which must be followed unquestioningly' resides within 'an Old Testament view' (Clegg 1972c, p.236). Whereas an opposite view recognises childhood as 'not merely a preparation, it is its own justification' (ibid). In contrast to this latter view, Arendt saw childhood as 'a temporary stage, a preparation for adulthood' (Arendt, 2006a, p.181), 'a human being in a process of becoming' (p. 182), and in need of protection from the world. The teacher knows the world and has authority by virtue of 'assumption of responsibility for that world' (p.186). Rather in contrast to Clegg's position, Arendt was more conservative in her views and we surmise that a progressive idea of childhood as its own justification would be at variance with her thinking rooted in authority and tradition. For her, conservatism is about conservation 'of the essence of the educational activity, whose task is always to cherish and protect something - the child against the world, the world against the child' (p.188). Arendt's conservatism though is very clearly limited to the realm of education and relations between children and adults.

She is clear that such attitudes in matters of politics are dangerous; 'this conservative attitude - which accepts the world as it is, striving only to preserve the status quo - can only lead to destruction' (2006a, p.189). She demarcated childhood and adulthood with a very clear line between them: 'the line drawn between children and adults should signify that one can neither educate adults nor treat children as though they were grown up'. However, this is nuanced, the separation is neither fixed nor total, for we inhabit the same world: 'this line should never be permitted to grow into a wall separating children from the adult community as though they were not living in the same world and as though childhood were an autonomous human state, capable of living by its own laws' (Arendt, 2006a, p.192). A task of education is renewal of the world that we share in common, and education 'is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world' (p.193).

In the following sections, we converse with Arendt and Clegg on: the importance of dialogue in education as a means to participate in and contribute to the public sphere; the concepts of promise and plurality; constructions of childhood and the location of children and young people's perspectives in the adult world.

### **The importance of dialogue in education**

Arendt was concerned with the importance of dialogue for democracy. In her account of the trial of the German Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann for war crimes (Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil), Arendt (2006b) developed the concept of dialogue, considering it not only as something that happens in the world and in a public space, but also as something personal to the individual. She stresses the importance of thought, making the simple proposal

'to think what we are doing' a central theme of her major work *The Human Condition* (1998, p.5) and warning against the adverse consequences of thoughtlessness and the inability to think, 'namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else' (2006b, p.49). The ability to think and thus engage in personal dialogue allows the consideration of an issue from many people's standpoints, encouraging what she terms the capacity for representative thinking and thus enables the faculty of judgement. In a way, such an inner dialogue seems to be a precondition of dialogue with others in the public sphere: without inner dialogue and the representative thinking it enables, the individual is not capable of engaging with people and issues in the public arena. As Nixon puts it: 'It is by thinking that we form judgements, by forming judgements that we enter the public sphere and by entering the public sphere that we constitute a citizenry, a polis, and thereby open up the possibility of concerted action' (Nixon, 2020a, p.32). Veck and Gunter (2020) argue that Arendt developed a concept of dialogue that connected action, speech, and personal internal reflection through a public space. Arendt developed an understanding of dialogue as needing a 'public space' for it to be meaningful and transformative.

Arendt's concept of dialogue has implications for education practice. Guilherme and Morgan (2018, p.68) suggest that education must balance the need for internal reflection on the one hand and the need for public dialogue on the other.

It is through such experiences that students develop the capacity for critical thinking and become prepared to disclose themselves in the public arena. If the individual is not exposed to critical thinking, and by this we mean not only to be able to question knowledge and other individuals, but also to formulate new propositions and defend them, then the ability to participate in the public sphere is restricted.

For Clegg, we suggest it was more about practising dialogue in his education leadership, and providing space for teachers, caretakers, and other education professionals and support staff

to engage in dialogue with each other, for example through participation in continuing professional development. In-service courses for teachers at Woolley Hall for example were opportunities for dialogue as teachers exchanged experiences and were strengthened by new ones (Clegg, 1974a). Through dialogues, Clegg communicated his views on various aspects of education to his colleagues, students and teachers. In a speech 'Making the whole world wonder' on 3rd August 1972 addressed to school teachers, Clegg (1972a) reflected on the qualities that really fine head teachers have in common, drawing on conversations with them, and suggested the priority of thinking for oneself rather than unquestioned adherence to ideas currently in vogue:

Perhaps the most important quality in all these heads was that each had thought out why he was doing what he was doing and did not bend to fashion or cliché.

Clegg also highlighted the importance of dialogue in classroom teaching as an element of a pedagogy which 'could redress the balance of inequalities and deprivation in society' (Hoare 2020, p.95). For example, he admired the 'asking out' teaching approach of Muriel Pyrah, who taught at a West Riding school. Clegg was enthusiastic about the effect of this technique. 'Asking out' was where the pupils in Pyrah's class 'remained seated at their desks while they busied their hands with creative work such as painting, book making and sewing. They simultaneously spoke in turn to the rest of the class and asked for guidance on their vocabulary, scientific knowledge of the natural world and feedback on their artwork' (Hoare, 2019, p.109). While Clegg was an exponent of this approach, Hoare's work suggests that his enthusiasm was driven in part by his desire to show evidence of how the West Riding emphasis on dialogue, arts and creativity contributed both to pupils' well being and educational success (Hoare, 2020, p.88).

We may surmise that both Arendt and Clegg regarded dialogue as an important means to achieve the promise of education either through a public space, classroom or leadership

practice. Our dialogue between the thoughts and practices of Arendt and Clegg begins with an analysis of the concepts of 'promise' and 'plurality' from their perspectives, and what relevance this might have for today.

### **Bulwarks against totalitarianism: plurality and the promise of education**

Despite their very different backgrounds, upbringing and experiences of the great upheavals of the twentieth century, the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, total war and the reshaping of the political order in its aftermath, a dialogue of their ideas and actions can serve to illuminate current debates and controversies in education. For Arendt, totalitarianism and tyranny 'contradicted the essential human condition of plurality' (1998, p.202) and is not sustained solely through brutal force or the ideological zeal of 'the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist' (2017, p.622). What is more important is the action and inaction of those who are most eager to obey, often 'the most respectable pillars of society' (2003, p.406) and people who can no longer separate fact and fiction or distinguish between truth and lies. In terms that would be recognised today, Arendt might speak of those who promote the 'one authentic voice of the people' and those who are susceptible to fake news and baseless conspiracy theories. In Arendt's view, we are only the same in that we are wholly different from one another. Our sameness lies in our commonality of difference, which she expresses as 'because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (1998, p.8). Plurality together with thinking and thoughtfulness are for her, the essential bulwarks against tyranny and totalitarianism and a prerequisite for democratic community. Plurality rejects the populist and reductive notion of a general will of the people (Nixon, 2020b), an anti-pluralistic unthinking rhetoric.

Within the English system of schooling, according to Gunter (2014, p.54), the neo-liberal and neo-conservative reforms of the past 30 years have served to reduce pluralism by

insisting on one approved model of school organisation and governance and sought to restrict thoughtfulness by insistence on a narrow and traditional formal curriculum and a stringently disciplinary hidden curriculum (for example authoritarian zero tolerance discipline policy, strictly enforced school uniform and personal appearance policy and internal isolation and exclusion). The implication from an Arendtian analysis of these changes points to how plurality is being undermined and reduced and according to Gunter (2014, p.44) even ridiculed by the ways in which those managing and leading local education systems are portrayed.

Alec Clegg's actions in the leadership of the West Riding Education service, whilst not framed as such, can be seen as the construction of bulwarks and defences against totalitarianism through the encouragement of thoughtfulness, creativity and expressive arts and the approach to school reform. As Wood et al (2021) explain, Clegg was an advocate of ending selection for secondary schooling by ability (the divisive 11 plus). Arendt, approaching the question of selection for secondary education from her experience of the American context, was clear about the denial of fairness evident in the English 11 plus system. She asserts that selection by ability at age eleven is aimed at creating a meritocracy which in reality 'is once more the establishment of an oligarchy' (2006a, p.176). Whilst noting that such a physical division of children would be unacceptable in the United States, she makes clear the real purpose behind selection at 11 is the undermining of democracy: 'Meritocracy contradicts the principle of equality, of an equalitarian democracy, no less than any other oligarchy' (2006a, p.177).

The manner in which the end of selection by ability at age 11 was implemented in the West Riding was characterised by a pluralistic approach. There was no single approved plan or template which was imposed in every area without engagement of local communities (an approach to school organisation and governance which characterises the process of academisation and Multi Academy Trust formation in England today). Instead, Clegg and his

colleagues engaged in dialogue with schools and communities in local areas, developing solutions to promote fairness and equity in secondary school admissions suited as far as possible to local conditions. For example, grammar schools kept their names upon comprehensive reorganisation where this was felt locally to contribute to building community support and acceptance.

For Arendt, promise and plurality are inextricably bound together. A promise requires the presence and action of both the one who makes it and the one who seeks to fulfil it. It is this process of promise that mitigates unpredictability and uncertainty inherent in the future, it creates islands of security in the ocean of uncertainty as Arendt puts it (1998, p.237). The power of promise is shown in the long history and lineage of covenant and contract and their centrality to political and social structures. The current neo-liberal colonisation of education and schooling is characterised by contractual and performative architecture which operates at all levels from national government through institutional design and operation to individual responsabilisation and accountability for test and exam performance. But as Arendt warns, this is a misuse of the power of promise, for when promises are used to 'map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating' (1998, p.244).

'For Arendt, the prime purpose of education was to enable each individual to develop the capabilities and dispositions necessary to enter the public sphere as independent minded citizens' (Nixon, 2020b, p.49). She had an abiding concern with the importance of thought and with education as a space 'to imagine the world from different standpoints and perspectives, to reflect upon ourselves as unique persons who share a common world' (Nixon, 2020a, p.33). However, Arendt also thought that adults have the responsibility of leading the child into the adult world. So, she was highly critical of any attempt to allow the child unlimited freedom. We surmise that she may have been sceptical of the idea of young children having a leadership

role. In some ways - and according to some versions of 'progressive education' she would be considered highly conservative.

Clegg believed that schools could lead rather than follow society (Clegg, 1980) by providing spaces and resources for association and activity, developing community leadership, and encouraging what Wood et al (2021) identify as vigour in communities. For Clegg, education is concerned with mind and spirit and he recognised that there is more to education than 'the facts of information'. However, he recognised that 'things of the mind' being more amenable to measurement, tend to be afforded greater importance in our education systems, for 'you cannot measure the love of poetry, the sensitivity to music or art, the zest or initiative with which the peculiarities of nature are investigated, the extent to which encouragement and expectation and just treatment breed trust and compassion and concern in a child' (1972a). In his 1970 lecture 'Education in Society', he highlighted the importance of thoughtfulness and his concerns about the assessment driven approach to education.

If teaching is really to become a profession the main purpose of which is to diagnose the needs of each child and meet them, we shall have to abandon the external examination which relieves the teacher of thought about why he is doing what he is doing for an individual child and turns him into a mere purveyor of other people's syllabuses.

The enactment of pedagogic practices without careful intellectual understanding and thought can lead to misinterpretations and distortions. For example, the problems of 'lack of intellectual engagement' (Alexander, 1995, p.286) with progressivism gave rise to notions of a 'required ideal' for practice, and "For those under pressure to adopt practices to which they were not fully committed or which they did not fully understand, or who were working in difficult classroom circumstances, or whose personal style happened not to match the

professional image, the progressive ideal could be highly problematic as practice ... At its worst, the result was by no definition of the word 'progressive' - simply mediocre" (p.287). Just as Clegg saw thinking as a professional duty of teachers, so Arendt stressed the importance of thoughtfulness and thought as essential conditions for engagement in human affairs. Thinking and forming judgements is how we share the world with others. She stressed that thought was at the heart of how we come to engage with the essential plurality of the human condition. Considering an issue from as many different viewpoints makes present to one's mind the standpoint of those who are absent; it represents them. 'The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion' (Arendt 2006a, p.237).

### **Conceptions of childhood and children's voices and rights**

Conceptions of childhood have shifted over the years as assumptions and views about children and their role and place in society have changed. With these shifts, certain characteristics of childhood in the Western world at the end of the twentieth century have been identified (Brooker, 2001, p.162) including recognition of childhood 'as a distinct and intrinsically interesting and important phase in human experience, valued for its own unique qualities rather than for its resemblance to adulthood'. This echoes Clegg's view of the distinctiveness of childhood and embodies a view of children as beings with rights which was enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This represented a shift in the policy trajectory, towards the centrality of children's voices. In England, following the 2004 Children Act a whole performative architecture of services in education and children's social care was built to administer this through local authorities under the banner of Every Child Matters. This development can be seen as a coalescing of established but disparate elements into a coherent policy ensemble and was perhaps foreshadowed by Clegg in 1968 when he spoke of

the need for 'a positive and well-constructed and properly financed preventative service for children based on the schools' (Clegg and Megson 1968, p.77).

These reforms were the product of tension between the neo-liberal performative agenda of the New Labour administration of the time and a more person centred, liberatory thinking which aimed to give children, young people and families agency and voice. Political developments following the change of government in 2010 saw the neo-liberal influence in education policy become more dominant, together with an added ingredient of neo-conservative 'flag and nation' ideology. Children and young people's active agency has, we believe, been disavowed since 2010 and the intergenerational promise broken, particularly by the way in which their needs and life chances have been sidelined and diminished in the UK government's response to the social and economic policy challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. In reality an instrumental view of children and education emanating from neoliberal and neo-conservative views of education and children - children as economic units, workers-in-training, human capital in development, standards and assessment, outcomes and qualifications - have had dominion.

A rights-based discourse can be contrasted with this economistic view of children as human resources in development, requiring training in work-readiness and employability. Arendt argued that rights exist by virtue of one's citizenship. There is, in her world-view, no abstract or universal set of rights independent of specific polities. So one might assume that she would support a 'rights-based discourse' that seeks to establish rights within legal and constitutional frameworks. Seen in these terms the fragility of the legal and constitutional position regarding rights in the UK is of concern. A crucial point is that rights are discussed - not as abstract universals - but as embedded within legal and constitutional frameworks. That - to our minds - feels very Arendtian. Whilst the shift in social and education policy in recent years has been towards service user voice and child-centredness, arguably in reality the focus

has narrowed to child protection, and the focus on safeguarding has given insufficient attention to the role of communities and community development. This links directly to Arendt's notion of 'worldliness' and the need to engage with the world. The discourse has shifted from children and agency to children as economic units, workers in training, the trope of 'human capital' in development, a shift towards containment rather than empowerment.

Arendt argued that power exists between people. It exists in concerted action, people acting together she saw as the source of all genuine power (Nixon, 2020b) and so her notion of 'power' is akin to the notion of 'empowerment'. Being aware of their vulnerabilities, Arendt believed that children should be sheltered and protected from the adult world, and also that the authority of adults in a sense acts to protect the adult world from children and from the rupturing of 'normal relations between children and adults, arising from the fact that people of all ages are always simultaneously together in the world' (Arendt, 2006a, p.178). As discussed above, she maintained that it is the role of education to cultivate and lead young persons into the common world (Berkowitz, 2020, p.21), for children must be taught to understand and respect the world that we share before acting to change it:

This double aspect of the relation between child and world means that education is both conservative and revolutionary. It is conservative because education conserves the common world against the rebelliousness of the new. But education is revolutionary insofar as it prepares the way for young people to become self-thinking citizens who will judge and act to make the world as they want it to be (p.22).

Clegg also acknowledged the importance of protecting children from the worst features of the adult world and teachers' prime responsibility for this: 'Education is inevitably to some extent a tug-of-war between the corrupting values of adult society and the efforts of teachers to help children to withstand them' (1974c, p.25). His championing of the importance of creative and aesthetic experience within education for children to express their own ideas and feelings was

a way in which we can surmise that he believed children could become the 'self-thinking citizens' Berkowitz identifies. His thinking in the West Riding of Yorkshire influenced 'child-centred' progressive educational ideas which became the subject of a highly politicised debate. This has seen the polarisation of progressive against 'traditional' views of education and public angst about standards and quality which ran alongside debates about topic work and subjects in primary education (Alexander et al., 1992) in the era after Clegg and the demise of the West Riding in 1974.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have taken a novel approach in addressing, through a comparative biographical lens, what we have identified as contemporary concerns, dilemmas and meanings of education. The paper brings into focus the lives and careers of two contemporaries who, as far as we are aware, never met, who were from different countries and who pursued quite different professional paths. The main challenge in attempting a comparative interpretive analysis of this kind is how to contextualise the background of each of the subjects under consideration: in this case, a great Jewish cosmopolitan public intellectual and a very British educational administrator who rose to the challenges of the post-World War Two era within a particular national and regional context who inspired following generations of aspirational local government administrators. We have addressed this challenge by identifying and analysing themes where their thinking collides, connects, and intermingles. We believe the insights this generates are of continuing widespread relevance because, as Jones (2020, p. 160) asserts, these works are unfinished and 'are still able to provoke their audiences into thinking about their own conditions and problems'.

For Arendt, thoughtfulness and thinking are crucial in defending plurality as a cornerstone of human flourishing. Her thinking as expressed in her writing and public statements was bold,

sometimes controversial and at times generated outrage from both sides of the political spectrum. We have sought to use the challenges she posed to examine the points of convergence and tension with the educational thinking and actions of Alec Clegg, and in so doing illuminate some concerns and debates about current educational policy and direction. Gunter (2014, p.104) suggests that Arendt's historical and political thinking provides insights and approaches for analysis of education management, leadership and administration and the wider social sciences, what she terms 'thinking with Arendt'. We have sought to take up Gunter's suggestion and think with Arendt and Clegg on education and its role in society, the rights of children and the construction of childhood and our collective defences against tyranny and totalitarianism. This process informs our thinking about education in a number of ways.

Firstly, the importance of an education that feeds, fosters and celebrates imagination and the soul of learners, particularly perhaps in an uncertain post-pandemic era, because of the power of imagination in visualising and framing a new and different world. Secondly, that education should be rooted in and at the service of communities. It should move beyond the neo-colonial formations of what Said (1994, p.xxi) terms 'illusions of benevolence' and 'imperialist philanthropy' and support vigour and self-determination in communities. By working with communities, education provision must develop in ways that are aligned to local conditions, affording agency to communities. Thirdly, the place of thoughtfulness and 'representative thinking' as a bulwark against totalitarianism in an era of 'fake news', falsehoods, half-truths and misinformation. We agree with Nixon (2020a, p.ix) that the mechanisms, structures and institutions we construct for education 'are crucially important in ensuring an inclusive and informed citizenry: a citizenry with the knowledge and the know-how to challenge half-truths, untruths and downright lies'.

Finally, the importance of positively embracing plurality and freedom in a culture of prescription and rigid conformity which besets schools, and the role of education for a more inclusive, compassionate and thoughtful society. As Nixon (ibid) has reminded us, 'education is the fulfilment of a binding commitment - a promise - between generations to preserve what is worthwhile in human thought and culture and to expose it to the judgment of posterity'. Through our encounter with ideas from Clegg and Arendt the central role of education as a creative force for remaking and renewing the world and developing imagination and feeling for others, appears more salient than ever in our market-led, measurement-driven and narrowly framed instrumental education sector.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 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. (Wood et al, 2021, p.325)