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THE FEPG REVIEW

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FEPG Review Editorial team

Chris Harris-Editor

Brian Hudson, Sarah Younie and Valerie Bossman-Quarshie – Deputy Editors

Ian Davies– Reviews Editor.

EDITORIAL

We hope you had a lovely summer break and are looking forward to the autumn and winter activities.

There has been much change centrally within Labour since our last edition and we wish Andy Burnham and team well and thank Keir Starmer for his public service and specifically on making Labour electable again. On the education front we wish Bridget Phillipson well in her new roles as Minister for Women and Equalities and Chair of the Labour Party and congratulate her successor, Lucy Powell. Bridget 's team progressed many areas of education policy and had some significant successes particularly on breakfast clubs, early years, educational opportunity, and social mobility. This provides a platform for Lucy to build on that work developing the overhauls of the curriculum, assessment, inclusion, and accountability alongside addressing pay and conditions for staff working in the sector.

In this edition we start with our bi-annual newsletter which details all our many activities from January to July of 2026.This keeps all FEPG members updated about our: activities, speakers, zoom meetings, blog, social media and face to face events over the previous six months

The articles we are publishing in this edition are varied and excellent. Carl Smith writes on Selection and building a fairer school system; Alpesh Masuria explores why currently academic research struggles to be usable to parliament and what changes are needed to facilitate this. Sinéad Mc Brearty explains what she has found about Ofsted and Wellbeing in her research.

We are delighted, too, to include four book reviews in this edition: Ginani De Fraja's review of The Story of the Harris Federation by Ivan Fallon; Shaddai Tembo's review of Disrupting Anti-Black Racism in Early Childhood settings edited by Kerry-Anne Escayg and Beverly-Jean M. Daniels; Dan William's review of Exploring your further Education Teacher Identity by Abbie Cairns and Ian Davies' review of The Good Society and how we make it by Kate Pickett. These reviews reflect our interests in education for all within and beyond the UK and help us to think more clearly about and become better at creating, through education, a fairer, more inclusive diverse society.

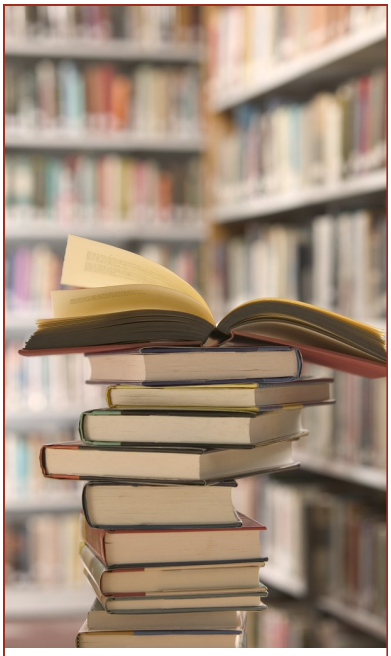
We hope you enjoy this edition of the Fabian Education Policy Group Review.

Chris Harris, Editor



IN THIS EDITION:

- A review of our activities from January to June including inspiring Keynote speakers at our monthly Zoom Meetings
- Articles by: Carl Smith, Alpesh Masuria, Sinead McBrearty and Brian Matthews.
- Reviews by: Gianni de Fraga, Shaddai Tempo, Dan Williams, and Ian Davies.



FEPG NEWSLETTER ROUNDUP- JANUARY- JULY

In **January** we were introduced to the current Open School pilot with inputs from Mick Waters, David Jackson and Marilyn Leask. This explored the current pilot involving 27 secondary schools. Each school needs to know each student well enough to know what makes them tick. Then there is a need to map potential learning experiences focusing on locality and place and extending from the curriculum to the school's wider offer ideally providing a mentor or coach to each individual student. Global Open school initiatives were discussed and the role of local education systems in progressing the ideas. Mick has written an article for the Fabian Review that will be published shortly.

In **February** we heard from Liz Robinson the co-founder and CEO of Big Education, a Multi-academy Trust running schools in underserved communities in inner London. Liz spoke about her team's role as change makers in the wider system by modelling practices which embody 'a big education' - an education of the 'heart, head, and hand'

In **March** we discussed the Curriculum and Assessment review which presented ideas from blogs that FEPG colleagues had written (see P5) alongside keynote presentations from FEPG Chair, Brian Hudson, Ecarda CEO Peter Lacey and the NEU's Matija Tomanovic.

In **April** Sinéad Mc Brearty who is the CEO at Education Support spoke to us about an independent wellbeing impact assessment of the revised Ofsted framework which she conducted. We are delighted that Sinead has written an article in this edition around this topic.

In **May** Professor Alpesh Masuria discussed the barriers that Parliamentary researchers encounter with academic research, and what academics (and other stakeholders) can do for effective knowledge exchange. We are delighted that Alpesh has written an article in this edition around this topic

In **June** Principal Carl Smith spoke on building a fairer school system by ending school selection. We are delighted that Carl has written an article in this edition around this topic.

Fabian Education Policy Group | Fabian Society website.



Our Linkedin page:

(58) Fabian Education Policy Group | Groups | LinkedIn

Our X social media page

Fabians' Education Policy Group (@EduFabians) / X

Our Facebook Page;

Fabian Education Policy group

FEPG'S 10th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS.

During the meeting in May we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the FEPG. Sarah Younie, Brian Matthews, Chris Harris and Norman Rimmel offered their short reflections to mark this moment followed by a toast.

Former chair Brian Matthews has written an article on our blog site documenting the history of FEPG over the last ten years. You can find it here:
10th Anniversary of the Fabian Education Policy Group: Brian Matthews – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT BLOG SERIES

In January to March we produced a series of blogs dedicated to discussing perspectives of the Curriculum and Assessment Review led by Becky Francis. This culminated in the March zoom meeting which was given over to the topic. You can find the blogs here:

Reflections on the Curriculum and Assessment review: Ian Davies – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

Reflection on the Curriculum and Assessment Review: Chris Harris – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

Reflections on the Curriculum and Assessment Review: Brian Matthews – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

Reflections on the Curriculum and Assessment Review: Ed Harlow. – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

Reflections on the Curriculum and Assessment Review: Brian Hudson – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

Reflections on the Curriculum and Assessment Review: Peter Lacey – Fabians Education Policy Group UK

SUBMISSION TO THE LABOUR PARTY POLICY FORUM

The FEPG team of John Bolt , Chris Harris and Brian Hudson produced a submission to this year's Labour Party Policy Forum. This Year's focus was Break down barriers to opportunity. There were seven questions for us to consider the first of these being:

1. *What are the reasons for the increase in the number of young people not in education, employment, or training since 2021, and how can Labour best support young people to earn or learn*?

You can find this submission on our website alongside our redrafted full 2024 'Labour's Preparation for Government- Establishing Commissions, maximising impact during the First Hundred Days and beyond.'

FEPG's AGM.

Our annual FEPG meeting on the 6th July included reports from all post holders, an agreed statement of our aims and values, the nominations process for committee roles moving forward into 2027 and a vote of thanks to retiring committee member Norman Rimmell who has been our minute taker.

Joe Dromey, General Secretary of the Fabian Society, joined between 7:30 pm – 8:00 pm, to discuss and gain our thoughts for a current Fabian Society research project, that explores how to fix the pre-apprenticeship system.

FEPG's remaining Meetings scheduled for 2026

Monday 28th September– Ian Widdows

Misleading Metrics and the problems with High-Stakes Accountability: Rethinking School Performance Measures and Inspection

Monday 19th October -Dr Paul Mcflynn

The Northern Ireland Curriculum Framework for Initial Teacher Education

Monday 30th November- Sally Thomas and Katie Ryan

Ofsted's new inspection framework: feedback from NEU members

Completing the Unfinished Revolution: Ending Selection and Building a Fairer School System.



Carl Smith

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Abstract

This article argues that England's partially selective secondary education system represents an unfinished educational revolution that continues to exacerbate social inequality. Despite the widespread adoption of comprehensive education since 1965, grammar schools persist in certain areas, reinforcing selection by wealth and access to private tuition. Drawing on historical analysis, policy evidence, and school-level experience, the article demonstrates how selection disadvantages comprehensive schools and undermines outcomes for the majority of pupils, particularly the most disadvantaged. It concludes that phasing out grammar school selection would be a low-cost, high-impact reform essential to building a fairer, more coherent and effective education system.

Introduction: From Two Bus Queues to a Policy Problem

Each morning, in selective areas of England, a quiet but profound injustice is visible in the form of two bus queues. Children stand side by side, yet are on very different journeys: one towards grammar schools, the other towards comprehensives that have already been stripped of many of their highest-attaining pupils.

This is not simply a matter of parental choice; it is the product of a policy settlement that has never been fully resolved. England's education system remains comprehensive in principle, but selective in practice. If the purpose of education policy is to raise standards while narrowing inequalities, then the central question is unavoidable: can a system that selects children at eleven ever deliver both?

A Practitioner's Perspective

My perspective on this issue is not abstract. I am Principal of Casterton College, Rutland, a state comprehensive school located on the border of a selective authority. Although the school is fully comprehensive, the majority of our pupils are drawn from neighbouring areas where selection at eleven continues to operate.

This creates a structural imbalance. Many of the highest-attaining pupils have already been filtered out, meaning that our intake does not reflect the full range of attainment in the local population. Despite this, our students make strong progress, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This demonstrates clearly that ability is widely distributed—even if opportunity is not.

Yet perception matters. Schools like mine are too often seen as places for those who "did not pass". That judgement is made before pupils even walk through the door. It is not a reflection of school quality; it is the direct consequence of system design.

The Unfinished Revolution

The comprehensive movement began with Circular 10/65, which aimed to extend academic opportunity to all (Crosland, 1965). By the late 1970s, most pupils were educated in non-selective schools. However, the survival of grammar schools left a hybrid system that persists today.

The revolution was not reversed by successive governments—but it was never finished. What remains is a system that combines universal access in principle with selective privilege in practice.

Selection in Practice: Wealth and Access

Selection at eleven assumes a level playing field but in reality, access to grammar schools is heavily shaped by private tutoring and parental resources. Families with greater financial means are able to prepare their children in ways that others cannot. Typically, it costs between £2000 and £4000 to tutor a child to pass the 11+ and that's too much for disadvantaged families.

Attempts to create "tutor-proof" tests have consistently failed. Admissions systems remain vulnerable to gaming and the ability to pay (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017). As Andy Burnham has argued, the 11+ has become "an instrument of social immobility".

System-Level Consequences

The impact of selection extends beyond those who attend grammar schools. Evidence shows that grammar schools do not improve overall attainment once pupil background is taken into account. Average Attainment and Progress 8 scores are lower in areas where there are grammar schools (Education Policy Institute, 2016).

At the same time, disadvantaged pupils are significantly underrepresented in grammar schools and the attainment gap between them and non-disadvantaged pupils is wider in selective areas, indicating that

selection amplifies inequality rather than reducing it (Education Policy Institute, 2016).

Selection therefore redistributes attainment rather than raising it. It concentrates advantage in certain schools while creating structural challenges for others, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities.

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Selection therefore redistributes attainment rather than raising it. It concentrates advantage in certain schools while creating structural challenges for others, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities.

International Context

England's approach is unusual. Across most systems internationally, pupils remain in common pathways until they are much older, typically 15 or 16 when they decide between academic and vocational pathways. Systems that prioritise equity and inclusion are more likely to deliver strong outcomes across the whole population (OECD, 2023; Eurydice, 2023).

This suggests that fairness and excellence are not competing goals. Early academic selection, by contrast, narrows opportunity at a point when development is still uneven .

A Fabian Policy Response

If the problem is structural, the response must be policy-led. Grammar schools now represent a small minority of the system, making reform both feasible and affordable (House of Commons Library, 2023).

A phased transition away from selection would allow schools to adapt over time without disrupting current pupils.

In Education Policy Redesign (Younie, H., Hudson, B. *et al.* (2023) *Education Policy Redesign: A Future for Education)* I argued that reforms must be coherent across the system and if they aren't, it might lead to unintended consequences. I predicted that when the tax on private school fess was introduced some parents would turn to grammar schools where they were available and there are early signs that is happening.

Families priced out of private education are seeking advantage through grammar access, assisted by expensive tuition fees only available to those that can afford them, effectively creating a form of private education through the back door. The result will not be reduced inequality, but redistribution within the state system.

Policy must therefore be joined up. The successful taxation of private education fees must be accompanied by reform of selection if governments are serious about reducing inequality.

Conclusion: One Queue, One System

England's education system continues to be shaped by an historical compromise that no longer serves its purpose. Selection at eleven divides children into winners and losers, reinforces inequality, and reduces overall effectiveness. It is based on the outdated notion that ability is heritable and fixed, and it enshrines social stratification. This is not the meritocratic system we should have.

Completing the unfinished revolution is both a moral and practical necessity. It is about aligning policy with evidence and ensuring that all children have access to opportunity regardless of background.

Or to put it more simply: it is time to move from two bus queues to one.

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Why Academic Research Struggles to be Usable to Parliament and the Changes Needed.



Alpesh Masuria

Universities across the UK produce some of the world's most highly regarded research. Every year, billions of pounds of public investment support academic research that is peer-reviewed, ethically sound, and designed to generate real-world impact.

But my study finds that academic research is not used by Parliamentary researchers as not as much as it could be. This may be surprisingly and disappointing, but there are good reasons.

An important interface connecting the parliamentary research community and the academic research community is the House of Commons Parliamentary Research Service (PRS). The PRS is the impartial research service that supports all 650 MPs. It publishes topical briefing papers and offers a confidential enquiries service for all MPs. Its 80 researchers help parliamentarians find research to help scrutinise legislation, prepare for debates, and respond to constituency work. Annually, the PRS researchers publish 1000 briefing papers that attract 18million views engaging a wide range of stakeholders and responds to 30,000 enquiries, hence it is an important interface for academics, and it inspired my study into how academic research is used by PRS.

The findings reveal the barriers and challenge some commonly held assumptions in academia. These findings hold genuine originality because it's the first study to directly get data from PRS researchers.

The problem is not hostility to academic research

The study's shows that PRS researchers recognise that academic research is high value, some were former academics, and it can strengthen parliamentary scrutiny and policymaking.

The issue is more practical.

Parliamentary business is fast-moving and therefore requires research that can be used in highly responsive environment. PRS researchers may have only a few hours to answer an urgent enquiry from an MP or prepare briefing material for rapidly developing legislation. In these circumstances, *usability* becomes crucial.

The reality is that academic research often struggles to fit the rhythms and demands of PRS work led by the demands of parliament's business agenda.

Four barriers to academic research use

My study identified four major barriers: Access, Awareness, Relevance/timeliness, and impartiality concerns.

1. Access

Academics need to write for prestigious journals, but this means that most of their articles are locked behind paywalls. While parliament has an extensive range of subscriptions, it can never be enough and the costs are prohibitive to extend the offering.

Even where PRS researchers can access articles through inter-loan library services, they do not have the time when facing urgent deadlines. If a source cannot be accessed, immediately, PRS researchers frequently move on to alternative material that is readily available. There is an industry led by think-tanks, campaigning groups, lobbyists, and trade unions who are aware of parliament's need for responsive publishing.
This creates a paradox. Rigorous research may exist, but if it cannot be accessed quickly, it is unlikely to be used. And in turn this jeopardises the impact potential of academic research.

2. Awareness

PRS researchers are specialists in their policy subject areas, but they are not necessarily academics with disciplinary knowledge.

They reported uncertainty about which journals are most reputable, where to search for relevant academic literature, or how to identify the best evidence within unfamiliar disciplines.

As a result, Google searches, think-tank briefings, government publications, and professional bodies often become the first sources consulted. These materials are easier to find, easier to use, and usually appear higher in searches because they are optimised for search engines.

Academic research is therefore competing within a crowded research marketplace.

3. Relevance and timeliness

Academic publishing moves slowly.

A peer-reviewed article may take months, or even years, to be published. By that point, parliamentary interest will already have shifted.

Academics are keen to tell the full story of their research journey (methods, ethics, etc), concluding with a cautionary "need more research" – this makes it unusable.

PRS Researchers repeatedly emphasised the need for evidence that speaks directly to topical policy questions. They want to understand what works, what does not, what the trade-offs are, and what decisions policymakers might reasonably take.

Academic research often addresses these questions, but not always in ways that are immediately visible.

4. Impartiality

PRS researchers maintain a strict commitment to political impartiality.

This can be challenging when engaging with academic research. PRS researchers need confidence not only in a study's integrity but the academic researcher, especially when dealing with sensitive topics.

PRS researchers explained that making a decision about whether to use an academic's research be time-consuming because it includes evaluating their online presence – *have they said anything defamatory on Twitter*?

PRS researchers often feel more comfortable using information that has been passed trusted intermediaries such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) or Parliament's Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU).

In other words, the issue is not whether academic research is valuable. The issue is whether PRS researchers have the confidence and capacity to use it quickly.

What academics can learn

The findings contain important messages for the academic research community.

If academics want their research to impact policy, they need to think carefully about how make it usable.

One of the strongest messages from PRS researchers concerned the importance of the abstract.

For many of them, the abstract is not simply a summary. It is the gateway to the research – it may may be the only part of the publication that is visible.

PRS researchers often decide whether to engage further based on the title, abstract, and opening paragraphs alone.

This means academics should consider:

- Writing abstracts in clear and accessible language.
- Explicitly stating policy relevance.
- Highlighting key findings upfront.
- Explaining implications for parliamentarians.

Explaining implications for parliamentarians.

The quality of academic research matters. But good communication matters as much

Building better knowledge exchange

Parliament has invested significantly in enhancing knowledge exchange through initiatives such as POST, the Knowledge Exchange Unit, the Parliamentary Academic Fellowship Scheme, and more recently the Thematic Research Leads. These initiatives aim to connect academic researchers and parliamentary research communities more effectively. The Commons Library is a major end-user of academic research, and is actively exploring ways of enabling their PRS researchers to use academic research and culture to do so among PRS staff.

My report for PRS Leaders recommends greater support for PRS researchers to identifying academic sources. Training on accessing academic research and creating a repository of academic research are some changes that my study has initiated through the recommendations.

Equally, academic researchers need to become more strategic and proactive. Knowing about the needs of parliament, its schedule, and how it works enables being strategic about knowledge exchange.

In my workshops with academics, I recommend reading the governing Party's manifesto and the Kings Speech these topics *will* be raised for debate in parliament.

A shared responsibility

At a time when misinformation is proliferating and public trust in democratic institutions is under pressure, ensuring that parliamentarians have access to robust evidence is more important than ever.

It is not that PRS researchers avoid academic research. Rather academic research is largely not usable.

The challenge is that the systems of academia and Parliament have evolved to serve different purposes, operate on different timescales, and communicate in different ways.

Bridging that gap requires effort from both sides.

For Parliament, it means thinking about training needs and a culture that make academic research easier to discover, access, and use.For academics, it means pro-active and strategic through producing research that remains rigorous while becoming more accessible, relevant, and visible. My workshops are designed upskill academics to do this.

If both communities can move closer together, the rewards are significant: better scrutiny, better policy-making, stronger democratic institutions, and greater public value from the investment made in academic research. The question is no longer whether academic research matters to Parliament. The question is how we ensure that Parliament can use more of it.

Author bio: Alpesh Maisuria is a Professor of Education Policy at the University of the West of England, Bristol, where he Leads the Education Childhood Research Group (ECRG). He is also Researcher-in-Residence in the House of Lords Research Service, UK Parliament. Prior to this, he was a House of Commons Parliamentary Academic Fellow, 2022-2025, during which time conducted the study entitled *Parliamentary Engagement with Academic Research*. The study's report and other information can be found on the UWE Education and Childhood Research Group website

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What I found when Ofsted asked me to look at wellbeing



Sinéad Mc Brearty, CEO, Education Support

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This short article offers an overview of Mc Brearty's independent wellbeing impact assessment of the revised Ofsted framework, published in September 2025. The article sets out brief context and consideration of method. It goes on to highlight the relative fragility of the education workforce, to briefly explore the idea of "high stakes" and to consider how risks of significant distress related to inspection can be thought about. Finally, three priority areas for improvement are suggested, grounded in the original report recommendations.

Sinéad Mc Brearty is CEO at Education Support, the mental health and wellbeing charity for the education workforce across the UK. Education Support works with education staff across all settings, providing preventative and crisis interventions. Sinéad advocates for a systemic approach to wellbeing for the education workforce, attending to the individual, the workplace and the wider policy environment.

In June 2025 Ofsted invited me to assess whether its revised inspection framework would leave the workforce better off, worse off, or merely differently strained. In undertaking this work, one fact remained central in my mind - the coroner's conclusion that headteacher Ruth Perry's death in January 2023 was a suicide contributed to by an Ofsted inspection. That finding became the report's North Star, and it frames how the review should be read. Wellbeing here is neither soft nor fluffy. The evidence shows that getting it wrong can be fatal.

A clear method

The approach to this work had to be careful, and the choice of method was important to guide constructive activity. I chose the Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment because it defines wellbeing positively, not merely as the absence of illness. This method allowed me to triangulate three sources of insight: workforce data, the academic literature, and the experience of the people affected. Through interviews with seventy-seven people from across the whole system, I gathered views from unions, trusts, local authorities, colleges, governors and Ofsted's own inspectors. I also had the opportunity to shadow live test inspections.

There were obvious limitations to the work. This was a small, fast project. Education Support, the charity I lead, works in exactly this territory, and a risk of bias was explicitly declared. Parents, pupils and support staff could not be reached within the timeframe. Recognising those constraints was part of taking the task seriously

A relatively fragile workforce

The most important finding of the review materialises before inspection is even mentioned. It is the existing baseline fragility of the workforce

The most important finding of the review materialises before inspection is even mentioned. It is the existing baseline fragility of the workforce.

Education is one of the most stressful occupational sectors in Britain, according to a variety of datasets. The workforce scores meaningfully below the general population on wellbeing. Some of the specific figures are shocking. Eighty-nine per cent of teachers and leaders experience stress at work. Sixty-two per cent feel that the job harms their mental health. Workload and poor wellbeing are the two most common reasons people give for wanting to leave the profession. School leaders average 56.6 working hours per week — above the threshold that the WHO links to elevated heart-disease and stroke risk. And in 2024, more than a third of the workforce reported wellbeing low enough to signal potentially significant mental health concerns.

Onto that fragile foundation, inspection brings its own weight. Ofsted's Big Listen found a culture of fear: 71% of staff (rising to 82% of senior leaders) say inspection negatively affects wellbeing. Trust is strikingly low — only around a fifth of primary schools agree that Ofsted is trusted — and, tellingly, that low trust does not track with inspection outcomes. One headteacher put the emotional physics of it better than any statistic could: "one bad Ofsted experience drowns out seven good experiences."

Toward a definition of "high stakes"

"High stakes" is not helpfully left as an abstraction, so the report tries to define it concretely. It means four things: loss of control through forced academisation, job and career loss, financial strain from falling rolls and funding, and workforce strain that makes a struggling school ever harder to staff. There is no evidence that these specific high stakes improve standards in schools.

Ofsted does not enact these high stakes itself. A negative Ofsted report is the catalyst for all of them. School and college staff experience an inspection and its consequences as a single, inseparable experience.

A lower-stakes system simply would not generate this much distress.

Attending to the greatest risks

Suicide-prevention research explores risk from a variety of perspectives. Because no one can predict which individual will be at risk, responsible policy-making should work on two levels at once. Firstly, to improve wellbeing universally. Since the whole workforce sits in a state of elevated vulnerability, the single most protective strategy is to lift everyone's underlying wellbeing back toward the average for the general population. Secondly, it’s important to address wellbeing in a targeted way at the specific moment that can be predicted with confidence to produce acute distress — the arrival of a disappointing judgement.

The root of work-related suicide reads like a warning. The academic literature lists humiliation, defeat, entrapment, shame, hopelessness and job insecurity. It is hard to sit with the fact that these are the exact words that recur in our crisis work with leaders at Education Support, in Ofsted’s Big Listen submissions, and in the Select Committee inquiry.

What will actually protect heads

Three improvement areas matter most for the people leading our schools.

The first is the most significant: break the link between inspection and individual blame. No school underperforms because of one person — leadership is a constellation of heads, trusts, advisors and governors — so a head losing their job over an outcome should be treated as a sign of poor collective leadership, not individual culpability. Specifically, inspection should no longer be usable as a performance-management tool to remove heads. Such a change would dismantle one of the four planks of "high stakes."

Secondly, develop a clear protocol for anyone in acute distress or at risk of suicide during inspection, built on the BS 30480 standard. This should consider the most difficult circumstances, including situations where the person formally holding a duty of care is also a source of conflict or stress.

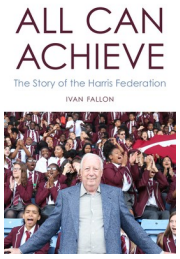
The third area is addressed to Government rather than Ofsted. Increase personal support at the identified high-risk moment of a poor outcome. In parallel, promote universal wellbeing interventions as an explicit suicide-prevention strategy. And all the while act to reduce the financial and workforce high stakes that are not within Ofsted's control.

This is not Ofsted's problem alone to solve. Without Government moving on the consequences, significant fear will remain in the system, no matter how kind inspection becomes.

The full Independent Wellbeing Impact Assessment can be found here

Book Reviews

All Can Achieve. The Story of the Harris Federation **by Ivan Fallon (2026), Biteback Publishing, 192pp, ISBN 978-1-83736-037-6, hbk., £18.99**



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Can state-provided education be the best possible education for children, and for the UK? This question runs through every page of this highly readable book. Its author, Ivan Fallon, has been for many years one of Britain's leading financial journalists, serving as editor of the *Sunday Times* and City editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*. Fallon has written or co-written several books charting the rise (and, occasionally, the fall) of major business figures, including James Goldsmith, the Saatchi brothers, Lloyds, Tony O'Reilly, and John DeLorean. In *All Can Achieve*, he returns to one of the business leaders whose career he has previously chronicled, the carpet entrepreneur Phil Harris, now Lord Harris of Peckham. Here, however, Fallon follows him along a different path: that of an energetic and highly successful educational reformer.

The story begins at Harris City Technology College Crystal Palace, whose motto gives the book its title, and which opened on 10 September 1990. This was the first of the many schools established and run by Harris, who would become one of the leading figures in English education. The book centres on his experience of four decades of educational reform and policy change. One lesson that emerges is that a single individual with a clear vision, determination, resilience, and unbridled enthusiasm – combined, of course, with the resources needed to turn ambition into reality – can transform thousands of young lives.

By telling the story largely from Harris's perspective, Fallon brings to life many memorable sketches. We hear, for example, of the moment when Harris, who is himself dyslexic, was deeply moved by a young pupil with a learning disability asking, "Please, sir, can you help me read?" We are given glimpses of his first conversations with Andrew Adonis, the man entrusted by Tony Blair's "education, education, education" government with transforming schools. We meet the seven-year-old girl from Harris Primary Academy Croydon whose favourite artist is Picasso, and even find, in Appendix 2, the complete list of teachers who inspired former pupil Kailan Hanson

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The importance of individual commitment also has a broader significance for researchers. The progress of the City Technology Colleges stalled after Kenneth Baker – one of the scheme's architects and its most committed minister – was promoted from education to the Home Office. Without an enthusiastic political champion, the fifteen CTCs created in the first wave remained isolated, and four successive education secretaries showed little interest in expanding the programme. Opposition from teachers' unions, Whitehall officials and local education authorities compounded the problem.

A second lesson is that sustained, *measurable* success eventually attracts attention and can overcome ideological resistance. Soon after becoming schools minister, Andrew Adonis recognised the remarkable performance of CTC pupils across every conventional measure: GCSE and A-level results, discipline, progression to university, and parental demand, especially so for pupils eligible for free school meals, the standard indicator of deprivation. The schools were rebadged as academies, a name that was both more neutral and more accurate, while also distancing the programme from the Thatcher and Major governments and reducing hostility from unions and local authorities. Yet the underlying philosophy remained unchanged. In Blair's words, these schools would "have just one thing in mind, something shaped not by political prejudice but by common sense: what will make the school excellent."

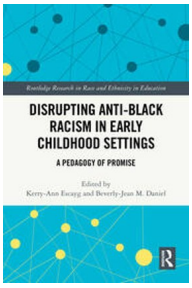
History then repeated itself. Like Kenneth Baker before him, Adonis left education for another ministerial post, depriving the academies programme of its principal advocate. That role was later assumed by Nick Gibb, who served as schools minister for most of the Conservative governments from David Cameron to Rishi Sunak, interrupted only briefly by periods on the backbenches. Together with Michael Gove, he accelerated the academies programme and challenged the educational establishment, opposing forms of "progressive education, which focused too much on teaching children 'how to think rather than teaching them what they should know'".

The book is not without flaws. There are occasional digressions that interrupt the narrative: the extended preamble to the creation of Harris Westminster Sixth Form feels at times like an excuse to drop Prince Philip's name; the lengthy account of the 2011 Tottenham riots adds relatively little; the discussion of London's demographic changes is cursory; and the history of Harris Manchester College, Oxford, seems only loosely connected to the main story. The repeated recital of each school's improvement statistics also becomes somewhat wearisome, particularly since the data are already collected in an appendix. These are, however, relatively minor blemishes.

Overall, I read the book with great pleasure. As for the question with which I began this review, Fallon makes a compelling case that state-provided education can indeed offer the very best opportunities for children. My own research on the academisation of English primary schools (Sabrina Auci, Manuela Coromaldi and Gianni De Fraja, "School Autonomy and Pupils' Performance: Academy Conversion in English Primary Schools", *Economics of Education Review*, 107, 2025, 102674) suggests that academy status alone is not sufficient to improve educational outcomes. If anything, that finding reinforces rather than weakens the central message of Fallon's book. The remarkable transformation of so many London schools suggests that there is no mystery in "Harris in a box". Political leadership that genuinely prioritises education, outstanding organisational management, relentless efforts to recruit, motivate, and retain excellent teachers, a strong institutional ethos, adequate resources, and freedom from unnecessary bureaucratic interference are the ingredients that enable all children to achieve.

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***Disrupting Anti-Black Racism in Early Childhood Settings: A Pedagogy of Promise*, Kerry-Ann Escayg and Beverly-Jean M. Daniel (eds) (2026), Routledge, 172 pages, ISBN 978-1-032-84080-2, h/bk, £137.59**



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Early childhood is frequently imagined as a protected and innocent space in which conversations about racism are considered unnecessary or politically inappropriate. *Disrupting Anti-Black Racism in Early Childhood Settings* directly challenges that assumption. Children enter early childhood settings already surrounded by racial meanings, hierarchies and representations. Silence leaves them to interpret these messages without the language or support needed to understand and contest them.

Edited by Kerry-Ann Escayg and Beverly-Jean M. Daniel, the collection brings together conceptual, empirical and practice-based contributions on anti-Black racism across early childhood education and family life. Although some of the scholarship originated before 2020, the book appears six years after the murder of George Floyd and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter generated renewed attention to racism across education. That period also produced a significant political backlash against anti-racist teaching, including familiar claims that race is too divisive or complex for young children.

The collection advances a preventative argument as the authors argue that anti-racist education should begin before Black children experience overt racism or absorb diminished understandings of themselves. The editors seek conditions that "allow children to truly experience inclusion as fully human members of their respective social worlds, as opposed to retroactively seeking to 'repair' their broken psyches" (Escayg and Daniel 2026, p. 4). Its most compelling chapters give pedagogical substance to this position. They address children's literature, racial vocabulary, Black children's hair, racial identity development, pro-Black pedagogy and the knowledge held by Black parents and families. These practices move beyond tokenistic celebrations of diversity and instead centre Black lives, histories, knowledge and beauty within the ordinary relationships, resources and conversations of early childhood pedagogy. Black children are recognised as socially knowledgeable participants who interpret and resist racism, while retaining their entitlement to care and protection.

Read through the English Early Years Foundation Stage prime area of Personal, Social and Emotional Development; these are central questions of development rather than supplementary questions of representation. Children's self-image, emotional understanding, relationships and sense of security affect their confidence, capacity for joy and ability to learn. In that sense, repeated experiences of anti-Black racism can be traumatic, particularly when children encounter messages that their bodies, families or cultures are less valued, less beautiful or more threatening. Against this, affirmative anti-racist practice supports belonging, emotional security and a positive sense of self.

complex play to simple categories of good and bad behaviour (Tembo and Bateson 2025

The book's preventative approach also resonates with my research with Simon Bateson in early childhood settings in England and Scotland. Our *Playing with Power* study found that children reproduce and resist colonial habits through ordinary play, including patterns of exclusion, power hoarding and control. Educators need to notice these precursive habits before they become sedimented within children's relationships, while avoiding the reduction of complex play to simple categories of good and bad behaviour (Tembo and Bateson 2025).

The chapter 'Racial Fallacies and Erasures' is especially valuable in locating these pedagogical difficulties within the preparation of the workforce. Daniel and Escayg describe the whiteness of early childhood teacher education programmes in Ontario, where participants recalled little sustained engagement with race during their initial training. Discussions of race were sometimes absorbed into broad accounts of difference or disability, erasing the specificity of anti-Black racism. The educators with the least extensive formal preparation, including those entering frontline practice through shorter diploma programmes, were also the least likely to have encountered the knowledge required to recognise and address racism (Daniel and Escayg 2026, 121–22). This account closely resembles the English context. In my teaching, students regularly tell me that they wish earlier stages of their education had provided stronger conceptual knowledge and greater practical confidence for discussing race and responding to racism. Discussion of race often appears reactively, through isolated sessions or generic accounts of equality and diversity. Students may consequently understand that racism is wrong while lacking the language to analyse anti-Blackness, whiteness, racialisation or structural inequality.

The same absence places unequal demands upon the workforce. My research with Black educators in predominantly white early childhood settings found that their racial identities became highly visible within professional cultures that continued to present white experience as neutral. Black educators negotiated pressures to represent Blackness, challenge racism and explain racial difference, frequently without corresponding institutional recognition or support (Tembo 2021). A stronger preparation curriculum would distribute responsibility for anti-racist practice across the profession rather than leaving Black educators and students to supply knowledge that formal programmes have omitted.

Most contributions in the collection are rooted in the United States and Ontario and as a result their terminology, policy frameworks and institutional arrangements cannot be transferred wholesale to England. The sustained focus on anti-Blackness nevertheless supplies a precision often missing from English equality discourse, where distinct forms of racism can disappear within expansive categories such as diversity or inclusion.

For Fabian readers, the book directs attention beyond the choices made by individual educators. Anti-racist early childhood education requires substantive preparation within qualifying programmes, sustained professional development, racially literate leadership, supportive curriculum guidance and institutional accountability. It also requires a workforce in which Black educators can flourish without carrying disproportionate responsibility for transforming white institutions.

The collection refuses the postponement of anti-racist work until children are considered old enough. Racial learning has already begun. Its pedagogy of promise lies in creating educational worlds in which Black children encounter affirmation, honesty, care and joy from the outset.

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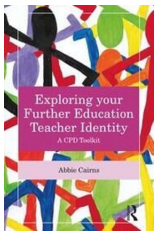
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***Exploring your Further Education Teacher Identity*, Abbie Cairns (2025), Routledge, 170 pages, ISBN 9781032803678, £27.19**

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The further education (FE) and skills sector continues to attract teachers and trainers whose professional identities have been shaped through technical, vocational and occupational practice. While this richness of experience is one of the sector's greatest strengths, the transition from expert practitioner to educator is rarely straightforward. In 'Exploring your Further Education Teacher Identity: A CPD Toolkit', Cairns offers a timely and thoughtful contribution to understanding that journey.

The text is aimed particularly at those considering a move into teaching from technical or vocational occupations, as well as those in the early stages of their FE careers. However, to view it solely as an introduction for new teachers would be to underestimate its wider significance. Cairns addresses a complex and prevailing question in FE: how do teachers and trainers understand, negotiate and develop their professional identities?

Drawing on research and theory, the book introduces two practical tools for exploring teacher identity. The first utilises Wallace and Gruber's Networks of Enterprises framework, enabling readers to consider the multiple roles, commitments and influences that shape their professional lives. The second uses Likert-scale measures to explore dual identities, building on Cairns' own work and experience in supporting practitioners to reflect on the relationship between occupational and teaching identities. Importantly, these are not presented as abstract concepts. Readers are encouraged to actively engage with the tools to examine both their current and ideal professional selves, creating opportunities for meaningful reflection and professional dialogue.

One of the book's strengths is its willingness to move beyond simplistic interpretations of dual professionalism. Too often, discussions of FE professional identity reduce practitioners to a binary position: industry expert or teacher. Cairns recognises that professional identity is considerably more dynamic, shaped by organisational contexts, changing responsibilities, policy influences and personal aspirations. In doing so, she acknowledges the realities of contemporary FE, where teachers are expected not only to facilitate learning but also to support wellbeing, engage with employers, manage data, contribute to quality processes and respond to continual sector change.

The book also has relevance for discussions around technical and vocational pedagogies. Effective technical and vocational teaching requires practitioners to draw upon specialist occupational knowledge while simultaneously developing expertise in how people learn within specific vocational contexts. Readers familiar with work on technical and vocational pedagogy and occupational expertise will recognise the value of understanding how these different dimensions of professional practice interact and evolve over time. The reflective tools offered here provide a structured way of making those often-hidden professional negotiations visible. As someone who writes and researches in the areas of technical and vocational education, I can see this text sitting comfortably alongside wider discussions of vocational pedagogy and professional learning. Readers of my own work on teaching, learning and professional practice in FE (Williams, Haselgrove and Tyler, 2025; Williams and Tyler, 2026) may find Cairns' toolkit a valuable complement, particularly in supporting individual and collective reflection on the identities that underpin professional decision-making.

Perhaps the book's most important contribution is that it reassures practitioners that tensions, uncertainties and changing professional priorities are not signs of inadequacy but natural features of professional growth. In a sector characterised by complexity and continual change, this is an important message. Cairns has produced a practical, accessible and theoretically informed resource that deserves a place within the professional development toolkit of FE teachers, trainers and teacher educators alike.

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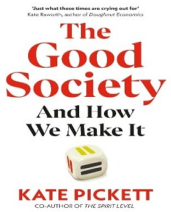
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Pickett, K. (2026). *The Good Society and How We Make It*. ix + 388, ISBN 978-1-847-92872-6. H/bk, £25.

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Kate Pickett's is Professor of Epidemiology at the University of York where she leads the Public Health and Society Research Group (and here I need to declare an interest that I worked for many years at the same university and know her slightly). But rather focussing on her current role, it is far more important to note her high academic and public profile and to remember that she is the author and co-author of very many highly significant publications, including the international bestseller *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone* (with Richard Wilkinson). Her latest book comes garlanded with praise from very many significant public and academic figures (including Andy Burnham).

Following a prologue, titled 'What is a good society?', the book is divided into two main parts. In part one ('the blueprints for a good society'), there are four sections: 'in sickness and in health'; 'all the kinds of care we need'; 'educating a good society'; and, imprisoned by injustice'. In part two ('how to build a good society'), there are two sections: 'time for new economic thinking' and 'the building blocks: evidence and equality'). The book ends with an epilogue ('living proof'), acknowledgements and a note on methods as well as useful notes and an index. This impressive book is evidence-based, hopeful, optimistic and very well written.

Her idea of the good society is as follows:

> I want a society where everyone's physical and mental health is as good as it could be, because prevention is prioritised by the public health system and the health service, and health inequalities are levelled out by addressing the wider determinants of health. I want those who need care – whether children, those with disabilities, or the elderly – to be looked after without incurring financial stress in settings where their emotional and social wellbeing are as important as their physical needs. I want our children and young people to flourish in an education system that engages their imaginations, inspires their creativity, equips them with skills for life and leaves no one behind. I want a society where the focus is on preventing crime and rehabilitating those who commit crimes so that they can contribute to society rather than weighing it down. I want us to adopt new economic thinking and make serious strides towards tackling the climate emergency and protecting the environment, always keeping in mind how well we ensure the wellbeing of future generations. (p.3).

In health she suggests that prevention is better than treatment and that we must get people away from the cliff edge and look at the causes of how they got to that vulnerable position in the first place, arguing that improvements in health care are less important for people's health than improvements in equality. She draws attention to shocking data. "Close to a third of British children are now living in poverty, most of

them in a home where someone is earning" (p. 58). And, she suggests it is in everybody's interest to address these matters: "*other people's income sufficiency* underpins *your* health and wellbeing" (p.67).

A significant part of the book is devoted to education. The approach is thoughtful, drawing from Sen's capabilities theory (p.138) and Bronfenbrenner's model of civic development (p.140). She shows some of the good work being done in Scandinavia, especially in Finland, where there are comprehensive schools for all (incidentally, my addition of 'for all' following 'comprehensive schools' shows how far our system in England and Wales has become unhelpfully fragmented), a child centred holistic curriculum with authority and autonomy for individual schools, a respected system for teacher training and a public discourse which demonstrates and builds public support. She takes a rather broad approach, focusing on systems in which we are "prioritising well-being ahead of results on standardised tests and exams" (p.153). She does not want knowledge and exams to be ignored but as well as the emphasis on the three 'R's (of reading, writing, arithmetic), she wants the 3 'Cs' (variously labelled but she seems to settle on creativity, care and character). She wants the arts and vocational education to be as recognised as academic subjects, and she rails against a system that is private and selective in which there are inequalities and persistent levels of high absence. She praises ideas from people such as Melissa Benn and, as an overarching position, makes clear that she favours a range of initiatives from "mixed age classrooms to prioritising the 3Cs, to abolishing Ofsted, to setting up a fully comprehensive all ages National Education Service all of which are common sense evidence-based responses to some of the problems (p.181). And, of course, all of this is seen in the context of an education system that is part of society in which discrimination and deprivation are tackled.

Her chapter on the prison system makes for very grim reading. She evidences high levels of incarceration, poor conditions, drug use, self-harm and suicide. She argues persuasively that there is a strong link between inequality and crime and suggests that there must be a public health approach (which does not exclude punishment) if society is to be more just.

Part Two of the book (How to build a good society) focuses on solutions. She makes a good case against neoliberalism which "foregrounds self-interest, selfishness, individualism and materialism" (p.251). She suggests it is time for new economic thinking and proposes that we should "pull three big levers: progressive taxation on income and wealth for both individuals and businesses; strengthening workers' rights and trade unions; and putting in place social safety nets, innovation safety nets and enterprise safety nets to share prosperity and provide security during times of change" (p.266). The building blocks for these changes are evidence and equality. There is a useful section at the end of the book on the robust methods that are needed from researchers and policy makers. Universal basic income, a wealth tax and citizens' assemblies are, she proposes, the way forward in the achievement of a good society.

This is a wonderful book. It is intelligently written with a strong, persuasive argument. It is well organised and well written with personal reflections and illustrations as well as a mass of statistics and logical arguments. Of course, not everyone will be won over. She was known as a Corbyn supporter when he was leader of the Labour party, the arguments within each of the sections (about care, education, prisons etc) will not find agreement with all. But these high-level arguments (rather than the necessary but highly specialised detail about curriculum or pedagogy or whatever) are intriguing. She shows what we are getting wrong, she suggests we have good evidence already to suggest what needs to be done and she makes a good argument for doing things to create a good society. This is a very impressive book which may not persuade key policymakers who are drawn to established economic theories and feel bound by the powerful but it an argument to which all who care about society should pay attention

already to suggest what needs to be done and she makes a good argument for doing things to create a good society. This is a very impressive book which may not persuade key policymakers who are drawn to established economic theories and feel bound by the powerful but it an argument to which all who care about society should pay attention.

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