

THE SCHOOL OF TOMORROW VALUES AND VISION

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Buckingham · Philadelphia

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First Published 2000

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 335 20467 8 (pb) 0 335 20468 6 (hb)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
White, Roger Crombie, 1949–

The school of tomorrow : values and vision / Roger Crombie White.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-335-20467-8 (pb) – ISBN 0-335-20468-6 (hb)

1. Education, Secondary–Great Britain. 2. High schools–Great Britain.
 3. High school students–Great Britain–Interviews. I. Title.
- LA635.W55 2000
373.41–dc21

00–035613

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by St Edmundsbury Press Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

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Preface

This is a book about education – specifically about issues to do with secondary schooling.

The original plan was to explore the views of young people as to what kind of future they envisaged for the form and structure of education in the new millennium. Interviews were arranged with students aged between 14 and 18 who were attending independent and state-funded schools in Bristol, Liverpool, London, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, North Ayrshire and York. Individually or within small groups they were encouraged to reflect on their educational experiences – the highs and the lows – and identify the things that had seemed most important in their years at school. Their comments provide an interesting snapshot of the current, lived experiences of adolescents in our secondary school system.

In considering possible changes and how differently things could be constructed in the future, the discussion led into an exploration of values – the rights and wrongs of particular courses of action, and the kinds of choices they would be making in their adult lives.

It was this issue of values that then became the centrepiece of the subsequent interviews with a number of adults involved with the world of education, including the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. Through their own responses they shared a great deal about their own values, and some of the choices they'd made as a consequence – how their own actions had been determined by particular sets of beliefs. In revealing their very human selves behind the official robes of office they offer very rich and personal insights into some of the issues that lie at the heart of any debate about education.

The comments by the British students and adults are juxtaposed with observations from Danish young people, as well as the Minister for



Education in Denmark, so as to offer a fascinating cross-cultural comparison of similarities and differences.

Put together, the dialogue between young people and adult educationalists that is reflected in the following pages offers an illuminating vision of the kind of educational system we might be able to create for the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to thank for their help with this book.

The largest thank-you must go to the 77 students who gave time to be interviewed, who were very ready to enter into correspondence about their respective transcripts, and who were prepared to make their thoughts and ideas public: Keji Adedeji, Amel Alghrani, Jannine Antigha, Alistair Archibald, Lisa Ash, Oliver Banfield, Andrew Barber, Gillian Bayne, Alison Bentley, Katrine Bjerre, Laura Cook, Michael Court, Darron Cullen, Alex Deas, Jennifer Dew, Julia Ebdrup, Claire Evans, Lizzie Eves, Katy Garrett, Jaclyn Goddard, Jon Goode, Simon Goodhead, Ian Goodwin, Lilian Graversen, Leon Hendra, Kristian Henriksen, Tanya Heppell, Sarah Hewett, Catherine Hickey, Karen Holm, Clare Hudson, Mouna Ibrahim, Manmit Kaur, Josh Kay, Merete Kristensen, Victoria Laidlaw, Helene Lauridsen, Torsten Lauridsen, Richard Lewis, Karen Lloyd, Ann Karin Lodberg, Jody Lorimer, Ryan Lynch, David McGarry, Kirk Macrae, Paul Martin, Alex Mattin, Shafrin Nathoo, Rine Nielsen, Michael O'Callaghan, Lisa Osborne, Karim Palant, Mona Petersen, Katherine Poole, Jacob Rasmussen, Paula Reid, Katrine Rubjerg, Jendayi Selassie, Matthew Seymour, Amelia Smith, Judy Smith, Mark Smith, Nick Smith, Ole Sorensen, Peter Stidwell, Nawaz Sumar, Gareth Sutton, Asbjorn Thomasen, Lonni Vandborg, Carly Vaughan, Anne Vedel, Nicola Ward, Paul White, Deon Williams, Gary Williams, Nathalie Wirtz, Jonathan Wiseman. Good luck with whatever you go on to do.

In setting up these interviews, I am also very grateful to those staff in the schools and colleges in the different parts of the UK and in Denmark who showed considerable interest in this project and were so helpful in bringing together the various groups of students: Nils Andersen, Alan Easby, Phil Galbraith, Peter Gallie, Chrissie Garrett, Richard Gliddon, Marie Gray, Kaye Green, Knud Hagedorn, Anita Higham, Dorothy Holladay, Caroline

Inskip, Johanne Møller Sørensen, Dewi Phillips, Ray Priest, Allan Scott, Liz Teasdale, Julie Tridgell, Kathleen Zimac.

David Blunkett, Tim Brighouse, Anita Higham, Richard Pring, Nick Tate, Ted Wragg are all eminent in the world of education and I am very grateful that they were prepared to take the risk to air their views in a recorded interview, and allow these to be transcribed for wider dissemination. Their respective personal journeys illuminate the inspiration behind the vision and values that each of them holds. I am grateful to those in the DfEE, particularly John Connolly and Ralph Tabberer, who took the trouble to brief both me and the Secretary of State, so that the groundwork for that particular interview was well laid before we met.

To Margrethe Vestager, the Minister of Education for Denmark, and those in the Danish Ministry of Education (Thomas Lowell, Jens Marcussen, Bodil Andersen) who helped set up the interview and briefed the Minister accordingly, I am very grateful for the willingness to engage in debate and discussions about similarities and differences between the UK and Denmark.

Transcribing the tape recorded interviews was a daunting task, and I am indebted to the painstaking work of Elizabeth Rosengren who was in the middle of research for her own book at the same time, and to Vena Bunker, both of whom took great care with the accuracy of what went into print.

A collective thank-you to those colleagues at ASDAN and the University of the West of England, and to Keren Durant and Judith Stewart in particular, who have shown interest in this project and shared their own ideas and comments.

Discussions with Dave Brockington and Brian Fletcher in the context of our ASDAN work have helped develop my own thinking about ‘social justice’ – and have been much appreciated and enjoyed.

Shona Mullen at Open University Press deserves the credit for helping to mould the original idea for this book. The process of evolution of this book, by which ideas and chapters were revised and refined, illuminates the potential for creative interaction between publisher and author. My thanks to Shona for this.

Finally, to Christina Gray, who has commented on various versions of the manuscript and shared the journey, a very special thank-you. It is a better book as a result.

The context

'I wish that there could be no wars and just peace, because when I see all those refugees on the television, I always think that if I was in that condition I would not like it at all. I hope that all the homeless people on the streets will become like us. We should all be the same.'

Jody Falla, age 9, in *Our World 2000* (Save the Children 1999)

An estimated two billion people watched the final of the World Cup in 1998, twice as many as those who tuned in to watch Prince Charles Windsor and Lady Diana Spencer get married in 1981. It is possible for significant world events to be experienced simultaneously by anything up to half the world's population. The dawn of the third millennium took place at different times around the world, but it was estimated that three billion people – half the world's population – were connected by satellite to watch revellers in Kiribati and New Zealand become the first people to enter the twenty-first century, or the countdown to midnight inside the Dome in Greenwich.

The power of technology to relay imagery and experience is so profound that we are often left reeling from the impact in our sitting rooms. In addition to rock concerts, celebrity weddings, coronations and international sporting events we can view wars, earthquakes, famine and poverty at the press of a button. Yet, strangely, at the same time, we are often bewildered as to what, if any, response we can make to these events. All the information in the world doesn't necessarily help us, assuming we even want to make a response.

Has this global highway brought us closer together as a species or further apart? Does the opportunity for enhanced communication at a personal level, through the telephone, fax and email, lead to heightened understandings and richer relationships? At a local level in our daily lives are we more or less sensitive to the needs of those around us? And where does it leave us in relation to our values and responsibilities?

In the UK we have been encouraged, through various 'charters', to take more notice of our rights. The patient's charter, the parent's charter and the traveller's charter have made it more explicit what standards we can expect from public services such as our hospitals, schools and transport, and what

we can do if they fail to come up to standard. Competition between providers of these services has been promoted, in the belief that this would drive up the cost-effectiveness of such provision. We are all more conscious of our rights, and perhaps more clamorous for them. Yet at the same time we are aware of certain limitations – that these much-heralded rights don't necessarily translate into an improved quality of life.

Tabloid headlines alert us to the rationing that exists in a National Health Service that is having to confront an exponential increase in expectations of treatment against the backdrop of a finite budget. Fears are growing again about how we will manage as old age creeps up on us, because we know the workforce is shrinking in comparison to the number in retirement. As parents we can now choose where our children go to school, and the government provides a vast array of information in the form of school performance tables to help us with our choice. However, the reality for many parents is that choice is a chimera. Individual circumstances and experience can mean that the only realistic choice is the local school, which may have been abandoned by better resourced parents, with an eye to what seems like more impressive performance indicators from a neighbouring school. On the transport front we heard a lot about how rail privatization would lead to a better service, yet passengers now experience a growing number of delays and cancellations. In order to satisfy the performance indicators of punctuality, rail operators are simply extending journey times to increase the odds that trains will make it by the allotted hour.

In addition, we are preoccupied with crime and personal safety. Many people are reluctant to go out at night, or to venture into certain districts of our towns and cities. Parents are anxious for their children en route to school or the cinema. Alarm bells are sounding about the environment and the quality of our air, food and water. We are conscious some things are wrong, and we know our rights. But what of our responsibilities as individuals, either as residents in a particular street, or members of a local community, or inhabitants of particular towns or cities or rural areas, or citizens of a country, or the earth that we share with six billion others?

And to what extent are our responses as individuals influenced by the collective values of the culture in which we live, and how much do these collective values constrain or support us in making these responses? These are important questions. Consider, for instance, the following incidents, which could take place close to any corner shop in any street in any part of the United Kingdom.

A man comes out of the shop, slits open his packet of Regals, pushes a cigarette between his lips and tosses away the cellophane wrapper.

In the telephone box a group of 12-year-olds are giggling as one of their number tries to unscrew the coin box from its mountings.

Further up the street a middle-aged woman allows her poodle to defecate on the pavement, and hurries away from the offending pile.

In the house next to the corner shop the senior executive sighs with satisfaction in front of his computer screen as he sidesteps yet another tax claim.

The news-stand in front of the shop announces a 700 per cent bonus as part of the year's productivity payment for the boss of another privatized utility, which has generated massive profits for its shareholders.

Were we to observe any of these events, would we intervene in any way? And if we did, would the society of which we are part support us? Is there sufficient consensus about a core set of values that provides us with a solid point of reference for individual intervention? Or do we only do so when the event is something so starkly challenging and life-threatening that we are forced to respond, like witnessing a rape or a murder?

Much was written in the press at the time of Jamie Bulger's killing about the 'scores of people' who walked past the distressed little toddler as he was hauled on his way to a death at the hands of two 10-year-olds. There was a sense in which blame was being apportioned to these passive onlookers, without any acknowledgement that he could have been dragged past any one of us – and we would very likely have hesitated like they did, uncertain whether or not to intervene, immobilized by doubts about the seriousness of what we were witnessing, and our fear of repercussion from the youngsters, their friends, or their parents. Better not to get involved. What would we have done? And what would the people around us have done if we had acted?

These are uncomfortable questions, but they go to the heart of the sort of society we want to live in and the sort of education system that will mirror the values of such a society. We know enough about how groups function to know that it can be very difficult for individuals to take an initiative that they fear may be opposed by most members of the group – especially if that initiative will expose them to danger or ridicule. It is precisely why anti-discriminatory policies, enshrined in law, are so important as a backstop.

Let me illustrate this point with a more personal example.

Some years ago Christina and I were crossing London by underground, hurrying to catch a train from Paddington. It was close to rush hour. The train was full but not crowded, with only one or two people strap hanging. We were sitting in the middle of the carriage, near to the centre doors, idly doing what everyone else does on the underground: reading the adverts, checking Harry Beck's map above our heads, occasionally glancing at the people opposite, never long enough to make eye contact, but long enough to note the vast assortment of colours and shapes and accents and ages represented in this cross-section of humanity.

‘Fucking nig nogs.’

Well, that’s what it sounded like. I looked at Chris to see if she’d registered it too.

‘Sodding little piccaninny children with smelly curry breath.’

The words seemed to come from the far end of the carriage. I leant sideways to see who was speaking. On one of the two pairs of facing seats beside the emergency door to the next carriage I could see an Asian couple sitting opposite their two children. The woman’s face was wrapped in the shawl of her sari. The man stared impassively over the heads of his two little girls.

Perhaps it was all imagined? The carriage lurched as the train rounded a bend. Outside the heated compartment blue flashes lit up the snaking cables against the grime-black walls. I looked away and up at the map, noting it was only two stops to Paddington.

‘Why don’t you go home, you unwashed Pakki intruders? We don’t want your sort round here. Scum round the edge of the Great British bath.’

It was impossible to ignore the voice. We looked along the carriage, past rows of expressionless eyes.

‘Brown-bellied bastards. Go back to your mud huts and Tandoori titbits.’

The hatred in the voice was only matched by the vicious expression on the white boy’s face. He was sitting on the edge of the parallel row of twin seats to the Asian family. Another youth sat beside him, facing two pink-haired, smiling girls. They all looked about 18 or 19.

‘Do you hear what I’m saying, you lump of wombat shit?’ The boy was looking straight at the father. ‘Take your stinking family out of here.’

It was surely too absurd to be true? This must be some sort of theatrical event. Chris and I exchanged glances. No film crew in sight. We sat, uneasy, and uncertain, trying to make sense of the nonsense. The father was staring straight ahead, ignoring the torrent of abuse in his left ear. No-one else in the compartment uttered a sound. Only the rattle of the train and the flashing electric sparks outside the carriage held any semblance of reality. I noticed the woman’s hand was squeezed against the arm of her husband, clutching the material of his finely cut jacket. This was no mock drama. It was horribly real – and unreal at the same time. Amidst the frozen inertia of the passengers the quiet dignity of the Asian family moved centre stage.

The clenched mouth was spewing its hostility inches from the brown ear, and still the man ignored it. What could I – we, anyone – do? What should we do? And would action simply make things worse?

The train began to slow down but the shouting continued. The carriage lurched to a halt, doors slid open, and the white vitriol dribbled into the dust on Edgware Road platform. No one moved or said anything. The silence stretched taut, as the seconds became minutes. Flickering eyes avoided each other, desperately looking for something to break the spell. Three policemen appeared with an elderly woman. The youth sat back, innocently smiling at his mates opposite.

‘That’s him, that’s the one.’ The elderly woman pointed with her umbrella. ‘Right lad, come with us.’ A restraining hand pressed down on the boy’s shoulder.

‘Take your fucking hands off me, copper,’ the cockney voice snarled.

‘Button your lip, son, just button it and come with me.’ The boy stood up and was led onto the platform, his arm held by the man in blue.

‘You’ll need to come too,’ one of the other policemen beckoned the Asian family off the train. It was then that the father spoke. ‘It was him as well, and those two girls. It was horrible, spiteful, vicious.’ He was shaking with angry reaction.

The other boy and the two young women were hustled onto the platform. The third policeman stood in the open doorway. ‘Anyone else involved here sir?’ The question was to the Asian man who shook his head.

‘Right, that’s it then, guard,’ he nodded to the uniformed man beside him. ‘You can move off now.’

The doors hissed shut; the train jolted and gathered speed. We caught a last glimpse of the father gesticulating to the listening policeman. Four sullen white faces stared back. The little girls were crying into their mother’s sari. The black walls of the tunnel obscured the rest of the drama.

We spent the rest of the journey, and a long time afterwards, wondering what else we could and should have done and what others around us might have done had we acted.

That scene has often replayed in my mind. Although it is now nearly twenty years ago, I can still rekindle the tension of the train journey and frustration at my own inactivity, and the word cowardice bubbles up as well sometimes. There were choices being made in those moments of inactivity and I’d like to think that if it happened again I’d do something very different. That experience had powerful resonance for me a year later when I was travelling through Africa. Several times I found myself as the only white person in a crowd of black people, some of whom were very hostile. In Luanda, Angola, it was the day after the South African airforce had bombed the airport. In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, it was nine months after independence and the public bus station was very definitely not a place for white people, unless you were mad or looking for trouble. At those moments it was hard to tell whether any of the faces in the crowd were friendly. I am better prepared for a rerun of the experience on the underground, and am clearer about the choices I would make and why I would make them – the values that would determine the action.

Values and choices are inextricably linked in the world of education. Take ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘equality of opportunity’ for instance. As a parent it is understandable if you want your child to do well at school. Because we have a system which allows ‘parental choice’ it is perfectly possible to shop around and consider schools beyond your immediate catchment area. If you have the financial resources, you can even buy your way

into a particular school, believing that this may well enhance your child's chances of access to university. As an affluent and articulate parent you have some freedom of choice and are therefore susceptible to advertising and blandishments from schools that can use statistics to demonstrate an advantage.

However, as a local education authority or a government administration, you may feel you have a responsibility to ensure that the best possible provision exists for all children, and that parental wealth should not be a determinant of university entrance. You know that you have some excellent schools whose success is masked by unfair comparisons with schools that come from a different starting point. You believe the evidence that indicates that parental 'opting out' makes the improvement of state comprehensives more difficult. You want to do your best to ensure that opportunities are available on as equal a basis as possible, and you want to place some restrictions on parental choice of schools in order to ensure that every school has a reasonably comprehensive intake. You would like parents to have a sense of responsibility that extends beyond their individual child, and you hope they will make a choice that helps you to improve the schools in their catchment area; but you know you have limited capacity to influence the values that underpin that choice.

Interestingly, this particular issue is one about which many of the young people interviewed for this book express concerns that are echoed by many of the adults. The interplay of values and choices that have led them to support the comprehensive system of schooling is fascinating, and the way that they have arrived at some of these critical 'choice points' is illuminating, as you will read for yourself in subsequent chapters. I am grateful they were prepared to be so open about their personal journeys and the choices they made en route.

How often do you think back to your own choice points – those moments when you made a decision that very clearly shifted your life in a particular direction? Start with the moment of birth – not your choice of course, but an event in time that determined so much of what has followed for each of us.

When I start to think about this I realize that I could have been born anywhere in the world to any set of parents – at least to any mother. The mind wanders – a hut in an African village, a corrugated iron shack in a shanty town in Rio de Janeiro, a yurt on the central Asian steppes, a turf-roofed stone shelter in Greenland, a marble palace in India.

I felt the randomness of the chance of my own birth very strongly when I was hitch-hiking on my own from Zambia down to Gabarone in Botswana. I observed some dreadful consequences of poverty and malnourishment, and often wondered how I'd have coped had I emerged into consciousness on this planet as a boy or a girl in an enclave of mud huts two days' walk from the nearest road. I have played with the thought that I could have

been born in one of a million places on my birthday. In many of these countries I would have had a 50:50 chance of surviving the first few years and would then have been working full-time by the age of 10.

Yet of the million possibilities, the reality turned out to be a hospital bed in Grantham to the wife of an RAF officer, and I grew up in a country where we'd never had it so good, where many of the diseases and illnesses that had wiped out huge percentages of previous generations had almost disappeared. Tuberculosis was no longer a killer; whooping cough and measles were serious but not usually life-threatening; even polio, whose very utterance held such dread for my parents' generation, was on the wane, although sometimes at school I'd meet children with legs in calipers. It could all have been very different, and the choices that would have flowed from the good or bad fortune of birth would have differed as a consequence.

However, the moment of birth is not a 'choice point'. It happens before we start creating our own luck – or not – and our own choice points. Can you identify those points in your life that have been momentous in terms of what you then went on to do?

One of mine was the first day I started teaching in a comprehensive school. I had left university, like many people of the 'sixties generation' unsure of what to do. In June 1970, we knew the statistics – that we represented an elite 6 per cent of the population – and we knew the world was our oyster. There was no doubt about getting a job; the only question was which one, and it didn't feel at all unusual to be one of many students who had finished university without a clear direction. I'd turned down offers from IBM and the RAF, having some vague idea about public service and the need to give 'something back' in return for the three very good years I'd enjoyed at university. I wasn't alone in that kind of thinking; it was part of the culture at the time.

So, in September 1970, after considerable prevarication during the summer holidays, I found myself walking through the gates of a Hampshire secondary school at 8.30 one morning to take a post as a teacher of science and drama, having spent the previous day (and half the night) dithering on trains to and from where I'd been staying in London.

It was then, for the first time in my entire life, I met children who couldn't read and write.

Culture shock doesn't adequately describe what happened to me during that first day. By the time I staggered into bed and sank down into a deep, deep sleep, I had experienced a world that was completely alien to the high-flying chemistry graduate from the direct grammar school. It was a world where the written word carried no meaning for some of the 11-year-old children in my tutor group, and where IQ measurements seemed to indicate that four of them were on the cusp of being 'educationally subnormal'. I felt I had made a dreadful, dreadful mistake and it was only utter weariness that prevented me from taking the train back to London. And the next

morning it was only a reluctance to let people down that kept me going through the day.

But within 48 hours I was hooked. The feelings of abject despair, which had threatened to overwhelm me when I appreciated my own inadequacies for the task of teaching, quickly evaporated. By the beginning of the second week I had felt touches of the euphoria that comes from a really good lesson. You will know what I mean – those moments when the interaction between you as a teacher and young people in the class is right on the cusp of their learning curve and you can see it soar upwards in an exponential arc. Exhilarating moments. And there were lots of them. I was totally, utterly, hopelessly hooked, and felt that, for the first time in my life, I had really found something I could give 100 per cent of myself to, without holding anything back.

In terms of jobs that decision to walk through those school gates was probably the most significant choice point in my entire working life.

Another was to move to Bristol in the mid-1970s to work with an emerging project for disaffected adolescents, which subsequently became the focus of a national dissemination project because of its remarkable success at motivating and reintegrating switched-off young people.

What drove these decisions? Why did I end up working with disadvantaged young people instead of working for a multinational company or continuing with flying training that might have led me into the pilot seat of a Harrier jet or Tornado bomber, and an opportunity to join the elite corps of pilots who saw ‘active service’ in the Falklands war, or some other war of the seventies and eighties? Or maybe I’d have been flying a desk or dead.

I can recall a brief conversation with my father in the mid-1970s. I had just resigned my position as head of chemistry at the comprehensive school in Hampshire to work with ‘tail end’ 14- and 15-year-old youngsters who had been ‘trapped’ in school because of the raising of the school-leaving age.

‘You must be mad,’ was his response to my news.

I started to explain that I felt they deserved something from formal education as well, that they had a right to something constructive, but I was conscious it all sounded rather weak and wishy-washy. The passion of belief in what had seemed like an important ideal on the steps of the Scotland Road Free School I’d visited some months before was hard to sustain in the coffee bar one street away from the Ministry of Defence building in the heart of central London.

‘I suppose I just feel that the system’s not fair,’ I ended rather lamely.

‘But you’re not going to change anything. It’s pretty pointless trying to help these sorts of characters. There are always going to be people at the bottom of the heap. There’s no career in this sort of work, boy.’

I wish now I’d been able to offer him the story about the dying starfish that Ted Wragg so eloquently recounts on page 134.

I wish, too, I'd been able to explain to him where this sense that some things weren't 'fair' came from. I felt it very strongly then, and I feel it very strongly still. But I can't tell you where it originated, or why. Maybe it was an aggregation of events and experiences that, despite my rather conservative upbringing, led me to a point where notions of a 'just society' came to feel significant. Perhaps, as Tim Brighouse says much more eloquently on page 99, it's close to religion.

I just know that when I watched the Tory party being counted out in the early morning of 2 May 1997 I felt a mixture of relief and elation. This is not really a party political point. There seemed to be an overwhelming reaction from the majority of the electorate towards the arrogance, the meanness, and the 'me first' set of values that came to characterize that particular administration of the eighties and nineties, which culminated in a series of high-profile scandals. The shift towards a more equitable distribution of wealth, which had been taking place under previous administrations (both Conservative and Labour) in the sixties and seventies, was effectively reversed by the Thatcher/Major brand of conservatism. It was an administration for whom a belief in 'social justice' seemed to be very low on the agenda and Labour, Liberal Democrat and many Conservative voters had had enough (O'Farrell 1999).

It was replaced by an administration that claimed a rather different set of core values, and had set out one plank of its market stall as 'Education, Education, Education', with a clear commitment to the state-funded sector. I felt that we might see the ascendancy of a set of values that put 'equality of opportunity' and 'social justice' high on the reforming agenda. I was optimistic about the wind of change that would blow through our education system, although I was realistic enough to know that there are huge obstacles within our system and our pervading culture.

I am optimistic because I have seen and experienced, not so very far from our own shores, a country where such values actually operate as a determinant of educational provision and social welfare. Those of you who have spent any time in Scandinavia will know what I mean. Danish schools, for instance, emphasize the importance of the affective domain, both through their structures and their curriculum. This is not to say that they disregard the cognitive, but they see the former as needing nurturing as a precursor for the latter. Pre-school provision is organized around cooperative play and practical activity. Reading and writing are not specifically encouraged in the early years, and formal teaching begins at age 7. There is a widespread belief among school teachers and pupils that 'being better' than other pupils at school work doesn't mean you're a 'better' person. There is no national testing before 16 and no attempt to produce league tables for school performance. Access to further and higher education is not a privilege for the few whose chances can be maximized by attendance at a number of selective schools. Ninety-three per cent of young people continue with

education and training after the age of 16, and all of it is free, paid for by a high level of taxation that the majority of the voting population are consistently prepared to support (Hastrup 1995; Ministry of Education in Denmark 1998a).

Chapters 14 and 15 consider some aspects of Scandinavian education in more detail, and draw on interviews with Danish sixth form students and Margrethe Vestager, the Minister of Education for Denmark, to illustrate certain points of comparison. At this stage it is just worth noting that some of the core values so evident throughout their education system find echoes in many of the values espoused by the other contributors to this book. If enough people assert them and we have an administration that promotes them, we may just have an opportunity in these opening years of the twenty-first century to create a rather different educational system to the one that has dominated our country and our culture for the past two hundred years.

The comments in this book may help to bring that vision closer to reality.