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Ken Jones

To cite this article: Ken Jones (2024) Grey/green: Anne Turvey's politics of education, Changing English, 31:4, 328-338, DOI: [10.1080/1358684X.2024.2402736](https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2402736)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2402736>



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Published online: 26 Nov 2024.



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Grey/green: Anne Turvey's politics of education

Ken Jones

Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The article is an appreciation of the work of Anne Turvey as a teacher, a teacher educator and a researcher. It discusses her evolving responses (1988–2015) to government-driven changes in the teaching of English in schools and teacher education. It shows how throughout this period she supported practices informed by Vygotskian theory and by a close attention to the cultures of London school-students. In doing so, she contributed significantly to the development, in hard times, of less reductive and impoverished versions of English.

KEYWORDS

Subject English; teacher education; language and culture; institute of education; resistance

Anne Turvey and I were colleagues at the University of London Institute of Education (IoE) between 1989 and 1996. We'd both read English at Oxford, in pre-theoretical times. We had each taught for a decade and more in different parts of East London. We had been students on the MA in Language and Literature in Education run by the Institute's Department of English, Media and Drama and had then become tutors on its PGCE and MA courses.

The Department was a place of great creativity, with strong loyalties and sometimes acerbic enmities. Its MA course was remarkable, mixing fiction with social theory, semiotics with children's literature, Vygotsky with ethnography and sociolinguistics. At its heart was the encouragement it gave to its students to make sense of teaching as a cultural encounter. Adopting Harold Rosen's maxim that the starting-point of English should be the 'social realities' of school-students (Hardcastle 2016) it saw teaching as a long and self-reflective apprenticeship in understanding these realities and developing a relationship to them which was educationally productive. PGCE programmes were founded on the same principle and were seen as central to the identity and intellectual ambition of the Department. Professors were expected to teach on the PGCE, school visits and all. Within the normative culture of the Department, reluctance to do so was seen as a disqualification from the role.

In an earlier time, the Department had contributed to policy-making at a national level, for instance in James Britton's influence on the Bullock Report. In the period of Thatcher and Major, that kind of influence was no longer possible, but the Department was central to a multitude of projects, events and dialogues through which a collective culture of English teaching continued to be developed. In the 1990s, in response to the government's introduction of a national curriculum and a national system of testing, that

CONTACT Ken Jones  ken.jones@gold.ac.uk

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engagement took on a political edge. Anne and I were both involved in the campaign to boycott national testing, a movement which the great majority of London English teachers supported (Jones 1994). (It was an involvement which did not please the Institute's management, who feared that the IoE would meet the same fate as the Inner London Education Authority, wound up by the Conservative government in 1990. When the Daily Telegraph gave lavish coverage to a History Workshop conference (Samuel 1991)¹ at which we spoke – 'Topping the English citadel: the left-wing's bitter struggle to control the way language is taught' – I was told that I should not necessarily expect my contract to be renewed.

This then was the long moment of Anne's work, shaped by the dynamic of opposing forces. One was what had become a tradition of thinking about language, learning and culture, increasingly and urgently aware of questions of power and difference. The other was a radicalised conservatism, aiming not so much to challenge these developments as to suppress them. From around 1990 onwards, the future of English depended not only upon the elaboration of tradition in contexts of practice, but also on the capacity to respond critically and effectively to the Conservative programme, and its later adaptation by the governments of Blair and Brown. This double endeavour had a formative effect on the activity of the English Department and of the units which, under various names, in successive reorganisations of the IoE, continued its work.²

Juxtaposition

Where did Anne position herself in this process of conflict and change? How did she describe its protagonists and discuss the terms and stakes of the arguments between them? What kind of intervention did she intend her work to make? To answer these questions it is helpful to consider some features of the way Anne's writing is organised – its recurring topics, the conceptual oppositions which it habitually presents, the authorities to which it makes frequent reference. I will suggest that there is a consistency in these features, across three decades, that allows us to identify in her writing a particular style, a distinctive though evolving position.

Juxtaposition is one such feature. By this I don't mean a general habit of comparison. Anne's juxtapositions are much more specific than that. Her writing engineers a collision between two kinds of discourse, repeatedly placing the language of politicians, policy-makers and inspectors next to understandings derived from the classroom experience of teachers. In 1994, she pounced on the lazy rhetoric of Education Secretary Kenneth Clarke. 'I want trainee teachers' he had said 'to concentrate on classroom skills rather than academic training. 'I'm interested in real children in real classrooms, not academic theory. 'Anne's response was not to weigh in with a defence of academic theory but to contrast the greyness of the political world with the green of the classroom: 'How narrow and barren this seems besides the richness and vitality of these 'real' trainee teachers and their 'real' children.' (Turvey 1994, 77) Twenty years later, she caught Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Michael Wilshaw, playing the same reductive game, "The Wilshaw version [of quality] is breathtakingly simple", Anne wrote. 'Schools are "good" or "outstanding" – or they are not ... If a school is "outstanding", the teaching is similarly "outstanding"; if a school is less than "good",

the pupils suffer from a relentless diet of less-than-good teaching. These reified judgements about a school are drawn from a series of separate abstractions, which are themselves reified judgements of individual teachers and individual lessons. Just as learners become the level that is attached to them, so teachers become “outstanding” – or they “require improvement”. Against the “data-ful Ofsted version of learning”, she posed questions that could not be answered within the Wilshaw framework – “questions about curriculum content and design, questions about students” and teachers’ different histories, cultures, funds of knowledge, values, affiliations and aspirations’ (Turvey, Yandell, and Ali 2012, 32). The intention announced in these juxtapositions is not to answer complex ideas with simplistic common sense – as the appeal to classroom verities often seeks to do – but rather the reverse. The classroom is experientially rich. Political and managerial perspectives, and the policies they lead to, are not adequate to it. They have established a curriculum framework from which culture is absent and which fails to ‘acknowledge the lives of students and teachers. It is not one we can or should work with’ (Turvey 1993, 312). Anne’s writing, by contrast is a work of recognition, making visible what policy cannot see.

Interrupting the lecture

Anne’s most ambitious exercise in juxtaposition is her article, ‘Interrupting the Lecture’ (Turvey 1992), which fully deserves its republication in this issue – few articles on education can match its breadth of scope, fineness of detail and measured clarity of voice. What follows here is an account of its context and a brief commentary on its themes – commentary being a genre which, as Benjamin wrote, starts from a recognition of the classic status of the text it addresses (Benjamin 1972, 46).

One February evening in 1991, Anne and I had walked from the Institute to the Gustave Tuck Theatre in the Wilkins Building at UCL; Wilkins (d. 1839) was the designer of UCL, the National Gallery and much else besides; Tuck (d.1942), through his work in the Christmas Card business, was a significant figure in the invention of English tradition.³ We were going to listen to a lecture by Brian Cox on the theme of ‘literature and the canon’. For Anne, it was curiously unsettling ‘to be back in such a place, a ‘world away’ from classroom teaching. ‘It was a setting which breathed age, calm, seriousness; and we were certainly more of a “captive audience” than I am used to’. Perhaps, though, this high hall, with its banked rows of seats, was ‘the perfect setting’. ‘What better place to explore . . . texts, reading, tradition and change?’ (Turvey 1992, 32–33).

Brian Cox was Professor of English at Manchester, a long-standing critic of progressive education, co-editor of the Black Papers and chair of the committee which had produced the ‘Cox Report’, the first iteration of the National Curriculum for English. The Report had been less severe on established practices of English teaching than many had feared and some had detected a turn on Cox’s part from Conservative ideologue to builder of a ‘liberal compromise’, ‘sensitive to issues of class and ethnic identity’ and ‘deservedly popular’ for his political restraint (Parrinder 1993). That was not the way Anne saw it. ‘Interrupting the lecture’ is in the first instance a witty and pointed contrast between the discourses and behaviours of lecture theatre and classroom, a subtle assertion that from the vantage-point of urban classrooms professions of universalist

liberalism are less convincing than Cox – and his appreciative readers among academics and journalists – would think them to be.

It is on this basis that Anne stages an encounter between the English of Cox and the English of London schools, an encounter in which juxtaposition is not used to simplify arguments but as a point of entry to a greater complexity. One of the great political achievements of Conservatism in education has been its success in structuring the field of argument. Debates about pedagogy and curriculum have frequently been presented in terms of well-worn binaries, traditionalist versus progressive, teacher-led versus ‘active’ learning and so on. These binaries are of no use to Anne – the argument she makes is more difficult and interesting. It is one she held onto throughout her working life: in the teaching of English, the experience and knowledge of students are not separate from the formal knowledge around which the curriculum is organised. Their relationship is symbiotic: ‘the everyday knowledge that students bring with them to school has the capacity to transform and reorganise the formal curriculum that they meet there’ (Turvey and Yandell 2011, 164). From this perspective, the familiar terms of the conservative argument are rendered problematic: it is not as a traditionalist that Cox is criticised by Anne, but as someone who cannot grasp the radical questioning to which ‘tradition’ is subjected in classrooms; it is not ‘child-centred’ ideas which fuel Anne’s criticism, but her sense that in a Coxian classroom an understanding of students’ funds of knowledge is absent.

These are arguments about curriculum and pedagogy. They are also arguments about the conservation of national identity, which in Cox’s view, lengthily presented in the lecture, supplies the National Curriculum with much of its purpose. ‘He began’, Anne writes, ‘with two readings, each highly revealing of his own position’ (Turvey 1992, 33). The first is a hymn of praise to the English countryside, spoken in all innocence by the central character of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and read by Cox with a heavy signalling of its ironies. It seemed as if Cox had chosen the extract to distinguish himself from cruder versions of nationalism, to make the point that ‘we are way beyond all that elegiac, sonorous, sentimental flag-waving . . . It is a multicultural world now and that kind of imperialistic swooning to the strains of Elgar just will not DO’ (Turvey 1992, 34). With Cox’s choice of a second text to read, however, things became curiouser. ‘The poem was Philip Larkin’s *MCMXIV*, one of those nation-on-the-eve-of-war, unaware-of-impending-doom elegies, a pity-the-society-which-can-never-be-the-same-again poem’. ‘Never such innocence again’: Cox read it in a tone of voice which struck Anne as ‘precisely elegiac, sonorous and sentimental’. ‘All those things we laughed at’ with Ishiguro had returned, in valorised form, as Cox evoked what he called ‘that longing we all share for continuity and a sense of collective identity’. The minor key nationalism of Larkin seemed to move him deeply. Here was an Englishness in which all could be included.

Like speaker, like Report. Anne suggests that underlying the curriculum devised by Cox’s committee are unexamined concepts of culture and national identity, and that although their Report allows for a measure of ‘diversity’ it is these which are its ultimate priorities. Culture figures as what James Donald, another critic of the National Curriculum, calls ‘a finite and self-sufficient body of contents, customs and traditions’, utilised to fabricate national identity. If, in the name of ‘diversity’ a national identity embraces the contents of other cultures, it is only on condition that ‘the norms which

define culture's categories, its values and its patterns of differentiation' are not disturbed (Donald 1989, 14.). Collective identity and national culture form what Anne calls the 'rock-solid, enduring central edifice' to which 'diversity' is at best an adjunct: diversity pushed too far, says Cox, will open a 'terrifying' scenario (Turvey 1992, 38), in which there no longer exists a single standard of literary and cultural judgement. It is precisely with the intention of making a disturbance, interrupting the lecture and problematising assumptions about collective identity that Anne composes the second part of her article. Veering away from the Wilkins Building and travelling back in time she arrives in the classrooms where she did her teaching.

Anne is teaching *Wide Sargasso Sea* to a group of A Level students. She sets an essay title, 'a quotation from some critic or other, about "the marooning of the Creole whites in a landscape where beauty hides cruelty"' (Turvey 1992, 40):

At this point, writes Anne, 'one student stopped me with a question about the word 'marooned'. Nathalie, a black girl, was new to the group. I knew she had been born in Jamaica and lived there with her grandparents until she was 10, when she had joined her parents in England. . . . I started to explain the word - 'marooned' means 'isolated' or 'cut off', but she interrupted impatiently, angrily: No, I mean maroons were slaves, weren't they, back home. From Africa and they escaped to the mountains.

Anne turns the lens on herself:

I remember conceding this angle on the word, but very much in a spirit of balance and consensus. . . . I was the teacher accepting the student's contribution, validating her attempt to learn the rules of that academic game. Everything the word might actually mean to her and how she brought to her reading a history and a personal *lived* experience of being 'marooned' were not really admitted by me. I was not prepared for Natalie's sudden resistance . . .

Why', she said to me, 'are we feeling so sorry for Antoinette' [Cosway, the central character of the novel]? Why shouldn't she be the outsider there? You talk as though Jamaica was to blame for her unhappiness, like it drove her mad or something. Anyway, what about all the others. What about Christophine and Tia? What do you mean 'marooned'? I HATE this book.

For Cox, Nathalie's intervention would be a lasting source of trouble, something terrifying even – a challenge to his notion of tradition and a demand for the interruption of a process of domination through learning that has lasted for centuries. For Anne, it is an unforgettable insight into fundamental questions:

Who speaks, who doesn't, who puts the price tag on a contribution, what ultimately counts as knowledge - these are not 'outside' the question of what book you are reading, a kind of background to the lesson; rather, they constitute, at the deepest level . . . learning and identity formation. (Turvey 1992, 40)

The 'marooned' episode thus takes us to some more general points, of great importance to the teaching of English. Learning, Anne always believed, involves helping students to make links between their everyday understanding and the forms of school knowledge that a curriculum addresses (Turvey 2015). The significance of any text studied in class lies in meanings which are constructed among teachers and school students in 'active, committed and shared classroom encounters'. (Turvey 1992, 44) Construction is necessarily a contentious process. The meaning of verbal signs, as Voloshinov wrote, in a text

well known to the Department, is an arena of continuous struggle (Voloshinov 1973) and teachers need to be receptive to this. Anne's 'marooned' cannot become Nathalie's 'marooned', and it is precisely in the difference in meanings that serious possibilities for learning lie. Assumptions, however sincere, about the centrality of cultural heritage, foreclose such awareness, and position the teacher as a reproducer of established literary and cultural histories, unable to learn from Nathalie and her peers, unable to contribute consciously to a process of meaning-making. It is likewise a mistake to think that the 'vernacular' knowledge of students and the 'analytic' knowledge of the teacher are located at different points on a hierarchical scale, so that school knowledge is invariably understood as superior to vernacular knowledge' (Wrigley 2018, 12) For Anne, this was the fatal weakness of the *avant-la-lettre* version of 'powerful knowledge' advanced in support of Cox by Colin MacCabe 1990, 'where 'the whole problem is presented in terms of a project of instruction, of school-based remedial activities, where children are seen as worked upon . . . to help them master the official language and culture' (Turvey 1992, 49).

A difficult tradition

Few academics have been more precise than Anne in the way they have located their work. This is what she wrote in 2014, in a review of a book by her colleague John Yandell:

It would be impossible to preface what follows with one of those 'disclaimers' that insist 'the views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the views of . . .'. This would not only be disingenuous, it would deny the history that I draw on to make an argument about teaching, learning and research. Twenty-five years ago I came to the Institute of Education to do an MA in Language and Literature. . . . My ideas about classrooms as places where creativity and cultural making are defining characteristics have grown out of my work here, the time I've spent in classrooms and working with trainee teachers and MA students. As important have been the conversations I have had with colleagues in the Institute and the writing I've done with them. This history has its roots in the work of James Britton and Harold Rosen and their insistence that we have no choice but to 'begin from where the children are' . . . John Yandell's work is part of this history, particularly his many studies of the ways in which students illuminate and make sense of the literature they encounter in the classroom. [There is] a clear link between John's work and the Bullock Report of 1975, with its insistence that no child should be expected to 'cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represented two totally different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.

Attributions, quotations and transcriptions are features of Anne's writing, generously presented. They amount to a statement about a dual belonging – to a tradition of academic research and to a practice of classroom work. Her expertise in both fields provides her work with its authority, but it was not an authority which Anne took for granted. The history of teaching in the neoliberal period is often presented in terms of the challenge which was made to teachers' claims to an 'authority based on superior training, professionalism and expertise' (Marquand 2009). Anne did not make claims of this sort; she never sought to climb on any intellectual pedestal. We have seen how in her school-teaching, the criticism of students made her question any claim she might have to expertise. Something similar went on in her work as a PGCE tutor, where she put her ideas to a public and continuous test of practice. As the impact of new public

management became stronger, the work of tutors in the tradition of IoE English became harder. This was not just a consequence of the cutting back of the time that students spent in a university setting, nor of the changes that governments made to the PGCE curriculum. It was also a result of the disparity between the notions of good practice that became current in many schools and the kinds of engagement with learning that tutors like Anne tried to promote. 'Transformation and change characterise the year in relation to ideas about English as a school subject' Anne wrote in 1997 (Turvey 1997, 184). Being a student was an unsettling experience, that cut into the sense of self. To engage in the kind of critique that the Department encouraged 'while at the same time trying to establish yourself as an effective practitioner ... is enormously challenging'. (Turvey 1997, 187) Anne wanted her teaching to communicate a full sense of disciplinary tradition, but she was aware of how easily it could become viewed as a 'diversion' (Turvey 1997, 187). Teacher educators needed to develop and defend this theoretical, research-based dimension in ITE'. (Turvey 1997, 198) and this meant maintaining a place for the likes of Jakobson, Fish, Iser (Turvey 1997, 202). But this was not an argument that could be won through assertion; the appeal to a particular tradition could never be in itself a winning card. The value of a research-based tradition had to be argued for and demonstrated, in the midst of the fraught conditions of the PGCE year, where 'competence' was all and the ideas of one's tutors seemed sometimes to threaten the chances of success.

At this point, as she broods on the conditions that work against her project, it is illuminating to think about Anne as one of a broader group. The twentieth century saw the articulation of movements for social and political change, whether in revolutionary or social democratic form, with thinking and practice that sought to identify cultural resources and political capabilities in subaltern classes and to mobilise them for counter-hegemonic purposes. This is one way of understanding the Department's MA course, with its interest in the knowledge of 16th century heretics and its close reading of the polemics of Ambalavaner Sivanandan (Ginzburg 1980; Sivanandan 1985). The breath of the course wasn't a sign of a relaxed eclecticism, but of a search for ways to reconsider and revalorise subaltern cultures and their relationship to power.

Anne connected with this thinking at several points. Stuart Hall's work, in particular, had a deep impact on her. In a 1993 article for *Women: a cultural review*, she discussed the lecture that Hall had given in Oxford earlier that year, which several members of the Department had attended. She wrote:

Everywhere the settled contours of a national identity' are being contested and cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed ... but in transition and drawing on different cultural traditions at the same time. I read the meaning of Hall's phrase 'our capacity to live with difference' as being at the heart of education. So many of the teachers I know are fundamentally concerned to make their classrooms places where questions of difference resonate, within structures of power which define and control difference. (Turvey 1993, 311)

'So many of the teachers I know': she is describing not an individual preoccupation but a collective project, which moves beyond a recognition of 'difference' to step into the realm of the political and its 'structures of power'. At this point, her thinking joins that of a wider community of practice, equally concerned to recognise experiences which, as Carolyn Steedman wrote in *The Tidy House*, 'have scarcely yet been entered into the

record books of our society’ (Steedman 1983, 249). There is an affinity between Anne’s enquiries and those of many others who wrote about the lives and labours of the subaltern, seeking to end the indifference with which they had been regarded, in education and also in the wider culture. The affinity extended beyond the topic of enquiry to the position of the enquirer herself, the middle person – doctor, teacher, researcher – intensely reflecting on the ways in which they might contribute to what in one idiom would be called a counter-hegemony and in others a better realisation of human capabilities.

Change

Frederic Jameson has written of the attempt to ‘proletarianise’, that is to subject to managerial and capitalist discipline, what he called “all those unbound social forces that gave the sixties their energy’ (Jameson 1988, 268). The notion of ‘bringing back into line’ practices that had become recalcitrant also helps to illuminate subsequent changes. The process of disciplining the recalcitrant has gone on for more than 40 years: polemic, institutional reform, new policy instruments have worked to bring a rebel collectivity under the rule of government in conditions of neoliberalism. Austerity shrinks material possibilities. The increased intensity of work decreases the space for collegiality and the time to innovate. Regulation, inspection and the demand for results narrow conceptions of educational purpose.

At no time did Anne’s work conform to governments’ preferred models of research and teacher education. To that extent, she was unbowed. But the changes that cascaded down on schools and universities after 1988 had an effect on the modalities of certainty and doubt in which it was written. Her early work possesses an easy confidence of style – wide-ranging in its references, witty, evocative. Informing the style was a sense that she spoke for others as well herself: English teachers were of a mind with her. The Major government might think it was in control of policy but in fact it had succeeded only ‘in drawing together and even uniting a range of oppositional voices’ (1993, 306). To the question, ‘Is it possible to clear some space at the lectern in order to admit newcomers, outsiders even?’ she could answer quickly, affirmatively (1992, 60).

Over the years that followed, her style became more tense and confined. There was less freedom of movement between the domains of the literary, the classroom narrative, the cultural analysis. The positions of those she opposed were no longer submitted to leisurely and amused interrogation but instead were presented in terse summary:

the complexity of schooling is reduced to data . . . Teachers who are identified as outstanding tend to feel better about themselves and even to accept the validity of the label . . . That’s why the process can be seductive for teachers too. (2012, 29)

The themes of her work did not change: classrooms are complex social spaces, populated by ‘competing forces’ which require close, historical analysis (Turvey et al. 2006). Its political element is, if anything, stronger: an article from 2012, of which Anne was the lead author, traces the impact of the ‘war against terror’ on schools and the changes in the conditions of learning which it has brought about. But the sense of ‘association’, of an educational collective in command of a discourse that informs a widespread practice, is much less secure. The exemplars of a pedagogy that

is alert to questions of power and difference are as richly worked as ever. The idea expressed by Brecht that ‘truth should be spoken with a view to the results it will produce in the sphere of action’ (Brecht 2015, 148) is never set aside, but the difficulty of achieving such results is not glossed over. ‘In an educational landscape that has become shaped by high stakes tests and Ofsted judgements’, wrote Anne and John Yandell in 2017 (LATE 2017), where the work of English teachers is ever more closely scrutinised and constrained, what scope is there for other – more creative and collegial – approaches?’ The terms of their answer, couched in terms of ‘guerilla teaching’, were an acknowledgement that ‘reductive and impoverished models’ now dominated the scene.

Envoi

It is early September 2024. I have spent the last few weeks reading Anne’s many articles, while looking out for policy announcements from the new Labour government that might signal how it will relate to the questions of language, learning and culture that so concerned her. ‘The roots of learning are social’, Anne wrote (Turvey 2014). But it seems that this is a principle that does not interest Labour. The government has just published ‘a £4 million plan to create a ‘content store’ for education companies to train generative AI models. According to the DFE’s press release, the project is intended to help reduce teacher workload by enabling edtech companies to build applications for marking, planning, preparing materials, and routine admin. . . . it will ‘pool government documents including curriculum guidance, lesson plans and anonymised pupil assessments which will then be used by AI companies to train their tools so they generate accurate, high-quality content, like tailored, creative lesson plans and workbooks, that can be reliably used in schools’ (Williamson 2024). Core pedagogic tasks will thus be ‘offloaded from professional judgement to language-processing technologies and edtech firms’ (Williamson 2024).

No kind of education practice is asocial. Every kind of practice is in some way affective and depends upon some kind of social relationship. The practice that Labour will fund is no different. Its social agents are tech companies, the education workers whose dead labour is embedded in an AI ‘content store’, the teachers or teaching assistants who will monitor the interaction between learner and machine, and the learners themselves, cast as atomised individuals. This will be a reconfigured ‘social’, distant from any conception of learning based on dialogue, on the idea that classrooms are spaces of cultural encounter. What kinds of ‘English’ it will incubate are uncertain, but it is difficult to see them engaging students and satisfying teachers. As edtech folds itself into existing curriculum practices, Anne’s questions become more urgent than ever: ‘What are the resources – intellectual, curricular – on which we can draw to sustain less reductive and impoverished versions of English as a school subject?’

Notes

1. Audio recordings of the Conference are preserved at the Bishopsgate Institute. <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/history-workshop-audio-archive>.

2. For convenience sake, I'll continue to refer to 'the Department' as the collective name for the group of staff who taught and researched around questions of English.
3. The Tuck family, two generations of Prussian Jewish immigrants in Victorian London, ran a publishing house that catered to new Christmas traditions. Beginning in the 1870s the Tucks mass-produced holiday greeting cards with inventive Santa and angel cut-outs and embossed mistletoe garlands'. Eve M. Kahn. 'Judaica from the Tuck Collection in London to be auctioned'. *New York Times* 15 November 2012.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Ken Jones is Emeritus Professor of Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has recently retired as Head of Education Policy at the National Education Union.

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