

## Another School is Possible: learning from Europe

**TERRY WRIGLEY**

**ABSTRACT** In this impassioned attack on the profound failure of the current English system of schooling Terry Wrigley reminds us of inspirational European alternatives, particularly but not exclusively, from Scandinavia. They not only produce better 'results' as measured by international league tables; they also produce better 'results' in the wider, more exacting senses that radical democratic progressive education advocates. The challenges, both national and global, that education now faces are daunting. Yet, it is becoming increasingly difficult to think outside the frame, especially for younger teachers perhaps who have not known anything else. Studying alternative traditions in Europe and elsewhere, as well as pockets of enlightenment here, may have a significant role in helping us to think outside the box.

Our world is in crisis as never before in human history. The ice is melting, the waters are rising, and even sunlight is becoming a threat. There is a daily holocaust, of 30,000 children dying of starvation and preventable disease. Asia and Africa, and consequently places nearer home, are fast becoming war zones.

And more and more of us are seeing these things as connected. The scale of poverty and injustice is monstrous, in Africa, Asia, but also here in Britain. Far from being accidental, social injustice is an essential requirement of the system. Ecological disaster, poverty and war are actively produced by the forces of capitalism. The world's owners, relentlessly chasing greater profits, are acting as if there is no tomorrow.

Its owners treat the planet as if it could be discarded, a commodity to be used up... But what other world are we going to move to? Are we all obliged to swallow the line that God sold the planet to a few companies because in a foul mood he decided to privatize the universe. (Galeano, 2000, p. 266)

It is in this context that we have to understand the crisis in education. The World Bank sees its role as producing 'human capital'. *We* see it as an opportunity to make sense of the world. On the whole, the earth's rulers don't

want that[1]– it would be far too revealing. It is no accident that Blair's neo-liberal government has gradually eroded the National Curriculum[2]and now intends most 14 year olds to pursue a diet of vocational preparation plus functional literacy. It is no longer a question of which version of science or history our young people will receive, but of who will have *any*.[3]

### **Childhood is Being Consumed**

In the heartlands of the neo-liberal project, especially England and the USA, childhood is also being consumed. Children are tested to destruction, and learners stuffed with fragments of inert knowledge like turkeys for Christmas. Despite the rhetoric of 'raising standards', learning is trivialised when literacy becomes disconnected from pleasure and purpose, and a curriculum is 'delivered' in the straitjacket of the four-part lessons favoured by DfES Strategies.

Meaning, not disconnected facts, is what sane human beings seek. I teach an infinite fragmentation ... what I do is more related to television programming than to making a scheme of order ... I teach you how to accept confusion as your destiny. (Gatto, 1992, pp. 3-4)

The comparison between television and school pedagogies is revealing. Television increasingly relies on a rapid succession of images; what is the impact when schooling parallels this with a drizzle of dead facts? An Argentine journalist said about the television news: 'We're told about everything, and we don't find out a thing.' How many of our schools are becoming like that too?

The mass media, increasingly controlled by a few giant corporations, are known as systems of 'communications' but:

Never have so many been held incommunicado by so few. (Galeano, 2000, p. 271)

Similarly, in schools, the gains of progressivism have been substantially rolled back, children reduced to silence or one-word answers to teachers' questions, and teaching regulated by a state bureaucracy and / or commercial interests. Of course it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this is universally true, that this is solely the consequence of government initiatives, or indeed that government reforms have led entirely in this direction. Teachers still exercise the power to interpret and even subvert government policies. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the literacy hour has limited pupils' opportunities for extended communication (Mroz et al, 2000; English et al, 2002; Burns & Myhill, 2004). More positively, the Key Stage 3 Strategy does emphasise co-operative group work, but the time frame is so pressured and the tasks so predetermined that the co-operative intention is undermined.[4] We are faced, in effect, with a Fordist parody of interactive learning and teaching.

### **It Doesn't Have to Be Like that**

It doesn't have to be like that. The British school system arose in the early days of capitalism, to provide basic skills, to subjugate and provide a veil of imperialist ideology. Thousands of teachers have struggled to bring about progressive and even radical reforms. From the 1980s, the state has imposed new forms of control – supposedly to raise standards, but actually a means of dumbing down.[5]

We can fight back – teachers, pupils and parents. We can learn from schools, at home and across the world, which, despite external pressures, have managed to sustain meaningful learning. A shining example is the teachers' network Rethinking Schools in the USA, which has inspired us to establish Rethinking Education here. Rethinking Schools combine policy critique with the development and sharing of innovative practice.[6] Rethinking Education ([www.rethinkinged.org.uk](http://www.rethinkinged.org.uk)) was established by a successful conference in London in March 2005; building on the strength of NUT branches and the Anti-Sats Alliance, it seeks to develop courage, cooperation and creativity and provide a living alternative for a generation of new teachers trained to think that DfES strategies and schemes are all that there is. A crucial task for this new network is to bring together teachers who are active in subject associations, union activists and school staffs who have dared to swim against the tide, to develop a more powerful voice and intervention. There are many fine examples of exciting and engaged teaching to build upon.

We can also learn from countries with more progressive educational traditions, where the neo-liberal reform of education has less of a grip. Policy export from the dominant English-speaking countries means that nowhere is safe, but resistance is growing. The Norwegian pupils' union organized a successful boycott of national tests, and a quarter of fifteen-year-olds handed in blank sheets of paper. They rightly recognised the tests as a way of setting up an internal market, with league tables, unfair competition between schools and attempts at privatization. There have been enormous protests in parts of Italy, and now a burgeoning struggle against City Academies here[7]

### **Schools as Learning Communities: the inspiration of Scandinavia**

A group of Scottish teaching students, on a study visit to an Oslo school this Easter, were hugged by the children greeting them. Perplexed, they asked the teacher what they should do. The Norwegian teacher was equally amazed by their question: 'Well, hug them back, of course!'

The atmosphere in Norwegian schools is warm and trusting. Physically, Norwegian classrooms look like rooms by IKEA, but with a human vitality that no furniture store can emulate. Children sit and move around and talk to each other, in rooms with curtains and carpets and settees and table decorations. The children feel at home there, and over 90% stay on beyond the statutory years.

From an early age, children learn to be concerned about each other, and about the wider world. In one class of 7 year olds, shortly before Christmas, I heard the advent song (from Amnesty):

*Three lights will shine  
for all who need to struggle  
for safety and freedom,  
who need help from us,  
for all the people of the world are one.*

I recalled with shame Blunkett's remark about 'schools swamped with asylum seekers'.

Younger primary children spend a day each week out in their forest camps – a site for cross-curricular learning, for science, crafts, language and number. The natural world is a core concern, for individual survival, national prosperity and our global future. Their 15-year-olds might, of course, score higher in PISA tests if they abandoned all this nonsense and spent the day at their desks practising arithmetic.[8]

Scandinavian schools for adolescents avoid the fragmented relationships of British secondary schools. Each teacher is qualified in several subjects. Norwegian teachers are grouped by school years, not subject departments. Typically, a hundred 14-15 year olds are taught by 5-6 teachers, who between them cover the whole curriculum and provide pastoral care and guidance. The team includes expertise in learning support, and is to a large extent self-managing, re-arranging its timetable for visits and special projects. Each class normally has one or two main teachers, for nearly half the week, and only 4 or 5 altogether. Teachers and pupils know each other very well, and relationships and trust make behaviour problems rare and negotiable. It is a social community and a learning community.[9] (For further information, see Wrigley & Fjeld Lofsnaes, 2005)

There are serious ironies here. It appears politically more convenient to denounce young people as 'yobs' and their families as 'dysfunctional', than to reshape schools as nurturing communities[10]Temporary exclusions in Scotland[11]increase fourfold from Primary 7 to Secondary 1. Among boys on free meals in lower secondary years, one individual in four is excluded from school each year, on average twice. This indicates considerable turbulence, but how would we cope, as adults, with 12-15 different bosses a week, and herded from room to room once every hour. There is overwhelming research evidence in the USA that less advantaged pupils benefit both academically and socially from smaller schools (including 'schools-within-schools'). Restructuring schools as human-scale communities would be a more worthwhile approach to school improvement than asset-stripping by Academy 'sponsors'.

## The Laboratory School, Bielefeld, Germany

One of the longest 'experiments' in educational history, this German 5-16 comprehensive school was established 30 years ago as a living laboratory of curriculum reform. The Laborschule gives a new meaning to 'learning community'. Following Montessori's concept of 'hand, heart and head', the vision of the school's founder Professor von Hentig was for an early years curriculum with the following entitlement:

- pursue an interest together, show each other, talk about it
- step back from the group – be alone
- literally explore the elements – make a fire, dam water, dig a hole
- build a hut, plant a garden or look after an animal
- cook together and eat it – wash up afterwards
- read quietly
- observe something, observe others, follow your curiosity
- celebrate special occasions, perform something, sing, give each other presents that you've made yourself
- and all of that alongside the normal school activities – writing, reading, calculating, drawing, cleaning up.

Re-using the PISA tests, the Max-Planck Institute, Berlin, discovered, after matching of parental occupation etc., that Laboratory School pupils were achieving very high levels of academic success despite – or probably because of – the school's distinct aims and methods. The school's development is driven by teacher-led initiatives, each undertaken in partnership with the university. Special funding enables individual teachers to be released part-time to design, lead and evaluate the project. It is difficult to summarise this unique school, but the following examples may give a flavour:

1. Marks and grades are not allowed (i.e. until the final year, since they are required for the next stage of education). Assessment is based on formative feedback, and reporting through letters addressed to the pupils and their parents.
2. Classes in the first three primary years are deliberately mixed-age. Children help each other with key skills, with teachers giving particularly close individual help in reading and maths for those who most need it.
3. Social development is central. Younger pupils eat 'second breakfast' together, and boys and girls take turns preparing and washing up. The school 'zoo' lends out pets to care for at home or in school. Pupils have built their own playground, tend allotments and run the disco.
4. Vocational learning has a fitting place within the broader curriculum, with a different work-experience fortnight for each of the three oldest years. The experiences of working life are then critically evaluated back at school.
5. A girls-only curriculum project was developed for 10-12 year olds, including sex and health education, but also aesthetic and emotional experiences related to their changing bodies – dance, psychodrama, aromatherapy, self-defence. The

boys insisted on designing a parallel project, which includes a 'housekeeping' certificate, during a residential; and a childcare placement in nurseries and playgroups.

6. Learning frequently takes the form of group and individual research, reported back and discussed by the class in a circle. Older pupils evaluate each other's contributions very supportively. Alongside the core and elective curriculum, the final years undertake two extended individual activities each year, academic or practical, e.g. designing a set of clothes, comparing American Indian cultures and their experiences of colonisation; examining Freud and Jung's theory of dreams; questioning whether religion is necessary for ethics.

(In addition to many publications in German, a more extended report on the Laborschule can be found in English in Wrigley 2003)

### **More Open Architectures of Learning**

Too much traditional school learning has been a kind of alienated labour, like commodity production in factories. You are told what to do, and how long for, then you hand it over, receiving wages in the form of a token reward – exchange value, rather than use value. We need to restore to young people's learning in schools not only meaningful content, but a sense of *voice* and *agency*. The role of the Student Voice project is catalytic here, and crucially needs to connect issues of school development and ethos with pedagogy.

This necessarily involves a sense of ownership or 'authorship' of the curriculum. Denmark's curriculum document for social studies / citizenship warns teachers against writing a fixed plan for the year as this can undermine their *negotiation* with their class. Chomsky's advice is relevant here, that we should seek to build in schools 'communities of common concern'. (Chomsky, 2000, p. 21) As an alternative to top-down short-term planning by lesson plans, we can draw upon more open architectures practised in Scandinavia and various other European countries.

*Project Method* (after Dewey) is fundamentally different from the individual 'projects' of progressive British schools of the 1970s.[12] Projects begin and end collectively. A theme is introduced, the learners' interest is caught, and they discuss key issues and projects. Individuals and small research teams choose particular aspects to investigate. Finally they report back to the whole class but also engage them in activities and further discussion. The conclusion may also involve a presentation to a wider audience or a public event or intervention.

*Storyline* is increasingly used in Scandinavia not just for younger pupils but into the secondary years.[13] This narrative approach to thematic work begins with a situation in which the learners adopt or develop an identity. The teacher, often in role, takes the story forward through events which trigger writing or drama or art or research. Alternatively, the storyline can be based on a novel or historical events.

*Design challenges* began in the USA as Education by Design, and are promoted in Britain under the title 'Critical Skills'. I saw an excellent example

in a two-day event in the early weeks of secondary school. The headteacher, in costume, appeared on screen as the Galactic Emperor, with an announcement that earth would soon be demolished. A holiday resort was being constructed at the other end of the galaxy, and our planet stood in the path of a proposed superhighway for the holidaymakers. However, the Emperor, being merciful, would allow the class two days to present their objections. Was the earth worth saving? The pupils were completely engrossed. They drew on their understanding of geography, they used library skills and ICT and maths and language, they made excellent Powerpoint presentations, they presented their case articulately.

Common features of these different approaches are that they provide a secure but flexible structure for teachers and learners, alongside scope and encouragement for choice and initiative within a common theme and activity.

### Conclusion

The challenge that education now faces is daunting, and particularly for teachers in England, one of the heartlands of neo-liberal economic and political reform. At times the situation develops so fast that it seems overwhelming. Such dramatic turns sit on top of the slower but still devastating growth of social injustice and poverty in the world, and the degradation of our planet the Earth. All this is going to require new kinds of learning if the peoples of the world are to build a worthwhile future for each other.

Education in England in particular suffers from an all-encompassing system of control in which the culture of daily life in schools, the curriculum and its 'delivery' are aligned to intensify the production of 'human capital'. Teachers' work is regulated by strategies and model lesson plans, inspections and teacher training. It has become increasingly difficult to think outside the frame, especially perhaps for younger teachers who have known nothing else. Studying alternative traditions, as well as pockets of enlightenment here, may have a significant role in helping us think outside the box. Exciting alternatives can be found in various parts of Europe, and, though increasingly at risk, even among some school networks in the USA. There are signs too that Scotland is stepping out in a new direction (see A Curriculum for Excellence – outline proposals of the Curriculum Review Group, 2004). The other articles in this Special Issue of *FORUM* include rich examples of good practice in English schools.

Finding a space for real learning is a difficult challenge, but one which we cannot afford to shirk. Critical and engaged thinking about science and history and media and environment must be at the heart of curriculum renewal. Critical literacies, including media education, should be among the new basics of education for a democracy. If *Another World is Possible*, then another school is also possible, and necessary.

## Notes

- [1] There are, of course, contradictions here, which have been apparent in Britain since the era of TVEI. Alongside the chorus of 'back to basics', some employers with greater foresight are demanding creativity, co-operation and communication skills, at least for higher grades of future employees. This gives rise to some contradictory developments, a kind of vocationalist progressivism. It would be valuable, for example, to compare officially sanctioned versions of 'thinking skills' with genuinely critical pedagogies.
- [2] The National Curriculum was technologically advanced and socially reactionary, but did have a degree of breadth and common entitlement which New Labour has eaten into.
- [3] The *Five Year Strategy* provides the clearest announcement of government intentions. Even a simple word count is revealing. *Employer* appears 146 times, plus *employment* 30 and *business* 36. The words *creative* and *creativity* appear once each. *Critical* features six times, but always meaning 'essential' rather than thinking critically or challenging the status quo: 'All young people should be equipped with the skills critical for success in employment'. Only once does the document suggest any purpose for schooling other than employability.
- [4] Consider, for example, the Planning Exemplars for English. A model lesson on pre-20th Century poetry allocates each group a different poem, and gives each group 20 minutes to 'work out topic, meaning and mood, and identify one forceful line and what makes it memorable'. The six groups then have a combined total of 10 minutes to feed this back to the whole class, so that the teacher can 'extrapolate first impressions of poet's work'. A lesson about learners' proposals to improve their school – almost a parody of Student Voice – gives groups twenty minutes to: 'select three best ideas; brainstorm how to promote them; anticipate objections; and develop ideas'. In the ensuing plenary, the teacher has 10 minutes to show 'how to tackle possible objections – deny, dismiss, ameliorate, outweigh, diminish, reframe'. [[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/respub/englishframework](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/respub/englishframework)]
- [5] This is not a conservative argument, derived from nostalgia or elitism. National testing is becoming a site for political self delusion, e.g. the simplification of KS2 reading tests; the substitution of GNVQ (Int) for four higher grade GCSEs. English undergraduate degrees have always been the shortest in the world, but now they are a three-year part-time course, with students working long hours to support themselves during term times.
- [6] Among the achievements of Rethinking Schools are its website ([www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)), a set of radical but highly practical books (Rethinking Globalisation; Reading, Writing and Rising Up; Rethinking Mathematics); and sets of teaching ideas in response to curricular emergencies such as 9/11 and the war on Iraq.
- [7] The Academies project may be the start of a much wider privatization of schools. Alternatively, they may be intended to serve as a model for vocationally orientated secondary schools. It is significant that almost all have a business,



- enterprise or ICT specialism, whether they are sponsored by businesses or (largely right wing) religious groups.
- [8] Of course, one of the flaws with OECD tests such as PISA is that they reflect the priorities of the most powerful countries, generally monolingual Anglophone ones. If PISA had been designed in Scandinavia, it would undoubtedly require a command of several languages, and Britain would probably come bottom.
- [9] A similar pattern can be found in the USA, in the Coalition of Essential Schools, a loose federation in which schools follow their unique paths of development, but with a common principle that no teacher should teach more than 80 pupils in any academic year. Another central principle (the word 'essential') is that deep learning is better than racing to cover a wide range of topics superficially.
- [10] The influential conference 'School is a house of learning' (North Rhine Westphalia, Germany, 1995) agreed this mission statement:
- a place where everybody is welcome, where learners and teachers are accepted in their individuality
  - a place where people are allowed time to grow up, to take care of one another and be treated with respect
  - a place whose rooms invite you to stay, offer you the chance to learn, and stimulate you to learn and show initiative.
- [11] There is, apparently, no comparable data for temporary exclusions in England.
- [12] A version of Project Method is becoming quite widespread at university level, under the rubric of Problem Based Learning. We are increasingly using this approach in Edinburgh for teacher education.
- [13] It is popularly known there as the 'Scottish method', having been invented at Jordanhill College. Ironically, it almost became extinct in Scotland, and is now far more widely used in Copenhagen than in Glasgow.

### *Correspondence*

Terry Wrigley, School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, United Kingdom ([terry.wrigley@ed.ac.uk](mailto:terry.wrigley@ed.ac.uk))

### **References**

- Burns, C. & Myhill, D. (2004) Interactive or Inactive? a Consideration of the Nature of Interaction in Whole Class Teaching, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 34, pp. 35-49.
- Chomsky, N. (2000) *Chomsky on Miseducation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Curriculum Review Group (2004) *A Curriculum for Excellence*. Edinburgh: SEED ([www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/cerv-00.asp](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/cerv-00.asp)).
- English, E., Hargreaves, L. & Hislop, J. (2002) Pedagogical Dilemmas in the National Literacy Strategy: primary teachers' perceptions, reflections and classroom behaviour, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 32, pp. 9-26.

Terry Wrigley

- Galeano, E. (2000) *Upside Down: a primer for the looking-glass world*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Gatto, J. T. (1992) *Dumbing Us Down: the hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Mroz, M., Smith, F. & Hardman, F. (2000) The Discourse of the Literacy Hour, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30, pp. 379-390.
- Wrigley, T. (2003) An Editor Visits: the Laborschule, Bielefeld, *Improving Schools*, 6(2), pp. 2-9.
- Wrigley, T. & Fjeld Lofsnaes, N. (2005) Schools as Social and Learning Communities: Scotland and Norway, *Improving Schools*, 8(1).