FORUM

The Struggle for Democracy in the Local School System

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ABSTRACT The Coalition Government, building on the foundations laid by its Labour predecessor, aims to dismantle the local authority system and with it what remains of the accountability of schools to local elected government. In this article, a response to Stewart Ranson's in a recent issue of *FORUM*, the author examines his claims for the emergence of new forms of participative governance and suggests an alternative approach to taking forward the democratisation of governance in local school systems at neighbourhood and local authority levels in the context of conflicting class interests.

The Conservative-led Coalition Government claims that conversion to Academies frees schools from local authority control. The reality is that local authorities exercise very little power over schools, but they do represent at least an element of democratic accountability of the local school system to the community through local elected government. The Government aims to finally complete the destruction, set in train by its Labour predecessor, of this historic democratic gain of the English school system (the result in part of a mass popular movement, the National Education League, founded in 1869) through a lethal combination of savage cuts in school and local authority budgets and a financial incentive to schools to convert to Academies (a share of local authorities' central service funding, which in turn reduces their support capacity and consequent attractiveness to schools).

The abolition of accountability to and involvement by the community in the school system at local authority level is paralleled by its attenuation at school level. The Coalition Government's schools White Paper (Department for Education [DfE], 2010) speaks of autonomy driven by heads, not governors. It recommends a reduction in the number of governors, with 'experts' replacing parent and community governors. In Academies a minimum of only two parents is required, with no entitlement to local authority, community or staff governors. The governing body is subject (though in ways which remain

unspecified) to the Academy Trust (a body requiring a minimum of three members, one of whom the Secretary of State has the power to appoint), which appoints its members and has 'strategic oversight' over it. The spread of Academies is fuelling the expansion of chains of Academies run by private organisations where strategic power is in the hands of a superordinate board of directors, often in another part of the country, and with no parent or community representatives. E-ACT, one of the principal Academy chains, has announced that it plans to run 250 schools within five years (*Times Educational Supplement,* 18 March 2011).

The only increase in popular power within the school system is the opportunity for groups of parents and community organisations to set up state-funded 'free schools', of which the main beneficiaries seem likely to be the private companies involved in setting them up and in many cases managing them.

The question for opponents of government policy is what is our alternative? Have we nothing more to say about this growing democratic deficit in our local school systems beyond 'defend local authorities'? Faced with the immediate defensive challenges of resisting cuts and job loss and opposing Academies and free schools, it might seem a luxury to be also raising the need for the democratisation of local school systems, particularly as there seem to be no immediate practical steps to be taken. But to have no answer to the Right's claim that consumer choice in the schools market is more democratic than collective participation in decision making is to concede a fundamental principle in the battle of ideas, and to neglect an important strategic terrain of practical struggle at the local level. It is a policy to be campaigned for as part of the programme of a future Labour government, but it is also posed concretely today in every campaign against cuts implemented by local councils and every campaign to prevent a school from converting to Academy, because opposing the *what* of policy also raises the question of *how*: how policies are decided upon and by whom. Yet the issue of the extension of popular participation in and influence over the governance of the local school system at school, neighbourhood and local authority levels has been largely undeveloped by the Left.

One important exception has been Stewart Ranson, who has argued the case for participative governance in local school systems in a series of publications over the years, and most recently in his article 'From Partnership to Community Governance' in a recent issue of *Forum* (Ranson, 2010), drawing on his research with Colin Crouch (Ranson & Crouch, 2009). Ranson begins from the principle that because education is a public good its purposes need to be the subject of public debate by parents, teachers and the local community:

> Public goods and public decisions acquire legitimacy when they are based on collective, public agreement and are accountable to the public. Because public goods require public consent, it is rational to develop institutional arrangements and establish practices of participation and deliberation that enable learning about the

expressed needs and wishes of families and communities.
(Ranson & Crouch, 2009, p. 50)

Ranson complements this with a pedagogic argument for the integration of school and community as a necessary condition for effective learning:

> If learning expresses a journey between worlds, the challenge for the school is to create a learning community that brings together local and cosmopolitan in its pedagogic practices . … This configuration of the school and its communities, by interconnecting the symbolic orders of each, creates the conditions for relevance, motivation and learning.
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>   Understanding this interdependence of learning and living leads to a conclusion that it is the function of governance to constitute the structures of mutual recognition within and between the school and its communities. (Ranson, 2010, p. 291)

Ranson proposes two levels of collaborative participative governance between the local authority and the school – neighbourhood 'clusters' and area 'localities'. His model does not, however, include democratising local authorities. Nor are we dealing here with the democratisation of individual school governing bodies, though Ranson has addressed this issue (see Ranson, 2004; also Hatcher, 2005; Dean et al, 2007; Fielding & Moss, 2011).

Ranson claims that participative governance is already taking place at the neighbourhood level as a result of Labour government policies, in particular the Every Child Matters agenda, which has led to the creation of local networks of collaboration between schools and between schools and other agencies:

> Policy initiatives have necessitated the re-configuring of school, children's centres and agencies into collaborative 'localities and clusters'. Because all the services and curricular opportunities required by these extended school policies cannot be provided by each institution alone, they will need to be offered in consortia arrangements. This is leading to fundamental changes in the governance of schools and localities.
> (Ranson & Crouch, 2009, p. 292)

These emerging governance arrangements are more than collaboration among professionals about provision. They entail the participation of parents and communities in the development of policy.

> If the community, the teachers and centre workers are to collaborate in supporting the learning needs of local people, then appropriate forums will be required to allow a neighbourhood strategy and provision to be deliberated and planned. Many local authorities have been working with schools, centres and communities to develop these cooperative practices at the level of the cluster. (pp. 294-295)

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In response to Ranson I want to do three things. I want, first, to question his claims for the emergence of new forms of governance; second, to argue that his conception of local participative governance does not take account of the class nature of the school system; and third, to suggest an alternative approach to taking forward the democratisation of governance in local school systems at neighbourhood and local authority levels.

Collaborative Networks without Participative Governance

As Ranson says, various forms of collaborative networks among schools have proliferated in the past decade. But the evidence from recent research studies, including his own research (Ranson & Crouch, 2009), does not support the claim of emerging participative governance by professionals, parents and the community in local clusters and consortia of schools. The form of collaborative governance is far more restricted in both membership and extent. In terms of membership Ranson & Crouch found that:

> The consortia have been designed to form a partnership between
> providers, rather than users, the agencies which deliver services,
> activities and opportunities to children, families and communities.
> Governors are involved, but in their role as institutional leaders
> rather than their user/stakeholder role. Parents are sometimes
> involved in their user role, but this is not typical and stands in
> contrast to the organising principle that shapes the partnership being
> formed. (2009, p. 44)

Thus 'Parents and school governors may be included in a joint committee but not as controlling public interest, and they will be appointed rather than elected by the professional leaders of their schools' (p. 49). In fact in two of the three case studies 'The contribution of governors to the partnership deliberations … were typically negligible or nonexistent' (p. 45). There was virtually no involvement by parents, except as parent governors, and none by the wider community. There was collaboration between professionals across schools, and to some extent other agencies, about service delivery, but no significant participation by wider non-professionals in the design of the service being delivered, and no evidence of collaborative governance as a vehicle to construct a 'learning community'.

In terms of the extent of collaborative governance, decisive power remained with the individual schools. They set up joint committees, but these were to implement specific tasks with powers delegated on behalf of their schools by head teachers and governing bodies and subject to their authorisation.

Ranson & Crouch's findings are congruent with those of other research studies of school networks (Hargreaves, 2009; Harris & Allen, 2009; Higham et al, 2009; Howes & Frankham, 2009; Lumby, 2009; Moore & Kelly, 2009; Muijs et al, 2010). Most school networks do not involve joint governance.

Governance remains located principally at individual school level. Networks do not tend to involve governors or parents. In the main, and often exclusively, they comprise professionals and are run by head teachers.

Under the Coalition Government we are seeing neighbourhood clusters of schools converting to Academies together, retaining their existing collaborative links and pooling resources to purchase goods and services and to provide shared teaching programmes and professional support and development, perhaps replacing local authority provision (in contrast to privately-run Academy chains, which, according to research by Hill [2010], tend to be unwilling to collaborate with other schools). These networks require some coordination of decision making, but by head teachers; they don't necessitate participation in network governance by governors, parents or community.

What is the explanation? The principal motive and focus of collaboration between schools is not the Every Child Matters agenda. (And the Coalition Government has abandoned ECM altogether. It is entirely absent from the 2010 White Paper and schools will no longer be evaluated about ECM by the Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted].) School collaboration is driven largely by the pressure to raise measured standards of attainment. The functions of collaborative networks are mainly the sharing of knowledge and practice for school improvement and the delivery of shared provision. Neither require significant new forms of governance. Nor do they in general involve either external agencies or governors, let alone parents and the community. The locus of power remains the individual school because it is the individual school that is the budget-holder and it is the school which is subject to evaluation. (The exceptions are hard federations, two or more schools with a common governing body, which do represent a new form of governance, but these are a relatively small minority of collaborations.)

The 'standards agenda', imposing a regime of performativity on schools, was the principal driver of the neo-liberal education policy of the Labour Government. The Coalition Government promises an easing of prescriptive micro-management, but schools will remain subject to the pressures of performativity: a new phonics-based reading test at age 6; Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) at the end of primary school; a new 'floor standard' of 35% A*-C at GCSE in English and maths; the five-subject 'EBac' and other more complex league table measures; and the subjection of lower-performing schools to more intensive Ofsted inspection and to enhanced powers of the secretary of state to impose Academy status, sponsorship or federation, or to enforce closure.

These, coupled with market mechanisms including competition from so-called 'free schools', are the instruments of a class strategy on the part of government designed to gear the school system more effectively to reproducing the conditions of capitalist society, including the production of the future class-stratified labour force, as well as opening up the school system further to private control and profit.

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Conflicting Class Interests in the School System

Ranson acknowledges that 'Education has remained inscribed by class at every level of service and practice' (Ranson & Crouch, 2009, p. 52) but he does not draw out the inevitable consequence for the nature of participative governance. He recognises that 'decisions about the purpose and content of an education are likely to reflect differences of belief and become the subject of contestation and debate' (Ranson, 2010, p. 292). For Ranson, these differences can be reconciled and consensus be achieved through rational deliberation:

> An essential and related purpose of the governance of schooling, therefore, is to constitute the spaces and processes that enable the relevant interests and voices to deliberate the purpose of learning and capability formation. This dialogue cannot be a technical task of calculation, but will need to be governed by the principles of public discussion – the giving and taking of reasons – that can resolve differences and secure public agreement. This process should include not only those directly involved in a school, such as parents and teachers, but take into account the interests of the wider community, because all will be affected by the public good of educating every child. (2010, p. 292)

The achievement of consensus through Habermasian dialogue has been a consistent theme of Ranson's writings. But while many differences of view within the local school system involve no fundamental conflict of interests and can be resolved through discussion, some derive from the capitalist deep structure of the system and involve conflicting class interests where no consensus is possible. (This is not to say that there are not other sources of irreconcilable difference too.) What consensus is possible today between advocates and opponents of the destruction of local authorities, or the return of a selective system, or premature segregation into vocational and academic tracks, or radical issues in the curriculum, or the rights of the teacher unions, or cuts in school budgets, or encroaching privatisation? These are not just differences of belief; they are expressions of conflicting class interests in the context of an aggressively neo-liberal Conservative-led government over which consensus through rational debate is impossible.

At the local level, dominant class interests are relayed by all those in positions of power – local councillors and officers, head teachers, governors – in so far as they use their power to operationalise those interests in policy and practice, however reluctantly, rather than resist them. This is precisely the issue today when schools implement cuts which result in the loss of jobs of teachers and other school staff, or when they decide to convert to Academies in order to gain extra funding.

Given the unequal power relationship within which governance operates, consensus inevitably takes place on, and legitimates, the terrain of neoliberalism. The experience of social movements shows that in a context of conflicting class

interests continuing independent popular organisation is necessary to ensure that participative governance does not become coopted and hegemonised by official agendas. 'Empirical studies have shown that participation in officially sanctioned deliberative forums is more effective where participants are also engaged in autonomous action' (Barnes, 2009, p. 38).

The recognition that conflicting class interests are at stake provides a deeper rationale for popular participation in the governance of the school system: to provide an opportunity for working-class and popular interests to be voiced and advanced.

Towards Local Democratic Participative Governance in the School System

I begin with the local authority because, notwithstanding the constraints on its powers, it to a large extent structures the local polity and is the principal local political expression, however inadequate, of its community. According to Ranson:

> The central function of a local authority is to govern the local debate about the purposes and content of education, through processes that ensure public reason so that the shape of local education as a whole is agreed and is believed to be fair and just. (2010, p. 296)

There are three fundamental problems with this scenario. The first is that local councils are, reluctantly or not, key relays of the government's neo-liberal policies (there are as yet no signs of rebellion from Labour councils as there were in the 1980s), and therefore there can be no consensus about fairness and justice. The second is that local authorities are haemorrhaging schools to Academies. The third is that councils are not very hospitable to popular participation in decision making, as the Power Inquiry (2006) found and Copus (2010, p. 588) confirms: 'If public engagement supports councillors' preferred policy option, it is a useful tool; if it does not, the views expressed are likely to be marginalised or ignored'. Further confirmation comes from the experiences of consultation processes for Academies managed by local councils under the Labour Government, which invariably disregarded public opposition (Hatcher, 2008, 2011).

This unfavourable context makes it all the more important to develop the case for a radical alternative vision of a reconstructed local authority's role in education which a future Labour government should implement (including bringing all local state schools back into the local authority system) and which the growing number of Labour councils should enact in so far as they have the power. Ranson makers no proposals for democratising local authorities, but, applying his rationale for participative governance, the principle is that there must be a space at that level in which the community can express its views about education policy and deliberative democracy can take place. I will call

this space a Local Education Forum (not to be confused with existing Schools Forums).

The Forum would be a body open to all citizens with an interest in education, including, of course, teachers and other school workers, school governors, parents, school students, and members of community organisations. Decisions would be taken by consensus or compromise where possible and by majority vote where not (perhaps by elected representatives of the Forum's constituents, ranging from the schools themselves to perhaps community, ward and constituency bodies). One vital role for the Forum would be to enable the wider community to express a view about policies adopted by individual schools which would result in increasing inequality between schools, a problem which greater school autonomy is likely to exacerbate.

Of course this is an ideal model. At present there is little sign that local councils, including Labour-led ones, are interested in extending local democracy. It represents a programmatic alternative model of local democracy in education around which support can be mobilised. It is impossible to predict how it might be translated into reality: unless it becomes the policy of a progressive Labour government it's a matter of the local balance of political forces. It is conceivable that a Forum could be set up on a partial and unofficial basis arising out of a mass movement in defence of public services. The demand would then be for the local authority to recognise the Forum as a legitimate body and engage with it, in line with the Power Inquiry's call for 'a structured space within which elected representatives, public officials and members of the public can speak to each other' (Power Inquiry, 2006, p. 235), and its recommendations that 'All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes' (p. 232). As a minimum the Forum should have the right of access to information and to present issues at Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny meetings. If in future we see the emergence of Labour councils with a more radical agenda the Local Education Forum could become the arena in which 'local authorities define a local cultural project of education for their community, a collective vision for the area, in relationship with schools, local communities and citizens' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 124), on the basis of policies which have the democratic legitimacy of having been produced through the deliberative processes of the Forum.

What Powers Should Be Exercised by the Local Authority?

Popular and professional participation in governance at the local authority level is meaningless without the capacity of the local authority to translate the policies arrived at into the policies and practices of schools. As Ranson says, 'If the indispensable role of the local authority in the emerging layered system of school and community governance is to be acknowledged and reinforced its authority and powers need concomitantly to be clarified and strengthened' (2010, p. 296). This is a highly sensitive and contentious issue. Schools, especially after the experience of micro-management under Labour, and perhaps

with negative experiences of the role of local authorities, are likely to be reluctant to accept greater local authority influence except over admissions policy and the provision of school places. Yet local authorities have to be able to restrict the exercise of school autonomy if it conflicts with wider community interests in social justice, and to have the power and the financial and staff resources to promote effective progressive pedagogic and curriculum innovation. Achieving its willing acceptance by schools will depend upon their being confident that the local authority is in turn genuinely committed to their participation in local authority decision making.

Neighbourhood Education Forums: community governance and the learning community

Ranson proposes two levels of collaborative participative governance between the local authority and the school – 'clusters' and 'localities'. My view is that intermediate governance structures are likely to take a variety of forms and that the neighbourhood is the most favourable scale. Ranson provides the rationale:

> If the community, the teachers and centre workers are to collaborate
> in supporting the learning needs of local people, then appropriate
> forums will be required to allow a neighbourhood strategy and
> provision to be deliberated and planned. (2010, p. 294)

The small scale of Neighbourhood Education Forums would make them much easier to establish than authority-wide ones. They become particularly important if large numbers of schools leave the local authority and establish local clusters or consortia of Academies with no participation by local parents and community in their collective governance. NEFs could link to other local participatory forums such as Ward and Constituency Committees (which also need democratising), from which at present the school system is entirely separate, integrating education into a full-service neighbourhood plan. And the experience of successful Neighbourhood Forums could generate the motivation for setting up an authority-wide Forum.

Neighbourhood Education Forums also open up the possibility of realising Ranson's aim of creating 'a learning community that brings together local and cosmopolitan in its pedagogic practices' (2010, p. 291) by the collaborative construction of an area-based curriculum 'co-developed in collaborative and equal partnerships between schools and community partners (organisations, groups, or individuals), supported by a charter of principles' (RSA, 2010, p. 28). This area-based curriculum would provide a bridge between the lived worlds of children and families and the wider worlds of globalised society and systematised knowledge.

> The Area Based Curriculum approach contests the dominant view of
> parents as simply the consumers or clients of education services, and
> also of parents as the only local stakeholders that should engage

> with schools. The involvement of a broader community in the creation and enactment of curriculum could anchor the curriculum more securely in the local area and community and allow that wider community to act in the interests of all children in a local area.
> (p. 18)

I do not minimise the difficulties in developing popular participation in the governance of education at the local level. It is not the case that at present there is a significant movement of popular demand for it, though the evidence is that people will participate when they believe it can make a difference (Smith, 2005). The Coalition Government's Localism Bill (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2010) contains no opportunities to democratise governance through enhancing community participation (Sullivan, 2011). There is the tension between participative and representative forms of democracy. There are problems of equality: of ensuring that those who gain least from the school system have the confidence, knowledge and skills to gain most from participation. It will not inevitably result in progressive policies, especially in the absence of a progressive policy framework at the national level. There will be those who see participative governance as an opportunity for gaining positional advantage in the school system, or for promoting business interests. But experiences of participation in local governance on the basis of collective popular self-organisation can be a practical pedagogic laboratory in which new social identities can be formed and a common popular and professional interest in democratic, egalitarian, emancipatory education can be constructed (Anyon, 2005; Hatcher & Jones, 2006). And the vision of a democratised local school system open to public as well as professional shaping of policy can inspire struggles today bringing together school staff and local communities to defend it against the attacks of the Coalition Government.

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