
A New Direction for Schools and Labour

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ABSTRACT The authors argue that it is time to get radical about the Left's vision for education and develop a direction that communities can really own. The Labour Party being out of government for the first time in 13 years gives us a chance to consider what education means to the Left, and allows us to be innovative in how the Party can approach education both now and in anticipation of an eventual return to government. The authors consider the interaction between policy and citizen action in education, highlighting the importance of both and their complementary nature. It is argued, following some of the values and reasoning of the 'Blue Labour' dialogue, that for schools to be both truly free and effective they need to be governed by alliances of parents and teachers and not by the state or the market. This requires a shift of trust on the part of the Left, and in particular a willingness to accept pluralism and diversity in education *contra* both the centralised prescriptions and target setting of the New Labour Government and its moves towards marketisation with the 'choice' agenda. In particular, against the consumerist approach to education, they envisage an onus on parental agency beyond selecting the school – on being trusted to work continuously in collaboration with other school stakeholders and inculcating a sense of citizenship in children in order that they should do the same.

Introduction

As 'New' and 'Blue' Labour thinking begin to mix, the 'Blue' principles of developing strong local relationships, connecting to local institutions, taking community action and recognising the limits of the State are desirable if we are to regain the trust, hope and excitement needed to see Labour succeed again. Articulations of 'Blue' Labour ideas often invoke friendly societies, mutuals and cooperatives, which are institutions that bring people together for political purposes.[1] Whilst these provide great models of organising society in positive ways, they are no longer connected to the majority of people's lives and day-to-day experiences. Schools, however, are a near universal element of public experience and are at the heart of our communities.

The focus on schools also allows us to develop thinking about the different roles for *community action* and new *policy* to effect change in our communities. As we move forward, *policy* alone isn't going to be enough to reconnect. Briefly, by *policy* we mean an intervention by some level of government that modifies the existing state of affairs or creates a new state of affairs. *Action*, on the other hand, is political building, organising, or campaigning whereby people come together in order to achieve a goal, which may or may not be a change of policy by a relevant organ of government.

Two points are necessary to set the context here.

1. Labour is not currently in government. This is an obvious point, but we think it is worth Labour taking this time to consider what is possible without control of the State.
2. The Coalition Government has, in regard to schools as institutions, a three-pronged policy approach: cut funding, establish free schools and 'upgrade' as many schools as possible to academies, starting with the highest achieving.

Whilst being in opposition is far from desirable for Labour supporters, together these two points offer an opportunity. Much of the current debate surrounding future directions for the Labour Party has been couched in terms of statist versus decentralised solutions to society's problems. Until May 2015 at the earliest, point 1 above rules out the Labour Party implementing statist policy options. This provides it with a moment to both develop policy in anticipation of a return to government, and perhaps more interestingly right now, to develop the Labour Party and its communities in action. Schools are a vital place to start.

Education, Education, Education ... But for What Purpose?

We first need to consider the fundamental purpose of public education and consider how Blue Labour values of reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity can inspire a renewed vision to develop policy for the school system and support educators and communities develop an institution which has increasingly been shaped by external forces.

When addressing the purpose of education recent curricular theorists have divided thinking into four categories: scholar/academic (knowledge for knowledge's sake), child-centred (whatever serves the unique interests of the individual child), social efficiency (a utilitarian approach that values the good of society as a whole) and social-reconstructionist (education as a tool of social justice). The direction of travel has seen recent Labour and Conservative governments largely focus on a narrow vision of neoliberal social efficiency. Education reform has looked to drive up standards using centralised tools of targets, monitoring (the Office for Standards in Education – Ofsted) and the design of teacher practice and curriculum content. Government has also looked to alter the system through the introduction of parent choice (market

competition) and the introduction of more independent state schools (academies). From this perspective, while efforts to ensure that poverty has not been an excuse for poor educational outcomes under New Labour are laudable, 'closing the achievement gap' has been more about ensuring that the nation can effectively compete, rather than about fundamentally achieving equality or social justice.[2] Meanwhile, because of the lack of public debate on these essential questions, most people conceive of education as a largely technocratic question, rather than a philosophical, moral or democratic one with which they can get involved.

Looking through a Blue Labour lens towards the 'Good Society', we prioritise the purpose of education as a tool of social justice, where schools and their communities (both within the building and outside it) work for the development of the common good. Not only is their intrinsic good in building schools up as democratic institutions capable of striving for the common good; there is also an instrumental good in making schools the arenas for democratic action in that it will build people – parents, teachers and children – as democratic citizens. Creating space for this kind of development is, as Marc Stears argues, essential for revitalising the democratic leadership of the Labour Party.[3] We can add that building children up as democratic citizens and leaders is vital for revitalising the future of the country.

With this approach we have the opportunity to rework and regain belief in a comprehensive system in which everyone is valued, and all abilities, interests and backgrounds are organised towards the raising up and education of all. No longer will it be about a frenetic competition to ensure the best for your child as a consumer within the marketplace of education, but a responsibility to all our children as citizens engaging with a common good comprehensive system. This, we believe, connects to the fundamental values of those who launched the Comprehensive Movement.

While some policies, such as an admissions legislation to prevent selection, will need to be set by central government, the routes to success in a particular locality or particular school need not be the same. Common good comprehensives need not be the one size fits all schools that their opponents have accused them of being, but will be able to adapt provision and the curriculum as students, parents and teachers decide what is relevant and meaningful for them and the priorities they and their broader community face. To achieve this, schools must be seen as a fundamentally democratic organisations where we learn to build relationships and trust with others and develop choices as citizens rather than consumers. This might see schools and communities develop innovative and new vocational routes to respond to the realities of globalisation, or work with local youth organisations to shape leisure and out-of-school support. As our recommendations for policy and action now suggest, the institution of the school is a vital one to develop our communities and a basis from which the Left can regain credibility and trust.

Policy

In terms of policy, we should look to develop a model of the school as an institution at the centre of neighbourhood life. Schools should bring together teachers, pupils, parents and local government in a constructive relationship focused on the successful education of children. Schools have huge potential to achieve this, because all the people in an area who have children automatically have a stake in a school, and are potentially active members of the school as an institution.

To a large extent, this already happens. Governing bodies in local authority (LA) controlled schools feature representation from all these groups, including pupils. However, if we want to affirm local democracy as both a creative force and as an intrinsic good, we must renew and extend these institutions. Creative local democracy in schools has the potential to allow collaboration and innovation. Some of the best ideas we have seen in schools, such as plans for vocational work experience in diverse industries, and education about the local area, have come from parents offering their own connections and professional expertise for the school to use. Furthermore, ensuring that parents are involved in their children's education certainly can (there can be negative effects too!) have positive effects.

New Labour's schools policy encouraged a 'compliance' culture. Targets had to be met, and standards adhered to. Schools were held accountable by a combination of parental choice and league tables of results.[4] As in other policy areas, New Labour was to a point successful with its combination of choice, compliance and decent funding. Now, though, we have the chance to consider how we can move beyond the pattern of school as provider, parent/pupil as consumer, public purse as funder.

League tables create a kind of accountability that Warwick Mansell refers to as 'hyper-accountability'. [5] If a school gets poor results, it runs the risk of parents choosing not to send their children to that school, so schools do everything they can to make sure they get a high percentage of children achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE. Through hard work, teaching to the test and a variety of increasingly creative methods, teachers succeed in getting as many children as possible to hit the 'magic 5' target. Now, it is vitally important for children to get good GCSEs and we would not suggest abandoning this standard. But we should question whether schools are truly being held accountable here. Britain now has the most tested school population in the developed world. In 2008 the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) criticised the United Kingdom for the way testing detracts from children's learning.

Accountability that values what is important to families has to involve some sort of relationship. To both improve outcomes for the young and place people at the heart of deciding what is best for their pupils and children, we have to move away from a compliance culture in education and towards a relational culture. This relational culture has to involve *conversations*, where one party is able to say 'I think it would be better if little Jonny did this ...' and the

other can say, 'OK, let's work together on that'. It is a simple strategy but is easily overlooked – and it takes time and effort. Crucially, and this illustrates both the tension between policy and action and the tendency we have to overlook action, no government can force parents to have face-to-face conversations with teachers about the progress of their children. So the last Labour Government devised ways of improving outcomes for children that do not rest on relationships. Whilst this was successful to a point, we missed the opportunity to create an education system that prioritises locally determined outcomes over uniform national standards. Although the Government cannot make parents and teachers take joint responsibility for children's education, it can make it easier for this to happen.

Policy ideas that flow from this principle might include a statutory role for both unions (teaching and other staff unions too) and Parent-Teacher Associations in the running of the school. In this way a school can become an institution of institutions that each have the capacity to develop both a voice for their constituency and relationships with the other groups involved in the school. A place for teachers (organised as unions, or otherwise) will ensure that their expertise and concerns are not trampled on by management, a practice that threatens to become an emergent trend in the Government's new academies. Having a role for organised parents on the governing body will allow for parents to hold management and teachers accountable for their performance in educating their children, and by entering into a relationship with the other groups, this accountability can be reciprocated. In this way, teachers can become democratic professionals who work with parents and children, as opposed to providers of a service that children consume.

There is important evidence for the beneficial effects of building relationships between parents and teachers. Dating as far back as Douglas's work in the 1960s, educational researchers have found that parental involvement in a child's education is an important determinant of that child's eventual attainment.[6] Such findings were integrated into Labour's 1997 White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, which sought to inform parents about the curriculum and encourage parent governors. More recently, a study of the effects of community organising initiatives on schools found that building relationships with parents led to better results as well as the capacity to improve not only the school but also housing, health services and wages in the local community – which in turn improved the school and the lives of young people in its care.[7]

A second policy idea is to legislate to ensure there is a mechanism for the school as a community of institutions to influence local government and possibly local business too. Local government's decisions will have an impact on the lives of the children and their families, giving the school, so long as it is internally democratic in the way described above, a mandate and a prerogative to have an input into local government decision making. Similarly, local business will go on to employ many of the children based at the school and its decisions too will affect the school as community. Again, school has a prerogative to have a voice here too.

The Coalition's Free Schools programme has something to recommend it in so far as it allows new schools to be established which could be the sorts of powerful community institutions described here. Academies, on the other hand, have often failed to become such institutions because they concentrate power and patronage in the hands of head teachers and governors appointed by the academy sponsor. Heads who are committed to principles of relationality, accountability, mutuality and reciprocity may well be able to use the freedom and government money that comes with academy status to achieve interesting gains (there are currently schools in Hackney pursuing this route). However, given the marketised nature of the school system and the pressure on heads this brings, the power associated with the institution is likely to be further concentrated in head teachers, who will make unilateral decisions in line with what they see as the school's interests and values, which have often been set with little involvement of the community.

Finally for policy, we must remain firmly committed to fully comprehensive schooling. Analysis of the Labour vote at the last general election has revealed a tension between Labour's traditional working-class vote and its increasingly dominant middle-class/professional vote. The best way to address this tension is to ensure that people from different class backgrounds can come together and build relationships to address their common interests. Where those interests diverge, it is even more important that people from different class backgrounds have an understanding of each other. Comprehensive schools, particularly ones structured along the lines we have sketched, hold the promise of bringing different sections of society together. This is easier said than done, but abandoning the comprehensive principle sends a signal that Labour will also abandon its historic project of building a coalition between the middle and working classes. Of course, to make this integration a realistic prospect a future Labour government would have to pursue a housing policy that prioritised the integration of communities.

It is surely the case that encouraging the building of schools as local institutions will increase pluralism in education. Different children in different parts of the country will have a different experience of school. There is a possible danger, in particular of ghettoisation, where middle-class areas coalesce around middle-class schools, and 'challenging' areas with their 'challenging' children produce 'sink' schools. This has happened in many cases already, and is another reason for Labour to advocate a hard line on enforcing the comprehensive principle. However, pluralism should not be feared – and we would not propose removing the five A*-C measure, or for that matter regular Ofsted inspections to ensure minimum standards of outcome, without prescribing minimum standards of provision.

This proposition cuts to the heart of another point of tension that the Blue Labour project seeks to resolve. Target-driven centralisation is one way of working towards equality, but at the cost of local freedom. Awarding measures of control over curriculum and governance to the people associated with a school runs the risk that they won't be very good, and their children will be

failed as a result. It is a risk we should be prepared to take for a simple reason: we should trust parents and teachers, and not solely the State, to educate children. As we have tried to argue, a school experience that is shaped by parents and teachers will be more rooted in a locality and therefore more successful at raising conscientious, active citizens. Furthermore, where children are failed by parents in difficulty, a target or league table will not help – they need their parents to be in a relationship with the school that is marked by communication, understanding and accountability. They need, furthermore, a school with the institutional capacity to work on the interests and needs that parents face in their lives and development. We must believe that schools can support the improvement of their local communities and parents' lives, and Heckman's work has evidentially shown how important healthy families are to successful schools and productive workers.[8]

We should not give up on the ideal of an equal entitlement to a good education for our children. Perhaps, though, this equal entitlement can be best delivered in a way that is rooted in the traditions and ethos of a distinctive time and place. And as well as the State playing a role in enforcing this equal entitlement, enforcement can take place within a context of citizens taking action to build relationships that allow the giving and receiving of help and accountability.

All of these policy ideas are empty without citizens taking action to make them work. Much of this vision and ethos can be encouraged by citizen action and without State intervention. Citizen action is a concept that was largely implicit or absent in New Labour policy making, and has been unfortunately caricatured by the 'Big Society'. It is to this idea of action that we now turn.

Action

In this article we have tried to show what a Blue Labour-inspired policy for schools might, in part, look like. Key to these ideas working, however, is an understanding of the necessary forms of action that must go alongside them. In order to maintain an institution as one capable of achieving its goals, people must be active and have an interest in being active within that institution. Anyone who has seen a social club, non-governmental organisation or local Labour branch dwindle and die knows this, and knows the fear of an empty room. Crucially, however, policy can never make people be active. A future Labour government can make it easier for people to be active within their child's school, but it cannot force them to turn up and be involved. Therefore, if Labour renewal is to embrace ideas of mutuality, reciprocity and the importance of relationships, it must also embrace the idea that political action is a crucial, permanent complement to political policy.

The New Labour project was built on an ideology that stressed the importance of successfully capturing the State and using it to enact policy change. It was excellent in doing this. Now, though, we need to appreciate that raising active citizens can be as important as capturing an active state. There are

three reasons why this is necessary. First, there is a limit to what state action can achieve because of the constraints of state funding. Second, there is an intrinsic good in active citizens having the capacity to determine together what happens in their lives. Third, as stated before, Labour is not in government so it may as well do what it can without the power of the State.

Participative democracy is something that the Labour Party needs to embrace. Marc Stears' response to Jonathan Rutherford in the recent e-book, *Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*, sends a powerful call to Labour to allow aspirations to be determined 'by real people in the context of their real lives'.^[9] When it comes to determining the education of children, this means democratic decision making by parents and teachers who are involved in a school. Not only is this a worthwhile goal in itself, it is also a goal that Labour can actively work towards whilst in opposition.

This can work at two levels. The key realisation here is that we do not need to wait to recapture the State in order to start acting and promoting a culture of action. In so doing, there is also the possibility that it can continue to influence policy at different levels despite not being in power.

First, Labour can organise and lobby at different levels to build the kind of schools as institutions we have described. This means establishing at the neighbourhood level alliances of people who represent different institutions associated with the school. Labour councillors can work with teaching union representatives and with parent governors to increase the involvement of parents in the school and to reform, where possible, how the school is run. Again, this happens to an extent in plenty of areas already.

Second, Labour can take action to not only affect policy outcomes but also to sustain people and institutions in response to policy. In the process of building the institution of the school, people will have to fight spending cuts where they can and other policy plans that they judge to be threatening to the community. Through taking action together the institution can build to a point where it can claim to legitimately represent the community of people associated with the school. As noted above, this gives the school a mandate to look outwards and work with (or against!) local government and business. It also raises the possibility of successful innovation within the school. As more voices are heard, and a habit of working together develops, people can suggest new ideas to try out. Accountability also develops with relationships, as parents are able to talk to teachers about the progress of their children outside of often formalised parents' evening encounters.

A great example of people understanding and working within the tension between policy and action is the Child First Authority in Baltimore (<http://www.childfirstauthority.org>). Child First is an organisation funded by the city in response to campaigning from the BUILD broad-based organisation. It works with around 17 schools across the city, with a mandate to increase the capacity of schools as institutions, to lobby to secure funding for schools and projects where necessary, and to organise schools and local congregations to provide programmes such as after-school clubs and summer schools. Child First

employs organisers trained by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the umbrella body for community organising in the USA, to knit together Baltimore's schools and the communities that surround them. Child First goes through the process of bringing together different stakeholders that surround young people. One-to-one meetings, house meetings and workshops build relationships between parents, teachers, community leaders and officials, prior to identifying the needs of a particular school and taking action to address these needs. Child First demonstrates that people can take action to influence a policy response. This is firmly within the experience of Labour supporters. However, Child First takes the next step of responding to policy (the creation of the Child First Authority with its institutional resources – such as organisers – and mandate) with action (the organisation of people to support their schools). The result is the capacity of people across the city to provide for their children, and the inculcation and the strengthening of a participative political culture.

Labour can learn from this example. We need to see the State and other policy-enacting bodies as enablers of action. And we need to see the Labour Party as active in trying to shape policy (by winning elections) and active in response to policy (campaigning, and organising to strengthen institutions). Schools provide an ideal example of how this could work. Imagine a city where schools bring together parents of different backgrounds with other institutions in the community, empowered by their relationships and a culture of action to not only defend their schools but to innovate, experiment and learn from each other. The Labour Party can and should take a lead in working for our schools both now and when they return to government.

Such activity harks back to the pre-1945 days of the Labour Party, where its members acted together to set up cooperatives, mutual societies and friendly societies for the good of the people, as well as campaigning and lobbying to protect themselves from the infringements of the Liberal/Tory State. This kind of activity is not lost to the Party and certainly not lost as far as education is concerned – hundreds of Labour councillors work hard to shape and defend schools under the Coalition. We must place a renewed emphasis on and recognition of this kind of action and those who do it.

Schools, then, can become the birth places of active citizens and the institutions which can more fully support the development of collective values, through connecting parents in a broader societal relationship. Education practice, policy and action then must be grasped by the Left if it is to rebuild the foundations of communities which underpin the movement it is aiming to become again and allow it to stand up from the bottom, rather than crumble from the top. If Labour is looking for somewhere to be reborn, our schools are vital places to start, to produce future leaders of a renewed Left who have the ability to create stronger communities, and who know how to put their values into action whether we be in control of the state or not.

Notes

- [1] See, for example, M. Glasman (2011) Labour as a Radical Tradition, in M. Glasman, J. Rutherford, M. Stears & S. White (Eds) *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*. <http://www.soundings.org.uk>
- [2] G. Whitty (2009) Blair's Education Legacy, in S. Ward & C. Eden (Eds) *Key Issues in Education Policy*. London: Sage.
- [3] M. Stears (2011) Democracy, Leadership and Organising, in M. Glasman et al (Eds), *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- [4] Whitty, 'Blair's Education Legacy'.
- [5] W. Mansell (2005) *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing*. London: Methuen.
- [6] J.W.B. Douglas (1964) *The Home and the School*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.
- [7] M. Warren (2005) Communities and Schools: a new view of urban education reform, *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 133-173.
- [8] See, for example, J.J. Heckman (n.d.) Policies to Foster Human Capital. http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/about/publications/working-papers/pdf/wp_00_28.pdf
- [9] M. Stears (2011) The Radical Potential of Conservatism, in M. Glasman et al (Eds), *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*.

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