FORUM

From Hollowed-Out Council to Educative Commune: imagining local authorities in a democratic public education

PETER MOSS

ABSTRACT This article argues the case for local authorities having an important role in a renewed democratic public education, adopting the term 'educative commune' to express an image of the local authority as a protagonist working with others to build a local educational project. It concludes by considering what conditions may benefit this development.

> Why is it that here in the United States we have such difficulty even imagining a different sort of society from the one whose dysfunctions and inequalities trouble us so? We appear to have lost the capacity to question the present, much less offer alternatives to it. Why is it so beyond us to conceive of a different set of arrangements to our common advantage? (Judt, 2009, p. 86)

The key players in the English education system have been recast: the autonomous parent and the autonomous school, overseen by a central governor, the Secretary of State, with more powers today than ever. The big loser in this recasting is the democratically elected local authority, the main political expression of local community, now marginalised to minor roles. For those who wish to reduce education to a private, marketised commodity, a matter of consumers choosing between competing businesses, regulated from afar by the powerful governor, the promised land is in sight, the market and private spheres triumphant. For those who believe that education is a common good in the public sphere, in which every citizen has an interest and for which every citizen is responsible, that democracy should be a fundamental value and practice

throughout the education system, and that an inclusive public education is of fundamental importance for local communities – then the promised land looks more like a dystopian nightmare. Worse, so repressed are we by the neoliberal dictatorship of no alternative, that we struggle (as the sadly missed Tony Judt said of the USA, but could have applied equally to his native England) to even imagine a different sort of society with a different set of arrangements.

I want to argue the case for local authorities once more having an important role in education; not education as we find it today, but in a renewed democratic public education. I do not argue they should be the only local player, but that they should be an important one. For whatever its failings and weaknesses, the local authority has a democratic mandate, giving it representative legitimacy and making it accountable to the electorate. In contrast to the current hollowed-out council, I adopt the term 'the educative commune', to express another image of the local authority, as a protagonist working with others in building a local educational project. As well as considering the role of this educative commune in a democratic public education, I also want to consider what conditions may benefit its development.

But first, I offer an example of what an 'educative commune' looks like in practice, taking the case of Reggio Emilia, a city of some 160,000 people in the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy, around 60 kilometres west of Bologna. Reggio Emilia is famous in the field of early childhood education, but less so among those whose main interests are in other fields of education.

Reggio Emilia: the case of an educative commune

In the 1960s, Reggio Emilia took part in a 'municipal school revolution', when a number of mainly left-wing local authorities in Northern Italy decided to take responsibility for the education of their young children, those under six years, a group long ignored by central government. Opening its first 'municipal school' in 1963, the commune of Reggio Emilia today has a network of 54 schools – for 3500 children from 1 to 6 – some managed directly by the commune, others by cooperatives under agreement with the commune. These schools have gained international recognition and acclaim and Reggio Emilia has become one of the most important experiences of early childhood education in the world.

What Reggio Emilia represents is an educative commune, a local authority that has initiated and sustained, over nearly 50 years, a local educational project with a distinct pedagogical identity. This project is first and foremost political. Political in the sense that the project grew out of resistance to a political regime: the fascist experience, said the Mayor of Reggio when the project began, 'had taught them that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to safeguard and communicate that lesson and nurture and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves' (Dahlberg, 2000, p. 8). And political in the sense that the project explicitly starts from political questions – 'not mere technical issues to be solved

by experts … [but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives' (Mouffe, 2007, n.p.).

The most fundamental political question for Reggio is 'what is your image of the child?' Their answer is the 'rich child', not materially rich but a child 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and children' (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10). This child is a protagonist from birth: born with 'hundred languages' – 'the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems' (Vecchi, 2010, p. 9) – and engaged from the start of life in the process of meaning making. This child, too, is a citizen, a subject of rights not needs.

From their answer to this political question, Reggio Emilia has built ideas about learning and knowledge. They have rejected what they call a 'small' pedagogy: learning as knowledge reproduction, where the answer to every question is already known, where outcomes are pre-defined, where education is about transmission. Instead they have evolved a pedagogy of relationships and listening, in which learning is understood to be

> a process of construction, in which each individual constructs for himself the reasons, the 'whys', the meanings of things, others, nature, events, reality and life. The learning process is certainly individual, but because the reasons, explanations, interpretations, and meanings of others are indispensable for our knowledge building, it is also a process of relations – a process of social construction. We thus consider knowledge to be a process of construction by the individual in relation with others, a true act of co-construction. The timing and styles of learning are individual, and cannot be standardized with those of others, but we need others in order to realize ourselves. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 125)

Working with the 'hundred languages', with which the 'rich child' is born, is an integral part of learning, hence the great importance attached to the visual arts in the education process. Knowledge is not a matter of linear progression, moving sequentially from one step to the next, but more like a *rhizome,* something which shoots in all directions with no beginning and no end, functioning by means of connections and difference. In this pedagogical context, key words are new and innovative, surprise and wonder. Metaphors used for the school capture its creative potential: forum, place of encounter, workshop, permanent laboratory.

This educational project is inscribed with values: solidarity, collaboration and interdependence; uncertainty and subjectivity; experimentation and research; dialogue and participatory democracy. Democracy can be seen in the management of schools, in the approach to pedagogy and evaluation, and in everyday practice and relationships. Participation does not mean simply 'the involvement of families in the life of the school'; first and foremost, it calls for the involvement of the children 'who are considered to be active constructors of

their own learning and producers of original points of view about the world'. Participation is based on

> the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, especially an educational project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts; and in our opinion, so too is democracy itself. (Cagliari et al, 2004, p. 29)

This rich, sustained and constantly evolving pedagogical work has not just happened. It has been enabled and supported by the city council of Reggio Emilia acting as an educative commune, creating a local educational project consisting not only of pedagogical ideas and values, but also effective organisation and ways of working – the latter, though, always at the service of the former; they never forget that behind every solution and every organisation, there is a choice of values and ethics. In this way, the schools have moved from one to two teachers per group, to promote dialogue and multiple perspectives. Schools have *ateliers* (workshops) and *atelieristas* (educators with a background in visual arts) to develop the role of the visual languages in learning; working with these languages, ateliers and atelieristas help connect the cognitive, expressive, rational and imaginative and bring an 'aesthetic dimension' to learning processes. Project work has a central role in learning. It is a practice inscribed with the values of democracy and uncertainty and enabling the co-construction of knowledge without a pre-determined end point:

> It is sensitive to the rhythms of communication and incorporates the significance and timing of children's investigation and research. The duration of a project can thus be short, medium, or long, continuous or discontinuous, with pauses, suspensions, and restarts. The statement of a hypothesis on how the project might proceed is valid only to the extent that it is seen precisely as a hypothesis and not as a 'must', as one of a thousand hypotheses on the direction that might be taken. Above all, making hypotheses is a way to increase the expectations, excitement, and the possibilities for being and interacting, for welcoming the unexpected as a fundamental resource ... [Project work] is a way of thinking, a strategy for creating relations and bringing in the element of chance, by which we mean 'the space of the others'; i.e. that undefined space of the self that is completed by the thoughts of others within the relational process. (Rinaldi, 2006, pp. 132-133)

The city fosters collaborative relationships between its schools and between the city and its schools. A key role is played by the commune's team of *pedagogistas*, experienced educators who act as pedagogical coordinators for the city's educational project, each working with a small number of municipal schools to

help educators deepen their understanding of learning processes and pedagogical work. Last, but not least, pedagogical documentation is a multipurpose and participatory tool of great importance for many tasks: planning, researching, professional development, evaluation.

Put simply, pedagogical documentation makes learning processes and educational practices visible by being documented in various ways (by means of notes, photographs, videos, recordings, children's artistic or other creations, etc.) so that they can be shared, discussed, reflected upon, interpreted and, if necessary, evaluated. It can and does involve everyone – children, teachers, auxiliary staff, families, administrators and other citizens – and gives 'the possibility to discuss and dialogue "everything with everyone" and to base these discussions on real, concrete things' (Hoyuelos, 2004, p. 7). It makes education and the school transparent and transforms a school into a place of democracy. Pedagogical documentation is an example of democratic practice at the heart of the educational project, with participants taking responsibility for education, not ceding it to outside experts or supposedly objective indicators.

One of the originators of pedagogical documentation, and indeed of Reggio's educational project, was Loris Malaguzzi (1920-94), head of the city's schools for 30 years. His influence is everywhere, even years after his death. He was a man of many interests – pedagogical, psychological, philosophical, cultural, scientific; he was a border crosser *par excellence*. He was a gifted administrator, but also deeply involved with educators and children and the everyday practice in schools; he was constantly working between theory, policy and practice. He pursued a 'pedagogy of transgression': 'The important thing for him was to question the most rigid truths that curb the possibility of thinking differently. This represents his beloved concept of the new, of innovation, as strangeness and surprise' (Hoyuelos, 2004, p. 6).

Despite Malaguzzi's towering presence, Reggio survived his untimely death in 1994. The educational project was taken forward by the local authority, the network of schools and the many people who subscribed wholeheartedly to the values, understandings and practices that constitute Reggio's educational project. Malaguzzi's loss showed that, far from being a one-man show, Reggio had become an educative commune.

There has, however, been one important organisational change in recent years. In 2003, the commune changed the way it manages its educational project and municipal schools. It established a new legal entity and agency – *Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'infanzia* – by which the city council confirmed its commitment to public management of its municipal schools, while giving the management increased autonomy and responsibility. The Istituzione is responsible for the direct management of municipal schools and for relations with other schools in the city, including the cooperatives with which the city has agreements, and church and state schools for 3-6 year olds. It has its own financial budget, €28 million, of which €21 million comes from the commune, and its own board of directors nominated by the mayor. Today Reggio Emilia remains an educative commune, but the city pursues its educational project

through an organisation that maintains public responsibility without being a department of the local authority.

I have not presented the example of Reggio Emilia as some blueprint that can be exported and copied anywhere, anytime. The significance of context, too often overlooked, makes that idea fatally flawed. But such examples do have value – indeed, we need to identify and document far more of them, past and present. For they are reminders that there are alternatives, that other ways of being and doing are possible, that centralised governments and local markets are not the only show in town. They are, too, a provocation to think, to imagine, to contest – in short, to open up for democratic deliberation about possibilities, from which can emerge new and different ideas and, equally important, hope. Last but not least, Reggio Emilia provides some clues as to the main design features of an educative commune – for sure, not the only ones and not to be deployed identically in every place; but a useful contribution to the process of renewing the role of local authorities, as educative communes in a democratic public education.

Designing the Educative Commune

As the example of Reggio Emilia shows, the local authority is a strong candidate to be the educative commune, either acting directly or acting at arm's length through an organisation like the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'infanzia. The local authority is a democratically-elected and accountable body, representing all citizens. If, for whatever reason, it is not to play the role of the 'educative commune', then we need to create another such body – a 'local educational guardian' to use Tim Brighouse's phrase – that can do so.

What, then, might be the main design features of the educative commune in a democratic public education? First and foremost, the 'educative commune', representing and accountable to its citizenry, proclaims the responsibility for and the interest in education of all its citizens, not just those with children. It is an essential part of the de-privatisation process that insists on education belonging to the public sphere.

The educative commune acts as an advocate, mediator and interpreter between the very local school and the distant nation-state. Where the nation-state is highly centralised, then this is difficult; the local authority can be reduced, as now, to an agent of central government power, to be tossed aside when central government no longer feels the need for it. But in a more decentralised democracy, one of the conditions I will return to, then the 'educative commune' can play this vital and creative role of intermediary. National directions, such as curricula, can allow scope for local interpretation, as well as local supplementation, and the educative commune can coordinate local responses. Equally important, the educative commune can represent local views and experiences to the centre, which recognises that, by itself, it cannot hope to understand the complexity and diverse contexts of its many parts.

The educative commune plays a direct, active role in a local and democratic public education: it is one of the main protagonists. Central to this role, it can take the lead in creating and implementing a local educational project: 'a shared and democratic exploration of the meaning and practice of education and the potential of the school … [providing] an educational context and ethos, as well as a forum for exchange, confrontation, dialogue and learning between schools' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 125). Such projects, exemplified by Reggio Emilia, can also be seen as educative communes initiating what Roberto Unger terms 'democratic experimentalism':

> The provision of public services must be an innovative collective practice … It can only happen through the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below. Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain. (Unger, 1995, pp. 179, 182)

The educative commune creates an infrastructure for supporting the implementation and evaluation of the local educational project. An important component of such infrastructure is teams of *pedagogistas*, each working with a few schools, offering educators opportunities for exchange, reflection and discussion, introducing schools to new thinking and practices, facilitating contact between commune, schools and local communities. The importance of such infrastructure, and more generally of strong, value-led organisation for sustaining innovative work, cannot be exaggerated.

There will be many other design features, but three more will suffice for now. The educative commune has a duty to develop a *democratic* public education; it has to go beyond the rhetoric of democracy to engage actively with the hard work of implementation. The educative commune is politically accountable for the education provided by schools in its community, as well as being a public body to which schools themselves are accountable. And the educative commune manages certain administrative tasks in a democratic and transparent way, such as planning, admissions and data collection.

The educative commune may be a leading player in a local, democratic and public education educational project. But it is not the only player. Richard Hatcher (forthcoming 2012), for instance, proposes Local Education Forums, open to all with an interest in education, and these could play an important role in creating, implementing and evaluating local educational projects, offering additional spaces for participatory democracy and helping better connect local authority, communities and schools. The educative commune would take responsibility for creating and supporting this instance of 'mass deliberation in the public realm … an absolutely crucial process in a democratic and open society' (Power Inquiry, 2006, p. 11).

Such bodies could be further supplemented by other opportunities for encounter between citizens, for example Summer Schools (still found today in Barcelona and other towns in Spain) or the 'Pedagogical Februaries' that took place for some years in Bologna in the 1960s, which were open seminars

organised by educational experts but aimed at involving all members of civil society.

> The purpose of these initiatives – that took place every year in February – was to bring the debate on education [to] the centre of society ... The idea underpinning [these initiatives] was that education should be considered an issue concerning the whole society and, as such, it needs to be debated within meetings in public spaces. (Lazzari, 2011, pp. 53-54)

Not an Easy Task

Imagining the educative commune is a necessary step on the road to transformation, difficult enough when, as Tony Judt observes, our imaginations are so dulled. But to speak the desirable, to set out strong but abstract principles, is not enough; we also need, as Erik Olin Wright reminds us, to be concerned with viability and achievability. Viability calls for 'systemic theoretical models' of how educative communes would work, and 'empirical studies of cases, both historical and contemporary, where at least some aspects of [this] proposal have been tried', while achievability 'asks of proposals for social change that have passed the test of desirability and viability, what it would take to actually implement them' (Wright, 2007, p. 27).

Space and the limits of my own thinking preclude going far into achievability in this short article. A starting point is to define some conditions that might enable this ambitious exercise in social change. These include:

- Substantial decentralisation from central to local government, moving away from the local authority as agent of central power and towards being an important protagonist in a democratic society, with greater powers to initiate, interpret, implement, and raise revenue.
- The local authority cannot be the only local body to express public interest in education. It is a representative, not a participatory, body and, especially given the large size of most English local authorities, distant from individual schools and neighbourhoods. Intermediate and more participatory bodies may need to be introduced to 'enable communities to be actively engaged in shaping education in their area' (Dyson et al, 2010, p. 11), such as Richard Hatcher's proposal for Neighbourhood Education Forums, to complement the work of the Local Education Forum.
- All levels participating in education – national, local authority, neighbourhood and school – should share a commitment to certain common values and goals: a genuinely public education, democracy, collaboration and solidarity, experimentation. Such consensus may be hard to achieve all the time. But with greater decentralisation, some alignment of the relevant bodies within a local authority may be sufficient to enable a common educational project to be created and put into movement.

- Educative communes should, as in Reggio Emilia, be directly involved in providing schools – not all, but a substantial number. Education is a political and ethical practice, it is complex and contested, it requires asking critical questions and making choices between alternatives on the basis of answers to these questions: unlike waste management or street cleaning, it cannot be precisely specified and contracted out for others to do. The educative commune needs to be directly involved, getting its hands dirty in the messiness of everyday practice, confronting the realities of school life, working between policies, theories, practices and organisation. This also means rethinking the roles of politicians and administrators, exploring ways to engage them in practice, in participatory evaluation, and in dialogue with teachers, parents and children.

There May Be Troubles Ahead

Even with these and other conditions in place, there are many problems in the way of creating the educative commune. Richard Hatcher (forthcoming 2012) sets out some of them in his discussion of developing participative institutions in the school system:

- Resistance by some local councils and politicians to independent popular participation.
- The possibility of insufficient popular interest to sustain participative governance bodies (to which might be added, to sustain democratic participation in all regards).
- The danger that participation will be disproportionately taken advantage of by middle-class citizens and professionals, reproducing the class bias in the system.
- The undermining of collaboration arising from self-interest among teachers (for their own schools) and parents (for their own children).
- The possibility that participative democracy at local levels – from school to local authority – may block rather than accelerate movement towards more progressive public education.

None of these can be easily dismissed, though as Hatcher shows, there are some reasons for thinking they may not be insuperable.

Then not all local authorities will want to become, or will be capable of becoming, 'educative communes'. This is something that cannot be legislated for from above. Another tack is needed. Radical reform is more likely to happen if those who desire transformative change and are willing to work for it are given their head and supported. Others should not be neglected, but they are perhaps more likely to move as and when they see the results of those who have already embarked on change – and even then, not all will choose to do so. If the last 30 years of educational reform has been the story of centralised initiatives, with Whitehall pulling all the strings, a new era of radical reform should look much more to 'the organisation of a collective experimental

practice from below', a strategy for change that adopts 'a working faith in the possibilities of human nature … [and] faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgement and action if proper conditions are furnished' (Dewey, 1939).

The educative commune is a hope and a possibility; it cannot be guaranteed. It is part of the struggle to regain our capacity to question the present, to offer alternatives to it, to imagine a better sort of society. It is, to end with the words of Michael Sandel, creating a democracy that is

> about more than fixing and tweaking and nudging incentives to make markets work better [and] about much more than maximising GDP, or satisfying consumer preferences. It's also about seeking distributive justice; promoting the health of democratic institutions; and cultivating the solidarity, and sense of community that democracy requires. Market-mimicking governance – at its best – can satisfy us as consumers. But it can do nothing to make us democratic citizens. (Sandel, 2009, p. 4)

References

Cagliari, P., Barozzi, A. & Giudici, C. (2004) Thoughts, Theories and Experiences for an Educational Project with Participation, *Children in Europe*, 6, 28-31.

Dahlberg, G. (2000) Everything is a Beginning and Everything is Dangerous: some reflections on the Reggio Emilia experience, in H. Penn (Ed.) *Early Childhood Services: theory, policy and practice*, pp. 175-183. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Dewey, J. (1939) Creative Democracy: the task before us. Address given at a dinner in honour of John Dewey, New York, 20 October.

Dyson, A., Goldrick, S., Jones, L. & Kerr, K. (2010) *Equity in Education: creating a fairer education system*. Manchester: Centre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester

Fielding, M. & Moss, P. (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*. London: Routledge.

Hatcher, R. (forthcoming 2012) Democracy and Participation in the Governance of Local School Systems, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44(1).

Hoyuelos, A. (2004) A Pedagogy of Transgression, *Children in Europe,* 6, 6-7.

Judt, T. (2009) *Ill Fares the Land: a treatise on our present discontents*. London: Allen Lane.

Lazzari, A. (2011) Reconceptualising Professional Development in Early Childhood Education. PhD thesis, University of Bologna.

Malaguzzi, L. (1993) For an Education Based on Relationships, *Young Children*, 11/93, 9-13.

Mouffe, C. (2007) Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces, *Art and Research*, 1(2), Summer.

Power Inquiry (2006) *The Report of Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy.* London: The Power Inquiry.

Rinaldi, C. (2006) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia.* London: Routledge.

Sandel, M. (2009) A New Politics of the Common Good. Lecture 4, BBC Reith Lectures, 30 June.

Vecchi, V. (2010) *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia.* London: Routledge.

Wright, E.O. (2007) Guidelines for Envisioning Real Utopias, *Soundings,* 36 (Summer), 26-39.

PETER MOSS is Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom. *Correspondence*: peter.moss@ioe.ac.uk