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## Rights-Based Education: towards a local democratic project

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**ABSTRACT** This article offers a dialogic engagement with Fielding & Moss's *Radical Education and the Common School* (2011). First, the author puts forward a critical and reflective narrative on the process in the London Borough of Waltham Forest to create a strategic children and young people plan, which she cautiously proposes is an attempt to define a local democratic project – rights-based education. She then goes on to explore whether a local authority and a community or 'commonwealth' of schools can act together – possibly in radical collegiality - to further democratic education locally.

Fielding & Moss (2011, pp. 124-125) put forward three main roles for local authorities:

1. participate in the democratic self-government of common schools;
  2. define a local cultural project of education for their community;
- and
3. engage with schools in the implementation of a local educational project, developed within the framework of a national policy for radical education and the common school.

Fielding & Moss argue that strategy does matter. I think I would claim that our strategy, 'Your Rights, Your Future' ([www.walthamforest.gov.uk/cypp-2010-13-revised.pdf](http://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/cypp-2010-13-revised.pdf)), represents a first step towards democratic experimentalism. It attempts to change understandings of interests, ideas and identities – for example, the idea that our children are rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent, that they are citizens in their own right (rather than fledgling citizens), and that some rights are inalienable rather than attached to rules and responsibilities.

It is perhaps in the process of strategic engagement that I would claim most for our plan's democratic experimentalism. In order to connect to the community of local actors – by whom I mean children, parents, grandparents,

members of the wider family and community, heads, teachers, voluntary sector partners – we hosted what we referred to as a ‘rights supper’. Using a methodology called ‘open space technology’ we aimed to create the kind of meeting place that Fielding & Moss refer to as ‘a place of encounter for all parts of the education system where co-constructive learning can take place through a pedagogy of relationships and listening’ (p. 16). We wanted to co-create our strategy as and in a site of democratic fellowship – hence the concept of eating supper together while talking about what is important to all of us.

Open space technology starts with a broad, open invitation that articulates the purpose of the meeting – we placed an invitation in the local newspaper for anyone interested in children’s rights to come and have supper and talk about it. A distinguishing feature of the approach is its initial lack of agenda – the participants create the agenda themselves. Anyone can choose, if they wish, to host a conversation about an aspect of children’s rights that they feel passionate about. Each host then takes responsibility for naming the issue, posting it on the bulletin board and allocating a space and time to meet. Notes of the conversations are then compiled into a proceedings document, a bit like the pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia which is used as a multipurpose and participatory tool for planning, researching, professional development and evaluation (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 7). Throughout the process, the facilitator is described as being fully present and totally invisible, holding a space for participants to self-organise, rather than managing or directing the conversations. Our collective knowledge and understanding of rights was ‘created through relationships, theory building, listening and making connections’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 26) together.

Open space technology may be seen as an expression of democratic fellowship – it gives expression to some of the core concepts that Fielding & Moss explore (pp. 73-81). It is certainly dialogic in approach and has a democratic vitality in both its ends and its means. It involves a culture of genuine openness, provisionality and the willingness to be surprised. There is some role defiance and role jumbling in that traditional binary distinctions between children and adults, officers and residents, politicians and people, expert and amateur are eroded. It builds personal and communal narrative.

We continued the process of strategic engagement and co-creation through the development of the plan, with young advisors working with us to ensure that the plan was written in plain language – our ambition was that it could be read by a young person in their first year of secondary school.

In terms of critical reflection, I am not sure that I would claim our plan is prefigurative. A fundamental question for me is whether we did enough to address and challenge the basic arrangements of our society – not just its surface features and relational conventions. I do not think our plan puts forward profound change. It does demonstrate, I think, positional restlessness in that it pursues an inclusive common good, but we could and perhaps should have gone further in exploring new organisational forms of education, curriculum and learning.

I want to say a word about values – and the concept of children’s trusts. The previous government twice attempted, I think clumsily, to enact the concept of children’s trusts in legislation. In so doing, local authorities got caught up in a legal and technical debate about what a Trust meant. But trust is not a legal and technical matter – it is first of all a relational principle and underlying value. So in Waltham Forest, we decided to reclaim the word ‘trust’ and to consider what it would mean if we defined our children’s trust as holding trust with children. The introduction to our children and young people plan quotes Kofi Annan:

There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they grow up in peace. (State of the World’s Children, 2000, p. 4)

We wanted to reclaim trust as a value that would constitute the way we acted locally – and we believe that trust is most likely to come about when we as a community of actors (parents, extended family, wider community, professionals) practise building trust in our everyday relationships.

So, in my view, it matters not at all that the current government intends to revoke children’s trust legislation. In Waltham Forest, we will continue to act in a way that holds trust with children. And we will invite all adults in a child’s life to act as duty bearers to protect, promote and respect the rights of children and to support their flourishing as human beings in community. Perhaps this demonstrates that values and ethics transcend any particular government’s policy and therefore can and should be a starting point for elected local authorities in defining education as a democratic project and community responsibility. I give you this reflective narrative because, as Fielding & Moss argue, ‘our individual stories are not minor organisational footnotes to a more substantial collective narrative – rather they carry with them the weight and texture of institutional legitimacy that weaves its way through the fabric of social and political change’ (2011, p. 147).

The project of developing our children and young people plan was a starting point for a different relationship between the local authority and its schools in Waltham Forest. Following statutory intervention contracts and outsourced providers, our plan was the beginning of a new relationship. In acting together to develop our concept of rights respecting education, there is the potential for a deeper, more radical collegiality.

We are consciously aiming to avoid the discourse of despair and the ‘dictatorship of no alternatives’ (Fielding & Moss, quoting Unger, 2011, p. 1) – we do not want to fall into a despairing of the current government’s policy of academies, a two-tier system of education and market-driven educational consumerism. It is the case that three of our primary schools have converted to new-style academies – and more may follow. It is not the case that there is no alternative but to exclude them or to bemoan the demise of community schools.

As a local authority, our response to this defines us – we will continue to pursue an inclusive common good and foster collaborative relationships between our schools and between the local authority and our schools. We will continue to discuss how we might act together and what expression this action should take whatever form of governance our separate institutions have.

As we ask our schools to practise ‘a pedagogy of relationships and listening’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 6), I believe as a local authority, we need to ensure that what we do next is the outcome of a process of co-construction, built on fostering cooperation and solidarity between and among our children’s centres, schools and colleges. In this, I believe that as a local authority, we start to approximate Dewey’s democracy – a faith in the capacity of our children’s centres, schools and colleges for intelligent judgement and action – even if I or local politicians do not personally agree on all occasions with those judgements or actions. It is the role of the local authority to furnish the proper conditions for mutual, respectful dialogue and real listening and to create a mode of associated practice embedded in the culture and relationships between and among our educational organisations.

Fielding & Moss propose that ‘human flourishing is relational and dynamic, and best nurtured through the daily realisation of mutual respect, which constitutes the living reality of an inclusive and caring community’ (2011, p. 11) – so too is organisation flourishing. In this, as in the development of our rights-based children and young people plan, we put into practice a belief that ‘community is a way of being, not a thing’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 51).

## References

- Annan, K. (2000) Introduction, *State of the World’s Children*. Paris: Unicef.  
<http://www.unicef.org/sowc00/>
- Fielding, M. & Moss, P. (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative*. London: Routledge.

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