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## Back to Basics: repoliticising education

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**ABSTRACT** This article is about the ‘who’ of policy rather than the ‘what’. It is a plea for debate and discussion about the purposes of education. It is an argument for replacing technocratic solutions with democratic ones. It is about possibility rather than necessity.

My argument here is very simple. It is time to get *back to basics* – to think seriously about what the purpose of education is, what it means to be educated, what schools are for, and concomitantly and crucially, who should decide these things. Such a profound rethinking needs to move beyond the views of ‘experts’ and policy entrepreneurs and those with business interests in education, to hear what parents, students and teachers have to say about what they think education should be for – ‘about what education might be, rather than what it has become’.[1] To do this, we need to establish a whole variety of forums and other opportunities to speak, in which all speakers are taken seriously and their views collated – town hall meetings, school study circles, classroom moots; the social media also offer various models and possibilities for debate and discussion which could be explored. This would mean turning away from the current prevalence of technocratic ‘solutions’ for educational problems and towards the recognition that above all education is a political and democratic issue – and that the first task is to decide what the problems are.

We need to question the ‘necessarian logic’ which has dominated New Labour and Coalition education policy and that of the European Union, World Bank, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and UNESCO, articulated through their many and repetitive ‘persuasive texts’ [2] that articulate the subordination of ‘social policy to the demands of labour market flexibility and/or employability and the perceived imperatives of structural or systemic competitiveness’.[3] Or at least we have to create spaces in which it is possible for parents, teachers, students, communities, employers, social movements, trade unions and policy makers to reflect on, think and speak about whether this is what they want from education. Currently, the

'necessarian' policy default position trumps all other possible versions of what education might be for. It indirectly but very effectively constructs what it means to be educated and what it means to teach and learn, as though those things did not have to be thought about in their own right.

For the most part the politics of education, especially around the time of elections, is all about the *what of education* – what kind of schools, what kind of exams, what kind of curriculum, what level of funding – rather than, what kind of education. Here I want to argue that the 2015 election needs to refocus on two things – the *why* of education and the *how* of education. We need to revisit the question of what education is for, and related to that, address how we should decide these things, or to put it another way, who should decide.

Over the past 25 years in English education one of the changes – slow, incremental but profound – has been a reallocation of authority in education. Some actors, like teachers and local authorities, have had their authority diminished, while others, like philanthropists, secretaries of state, head teachers, and the technocrats of school leadership, have had theirs expanded. This expansion has been at the same time both political and *depoliticising*. It has positioned education as the product of technocratic solutions, 'effective' interventions and the sum of 'what works', all to be selected on the basis of 'evidence' and 'value for money' by teachers who are discouraged from reflecting constructively about what they do. This has displaced values and erased the essential and healthy political contestation over different versions of what it means to be educated. Democratic engagement and collaborative forms of politics have come to be seen as antithetical to growth agendas and a brake on the modernisation of education service delivery. We have seen a dramatic but almost unacknowledged shift from 'input legitimacy' (values and purposes) to 'output legitimacy' (standards and performance) – the latter represented almost exclusively in terms of improvements in examination and test performance.

What I am suggesting would involve other kinds of rethinking of education. It would mean reconnecting education with the lives, hopes and aspirations of children and parents, not through choice and competition but through participation, debate and educative engagement of schools with their communities. It would mean reconnecting education to democracy. Put simply, 'we should recognize the centrality of education to larger projects of democracy and community building'.<sup>[4]</sup> Among other things, schools should have a responsibility to develop the capabilities of parents, students, teachers and other local stakeholders to participate, to discuss, to challenge and critique, to contribute to the development of 'high energy democracy' <sup>[5]</sup> in ways that draw upon 'narratives of human possibility'. Students of all ages should be involved in discussing the *what* and *how* and *why* of learning; they should learn high-level academic concepts in familiar and interesting contexts; be engaged in problem solving; and work towards meaningful and motivating products, presentations and performances.<sup>[6]</sup>

All of this has to be part of a broader programme of social renewal in which schools are given the grand challenge of civic responsibility rather than

the narrow and stultifying task of driving up examination and test scores in the service of local and international league tables. Schools should become sites of what Fielding and Moss call 'prefigurative practice'. [7] That is, schools should be about what is possible rather than what is necessary.

### Notes

- [1] F. Coffield & B. Williamson (2011) *From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery*, p. 60. London: IOE Press.
- [2] R. Edwards & K. Nicoll (2001) Researching the Rhetoric of Lifelong Learning, *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(2), 103-112.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930010025310>
- [3] B. Jessop (2001) What Follows Fordism? On the Periodization of Capitalism and its Regulation, in R. Albritton, M. Itoh, R. Westra & A. Zuege. (Eds) *Phases of Capitalist Development: booms, crises and globalisations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- [4] N. de Lissovoy (2011) Pedagogy in Common: democratic education in a global era, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43(10), 1119-1134.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2009.00630.x>
- [5] R.M. Unger (1994) *Democracy Realized*. London: Verso.
- [6] J. Smyth & T. Wrigley (2013) *Living on the Edge: re-thinking poverty, class and schooling*, p. 304. New York: Peter Lang.
- [7] M. Fielding & P. Moss (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*. London: Routledge.

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