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Productive Pedagogies: narrowing the gap between schools and communities?

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ABSTRACT There is little sign that current attempts to close the 'attainment gap' are working. This article argues for a different approach to addressing the 'gap', based on a community asset approach. The authors describe ongoing work on community curriculum making in North-East England, in which schools undertake projects using community resources. The approach argues that young people should 'connect' with the world beyond the school fence: go places, meet people and do and make things. Many of the projects, despite successes, have been more problematic than expected, reflected in many logistical, communication and cultural challenges as well as the fact that teachers in the United Kingdom, and particularly in England, are no longer significant agents of curriculum development. These projects are analysed in terms of 'boundary crossing' in which all parties, including students, have to adapt and engage in 'horizontal learning' as they move between communities. The article discusses the critical importance of brokerage both within the school and the community partner, which permits translation and transformation of respective practices.

Introduction: only connect

There is widespread concern in England about the 'gap' between the attainment of disadvantaged students and their peers. The prevailing policy response has been to focus on educational interventions, to set targets and to hold schools more accountable for outcomes. The pattern of effects on attainment is complex (Strand, 2010), but it has been far from universally successful and the resultant excessive exam orientation has distorted the purposes of schooling (Berliner, 2011). Fielding, as early as 1999 in England, observed 'students expressing doubts about the genuineness of their school's interest in their progress and well-being as persons, as distinct from their contribution to their school's league table position' (p. 286). In the USA there is also strong critique of introverted school improvement models. Based on experience of the Ohio Community

Collaboration Model for School Improvement (OCCMSI), Anderson-Butcher and colleagues (2008, p. 161) argue that:

> This walled-in improvement planning reflects traditional thinking about schools as stand-alone institutions focused exclusively on young people's learning and academic achievement, and also reinforces the idea that educators are the school improvement experts.

The failure to look beyond the school gates because of the relentless focus on test metrics can lead to an engagement problem, as many students disengage from school. This can be manifested in a lack of motivation and connection to school, but equally can lead to absence from school. Disengagement is troubling as it can be linked to alienation from education, leading to employment problems and risky behaviours (Sodha & Guglielmi, 2009). Lawson and Lawson (2013, p. 433) argue that engagement is the:

> conceptual glue that connects student agency (including students' prior knowledge, experience, and interest at school, home and in the community) and its ecological influences (peers, family and community) to the organisational structures and cultures of school.

In other words engagement connects the student's learning in school to their life outside school. Disengagement suggests that something has become unhinged between learning and their lived world.

Connectedness is a key principle in promoting engagement, as it is in such programmes as Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI) and Forest Schools. It is pivotal in a number of contexts in the USA; for example, Place Based Education, which sees teachers, students and community members undertaking collaborative investigations into local issues and seeking to develop a sense of place and belonging (Elder, 1998; Sobel, 2004). These approaches are examples of a problem-centred model of curriculum development (McKernan, 2008). Goodson (2008, p. 134) argues that such curricula:

> Will engage with life missions, passions and purposes which people articulate in their lives. Now that would truly be a curriculum for empowerment. Moving from authoritative prescription and primary learning to narrative empowerment and tertiary learning would transform our educational institutions and make them live out their early promise to help in changing their students and social future.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) provides important evidence about school engagement through the description of the multi-stranded relationships between students and teachers when the former identify with adult role models based on teachers who fill multiple roles in the school and community, such as in sports and the arts. Ungar's (2011) Social Ecological Theory predicts that engagement in any sphere leads to engagement in other spheres, without which there can be a downward trajectory which interweaves loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy and

a lack of attachment to school. Engagement should therefore be a goal of the curriculum.

The discussion that forms the basis of this article is informed by data collected from three community curriculum projects undertaken by the authors (Skype Seniors, Co-Curate North East and Broomley Bees), plus our experiences of working with various primary and secondary schools focused on Community Curriculum Making (CCM). Further detail about these projects will appear as appropriate in the body of the article.

Community Curriculum Making

The roots of this concept are somewhat eclectic. John Locke (1690/1964) and John Dewey (1938) are influential figures through their arguments about the importance of experience and reflection in learning. John Locke valued the experience of play, engaging with children's curiosity and interests, and rejected the common practice of rote learning, while Dewey thought that an essential part of teacher preparation was getting to know the community around the school. His rationale for this was a belief in the need for the development of a progressive, alternative education that would push against the 'undesirable split' that was occurring between the experience gained 'in more direct associations and what is acquired in school' (1916/1944, p. 9). Thus, both argue for a freedom to learn that embraces experience and learning beyond the formal curriculum.

In the United Kingdom the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) has pioneered work on Area Based Curriculum which sought to develop sustained partnerships between schools and organisations in localities in Manchester and Peterborough (Thomas, 2012). Important principles, such as project tuning and critique, have come from US schools (High Tech High and Expeditionary Schools) which base their curriculum around projects.[1] Additional arguments for a community-focused element to curriculum development emanate from the 'Funds of Knowledge' (Moll et al, 1992; Gonzales et al, 2005) available beyond the school boundaries. This concept was developed to help overcome the seemingly impermeable barriers between subject-based curriculum knowledge and the expertise and practices of minority communities in the USA, particularly those from Latin America. With mass migration impacting on many European countries, there are many places with a mosaic of migrant communities with a pool of varied knowledge and experience that is a latent resource for schools. A theoretical rationale for such a complex assemblage will inevitably also be complex, but it would centre on the development of social capital, self-efficacy, informed aspiration and identity. Emergent theories concerning the efficacy of CCM would argue that students are meeting people who inform their aspirations, they are learning to cross boundaries and so are entering contexts where they can develop new aspects of identity. It is an experiential approach to confronting disadvantage. In essence, young people are getting the chance to go places, meet people, experience some more of the world and make and do

things. Addressing social justice requires valuing the cultural capital possessed by disadvantaged communities, in order that the boundaries between formal and informal learning and different learning contexts (classroom and school) become more permeable.

Projects developed through CCM would ideally have the following characteristics:

- Are driven by a question or curiosity, where possible emanating from the students;
- Make use of community resources where relevant and/or possible;
- Result in a product as the concrete (or abstract) outcome of the work;
- Have a client or audience for the work, sometimes a public audience;
- Ensure students take as much responsibility as possible, including the reviewing of drafts;
- Acknowledge soft skill outcomes and boundary-crossing achievements.

These characteristics align with the work by Lingard (2007) in Queensland in identifying productive pedagogies which, amongst other things, highlight connection to the world outside the classroom, the valuing of difference and intellectual rigour. There follows a particular example to provide flesh to this skeleton.

Broomley Bees

One of the stand-out projects drawing upon community assets in North-East England is the Broomley Bee Project undertaken by a semi-rural primary school (children aged 4-7 years) in Northumberland. The local community includes a number of keen beekeepers, one of whom had a child at the school. The beekeepers had previously approached the school about introducing the children to beekeeping: beekeepers are often passionate about the importance of bees to pollination and food production, and bees are frequently in the news. The school had been a little wary, not least because of concerns about health and safety. There followed a chance encounter between a beekeeping parent and another mother who was both an Ofsted [2] inspector and very curious about what Project Based Learning (PBL) could offer pupils in a performative system. It transpired that the Year 4 teacher (for children aged 9 years) was keen to extend his teaching repertoire, being conscious that his style was generally driven by subject progress targets. This three-way partnership developed rapidly with some key milestones:

- The Ofsted inspector parent reassured the head teacher that there was nothing inherently problematic about PBL; indeed it could address a number of school priorities;
- There was a joint planning session using Project Tuning (Patton & Robin, 2012) involving the two parents, the Year 4 class teacher and two university staff (one a scientist and the other an educational researcher). This had the effect of stimulating the imaginations of the core team of three;

- The project brief focused on how best to establish a hay meadow suitable for bees and other pollinators;
- One of the parents offered a patch of her lawn for the pupils to experiment with methods of establishing flowering plants typical of hay meadows;
- The two parents started contacting other parents, community members and contacts who might be able to contribute, including a journalist, a soil scientist, a plant breeder and a photographer.

The project concluded with four pupil groups presenting on four aspects of their work and learning in the garden to a variety of local community members, some with expert knowledge. The salient learning outcomes for the pupils were extremely varied, as is often the case in projects and enquiries, from soil analysis techniques to honey bee ecology, the effects of neonicotinoids on bees, plant identification, visual representation of data, sophisticated insights into working with others and how to work with adults.

Boundary Crossing

Anna Sfard (1998) refers to two metaphors of learning, participation and acquisition. Acquisition denotes contexts in which there is a fixed body of knowledge to be learned through predominantly traditional methods, while participation refers to the centrality of learning from experience in learning communities through a form of apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Akkerman and van Eijck (2013), however, regard both these modes as vertical learning, and instead argue that many people, including students, have to adjust and adapt to moving between contexts or communities, as experienced in CCM. This requires what they term horizontal learning or boundary crossing. A boundary reflects marked differences in context 'leading to discontinuity in action or interaction' – in simple terms this means places where the norms of behaviour and culture are very different. Boundary crossing originally referred to the way professionals 'enter onto territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore unqualified' (Suchman, 1994, p. 25) and 'face the challenge of negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid situations' (Engestrom et al, 1995, p. 319). The description of unfamiliar territory and combining ingredients is very appropriate to CCM and applies both to teachers, community partners, who rarely appreciate the tides and currents of school life and students, who are often institutionalised by school. Horizontal learning stands in contrast to vertical learning, which is usually characteristic of schools, whereby young people stay in subject classrooms and progress through the well-defined steps of learning particular subjects.

For pupils there is a real challenge in learning to communicate and work with adults other than teachers. It is different from working with teachers. The community partners do not have to be there and if the students are unresponsive, they can walk away, so the basis of the relationship is different.

The different quality of relationship and learning is evident in this extract of an interview with three Year 9 students (young people aged 14 years) who have been working, via Skype, with a woman involved in the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, as part of a history project on the role of women in history:

> Student 1 (female): she made Dee change her mind about women's rights ... because Dee thought that women's rights were equal, didn't you?
>
> Student 2 (Dee – name changed) ... and I totally changed my opinions ... before I thought that everything was equal but ... like every time we saw her she told us different things that we weren't equal. She told us different jobs to not do and stuff like that …
>
> Student 3 (male): we had like her point of view and cos we're all lads and we don't really look at it as a woman would.

The woman in question was both a witness of a social era and an advocate of a point of view, and she expected the group to engage with her view of the world. In fact we can see here an example of what Dewey described as a person having an 'enlarged and changed experience' as a result of social 'communication' (1916/1944, p. 5). We begin to share what another has thought and have our 'own attitude modified' (p. 5).

In the Broomley Bee project one of the pupils recounted that his group had enjoyed working with the 'experts' and that they had appreciated the time that they had spent with them. He said that they had been 'good' because they had not just stood at the front and talked at them but 'had interacted with us'. Many of the pupils revelled in the proximity of real experts.

Choppy Waters

CCM clearly presents some challenges. At a conceptual level it is almost impossible to provide a neat demarcation of community. It is clearly more than the local area and in many respects it reflects networks rather than geography and can readily embrace digital links to Australia and Thailand. This fuzziness is underlined when schools or organisers have too many offers of help and support, and there is a decision as to who is chosen and who is turned down. Such decisions can have a sharp bearing on the nature of the curriculum. This issue may become more problematic if a community partner (whether this is a volunteer, grandparent, local business person or university lecturer) is involved in decisions about what or who is included.

The evidence we have collected during project evaluations has shown that most community curriculum projects are very successful. In the Co-Curate North East project, for example, students aged 11 and 12 worked with university and museum staff on a local heritage project. They contributed to the

design and content of a digital archive and produced an exhibition in one of the main museums in a nearby city. In questionnaires completed by 107 students, 66% stated that the work that they produced in this project was of a higher quality than usual, and 97% of their parents (out of 101 completed questionnaires) stated that their children had talked about the project at home. Similarly, in the Skype Seniors project, where students aged between 9 and 16 years talked over Skype with people from diverse backgrounds about religion, books, maths, German and history, the teachers commented on improved engagement and standards:

> To be honest ... I don't know if you can see all the various sheets ... I am absolutely amazed. I thought I would have been chasing up work from them ... it's in from the boys, they worked to a really good standard. (German teacher)

The gains for partners involved in community curriculum projects are also not to be underestimated. In this example we see how a PhD student from Ghana relished being able to talk about his country and to influence perceptions about his country:

> For them to get to know about Africa was brilliant and it was like telling them about something they had not heard much about and for them to have a different perception about a different part of the world. (Mediator, Skype Seniors project)

However, there have been exceptions. For a very small minority of pupils crossing boundaries and interacting with other adults is too challenging and one boy in a high school refused the offer to talk to a retired engineer about his mathematics project:

> It was 'done' to Harry and he didn't like it at all, he went to see his mentor and complained about what was being done to him. (Maths teacher)

Some teachers too are unprepared for different expectations and there have been a few disconsolate community partners who lamented about teachers who mark books at the back of the room, or go off to the staffroom, leaving the impression that the partner will 'entertain' the pupils for a while. Similarly, there are partners who have fallen short of expectations.

Thomas (2012), in the RSA report on the Peterborough Area Based Curriculum, reported two particular challenges, with which we have also become familiar:

- For some schools the Peterborough Curriculum represented a choice between a standards driven agenda and a more holistic approach that involved developing students as whole individuals. It was therefore framed as very much part and parcel of a strategic direction that was *in opposition* to a standards agenda.

- The secondary school curriculum in particular remained not only resistant to modification but also to enhancement by the locality. This is in part due to the structures of the schools, where subject and classroom teachers were difficult for partners to access.

All of these issues speak to the need for brokerage (Kubiak, 2009) between schools and community partners.

Brokerage

Brokerage is one of the processes identified as supporting the process of learning from boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), instead of experiencing it as a set of problems. With respect to the two challenges identified in Peterborough, the first reflects a disturbing culture in some schools, geared to teaching to the tests, which snags curriculum development. Senior leaders and classroom teachers have a 'budget' of time and mental energy and while this has some elasticity it is not endless. For some schools, *delivering* the curriculum and measuring student progress absorbs all their available energy and spending time working with community partners is a distraction and might mean that they lose focus on progress. Even for schools with a wider curriculum vision, working with community partners requires a new imagination about what constitutes curriculum and how it might be achieved. The second issue, concerning the structures of secondary schools, is extremely difficult to address. Secondary teachers are subject specialists, they have degrees related to their subject, their training is subject focused, many belong to subject associations, they attend subject-based professional development courses. For many, who may teach 200-400 students over a week, they are perpetually rushing to catch up. Generally this leaves little margin for responding to community interests and resources, as it just makes life complicated. As a generalization, schools have their eyes, ears and minds focused on the Department for Education, because it calls the tune.

School cultures are therefore alien to many community-based organisations that aspire to work in partnership. There are significant barriers to be surmounted: establishing relationships and expectations; agreeing roles and responsibilities; agreeing on activities that meet the goals of both parties; agreeing logistics and arranging specialist or non-routine materials. This requires great sensitivity on both sides and we have many examples of where this has not been achieved. Brokerage therefore has emerged as a critical role in developing CCM projects. These general difficulties were neatly captured by one of the beekeepers:

> Clearly I had a totally different one-dimensional perspective on how school works and no one with time or courage was willing to explain the system in school!

And similar frustrations were expressed by one teacher who said that she and her colleagues just don't know who is 'out there' who might help them with their projects.

Fielding et al. (2005) identify a number of brokerage activities:

- Knowing about and making information available (brokering practices);
- Putting people in touch (brokering relationships);
- Creating a sense of audience and a sense of community to provide a context for practice sharing (enabling fruitful dialogue);
- Providing resources that could make practice sharing happen (resourcing joint work);
- Being a catalyst for activity among network members.

Brokers do enjoy a number of advantages. Firstly, they are not anchored by the culture, practices and discourse of schools and can be appreciated for their creative talents as they introduce new ideas, resources and opportunities. They do not have the same accountabilities or arduous routines as most teachers and they can access new resources either directly or through third parties. They can therefore bring structural advantages to the school and be regarded as a creative influence. At the same time, they are on a tightrope, treading the line between insider and outsider. On the one hand, they can become over-involved and on the other, they can be rejected or dismissed as an intruder with no legitimacy. Wenger (1998) stresses that brokers have the task of assisting the connection of different practices through translation, coordination and alignment of perspectives from the different parties. Burt (2004, 2005) also provides useful accounts of the perilous but creative role played by brokers.

In the local CCM context certain individuals stand out as vital in the process of negotiation and hybridisation. We have identified four broker types thus far:

1. The internal school senior leader broker who gets the necessary support and decisions made in the senior leadership team;
2. The teacher or teacher assistant broker who does the practical work planning and organising;
3. The external 'organisational' broker – these people occupy specialist roles in universities, large charities, government bodies, and companies and part of their work is specifically to work with schools;
4. The 'floating' broker – these people do not owe particular allegiance to any particular external organisation and they have wide-ranging networks that they draw upon.

These types are not exclusive; one person can perform more than one role. In the Broomley Bee project, the parent who led the project provided both some of the brokerage inside school through her close working relationships with staff, but significantly also acted as a 'floating' broker outside school, recruiting support from her community contacts.

Implications

A key issue for this article is that teachers and schools in the United Kingdom, and particularly in England, are no longer significant agents of curriculum development. Since the inception of national curricula in the home countries, curriculum is determined by national government and teachers 'deliver' it. The Department for Education in particular would claim schools have considerable curriculum freedom, especially in academies and free schools, but in reality, 'input regulation', in which government determines curriculum content directly, has been replaced by 'output regulation' in which content is determined by assessment regimes. Ball's (2003) concepts of 'performativity' (now used to describe a government's management of education system performance through numerical targets) and 'deliverology' (Ball et al, 2012) used to describe the effect on day-to-day actions and decisions in schools and capture some aspects of a new managerialism in schools. This has resulted in what Priestley et al (2012, p. 192) have described as 'a low capacity for agency in terms of curriculum development within modern educational systems'. Many young teachers, because of their training, have scant appreciation of the concept of curriculum, in which choices are made about aims, experiences, values and assessment with regard to the development of the whole person as a future citizen. They often equate curriculum to a scheme of work or the year planner, without considering in depth the ends and means of learning experiences.

One of the most important messages from CCM is that curriculum generally lacks visibility. There is precious little recognition that there is a link, however hard to define, between the experiences young people have at school and the sort of person they become and the capabilities they develop. It is not a linear connection and there are intervening variables but it does matter. Test and exam results are clearly important but they do not delimit a successful education.

To develop curriculum brokerage, whether for CCM or other aims, there are two obvious categories of action: structural and cultural. Structural change would involve policies, meetings, roles, timetabling, budgets and events which make CCM easier to organise. A necessary but sufficient first step is to identify staff, including teaching assistants, who might take on the role of developing community contacts and projects. People with networks and agency are obvious candidates and there are many advantages to making this a formal role in some way. Cultural change is harder, as it reflects a way of doing things in the school that normalises working with community partners at a deep level in order to develop a curriculum that provides an alternative experience to one dominated by subjects learned in classrooms. However, an obvious first step is to run a project which has a community orientation and uses community resources and to learn from it. In all our experience of such projects, it is the words of young people that make clear what freedom to learn might feel like for them:

> Yeah – it has made me think about what I can do and want to do when I leave, it has given me more confidence. (Year 9 student)

> I didn't know learning was like this – it's really good because I know what I can do more – to get better at things. (Year 9 student)

School has an immensely powerful influence in socialising young people and establishing lasting viewpoints in the landscape of their minds. A CCM approach can help ensure that those viewpoints or voices are varied, exciting, challenging and motivating and thus help address some of the disadvantages of material poverty.

Notes

[1] http://www.hightechhigh.org/projects/)

[2] Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It is responsible for inspecting all schools in England.

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