FORUM
Volume 58, Number 3, 2016
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2016.58.3.421

Freeing Up Teachers to Learn: a case study of teacher autonomy as a tool for reducing educational inequalities in a Montessori school

MARTYN STEINER

ABSTRACT A major factor influencing the potential for schools to address inequalities is the freedom that teachers have to reflect and to act to address those inequalities. This article describes how an education system that emphasises the informal and qualitative can leave greater room for teachers to develop themselves and to focus on the direct task of improving learner outcomes. Crucially, such a system can also afford teachers the time to reflect on their practice and upon their students as individuals and thereby direct attention to those who are vulnerable or otherwise in greatest need. This article presents Oxford Montessori Schools as a case study of how teachers who are empowered through autonomy can better provide for the most vulnerable children and thereby reduce social inequalities. The school has created time for teachers through a conscious effort to minimise administrative burdens. This is coupled with the trust afforded to teachers to teach according to their own professional judgement, giving teachers not only the freedom to teach but also to learn, to develop as professionals and to establish a system that works for them.

The School and the Author

Oxford Montessori Schools (OMS) is a group of two nursery schools and one extremely small school for children aged 2-16 years, the latter of which is situated on a rural hill just outside of Oxford itself. It prides itself on offering a different kind of education, with an ethos that emphasises relaxed and informal relationships and structures in which children are able to have freer, more active and more individualised learning experiences. Whilst not as fully democratic or liberal as schools like Summerhill or Sudbury schools, OMS shares a number of

features with these kinds of alternative models of schooling. The school sees itself as something of a laboratory for educational innovation. The minimal state intervention and willingness to take risks means that innovations can be easily trialled and abandoned if unsuccessful and the hope is that what works for OMS may be useful for others.

Although fee-paying, the school is non-selective and has a high proportion of children with special educational needs (41%), particularly autistic spectrum disorder, and mental health issues (30%). Many of these children have found mainstream schools overwhelmingly high-pressure and anxiety-inducing, and so coming to a smaller, less intense environment can provide an opportunity to be calmer and more comfortable. Over many years, the school has demonstrated a key principle: more time and trust allows teachers to focus on individual needs and to work more calmly and patiently to support positive mental health, thereby reducing educational inequalities for these vulnerable children.

The author is employed as the Head of Senior School at OMS and this article attempts to represent the strengths of the school as a model, but also to critically evaluate the approaches and their relevance to mainstream education. Two significant limitations upon the generalisability of the case are the exceptionally small size and the fee-paying status of the school. Smallness necessarily gives more time per pupil, and automatically creates a number of the conditions outlined below. Being fee-paying selects out the most economically deprived and whilst the school has offered scholarships to compensate for this, this has been met with limited success. The limitation generated by its fee-paying status is partially negated by the inclusive admissions policy of the school. The limitation of the size of the school is partially compensated for by its potential to be a small-scale trial for larger institutions to learn from.

Freeing up Teachers' Time for Reflection and Development

Various recent reviews have found workload to be a significant constraint on the lives of teachers, with excessive administrative and data-tracking tasks among the most complained about (Department for Education [DfE], 2014; National Union of Teachers [NUT], 2014; Education Support Partnership, 2015). Teachers' use of time is increasingly determined by a need to follow externally set protocols, a situation that severely limits their professional freedom and ability to make their own judgements about how best to support the learners in their care. It is perhaps no surprise then that secondary school teachers are free to spend barely an hour a week on 'training and development activity' (Gibson et al, 2015). At OMS, a conscious effort has been made to minimise these unnecessary administrative burdens upon teachers so as to free them up to make autonomous decisions about the use of their time. Giving teachers this space allows them to reflect upon their own practice and to identify ways to improve their own teaching. In other words, it affords teachers the freedom to learn. OMS seeks to respond to criticisms levelled by those such

as Dillon-Peterson (1986, p. 32), who claims that 'teachers seldom have been afforded the dignity or time to reflect on their teaching [even though] ... given the encouragement, teachers are entirely capable of identifying directions for self-improvement and carrying out plans to improve their effectiveness'. Time-intensive reports that teachers previously wrote about each individual student in every lesson have been gradually replaced by verbal feedback, and termly school reports have been redesigned to make them quicker and easier to do. There is no formal policy about how and when teachers must mark work and they are able to give feedback to students however they feel is best. Teachers at the school have also been encouraged to plan lessons and schemes of work in a format and depth that best meets their needs, and to use the reclaimed time to better plan and prepare for their lessons. All of this is done in conjunction with careful analysis of Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection requirements, to ensure that everything necessary is done, but also that everything done is necessary.

The school is freed up to do this partially by having relatively minimal influence from the state, but most significantly by its small scale. There are fewer than thirty children in the secondary school and consequently there is far less need to apply excessive quantitative measures to students. Whilst this feature may seem to make the OMS experience irrelevant to large comprehensives, the principles of actively trying to reduce workload and allowing more qualitative assessment of student progress are applicable to all schools. It should be possible for all schools to cut some of their workload by working with teachers to identify what tasks are not felt to be positively contributing to learner outcomes and by being less prescriptive about how tasks are to be completed. For example, planning and marking policies that are unreasonably burdensome and rigid could be modified to offer more scope for teachers to decide on their own format, and the frequency of written school reports could be reduced, perhaps replacing them with parents' evenings or phone calls home. At OMS teachers are often asked if they feel a task is actually worthwhile, and this approach could be reproduced elsewhere. Smallness can be mimicked by larger schools, such as the widely praised approaches taken by schools such as Stanley Park High to divide one large school into several smaller ones (Association of Teachers and Lecturers [ATL], 2016; *Times Educational Supplement*, 2016).

Trusting Teachers to Act Responsibly

Affording teachers the freedom to use their time in the way that they choose presupposes that significant trust is placed in the teachers to make sensible decisions. Trust here is defined, following Carless (2009, p. 81), as 'the confidence one has in the likelihood of others (management, administration, colleagues, students) acting responsibly in respect of sound principles, practices or behaviours' and more specifically Shockley-Zalabak et al's (2000, p. 35) concept of *organisational* trust as 'positive expectations individuals have about the

intents and behaviours of organisational members based on roles, relationships and interdependencies'. As with most alternative education providers, OMS emphasises the importance of trusting that children can be autonomous and self-directed, but it is also vital to the educational model that the same freedoms are afforded to the schools' teachers.

Affording trust to teachers necessitates an expectation that those teachers will perform tasks correctly and appropriately, and implies that they can be afforded the freedom to do so without the need for external pressure. Since the school has a single teacher per subject, each has almost complete responsibility for teaching and learning in their subject and is granted the associated rights and responsibilities. For instance, while teachers are given brief guidelines for progress monitoring, they have absolute freedom to design their own approach and are encouraged to create a system that is both useful and time-efficient for them. Teachers are made aware that they are the experts in the teaching of their subject and that decisions about pedagogy, curriculum content and assessment are, assuming they do not wildly deviate from the school ethos, entirely their own to make. Carless (2009) outlines four factors that support organisational trust, of which two, collaboration and communication, are particularly pertinent to OMS. Around 20% of lessons in the school are co-taught by a pair of teachers, allowing them to share ideas and responsibilities and also adding an informal sense of observation and the need to perform to a high standard. Providing spaces for communication about pupil progress, often as simple as unhurried lunch breaks, allows senior management to find out about what is happening in the school without needing to intervene in minor details and means best practice can be shared without diktats from above. With a significant proportion of the school's intake having SEND (special educational needs and disability) and mental health conditions, this all means that teachers can take rapid and targeted action to address educational inequalities using approaches that align with their strengths and preferences.

By removing micromanagement from above, teachers are more able to relax and enjoy their work. Such an approach is good for teachers and good for the school. Teachers with more freedom have been shown to be less stressed but also show more empowerment and greater professionalism (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). This finding aligns strongly with the anecdotal evidence from OMS, where teachers report a sense that their work is less pressured and that they have more mental space to consider their work. In an environment where experimentation is encouraged and enabled, teachers can develop professionally through greater scope for self-reflection and for trying out innovative approaches, safe in the knowledge that they will be trusted to do so and that the learning value even of making mistakes is fully understood (Dillon-Peterson, 1986). This sense of autonomy and professional growth has been linked to increased job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001) and means that the school is better able to retain effective and motivated teachers.

Happier, less stressed teachers make for a more positive school environment for students and mean that the school has become popular with

parents who had found that mainstream education was anxiety-inducing and mentally exhausting for their children, particularly those with autistic spectrum disorder (Tobin et al, 2012; Mandy et al, 2016). Although the links between anxiety and examination are still under debate, there is evidence to suggest that the inequity in provision for children with anxiety disorders could be significantly improved by greater provision of schooling where staff, and thus students, are under less intense pressure to perform to externally set ideals (Putwain, 2008). Sadly, this seems to run counter to recent attempts to make assessment higher-stakes, more exams-focused and less based on trust in classroom teachers' decision-making abilities; processes which, rather ironically, may well be reducing the trustworthiness of teachers (Carless, 2009).

Managing the Challenges of Teacher Autonomy

Offering students and teachers more freedom in their school lives necessarily requires consideration about how much freedom is too much. It can be difficult for those in positions of authority to yield complete control to others, and often for good reasons. It is essential, for example, to maintain good records of progress and attainment: for reactive planning, for applications for access arrangements, and even – as much as we may disagree with it – as evidence for Ofsted inspections. Without external pressure though, this kind of unpleasant task has a tendency to be de-prioritised and left undone. Equally, teachers can feel overwhelmed by the responsibility that comes with freedom, or may gain freedoms that they would actually rather be without. It is often easier to follow a prescribed model, with the added benefit of greater uniformity across the school. This is, however, rarely in line with the educational ethos of the school, and teachers can struggle to find a balance between meeting external and internal standards. The approach at OMS has been to offer greater freedom, retaining the potential to require that certain things are done but giving only the most open guidance about how, and to ensure that plentiful support is available for those who need it. In general this ensures that targets are met, although as with any workplace, it remains important to monitor and take action where necessary.

Conclusion: OMS and educational inequality

Alternative educational models often come at a cost, literally, in that in order to acquire enough of the desired freedoms, a school generally has to step outside of the state system and become fee-paying. The recent introduction of free schools in the United Kingdom has offered a route for greater freedoms, but with more restrictions than the independent sector (New Schools Network, 2015). Although relatively inexpensive, the OMS model is thus largely unavailable to the most deprived in society, although discounts and scholarships are sometimes available. In the context of a discussion of how freedom to learn can address educational inequalities, this is of course a significant shortcoming.

Other social inequalities are addressed by the school, such as the fact that giving teachers more control over their working lives is often more suited to the needs of working parents and a more flexible and relaxed system is better able to support those with socio-emotional vulnerabilities. Where the school is best positioned to address educational inequalities, though, is in demonstrating a workable alternative model and showing that a non-selective school can still do well in GCSEs and Ofsted inspections even when it takes the pressure off staff, and indeed that doing so produces better outcomes for all.

References

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) (2016) A Case Study from Stanley Park High for A Curriculum That Counts. http://acurriculumthatcounts.org.uk/case-studies/stanley-park-high/ (accessed July 9, 2016).

Bogler, R. (2001) The Influence of Leadership Style on Teacher Job Satisfaction, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37(5), 662-683. http://doi.org/10.1177/00131610121969460

Carless, D. (2009) Trust, Distrust and Their Impact on Assessment Reform, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), 79-89. http://doi.org/10.1080/02602930801895786

Department for Education (DfE) (2014) *Teachers' Workload Diary Survey.* London: DfE.

Dillon-Peterson, B. (1986) Trusting Teachers to Know What's Good for Them, in K. Zumwalt (Ed.) *Improving Teaching, 1986 ASCD Yearbook,* pp. 29-35. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Education Support Partnership (2015) 2015 Health Survey [Text]. https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/2015-health-survey (accessed June 9, 2016).

Gibson, S., Oliver, L. & Dennison, M. (2015) *Workload Challenge: analysis of teacher consultation responses.* London: Department for Education.

Mandy, W., Murin, M., Baykaner, O., et al (2016) The Transition from Primary to Secondary School in Mainstream Education for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, *Autism*, 20(1), 5-13. http://doi.org/10.1177/1362361314562616

National Union of Teachers (2014) Teachers and Workload Survey Report, September 2014. https://www.teachers.org.uk/files/teachers-and-workload-survey-report-september-2014.pdf (accessed June 9, 2016).

New Schools Network (2015) Comparison of Different Types of School: a guide to schools in England. http://www.newschoolsnetwork.org/sites/default/files/Comparison%20of%20school%20types.pdf (accessed July 21, 2016).

Pearson, L.C. & Moomaw, W. (2005) The Relationship between Teacher Autonomy and Stress, Work Satisfaction, Empowerment, and Professionalism, *Educational Research Quarterly*, 29(1), 38-54.

Putwain, D. (2008) Examination Stress and Test Anxiety, *Psychologist*, 21(12), 1026-1029.

Shockley-Zalabak, P., Ellis, K. & Winograd, G. (2000) Organizational Trust: what it means, why it matters, *Organization Development Journal*, 18(4), 35.

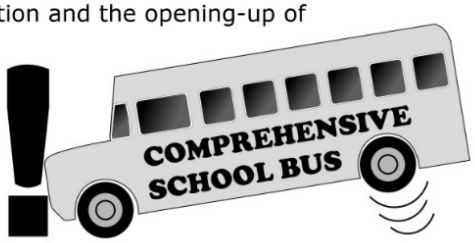
Times Educational Supplement (2016) TES Schools Awards 2016. http://www.tesawards.co.uk/tessa2016 (accessed Retrieved July 9, 2016).

Tobin, H., Staunton, S., Mandy, W.P.L., et al (2012) A Qualitative Examination of Parental Experience of the Transition to Mainstream Secondary School for Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, *Educational and Child Psychology*, 29(1), 75-85.

MARTYN STEINER is the Head of Senior School at Oxford Montessori Schools. He has worked in state and independent schools in the United Kingdom and Japan, and has a Master of Education in Politics, Development and Democratic Education from the University of Cambridge. *Correspondence*: martyn@oxfordmontessori.co.uk

THE STALLED REVOLUTION?

Fifty years ago, the Department for Education's Circular 10/66 opened the gates to comprehensive schools. This year should have been a celebration of the ending of selection and the opening-up of access to progressive, inclusive education for **all** pupils, not a privileged minority.



Yet the Prime Minister has announced **more grammar schools**, despite the evidence against and unease even among Conservative politicians.

This conference aims to pinpoint why and how the Government must be opposed on this.

You are invited to a one-day conference 10:00 - 15:45 on Saturday 12th November 2016 at Mander Hall, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BD

Speakers will include:-

- **Anne West,** Director of Education Research at LSE
- **Melissa Benn**, journalist and author
- **Roy Perry**, Conservative Leader Hampshire County Council
- **Joanne Bartley**, parent and Education campaigner in Kent
- **Richy Thomson** of Fair Admissions Campaign.

Online booking is available at www.ticketsource.co.uk/date/287985

Tickets cost £27.50 (£30 on the door)

RECLAIMING EDUCATION

CASE Comprehensive Future FORUM newvisions for education group ESCG SFA

We are grateful to the National Union of Teachers for allowing us to use Mander Hall.