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## Democratising Comprehensiveness: a prospectus

STEWART RANSON

**ABSTRACT** This article begins with a proposal to recreate the neighbourhood school as a comprehensive campus that stretches across a segment of a city or county in order to ensure children and young people experience class and cultural diversity in their learning. The article then focuses on what democratic procedures might be developed to justify such a policy and comprehensive education more generally.

‘The decision this country has to make – and quickly – is whether or not it desires to have an educational system that will truly educate for democracy. The decision is quite fundamental: without education for democracy we need not look for democracy.’ These words have a contemporary urgency, yet they were written in 1942 by H.C. Dent, the respected editor of the *Times Educational Supplement*. In his book *A New Order in English Education*, he contributed to the growing national debate about how to unite the nation after the war with a political settlement for a reformed society. He was clear that it was ‘absolutely essential that every member of the community played his or her part’, and ‘that educational reform (would) be basic to all social reform’ (p. 5). Today, education similarly has a crucial role to play in social change. A divided nation needs to re-unite through learning communities that develop the capabilities of each, enabling all to participate equally in creating a just society.

In this article, I would like to put this argument for democratic participation to the test of deliberating and justifying the central substantive educational question of our time: whether comprehensiveness for the common good can be justified above selection or choice for private advantage? I begin by developing a proposal for schools to be organised in comprehensive campuses, and then, through the rest of the article, consider the democratic processes of justifying such a policy.

## **Re-forming a Universal, Democratic Comprehensive School System**

The original model of the comprehensive school has been an inclusive institution that takes in all 'abilities' and embraces all classes and ethnicities. The children of the doctor and the miner would go to school side by side. If this educational and social ambition is to be recovered, the nature of the comprehensive needs to be transformed fundamentally from an independent school institution in a neighbourhood to a *comprehensive campus* that stretches across a locality or a segment of a city or county encompassing, for example, a post-sixteen institution, a couple of secondary schools, two or three primary schools, together with children's centres. Only in this way can class and cultural diversity be brought together in a common educational and social purpose. I observed this practice emerging in a Midlands city, in a study of 14 to 19 partnerships that included schools, colleges and children's centres. Young people travelling to and from the white suburbs and the multi-ethnic inner city developed their learning and capability in inter-cultural settings that strengthened mutual recognition and social cohesion.

An interdependence of traditional educational institutions needs to be supported by the growing collaboration of public service professionals who have traditionally been defined by their training in a specialist body of knowledge which only they can practice with their clients. The emergent practices of community governance, by placing the child and the family first, will mean working out from the complex needs of children, families and communities, and will require teachers, health and social workers to work together across traditional boundaries. A further change will involve professionals, families and communities recognising the requirement to listen more to the voice of children and young people, engaging them in a conversation about their needs and concerns.

The governance of the campus would follow the framework established in a London borough, which secures interconnected layers of democratic authority, including partnership boards, between institutions, community forums and neighbourhood councils, drawn together by the strategic coordination of the local authority.

Reform of education is always fiercely contested and change has to be justified. I want to examine whether a participatory democracy is up to the challenge of deliberating and deciding a comprehensive local education system which is just, ensuring that all institutional biases that favour the advantaged are frustrated. Can the proposals for a democratic comprehensive campus be warranted?

### **Justifying a Fair System of Education for All**

In a fiercely contested field such as education, with rival and often incommensurable claims competing for public assent, it is difficult to find a position that can justify any normative arguments let alone those that are the

focus of this article. However, as Rainer Forst (2014) insists, ‘there must be no social or political relation that cannot be reciprocally and generally justified to all those who are part of a political-social context’. The challenge for our time is to reconstitute education to meet the demands of the age, but what form of education, and how is it to be justified? Forst proposes to ground the determining of institutional norms in the democratic practice of justification, requiring ‘parity of participation’ to justify institutional arrangements or their reform, a procedure that should be developed in two overlapping stages. First, there needs to be a framework of justification in which there is ‘recognition of the basic right of every member of a basic social structure to be respected as an equal participant in procedures of effective justification ... and in which all members have sufficient status and power to decide about the institutions they are to live under’. Second, there needs to be democratic agreement about the substantive proposals being considered for institutional change. Here there is more tension about which procedures will enable a divided community to reach agreement about proposals for reform.

What devices can be constructed to secure the possibility of concord in policy reform? I propose to join together a radical and a liberal approach. Both strategies form two sides of the same coin seeking the same end: proposals that are rational for the community because they are independent of the material interests of any of the protagonists. The radical, democratic approach, proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/2012), is that those seeking to form new institutional arrangements have a duty to base their decisions on the general or public good – that is, outcomes that will be agreed as just by all members of the community together. The liberal approach of John Rawls (1971, pp. 17-22) proposes that individuals who enter a dialogue – for example, about the distribution of educational goods – would deliberate and decide fairly if they could imagine themselves in the original position of not knowing anything about their social status, wealth, capabilities or privileges. In so doing, and thus not knowing how their lives might unfold, they would be disposed to agree decisions that support the least advantaged. Together, detachment encourages willingness to participate as equals about the rules of fair deliberation and decision making, while participation reinforces detachment as scrutiny of intention strengthens pursuit of the common good.

I want to add an important distinction to these conditions for reaching shared understanding and agreement. The emphasis in Rawls is on individuals not being able to know those *personal* background conditions that would enable them to constitute privilege and advantage in decision making about the distribution of goods and opportunities in life. Yet, if citizens are to be able to make rational decisions for themselves and their families and communities, they should be able to be informed about, and to understand, their *common* background history and the structures that have shaped those histories as archived in our collective and scientific knowledge.

The proposition that I wish to put to the test of democratic justification is that if all citizens were invited to contribute to a deliberation about the

institutional form of schooling, using a variety of democratic procedures they would choose comprehensive provision. There is some empirical evidence to support this: when a referendum was held in Solihull in the 1980s about whether to reject comprehensive schools and return to selective grammar schools and secondary moderns, the people voted to retain comprehensives. I want now to consider the procedures for a democratic justification of the organisation of education: first, the questions which a community should consider, and then the procedures for democratic participation.

### **Questions for Deliberating a Rational, Moral Order for Education**

Drawing upon my Rawls–Rousseau device for democratic dialogue to reach just conclusions, I consider a set of questions which governing bodies, community forums and local councils would need to deliberate if they are to reach agreement about the local organisation of education, and the appropriateness of comprehensiveness in particular.

#### *(a) A National Framework of Education?*

What set of principles will need to be agreed for the education of young people and adults across the nation as a whole? Would it be appropriate for children in City X to be educated in disused factories with large classes while children in County Y are educated in well-resourced and staffed purpose-built schools and colleges? Should children in some schools be taught by university-trained teachers while those in other schools are not? Would it be acceptable for children in one area to leave school at 15 prepared for menial labour while those elsewhere leave at 18 socialised for the professions? I believe that citizens in the original position would choose principles of universal provision, national standards, to avoid the possibility that idiosyncrasies of geography, or asymmetries of resources, would leave their children experiencing a substantially inferior education.

#### *(b) A Public Service?*

Should the institutions of education be owned, governed and managed within the public sphere, or open to private-sector resources and control within the marketplace? I propose that citizens in the original position behind the veil of ignorance would not want education to depend upon the wealth and power of parents but to be an equal entitlement for all children, young people and adults to develop their capabilities. This would entail that they would bring an end to opportunity of the wealthy to buy a privileged education for their children in independent fee-paying schools. It would also mean they would judge that churches or religious sects should not be able to erect arbitrary boundaries to

exclude citizens, this being antithetical to the purpose of mutual recognition and social interdependence.

How important would be the practice of democratic participation as against executive prerogative and power at each level of the educational system? Citizens in the original position would, I suggest, emphasise public participation, thus securing their voice in decision-making, and therefore an understanding of the learning needs of their children and communities.

*(c) The Function of Education?*

Who should be educated and to what level? Are young people of equal worth or located in some hierarchy of educability? Is the education of the child alone the purpose of the public sphere and what place should the education of the family and wider community have in public policy? Should tertiary education as well as primary and secondary education be universal or a matter of choice? Should the task of education be to socialise communities in their separateness – religious, ethnic or social class – or to use the opportunity of education for different communities to learn together about their overlapping as well as distinctive qualities of culture and capability? Citizens, I believe, would value the role of comprehensive campuses in enabling diverse communities to learn together to generate, as Martha Nussbaum (1997a, b) encouraged, a cosmopolitan community of tolerance and respect.

And what is the principal function of education for society? There have been two contrasting traditions: the first classifies children into sheep and goats for the labour market. The archetype of this was, of course, the eleven-plus which selected children not only for different types of schools but also for occupations and life courses. The second tradition emphasises learning to expand capabilities over time, indeed a lifetime. Citizens, I propose, would reject classification as likely to diminish their lives in favour of lifelong learning. As Archbishop Temple (in Butler, 1982) argued, the state has no greater moral purpose than to educate its people to become citizens.

*(d) The Purpose and Content of Learning?*

What will the content of learning be? If citizens were presented with the choice of an elementary education of ‘the three Rs’ (reading, writing and arithmetic) or an education that gave them access to a broad, common curriculum which developed all their capabilities, I believe citizens would readily prefer the more expansive curriculum. That a child’s gift for the piano, or for painting, or singing, or acting, discovered in the home, should be regarded only as a private matter and have no place in the school curriculum would surely not gain the assent of parents. A succinct traditional statement of purpose and content would provide a beginning: ‘The educational system must be planned to secure the full and harmonious development of body, mind and soul for the three-fold purpose of personal living, civic responsibility and useful employment’ (Dent, 1942,

p. 18). William Morris would, however, want to give priority to the appreciation of beauty as well as to the making of art and craft in the homes and the community. He would also wish to emphasise care as well as understanding of the environment that sustains us. More contemporary reflections would want to ensure access to the common cultural heritage of achievement in literature, art and science, to develop children's capabilities in language.

The process of learning is as important as content. Historically, learners have been defined as passive recipients of knowledge which they are expected to memorise and regurgitate at a moment's notice. This method of teaching and learning has regained favour with recent Conservative-led governments which appeared alone to value memory and recall as the mark of success. Citizens, I propose, would reject such a limited pedagogy in favour of an approach to learning that valued creative imagination above the prosaic, enquiry and understanding above factual knowledge, encouraging students to question convention and to construct reasoned solutions for the problems they confront. They would also acknowledge the vital importance of connecting abstract ideas with practice, and value, with Dewey (e.g. 1897/2015) and Vygotsky (e.g. Dolya, 2010), learning through collaborative action, which encourages the remaking of our worlds for all citizens to enjoy.

*(e) The Structure of Schools and Colleges in Learning Communities?*

Institutions shape human behaviour: that is their purpose. If the background problem of contemporary society is fragmentation, division and misrecognition, then the system and organisation of institutions needs to be designed to enable the formation of mutual recognition and social cohesion. Citizens in the original position will grasp that if they wish to secure their purposes for education they will require the only institutional system – one of comprehensiveness – that will constitute inclusion, interdependence and collaboration in learning communities, enabling all citizens to develop all their capabilities. A recent editorial reinforced this defining purpose: 'Creating a more socially integrated education system should be an end in itself, given the critical role schools play in developing the citizens of the future. The road to a more cohesive, tolerant society must surely start in our schools: we can't simply hope it will simply materialise when a lack of social ethnic or religious diversity too often goes unchallenged.' Comprehensive schools, however, need to expand into comprehensive campuses.

**A Civic Colloquium: a democratic experiment of justification**

How are citizens to participate in decisions about the purpose and organisation of education in each locality? De Tocqueville (1830/2003) celebrated the New England town meeting as the means of deliberating questions central to the well-being of the civic community. So I propose that each city and county

should enter into a discussion, a civic colloquium, about the purpose and organisation of education, addressing the questions outlined earlier, and recognising in their deliberations the significance of their preferences for the good of the community as a whole. The deliberations would be constituted as a multi-voiced and multi-layered colloquium with formal dialogue taking place in institutional governing bodies, in community and locality forums and being drawn together for collective decision by locally elected representatives at the level of the local authority council.

Though John Stuart Mill (1861/1996; also, Urbinati, 2002) gave the Demos the last word, he was concerned that education should be able to make a significant contribution to democratic deliberations. He defined this in terms of expanding the influence of the qualified and those in professional occupations. This is now outmoded, but not the importance of knowledge for democracy, particularly in a disturbing era of post-truth politics that discredits evidence-based policymaking. Citizens participating in the colloquia would wish to learn from historians about the long struggle to achieve social democratic opportunity, the progress that was made from the 1960s, and how it has now been undermined by neo-liberal possessive individualism. Deliberations in the civic colloquia must also be strengthened by presentations from university researchers that would enable decision making to take into account both the latest scientific knowledge on the effect of selection on life chances, and the effect of the achievement of comprehensive education.

#### *Innovations in Deliberative Participation*

The nation has learned to its cost the limitations of using a referendum as the only means of judging the settled view of the polity. I want to draw on the research of Professor John Stewart (1999), the authority on local democracy, to identify a repertoire of practices of participatory democracy that would allow citizens collectively to reach settled and authoritative judgements about the purpose and organisation of education. Recent experiments to strengthen democratic participation have included a number of innovations which include:

(a) *The informed citizen.* This approach involves a group of citizens deliberately chosen as a representative sample of citizens generally, as the modern equivalent of the Athenian principle of selection by lot. In that way, people from all sections of the population are involved, avoiding the danger that only the articulate and the joiners take part. The approaches ensure that citizens only give their views after hearing about the issue in depth, with an opportunity to question and challenge. There is a fundamental difference between these approaches and opinion polls, which can be merely a device for obtaining the uninformed and often unconsidered views of citizens. These approaches also ensure that the citizens involved have discussed the issues among themselves. Democracy, if it is to be meaningful, must be more than a recording system for individual views. It should involve conversation in which citizens explore views together, test ideas, seek agreement, yet become aware of

difference. These approaches bring deliberation by citizens into the process of government. 'Considered reflection' is an essential part of any adequate theory of democracy.

(b) *Citizens' juries*. These bring together a representative group of citizens to consider an issue in depth over three to five days. During that period, they receive evidence, hear and cross-question witnesses and discuss the issue among themselves, before forming their conclusion. A report is prepared setting out the conclusions, recording both agreement and disagreement. Citizens' juries have also been used to explore broader policy issues on which they may well produce guidelines rather than specific recommendations. There is no judge, but rather a moderator whose role is to facilitate informal discussion and certainly not to maintain quasi-legal procedures.

(c) *Deliberative opinion polls*. These take as their starting point the opinion poll and seek to overcome its weakness. Fishkin (1991), its main advocate, has argued, 'An ordinary opinion poll models what the public thinks, given how little it knows. A deliberative opinion poll models what the public would think, if it had a more adequate chance to think about the questions at issue.' Deliberative opinion polls differ from citizens' juries in that they involve larger numbers and can involve less time and less intense discussion. They differ from normal opinion polls in that opinions will be tested after the participants have had an opportunity to hear witnesses, ask questions and discuss the issue, although for the purpose of comparison, views may also have been tested at the outset of the process.

These are not the only possible innovations. Other examples include:

- mediation groups which bring together groups which are in conflict over, for example, environmental issues, to see if through discussion differences can be reconciled or at least reduced;
- new forms of public meetings designed to enable discussion in groups, rather than structuring meetings around platform and audience;
- community forums in which authorities can reach out to diverse communities, remembering that as well as communities of place there are communities of interest;
- stakeholder conferences in which all interested in an issue can be brought together in a variety of forms of discussion designed to identify areas for action. These have included extensive consultation and the use of surveys, as well as using the authority's outreach staff to listen to the views of the public.

All of these innovations can enhance participatory democracy, and in so doing they strengthen representative democracy. Each approach used has a value in itself as an aid to or a means of decision making. What is important to consider is, however, not their impact on particular decisions, but their role in transforming local democracy by developing the practice of citizenship through arenas of dialogue. It is envisaged that all citizens can have the opportunity to participate in such arenas, at different points in time. The development of active



citizenship can help to reconstitute local democracy based on reasoned deliberation.

### Conclusion

I would like to believe that these civic colloquia would, through extensive and inclusive deliberation, reach conclusions about the construction of a new formation of a universal comprehensive education system: *the comprehensive campus*. The argument has suggested that citizens, if they set aside their material interests, would choose the universal interest, the good of all, as that which would best secure their own learning needs. They would choose, that is, the only framework of education that provides the most secure opportunity for their children as well as that of the nation, and through its democratic accountability, provide them with the greatest opportunity to voice their opinion and influence practice: a comprehensive, social, integrated education system. In so doing, they would be electing to develop democratic learning communities that provide the crucible of mutual recognition and the best possibility of remaking divided communities. Citizens learning together will strengthen our democracy and with it, make more likely the prospect of a cohesive society.

Comprehensiveness and democracy are mutually reinforcing. As Benn and Chitty (1996, p. 21) emphasise: ‘full comprehensive education is probably impossible in conditions where democracy does not also exist. This follows from its defining social inclusiveness, its place in the community, its rationality, and its belief in the inherent educability of everyone.’ These powerful words capture the power and depth of the comprehensive idea: they express a theory of human nature (about the intelligence and potential of all); a social theory (of the place of comprehensive schools in and for the community); a political theory (of the democratic inclusiveness and accountability to citizens); and they emphasise the cognitive rationality of the comprehensive idea (providing education in relation to the internal goods of need and purpose, rather than the extrinsic interests of power and wealth).

This should be a cause for celebration, as Henry Stewart (2015, p. 57) argues. By 1980, ninety per cent of secondary school students were educated in comprehensive schools. ‘This laid the groundwork for the expansion in achievement that has taken place since, and [for] the move from education beyond the age of 16 being from a minority to it being the norm. The proportion of young people achieving five O-levels or GCSEs has risen from less than one in four in 1976 to more than three in four by 2008. The proportion in education at the age of 17 rose from 31 per cent in 1977 to 76 per cent in 2011, even before it became compulsory. While some argue there is an element of “grade inflation”, there can be no dispute about the increase in students going onto higher education. The number achieving a degree has gone from 68,000 in 1981 to 331,000 in 2010, an almost fivefold increase.’ Admission to university grew from 3% of the age cohort in the 1950s to 40% in 2000.

Growing out of the initiative of democratic local government, comprehensive schools can be judged, with the National Health Service (NHS), to be the great achievement of post-war social democracy. If the NHS transformed the health of the common people, the comprehensive school transformed the capabilities and opportunities of a generation, enabling the expansion of economy and society. Research has verified the growth and spread of educational achievement, the rising norms of educational attainment, discrediting the pessimism of some policy makers. As Melissa Benn and Janet Downes argue, 'the still unfinished comprehensive revolution has laid the basis for the potential educational success of the vast majority of young people today' (Benn & Downes, 2015). Their excellent demythologising of comprehensive schools deconstructs systematically the idea that comprehensive schools have failed.

The denigration of the comprehensive school and the local authorities which sponsored them should be judged for what it is: an attempt to destroy the education of the common people and return them to subordinate places in a class hierarchy. The demeaning of comprehensive schools over thirty years, and of their local authorities, together the sources of expansion and opportunity, exemplifies the crisis of recognition at the centre of our time. It is not just individuals or even communities that have been vulnerable to vilification, but the very public institutions that have offered the possibility of justice and well-being.

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**STEWART RANSON** is Emeritus Professor at the University of Warwick. He was Professor of Education at Warwick (2005-2009) and previously at the School of Education at the University of Birmingham (1989-2004). His book *Education and Democratic Participation: the making of learning communities* has recently been published in the Routledge Progressive Education Series. *Correspondence:* [s.ranson@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:s.ranson@warwick.ac.uk)

