
Rebuilding Our Schools from the Bottom Up

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ABSTRACT We live in a democracy and yet our schools are far from democratic. Decisions made by central government, implemented by headteachers and policed by Ofsted are rarely scrutinised or debated by those whose daily lives are significantly affected by them. Little surprise then that there is so much disenchantment on the part of teachers, disaffection of young people and disengagement by parents, many of whom feel powerless in the face of current education policy. This article explores how schools can transform their culture by strengthening voice, participation and the understanding of what it means to be part of a learning community. Giving examples of schools where teachers are encouraged to explore new ideas and discuss the challenges they face, where parents are actively involved and supported to help their children, and where young people are genuinely listened to and able to contribute to decisions about their learning and their school, a new way forward is charted, one which recognises the power of developing a shared sense of purpose and a common vision. It proposes transforming our schools from the bottom up.

What are the purposes of education and who should decide? These are critical questions for schools, for local communities and for society, questions which challenge our view of schooling and the role it plays in building the future. They go to the heart of what kind of society we want to create and the role of education in helping to shape it. Do we want a society built on the values of democracy, fairness and respect or one based on competition and the survival of the fittest? These are stark choices which affect the way schooling is organised and influence the values of the young people who experience it and, by extension, their priorities for the future.

The Democratic Deficit in Our Schools

A fundamental principle of democracy is that individuals should be able to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. It surely follows that in a healthy democratic society, democratic processes will be incorporated into the education system so that all those who are involved – namely, teachers, parents and students – can share in shaping the values and vision of their school.

As Gert Biesta, Professor of Education at Brunel University, has argued, ‘a democratic society is precisely one in which the purpose of education is not given but is a constant topic for discussion and deliberation’ (Biesta, 2007). By placing democracy at the centre of the education process, schools can play their rightful role in fostering democratic citizens. And through collaborative decision making, schools will be better able to meet the needs of the communities they exist to serve, a key aspiration of the comprehensive school movement,

In the early 1900s, John Dewey was discussing the need to democratise education so that children and young people did not just learn about democracy but practised it in their daily lives. He saw this as fundamental to building a more democratic society. One hundred years on, democracy is largely absent from the English education system. School students have scant opportunity to contribute to decisions about what they are going to learn and how they are going to learn it. Furthermore, parents are not routinely involved in school decision making, even on policies which affect them; the majority of teachers have little say in what and how they teach, nor are they able to contribute to discussions about the direction of their school, and local communities are often disconnected from the school within their midst.

Comprehensive schools were introduced with the aim of meeting the needs of all children within a community, and the disconnection between the two makes it extremely difficult for them to achieve this aim. Schools need to know their local community inside out in order to offer an education which responds to its needs. The choice agenda, which sees growing numbers of parents, particularly at secondary level, opting for schools that are some distance away from where they live, has disrupted the relationship between a school and its locality and as a consequence has undermined the rationale for school-community collaboration.

The unravelling of local authorities has also been a major force in the erosion of democracy. Their role in planning, supporting and monitoring local schools has been diminished. With more and more schools becoming academies, any sense of local accountability has gone. Over the last few decades power has been transferred to the Secretary of State for Education so that the government’s agenda can be imposed from above. At the last count the current Education Secretary had more than 2500 powers over schools, with responsibility for over 5000 schools. Is this really what we mean by democracy?

It is important that we find ways to strengthen democratic processes and procedures in relation to education to make space for the dialogue referred to by Biesta. If governments, which are by nature partisan, dictate the nature and

content of schooling, it takes away from individuals, schools and communities a significant degree of power and agency over their own lives.

This point is well illustrated by the current situation in England, where the school system itself is dominated by the principles of the market and where a narrow vision of education prevails, one which prepares children to contribute to a society and an economy based on neo-liberal, consumerist values. Is it the role of a democratically elected government to prescribe the content of the curriculum and the methods of teaching such that schools turn out young people who will contribute to the perpetuation of their political and economic agendas? Alternatively, should education be distanced from the national political domain so that schooling is organised not to serve the ends of any one political party, but rather to meet the changing educational and developmental needs of children and young people?

The aim here is not to make a case for an alternative vision of education to that which is promulgated by any particular government, but rather to suggest that communities should decide for themselves how best to educate their young. Parents, teachers and local people as well as organisations and services that are based in the area surrounding a school all have a stake, and by involving them in decision making, schools would benefit from the breadth of expertise, imagination and local knowledge that they can bring.

How then can schools become more democratic? How can they protect themselves from the unreasonable demands of a politically motivated agenda and counter the incursions of the corporate world in order to better meet the needs of the communities they exist to serve?

Listening to Teachers, Students and Parents

An important starting point would be to ask students, teachers and parents for their views, not in a tokenistic way, but through a genuine and wide-ranging dialogue. Schools generally point to the existence of student councils as evidence that they listen to their students. But for the most part, these bodies do not tend to reflect on the quality of students' experience of learning both in and out of the classroom. When the *Guardian* newspaper conducted a survey of young people to ask for their views about their school life, a common complaint was that their schools councils had no real power (Birkett, 2011). Students commonly discuss how they might address the school's litter problem or any changes they would like to see on the lunch menu, or how they could raise money for their chosen charity rather than anything more substantive. They rarely have the chance to discuss the content of the curriculum, the teaching methods used or how they are assessed. One issue that sometimes emerges is the lack of respect that young people often feel is shown to them by teachers or by their peers. This certainly gets closer to the heart of how they feel about their life at school. Disruptive classmates, stressed staff, demands to take numerous tests and comply with endless rules do not tend to create a nurturing environment. But to what extent are students involved in a dialogue about how

things might be better? In Germany, there is growing understanding of the need to developing a more democratic school culture and many schools are introducing class councils as a way to encourage student participation. Such an approach has been found to promote independent learning and responsible and respectful interaction with others and to enhance self-efficacy, all of which are seen to be important in terms of engaging young people in society and countering dissatisfaction.

And when do teachers or parents get the chance to discuss and really try to understand the experience of young people and the extent to which they feel known, supported and valued? Most teachers themselves feel that they scarcely have any voice at all and that they simply go to work every day and 'deliver' the curriculum. The terminology says it all – a consumer culture in which young people are passive recipients of prescribed knowledge. But that is not at all how real teaching and learning happen. Many teachers feel compromised by the role that they are expected to play. It is not what they went into teaching to do and if they had a say, things could be very different. There is a need for school staff to reflect together. In Scandinavian countries teachers are given plenty of time away from the classroom to talk and plan together. Finnish teachers, for example, work as part of a professional learning community and time is allocated during each day for reflection, collaboration, planning and staff development, all of which are seen as crucial to successful professional life.

As for parents, they are pretty much excluded from any meaningful discussion about what goes on at their child's school. Parent-teacher consultations for ten minutes at a time, once or twice a year, do not allow for a useful exchange of ideas, and many parents find them a source of frustration. They certainly do not create the conditions for building an effective home-school relationship. Most of all, parents want their children to be happy and safe at school because they know that if they are, they are more likely to learn. But they have little opportunity to contribute to discussions about policies and practices, even though they know, perhaps best of all, what their children think about school. In Estonia, some schools have organised Ideas Festivals to involve parents and local people in workshops to explore how they might work together to enhance learning and improve their schools. As a consequence, many parents have offered time and expertise to support teachers.

If more parents in England were to spend time in school occasionally during the day working alongside their children, they would realise the scale of the challenge facing teachers in classes of 25 to 30 or larger still, with wide-ranging attainment levels and hugely varying standards of behaviour. This might kick-start a conversation about how our schools can better meet the needs of children and young people. With concern increasing around issues such as mental health, obesity, intolerance and bullying, such a conversation could be helpful in generating ideas to support schools in addressing such challenges.

Linking Schools with Their Communities

The growing democratic education movement in Israel has seen the emergence of 'education cities' where schools collaborate with a wide range of community organisations to share responsibility for the education of young people. It is recognised that traditional schools on their own are unable to meet the wide-ranging needs of each and every student. A more personalised education can only be achieved by harnessing the resources and support of the town or city surrounding the school, thereby linking education with employment, urban planning and welfare. The idea is to transform the city into one big school to support the learning of all young people, but also as a way of developing the city and changing the lives of adults. Education is no longer confined to taking place within the four walls of a school but becomes a much broader, richer enterprise whereby the development of the individual and the prosperity and well-being of the wider community are inextricably linked.

Perhaps it is time to re-invent the concept of the Community School as one in which all stakeholders are consulted about how their school develops. An ongoing intergenerational conversation between young people, their parents, their teachers, governors and school leaders could contribute to the development of a shared vision of a learning community in which children and young people can flourish. Such a thorough and continual review process is certainly something that could be initiated by a school's governing body and made an integral part of the life of every school, working in tandem with its local community.

The conversations could explore what kind of world we want to live in and how the school can foster attitudes, skills, knowledge and values to help build that world. Participants could discuss how the school might evaluate such attitudes, skills, knowledge and values while also being accountable to society. Such a dialogue would strengthen the school by giving everyone a voice and increasing their sense of ownership. Yes, the external political discourse will continue, but a school which has built the support and commitment of its students, parents, staff, governors – and, critically, its local community – is one that will be strong and resilient.

The academisation and free school agendas were supposed to be about giving schools more autonomy. It is time for schools to use that autonomy creatively to build purposeful learning communities which are responsive to their communities and which put children at the heart of their practice.

Inspiring Democratic Practice from across the UK

In England there are some examples of schools engaged in such dialogue. Passmore Academy in Harlow is part of the cooperative schools movement and seeks to integrate the core cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy and equity into its work. The school sees itself as comprehensive in the truest sense of the word, working to meet the needs of all local children. Indeed, 50% of the town's students with special educational needs attend

Passmores Academy. All members of the school community are able to participate in discussions about how the school might develop. Beckfoot School in Bradford regularly carries out surveys of students, staff and parents to ask for their views on school issues. Feedback from these surveys contributes to the ongoing development of the school as a place which is built on shared understanding and mutual trust. The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire is committed to a person-centred approach to learning. This approach is exemplified by family conferences which involve the child, his or her parents and the teacher in reflecting together on the child's learning and how they can best be supported. There is a culture of dialogue at the school with the aim that all members of the school community feel listened to and respected.

Schools such as these exemplify democratic and collaborative ways of working and have retained a sense of autonomy. In each case they have developed an ethos of trust so that teachers, parents and students can work together for the benefit of students and their communities. It is about creating the space and time to be able to articulate and respond to the needs of those they exist to serve. National politicians and civil servants are inevitably too remote to begin to be able to do this effectively.

It is worth noting that in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland accountability continues to be exercised through local authority and school governance structures. In a recent article comparing the four education systems, Professor Tim Brighouse, former London Schools Commissioner, suggested that 'England remains the poor relation with its centralised system and weakened local government. If a sense of powerlessness is the enemy of democracy, England is more at risk than the other three countries' (Brighouse, 2017).

The Scottish and Welsh systems are undergoing radical reform, a process which, in both countries, involves strengthening the teaching profession and encouraging new ideas to build the active participation of parents and children. By contrast, in England, there are only isolated examples of inspiring practice in schools where head teachers are prepared to challenge the system and do things differently.

Developing a New, Participatory Framework

What is needed is an educational framework which celebrates innovation, which unleashes the creativity of teachers, students, parents and local communities and where exciting ideas can blossom and take root. Such a framework would require ongoing consultation with key stakeholders at school, local and national levels.

Looking at the wider social picture and how education fits into it, the environmental commentator George Monbiot has argued that we need to rebuild local communities in order to overcome the isolation and alienation that many people feel. The worsening mental health of the population is surely evidence of the need for deep social change. He believes that by developing a richly participatory culture we can remake society at grassroots level, and in so

doing, 'it will eventually force parties and governments to fall into line with what people want' (Monbiot, 2017).

Schools are a good place to start and could be the hub of each community, a catalyst for the development of shared values based on cooperation and community regeneration. Michael Fielding, Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education in London, argues that we must 'reclaim education as a democratic project and a community responsibility – and the school as a public space of encounter for all citizens' (Fielding & Moss, 2011).

By working together to renew the comprehensive ideal which links the education process to its local context, we can challenge the democratic deficit and rebuild our schools from the bottom up. It is about creating a more cohesive and inclusive society. It can be done.

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