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Book Review

Rebuilding Our Schools from the Bottom Up:
listening to teachers, children and parents
FIONA CARNIE
London: Routledge
198 pages, paperback, £21.99p, ISBN 978-1-138-21188-9

A bold declaration begins this book. It is about democracy. More precisely, it is 'about strengthening schools by making them more democratic and in turn strengthening democracy through schools, thus contributing to the development of a democratic society' (p. 1). From the evidence of the rest of the book, the form of democracy the author has in mind leans more towards the direct than the representative, but theoretical implications are not discussed here. This is a practical text: 'a portfolio of transformative initiatives and intentions' (p. 151). It offers a plethora of detailed examples of ways and means through which the voices of those customarily marginalised within England's maintained-education system, and of their standard-bearers, can be boosted.

Fiona Carnie takes her cue from John Dewey's idea of democracy as a mode of associated living: 'conjoint communicated experience', as it is termed in *Democracy and Education*, from which Carnie quotes. She has been involved with Human Scale Education, a reform movement whose motto 'education as if people mattered' implies a sharp rebuke to our education system and expresses an ideal which always informs Carnie's text.

Carnie puts her faith in the benefits to be derived for schools, and hence for society, when more people are enabled to matter more. Extending democracy in the maintained-education system would see those interested gather to communicate the experiences, concerns and perspectives expressive of their particular position in relation to the work of the school, and to negotiate and compromise in order to shape shared understanding into a common vision, and an agreed way of proceeding. These 'stakeholders' include teachers, pupils and students, parents and carers, governors, and members of the wider community such as 'local organisations and businesses and local people' (p. 93).

Carnie describes how neoliberal policy has fragmented the education system in England, unravelling that superintendence which local authorities once exercised. Successive education secretaries have gathered power to the centre and instituted a range of methods to control at a distance, as Stephen Ball

has put it. The result has been to exacerbate inequality, enable corporate incursion and clear the way for privatisation. Carnie makes the case against such policy, and in favour of extending participatory democracy within education. She states that 'communities should decide for themselves, democratically, how best to educate their young' (p. 6), and that this is best accomplished by widening consultation and collaboration with stakeholders, and enhancing schools' autonomy and freedom of action. She notes the way in which the three groups listed in her subtitle – teachers, parents and children – are kept relatively powerless. There's no statutory requirement for English schools to consult parents, and no national parental organisation – nor one for young people – which government consults as a matter of course (p. 7). Yet research conducted over recent years suggests that listening to these groups can help change schools for the better.

Carnie concludes her opening chapter by recognising the practical and cultural barriers which hamper the work of extending democracy in education. In particular she acknowledges 'the question of competing agendas ... How likely is it that students, parents and teachers will have the same priorities – and how can parents and schools be sure that the expectations they have of each other are reasonable?' (p. 15).

I'm not sure this question is ever fully explored, though it is returned to more than once. For Carnie, the way forward would seem to be through sustaining a sense of what will be best for the school as a whole, which means continually returning to the material realities being worked with locally, and considering these through the lens of the school's sense of itself and its fundamental values. That is, returning to the ways in which it wishes to answer the questions about what education is and is for, and who is to decide. These are the questions Carnie sets out from. The bulk of her book is devoted to offering examples, resources and case studies which reveal how particular schools have generated processes, structures and practices which widen the discussion attending the questions. No school's work is presented as a panacea. The examples put forward will especially interest school leaders looking to widen participation, and those aspiring to lead who would further a vision of participatory democracy for schools rather than the authoritarian model so often lauded by government.

The text is organised so that a reader may straightforwardly pursue ideas relating to a particular stakeholder group. Each of the five central chapters opens with discussion of the issues likely to arise for the given group, followed by accounts of how schools have met the challenge. As well as short descriptions of particular activities or structures which have proved beneficial, Carnie presents more extended case studies of specific initiatives, policies and practices undertaken in particular schools. The majority of these are from England, but some come from the other home countries, and (in a separate chapter) from abroad. The case studies are presented on the page in individual grey boxes, making them easy to locate when dipping into the book. The degree of detail in the index is helpful, as are the website addresses relating to

individual examples and case studies. The final chapter offers strategies, frameworks and resources for schools wishing to make changes in line with the approaches outlined across the book. Everything put forward here is being used by schools: nothing is speculative.

For those already involved in a school community – teaching and non-teaching staff, school leaders, parents, young people and others – and looking to extend and deepen their school's democracy, this book will be a practical help and a source of great encouragement. I wonder whether a future edition might offer a more nuanced presentation of the important role played by trade unions in espousing the kind of democracy Carnie favours, not least through policy interventions such as 'More Than a Score'. And might not the example from Israel of 'Education Cities' be even more carefully framed, in view of the contentious issues in the locality from which the example is taken?

Governmental dirigisme and diktat have characterised the English approach to maintained education for several decades. Withdrawal of teachers' collective negotiating rights – essentially a dismissal of dialogue – preceded the counter-revolution in curriculum and pedagogy at the end of the 1980s. Ministers imposed an iron framework of national testing and league tables, replaced HMIs with Ofsted, and in due course decreed literacy and numeracy hours while continuing loudly to encourage 'ability' labelling and grouping. They have latterly mandated a single method by which to teach reading, required a phonics check, and welcomed the youngest into school with a baseline assessment test. Children and teenagers continue to pay a price for the way the curriculum has been narrowed and kept narrow, and for the way testing has been mistaken for assessment. Teachers pay a price too. But there's always a counter-movement telling another story, and in the examples of democratic praxis which Carnie gathers, you can hear it. A story of education as if people mattered.

Patrick Yarker