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# Public Education for the Common Good

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**ABSTRACT** The UK's neoliberal polity is undermining the very public institutions it requires to resolve its most pressing collective predicaments, in education especially, with its essential role of enabling society to learn the virtues and practices of cooperative enquiry necessary for remaking the common good. The author begins by understanding the nature of *public* goods and services before discussing the damage wrought by neoliberal governance. The remaking of public education, he argues, presupposes three projects: first, inaugurating public, democratic ownership of all education; second, re-imagining public service comprehensive education; and third, reconstituting democratic public participation for active citizenship in education and community governance.

## Introduction

Public service comprehensive education has been dismantled over 30 years, by Labour as well as Conservative governments, pursuing the restoration of selection and stratifying capabilities. The complementary agenda of contracting the public spaces of democratic deliberation silences the many who object to the appropriation of power, wealth and opportunity. By undermining the framework of democracy itself, the restructuring has lacked legitimacy as well as pedagogic integrity. The neoliberal project, designed to generate enterprise, has, rather, divided society while contracting and fragmenting the public sphere. As this accelerates, we confront the transformations of our time – climate change, the collapse of traditional patterns of work, opportunity and dignity, with migration triggering resistance to cultural difference – all presenting chronic public, collective-action dilemmas, those which cannot be resolved by individuals, but only by citizens cooperating together. Thus the contradiction of a society undermining the very public institutions it requires to resolve its most pressing collective predicaments.

What is the meaning and significance of this recurring theme of publicness? Why should it matter that the public sphere is being undermined in

favour of consumer choice in competitive markets? What is the significance of education for the public sphere?

### **Understanding the Purpose and Governance of the Public Sphere**

A *public* defines the members of a society or community as a whole, the values and interests they hold in common, and the activities which they undertake together. Publicness refers to the inescapable collectivity of any society as against the privateness of particular individuals pursuing their sectional interests to the exclusion of others. The concept of public encompasses nuances of meaning: it can relate to 'any person' within a society (thus, the public park, the public meeting, or being out in public); it can also define 'everyone' inclusively (the public bank holiday or the public rules which require all to drive on the left). Furthermore, publicness emphasises being open to public display and scrutiny (the public document, the public enquiry, the public meeting). Publicness, in particular, refers to our shared interest in meeting common needs – for example, a concern for clean water, fresh air and uncontaminated foods – together with our commitment to common public values in a just society, without which none can flourish. The public interest strives to ensure that all are treated equally in relation to these common goods, and, as Rousseau argued, this is designed to benefit me in common with everyone else rather than at the expense of everyone else. Publicness, therefore, emphasises inclusion as opposed to exclusion, being open not closed, holding in common, not possession in private, cooperative rather than competitive endeavour.

This understanding of publicness is exemplified in the spirit and practice of comprehensive schools as a public service provided for the common good. They are schools whose defining purpose is to be inclusive, taking in all 'abilities' and embracing all ethnicities and classes. No formal boundaries are erected, nor any principles promoted to exclude any young person, and these schools strive to ensure that their composition reflects the diversity of the wider society in general. Although practice has varied, especially in this age of austerity, many comprehensive schools have sought to emphasise the public nature of their institutions, encouraging adults and members of the community to enjoy their grounds, facilities and libraries, and indeed to join in the courses and practices of learning provided. These schools exemplify the public value of learning together to develop the capabilities of all equally throughout their lives. The exemplary public comprehensive school, moreover, will strive to be an open and transparent institution, providing literature and digital access to information that will enable scrutiny of its practices and performance.

The ownership and governance of comprehensive schools illustrates the nature and purpose of the wider public sphere, the distinctive purpose of which is to support and develop our common life together. Governance establishes the purposes, practices and structures created to authorise those collective activities: providing public goods and services (for example, street lighting); producing

collective efficiency (regulating traffic congestion); and, most significantly, establishing collective rules and purposes. They are fundamental because the deep purpose of the public sphere is to constitute ‘the basic framework’, the social and political preconditions that make society possible – the agreements that enable social life to proceed: who is to be a member and what are the defining qualities? What are their rights and duties to each other? What are the rules for determining social justice, the distribution of wealth, status and opportunity? What is it to be a citizen in society, who is to participate and have a voice, what is the practice and dialogue of public accountability?

*The Forms of Public Education Governance and the Failure of Neoliberalism*

The formation of education governance to fulfil these public purposes and practices has changed fundamentally since 1945. Until the mid-1970s the dominant framework of public governance expressed the values of social democracy striving to constitute principles of justice and equality of opportunity and designed to ameliorate class disadvantage and division. Public goods were conceived as requiring collective choice and redistribution. It was the age of professionalism: thus the significance of systems of administrative planning (the local education authority [LEA]) and institutional organisation (the comprehensive school). Citizens were clients, recognising the complexity of professional purpose and practice. Public trust was afforded to the specialist knowledge of professionals and the necessary requirements of answerability could be fulfilled by delegating authority to heads, teachers and advisors – only the trained eye could judge the quality of teaching and the pupil progress. Their monitoring of progress was typically informal and ad hoc.

Following a short period of ‘corporatist’ governance from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, the neoliberal project of reconstructing education and public services generally took hold. A new order of public governance based upon principles of rights, choice and competition was designed to empower the agency of citizens as consumers of public services. This programme of neoliberal restructuring has been designed to undermine public service comprehensive education. Free schools and academies, supported by private trusts, have fragmented the institutional framework without any evidence of improvement (see Benn, 2018; Gorard, 2018), while the restoration of traditional pedagogies has been designed to classify many more children as academic failures, encouraging them to identify expectations appropriate to their purported restricted natures and vocational aptitudes. The increasing segregation of schools and the stratification of achievement in effect rations opportunities through competitive selection rather than in relation to need. The social engineering of marketisation enables differentiation to masquerade as choice (and equity), with access to opportunity tied to those with wealth and cultural capital. Education is returned to its traditional function of social selection and class subordination.

Such social and cultural segmentation has begun to succeed because the 'hollowing out' of local, public, democratic authority that provided the engine for meeting equal educational need has weakened existing checks and balances against arbitrary abuse of power. Citizens once more have become subordinate subjects, bereft of equal rights and justice. The contradiction of confronting collective predicaments with predatory individualism sets the agenda for public education, the most important service in the struggle to develop understanding of and practices for regenerating the public good.

### **Remaking Democratic, Public Governance of Education**

For Hannah Arendt, creating a public sphere, of necessity, often provided the opportunity for a new beginning, an opening up of a common world, and thus the possibility of engaging the common issues that citizens need to confront together in civil society. Such a remaking of public comprehensive education presupposes, I argue, three projects: first, inaugurating national, public ownership of all education; second, re-imagining public service comprehensive education; and third, reconstituting democratic public participation for active citizenship in education and community governance.

#### *Inaugurating National Public Education*

Following the 1944 Education Act, education was described as a national service, locally administered. By the 1960s education had largely become a local government service, though requiring the approval of the Department for Education for some initiatives, such as school building or reorganisation. In the period of neoliberalism, however, marketisation has led, ironically, to the centralised ownership of state education by Whitehall (academies having to be approved personally by the Education Secretary), while creeping privatisation has expanded corporate sponsorship and control of schools. The outcome has been accelerating fragmentation of institutions in addition to an increase in traditional forms of denominational and private schooling.

If equal opportunity is to be realised for all learners in a just society it cannot be acceptable that those with wealth and power can secure for themselves the advantage of 'positional goods' in exclusive settings of learning. For education to be able to play its essential role in promoting mutual recognition and generating the capabilities of all to contribute to remaking society, the service must become a truly national public institution (see Benn, 2018): private schools and church schools to be phased out, and all schools to be restored to local authority leadership and control. The roles of Parliament and the Department for Education are to lead a national conversation to reach shared understanding and agreement about the purposes and practices of education.

*Re-imagining Public Service Comprehensive Education*

If the public sphere is to create the conditions for learning about the common goods that citizens value and about their capacity to cooperate together, the framework of public institutions will need to strengthen the practice of collaboration in two ways: (i) by creating inter-class/cultural campuses, which (ii) promote the pedagogy of learning communities for mutual recognition.

(i) *From school to comprehensive campus.* The original model of the comprehensive school has been an inclusive institution that takes in all 'abilities' and embraces all classes, cultures and ethnicities. The children of the doctor and the miner would go to school side by side. In recent years the practice of establishing partnerships between schools or more formal federations of schools has grown considerably. But if the comprehensiveness of schools is to be recovered, educating children and adults from different classes and cultures together, then the nature of comprehensiveness has to be re-imagined and 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-16 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 common educational and social purpose. I observed this practice emerging in a city in the Midlands, 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 practise with their clients. 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.

(ii) *Towards a pedagogy of learning communities.* If the purpose of the new governance is to create a wider learning community, the public education campus will need to develop a pedagogy of recognition and motivation. What has been grasped in research (see Hasan, 2005; Wells, 2009) is that engaging and motivating the learner depends upon meaning, and meaning is constituted by the lifeworlds which shape our upbringing. The learner cannot be educated effectively independently of her community's webs of significance. If learning is to connect with learners' own history and experience, schools and centres will need to learn to value the cultural capital which students bring and devise a socially and culturally relevant curriculum.

The process of learning is inescapably a journey between worlds, which connects the language of home and community with the language of the public space. Learning is always a bi- (or multi-) lingual experience, as we learn to

move between genres and codes of the tacit and particular and the explicit and universal. Schools cannot achieve their purposes without mediating worlds – remaking themselves as institutions in and for their communities of difference, understanding the interdependent nature of learning and living, and yet encouraging the capabilities that enable learners to flourish between cultures in a cosmopolitan public world. If motivation and meaning are to be realised in school, then a wider learning community is needed to connect the worlds of home and school in order to enable the journey between worlds. The task of the comprehensive campus is to develop their curricular and pedagogic practices so as to mediate the language of home and community with the language of the public space.

### *Reconstituting Public Participation for Active Citizenship*

Because the collective-action dilemmas bear down on the lives of citizens, requiring them to alter the way they live their lives – less driving, more responsible management of energy and waste – the key to motivating change now lies in a radical re-imagining of our democratic citizenship, involving and empowering citizens to take responsibility for remaking the communities in which they live, learn and work. Only a transformation in democracy can engage citizens, and through a practice of deliberating common goods, achieve mutual recognition of cultural differences and social cohesion. The present franchise, however, leaves citizens as passive spectators bereft of voice and agency. Democratic community participation will create the necessary public spaces and encourage the voices of different communities to deliberate over common concerns. Citizens need to reconfigure themselves from being clients dependent on professional knowledge, and then consumers in a predatory market place, to becoming active citizens, *makers* of the worlds in which they are to live and work, rather than merely detached voters in the polity. Can citizens remake the governance of civil society to be a space of public participation and mediation?

The challenge for public governance of the comprehensive campus, therefore, is to constitute the spaces and processes that enable the relevant interests and voices to deliberate the purposes of learning and capability formation. This dialogue cannot be a technical task of calculation, but will need to be governed by the principles of public discussion – the giving and taking of reasons – that can resolve differences and secure public agreement. This process should include not only those directly involved in a school, such as parents and teachers, but also the interests of the wider community, because all will be affected by the public good of educating every child. My research (Ranson, 2018) on school governance has identified a small number of authorities which, having experimented with new forms of cluster and locality governance, sought to move beyond experiment to establish a coherent system of school, community and local governance. The principles for such a framework of governance sought to accommodate and reconcile the tensions that presently

frustrated the practice of good governance of civil society. The local authorities wanted the emerging community governance to be multi-layered and include: executive and scrutiny functions; specialist and civic knowledge; difference and deliberation; professional and citizen membership. These principles were to be developed at three levels of the local authority:

*The level of the school and neighbourhood cluster.* All the schools and centres in a neighbourhood cluster take on responsibility for care and learning of all the young people and families in the community. The challenge is to engage and involve those families in the value of learning that can enhance their capabilities and life chances. Assuming this responsibility of care is not a substitute for pursuing the highest standards of attainment, but a condition for realising them. Elaborating such a learning community can only be formed through cooperation with children, young people and families whose voices are crucial to shaping the purpose of expert knowledge. Forums will be required to allow a neighbourhood strategy and provision to be deliberated and planned. Many local authorities have been working with schools, centres and communities to develop these cooperative practices at the level of the cluster. The comprehensive campus is likely to encompass and seek to integrate at least two neighbourhood clusters at the level of the locality.

*The level of localities.* If the community cluster is to be supported with extended learning activity, this will require planning and coordination at the level of 'the locality', above the cluster and below the authority. For many local authorities, the locality is a third or a quarter of the authority, perhaps 100,000 people. The number and complexity of voluntary services and agencies offering services to schools and centres needs to be negotiated and managed efficiently, preventing duplication and avoiding market manipulation. The local knowledge and the intensity of networking required suggest a point of negotiation and leverage below the local authority, yet above the school community. Furthermore, if clusters are not to become ghettos of learning, then localities provide a space within which young people can move not only in search of specialised courses, but in order to extend their learning about different social and cultural traditions so that they learn to become capable members of a cosmopolitan civic society. The appropriate tier for governing the diverse agencies and services needed to develop the practices of partnership and inter-agency coordination, planning and distribution is the locality. A Partnership Board is proposed, to include the variety of public, private and voluntary interests, and it will focus on preparing the strategic plan for the locality.

*The level of the authority.* What has become evident during the unfolding development of clusters and localities is that the support of the local authority is indispensable. Strategic planning and development will be needed to assess the diversity of needs and to ensure the distribution of resources in a way that meets all those needs. If it is acknowledged that there is no neutral, technical education that can be detached from the perspectives of different lifeworlds, then politics is an inescapable reality of the public sphere. Indeed, an essential role of governing civil society is to ensure that differences are voiced,

deliberated and mediated (see Hatcher, 2012; Fielding & Moss, 2011). The central function of a local authority is to govern the local political deliberation about the purposes and content of education, through processes that ensure public reason so that the shape of local education as a whole is agreed and is believed to be fair and just. The role of the local authority is to build coalitions that create the climate for, and thus legitimate, change. The local council as the democratic centre of local services needs to be restored to its principal role in leading the public sphere of civil society.

### Conclusion

The unfolding argument is that the purpose and practice of comprehensive education must be re-imagined if the public goods it promotes – equal opportunities for all in diverse mutually recognising learning communities – are to be recovered and strengthened. This article has argued that a new beginning for remaking public comprehensive education presupposes three projects: first, inaugurating public, democratic ownership of all education; second, re-imagining public service comprehensive education; and third, reconstituting democratic public participation for active citizenship in education and community governance. Such a reformation of the public comprehensive campus can, I propose, create learning communities that bring together the local and the cosmopolitan in pedagogic practices that realise mutual recognition and social justice.

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