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Building Equitable, Inclusive and Ethical School Communities in a Globalised World

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ABSTRACT Does education have a moral purpose, and if so, how can it be defined? In these troubled times, publicly funded schools which are seen to be equitable, inclusive and ethical in their practice have a key role to play in shaping a socially just world. Drawing on the education renewal currently taking place in Scotland and Wales, the author argues for a clear set of values and greater participation on the part of teachers, students and parents in building learning communities which reflect their moral purpose in society.

Across the world, governments are struggling to cope with the effects of globalisation, conflict and migration. Furthermore, the challenges presented by the climate crisis are urgent. Such issues demand that searching questions are asked about the purposes of education. Is it about enabling those living in rich countries to increase their wealth regardless of the impact on others in less developed parts of the world? Is it about providing a labour force to fuel the relentless pursuit of economic growth? If so, there is likely to be growing discontent in those countries exploited by the West for their natural resources or cheap labour. If, instead, our education system fosters the values, attitudes and skills to create a fairer and more sustainable world, this is more likely to lead to a reduction in such inequity. In these troubling times, education surely has a critical role to play.

In addressing the many challenges facing society, it is not sufficient for schools to impart knowledge in a vacuum. Instead, it is crucial that teachers draw out the connections between subjects such as science, history, geography, literature, economics and food technology and show how they relate to real world issues. If, through their lessons, young people explore the part played by multinational corporations, energy providers, agri-business, drug companies,

supermarkets and clothing manufacturers, they are more likely to leave school understanding that they too have responsibilities as members of a global community, realising that each one of their actions has an effect on others in different parts of the world and involves a moral choice on their part. If children learn to connect with these issues at school by analysing, questioning, debating and using their minds to delve beneath the surface, they will be better prepared to play their part in creating a more equitable world. There is a chance that young people will see that through work and the way in which we live our lives each one of us can make a positive contribution.

The need for educators to take such issues seriously is highlighted by the school climate strikes, started by a lone teenager in Sweden in 2018 and gathering pace across the globe, demonstrating that for growing numbers of young people, business as usual is no longer an option. How then can schools incorporate a moral dimension so that children are challenged and supported to think critically and to make ethical choices?

Core Values for Publicly Funded Schools

Children will be better able to engage with global concerns if they have some understanding of local issues, for which their own experiences are surely the starting point. Two key questions to ask therefore are 'how do members of the school community treat each other?' and 'how does the school community as a whole take care of the world?' Schools can address these questions by becoming more *equitable*, *inclusive* and *ethical*. Such values are key to the creation of a fairer society.

To become an *equitable* learning community involves listening to what children, teachers and parents have to say and ensuring that every voice counts. When children are involved in decisions about their learning, they are more engaged, more motivated, and they do better (Rudduck & Flutter, 2003). School councils which give young people a genuine say on substantive issues – issues that matter to them – help schools to ensure that children's needs are met (Carnie, 2018, p. 10). When parents are given the opportunity to participate in discussions and decisions about issues which affect them, they are better able to support their children. Research indicates that children with engaged parents are ahead of their peers by two to three years (Hattie, 2009). Parent councils and parent forums play a central role in building effective home-school partnerships (Carnie, 2011, p. 158). And when teachers are trusted as professionals, they are better able to develop methods and approaches which are appropriate to their students and their own local situation (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014, pp. 6-7). By listening to these different voices and bringing them together to build a shared sense of purpose, schools are better placed to meet the needs of the communities they exist to serve.

Schools are only *inclusive* if they care for every one of their members. This means integrating children of all abilities, including those with special educational needs. By focusing on the importance of relationships, by making

sure that each child and their family is known, and by giving all teachers a pastoral responsibility that is integrated with their academic role, schools can ensure that every child feels secure and supported. This is no small task, but inclusion is only made real by taking relationships seriously and by valuing all members of the school community regardless of background, race, colour, creed, appearance, disability or sexual orientation. Restorative practices, whereby all members of a school community – adults as well as children – are encouraged and supported to take responsibility for their actions and to make amends for any harm caused, offer an effective framework for building inclusive school communities.

To be an *ethical* community involves ensuring that ethos, curriculum, policies and practices are integrated and have a moral purpose. What this means in practice is that what children are taught and how the school operates on a day-to-day basis do not contradict each other. For example, if children learn about fair trade, then the school's purchasing policy should prioritise fair-trade goods where possible. If children are learning about the futility of war, the school bank account should not be with a bank that invests in the arms trade. If children are learning about climate change, this must go hand in hand with a school transport policy that puts bikes before cars and an energy policy that includes insulating the school and buying energy from renewable resources. In this way, children learn that change is possible and they are part of it.

Developments in Scotland and Wales

Scotland and Wales, both of which have devolved education systems, are paying heed to many of these issues. Through the introduction of their own curricula, the governments of both countries are endeavouring to make education a meaningful and relevant experience which equips children to live purposeful lives in contemporary society.

Scotland introduced its own *Curriculum for Excellence* in 2010, and this was designed with the aim of transforming education by providing a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum for all children aged from 3 to 18. The curriculum makes connections across subject areas and sets out to develop the skills needed for learning, life and work in a fast-changing and uncertain world. As well as fostering successful learners, the aim is to nurture confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Health and well-being are prioritised alongside numeracy and literacy as priorities for all. Learning for sustainability is an entitlement for all learners and relates to every aspect of the curriculum. Sustainable development education, global citizenship and outdoor learning are seen as integral to what and how children learn. Inevitably, some schools have been quicker to change than others, and there has certainly been some disquiet among teachers and parents, for example in respect of changes to assessment procedures; but the momentum is growing. It is worth noting that Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg, reflecting on three decades of educational change in Finland, has observed that 'reforming schools is a

complex and slow process. To rush this process is to ruin it. The story of Finland's educational transformation makes this clear' (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 3). In this context, it is early days in Scotland.

In Wales, following an extensive review of the curriculum and assessment procedures (Donaldson, 2015), a new national curriculum is under development, to be launched in 2022. The aim is to develop more rounded humans who are ethical and informed citizens, able to play an active part in their community and society. Instead of traditional subject boundaries, the curriculum is to be divided into Areas of Learning and Experience to cover the humanities, science and technology, health and well-being, languages, literacy and communication, expressive arts and maths. Assessment is being completely overhauled and there will be no formal tests before GCSEs. Greater emphasis will be placed on continuity by seeing education as a process rather than as a series of steps, ensuring that there is better collaboration when children move from one stage of education to another. And there will be a greater focus on cross-curricular learning. There is a recognition by government that in order to raise outcomes it is important to move away from a narrow, inflexible and overcrowded curriculum. These developments are at an early stage, and there is some resistance both from within the profession and from elsewhere, but, as with Scotland, it is a promising direction of travel.

Both governments are committed to publicly accountable, local schools. Local authorities play a key role in supporting schools and holding them to account. There is still a connection between communities, schools and local government, which, while imperfect, serves to strengthen rather than undermine democracy, contrary to developments in England (where the role of local authorities in education provision has been eroded). There is an understanding of the importance of working in partnership with young people, parents and local communities, and the education frameworks seek to build on those partnerships rather than emasculate them. Children's rights are prioritised, and restorative practices are increasingly favoured over strict, disciplinary approaches. The recognition that schools play an important and active role in nurturing the citizens of the future underpins such commitments.

Neither Scotland nor Wales has followed the English path of academisation. Both countries have rejected the English model in favour of something more forward looking, and more closely aligned with the progressive education systems of countries such as Finland which are achieving more highly on international measures. But in spite of the promising and far-reaching changes taking place in Scotland and Wales, and elsewhere, the Department for Education at Westminster continues on an ideological path, the failures of which, in terms of meeting the needs of all children and of creating a fairer society, are increasingly apparent.

Education as a Democratic Project

Given the many and complex challenges facing society, is it time therefore for publicly funded schools in England to be more explicit about the values they espouse? Is it important to make a clear link between these values and the kind of society aspired to? Should public funding bring with it such responsibilities, and if so, who should decide what those values might be?

It is encouraging that the Ethical Leadership Commission set up in 2017 to support school leaders has, in 2019, introduced a Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education. It reflects the concern felt by many at the direction that education in England is taking, and the desire for change. But until such time as education policy puts people and the planet at the centre of the education process, it will be hard for school leaders to bring about the changes that are so badly needed.

As Michael Fielding has argued, 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, 2010, p. 171). By developing a strong participatory culture in which teachers, parents, students and local communities work together, it is possible to challenge the democratic deficit and create dynamic, forward-facing learning communities for the benefit of all.

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