
Book Review

Education and Democratic Participation: the making of learning communities

STEWART RANSON, 2018

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The poet Michael Hofmann, worldly and astringent, caught and bottled the mid-1980s zeitgeist in his second collection, *Acrimony*. 'The enemies of democracy were back supporting it', one poem begins. In another: 'The newspapers preyed on my mind. On the radio / The National Front had five minutes to put their case'. The eight chapters and their coda which make up Stewart Ranson's book address the intensified political acrimony of our own day. Ranson offers a series of arguments for the importance to democracy of educating its citizens, and for educating them in particular ways.

At the outset, Ranson denounces the demolition of post-war social democratic comprehensive education. Such a system, he argues, was 'inescapably tied to expressing a more general tradition of public value, its commitment to a democratic form of polity, which is underpinned by a moral order orientated to the common good as well as individual opportunity' (p. xix). Together with the creation of the National Health Service, the comprehensive education system was the great achievement of the post-Second World War political order. Recent neo-liberal administrations, including those run by New Labour, have replaced this source of 'expansion and opportunity' (p. 204) with an education system predicated on market choice, rationing and social selection, both covert and explicit. A great deal is at stake for democracy, Ranson warns, in such a change. Gains made by those working to further a 'tradition of expanding and universalising education' (p. 21) have been reversed as '[e]ducation is returned to its traditional function of social selection and class subordination' (p. 20). The Brexit crisis distils many of the trends this change has precipitated. But crisis also opens the possibility for political renovation and re-imagination. Democracy can be remade 'through the participation of citizens' (p. 24) and a new political imaginary may have found its moment.

Ranson draws on a wide range of works of political philosophy to explore his argument about education's fundamental role in the preservation and reproduction of democracy. They provide him with the grounds on which to

make the large claim that '[t]he practice and organisation of education tells us everything about the emerging shapes and codes of a society and political order and its patterns of regulation' (p. 2). Education shapes what is to count as knowledge and how that knowledge is to be interpreted and valued. There has been a significant erosion in the conditions which enable 'mutual recognition' among the citizens of a democracy, conditions on which democracy itself depends. Social and cultural segmentation, the loss of allegiance to shared civic responsibility, and widening levels of inequality have all accelerated the subordination of the citizen to the status of a subject.

Ranson resists such subordination. He argues that '[t]he principle quality of the citizen ... is the capability to find a voice to speak out with others in the public square' (p. 136). Communication in the public sphere is here seen as rational, reliant on a common language of reason-giving and civility, and on a commitment to truth-telling, integrity, appropriateness and 'equality of recognition'. Education is fundamental because 'the aim of education during childhood is to shape the future adult' (p. 70). Ranson sees those adults as 'active members of the democratic practice of shaping everyday life' (p. 74).

In keeping with such a perspective, Ranson considers the importance of pedagogy and curriculum for remaking learning communities. He holds that 'the purpose of learning is not alone instrumental skills, but to create active membership of society ... Learning now needs to be connected to the wider experience of people and the purposes which are to shape their lives' (p. 118). This has profound implications for the way teachers approach their work, which can be seen as

the practice of mediating cultural difference to examine and reach agreement about the points of intersection that reveal what is particular and ... what is common in forms of knowing, understanding and imagining ... A learning profession is now defined by its practice of cultural mediation. (pp. 128-129)

A conception of the citizens' democratic voice in action becomes especially salient in chapter six, which looks at how parents and communities interact with the schools that local children attend. Later chapters engage with issues of governance, and with a renewed push to make our education system a properly comprehensive one. 'A divided nation needs to re-unite to create a just society for all citizens to join together within learning communities to develop the capabilities of each individual while clarifying and enhancing the common good' (p. 190). This vision requires not comprehensive schools alone, but comprehensive campuses encompassing cross-phase educational institutions in a locality. 'Institutions shape human behaviour: that is their purpose', Ranson writes. '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' (p. 198). The governance of comprehensive campuses would secure

‘interconnected layers of democratic authority ... drawn together by the strategic coordination of the local authority’ (p. 191).

Ranson ends his book with a brief and vivid account of his own schooldays. These saw him journey from the local boys’ secondary modern school, ‘a barren, brutal, depressing experience in a dark early twentieth-century building with meagre resources’ (p. 207), to Coventry University and the possibility – subsequently realised – of an academic career, thanks to finding himself among a group of some half-dozen boys chosen to transfer to one of Coventry’s newly built comprehensives at the end of the 1950s.

The energy released by this seemingly arbitrary intervention in his educational trajectory still burns for Ranson, and would seem to have helped fuel the deep exploratory dive into the concept of democratic participation, and education’s role in it, which this book records. I was moved by the concluding valedictory account, subtitled ‘a life transformed’, and by the hints it offers of the wider life which informs the book. The coda salutes a learning community constructed across an adult lifetime. It is itself evidence for one of the book’s chief arguments. Reading the final pages, I better appreciated the book’s dedication. I would have liked to read more in this vein.

However, the book as a whole takes a different tack. Much of its discussion is conducted at a general level and draws frequently on readings from a host of political philosophers, including Hobbes, Hegel, Mill, Marx, Arendt, Dewey, Rawls, Sen and Freire. With multiple abstractions often in play, and many a necessarily long sentence to negotiate, I found the going hard in places. I was helped by the way Ranson deploys vignettes at the end of chapters: briefly described individual case studies of particular local practice, not all of which come from the United Kingdom. The vignettes indicate the ways in which groups or communities have organised (or might be resourced to organise) so as to ensure their raised voice is actually listened to, and that vested interests and established power shall not fully prevail. These briefly illuminated examples offer ways to win, against the grain, space to be active in.

While Ranson’s theoretical explorations are nourished by the work of a range of Marxist and socialist thinkers, the practical political focus of the book tends to be on structures and mechanisms of governance at various levels: local and neighbourhood, urban and regional, and at the level of the polity. Perhaps my uneasiness with the position so tenaciously worked through over the course of the text may simply indicate wariness in respect of the social democratic lens through which this rich mix of recent educational history and longer-stretching political philosophy is to be seen. The tradition of organised working-class opposition in the workplace is largely absent from the discussion. But is it not the workplace, rather than the community, which offers the prime site for disrupting the operations of capital and hence for opening the way to thoroughgoing social renewal? The strike, too, is a school, and the picket line a pedagogy. These forms of democratic participation have much to teach about political realities.

Ranson's book is a contribution which academics specialising in policy will especially welcome for its range of references, seriousness of intent and illumination of complex questions to do with education, citizenship and governance. I remain unsure how the overall approach being advocated (if I have understood it properly) might serve to disarm the challenge posed by those who voice hate. Fascism in whatever guise is not only a rhetoric. It cannot be countered by discursive means alone.

Any state education service is unavoidably meshed with the political, Ranson reminds us, for its functions to reproduce social relations and their contestation. The issues he explores are as vital now as at any time since 1945. In the case of comprehensive education, perhaps none is more urgent than the need to stop misrecognising the nation's children. 'It is the organising assumption of selective education that children are essentially different in kind, like types of timber, which has to be rejected fundamentally' (p. 208). Even so.

Patrick Yarker

