Comprehensive education for mutual recognition

A sacred gift to the nation

Stewart Ranson

Abstract

The post-war consensus has been dismantled in favour of a culture that rewards and empowers a small acquisitive elite at the expense of the great majority. This culture actively prevents the creation of a society of mutual recognition and respect. But without just such a society there can be no true comprehensive education. Where it exists, progressive comprehensive education develops pedagogies of recognition in learning communities that mediate worlds of difference, and, in some areas, has fostered the introduction of tiered deliberative forums to enable at local level democratic discussion of major decisions. This framework offers a model for informing and sustaining inclusive democratic participation of the kind required to establish the new cohesive national-political settlement we need.

Keywords: comprehensive education; comprehensive campus; national-political settlement; citizens' deliberative assembly; democratic participation

Introduction: wreckage

We cannot begin to develop a discussion about the future of comprehensive education without understanding the context of society that shapes our contemporary being. An education is always an expression of larger structures of power. The purposes, practices, structures and resources required to regenerate a just education for all will depend upon agreements that must be forged in the wider polity. What world are we now in?

Strangely, I begin writing on 15 September 2020, the day commemorating victory in the Battle of Britain against an external enemy in 1940. The struggle had been to prevent further devastation of buildings and cities such as Coventry, London and Liverpool. The potential catastrophe frightened the bourgeois middle classes into a unique process of collective solidarity that unfolded from 1942 into a national debate culminating in a political settlement between the estates of the realm – labour, capital and the parties of the state – for the nature and future of the polity. There could be no return to the mass unemployment and poverty of the 1930s. Such inequality was to be replaced by a polity committed to social justice and opportunity. Much was achieved in what Piketty (2014) calls '*le trentes glorieuse*' to the mid-1970s. I judge comprehensive education to be, with

the National Health Service, the great achievements of post-war social democracy: if the latter transformed the health of the people, the comprehensive school transformed the capabilities and opportunities of a generation enabling the expansion of economy and society.

Now, the wreckage we face is not the bricks and mortar of our cities but the very institutional fabric of a social-democratic nation. In part, the enemies remain external forces, corporate conglomerates which have used their power since the 1970s to undermine the earlier political settlement so as to impose a neo-liberal regime of market forces that generate obscene inequality (Stiglitz, 2016), with riches for the few while many are thrown back into poverty. But it is the enemies of social democracy within who present the gravest threat; an ideological faction committed to a small state, deregulation, low tax, low wage, with market forces driven by predatory individualism. We have witnessed already the gradual dismantling of the post-war opportunity state: the brutal austerity imposed on local authorities and the NHS, together with the accelerating deconstruction of comprehensive education, accomplished through a twin strategy of corporate takeover (Wolf in Vaughan, 2016), and instead of expanding grammar schools, selectivity has been realised by introducing assessment systems designed to so accentuate difficulty as to strengthen strict hierarchies of failure (Rosen, 2015; 2016).

The political insurgency has now become a coup with a small cabal directing the institutional and cultural attack on the fabric of the social-democratic state: threatening the judiciary, attempting to break the international rule of law, proroguing parliament, dismissing leaders of the civil service, and contracting the BBC. The business of government, moreover, has been infected by corruption and incompetence (Sir Simon Jenkins, 2020). Placed at risk are the rule of law, what Rawls (1972) calls truth and public reason, and the foundations of our democracy, from school governing bodies, to local councils and the authority of parliament.

We cannot escape searching for the deep structure of culpability. Yes, there are the external forces of the tech giants, and yes, a political party has been taken over by an extreme faction. But ostensibly decent men and women elected the leaders of the faction, and although elections may have been corrupted nevertheless a mass of 'ordinary' people voted in good faith for contested policies. However, the deeper internal structure of our collective malaise lies elsewhere. Elections are what Braudel would call '*événements*', passing political events. What must now be addressed is what he calls the '*longue durée*' of deep-seated political culture: what I conceptualise as bourgeois middle-class acquisitive greed (Tawney, 1930; Collier and Kay, 2020) and denigration of the mass of the people, strangers, whom they despise and would not dream of sharing their wealth with, as the post-war middle classes chose to do to pay for the welfare state.

Until this deep culture is addressed there can be no social justice, no equality of

opportunity, no comprehensive education. Naming new buildings or creating new assessment systems will not be enough. When will the bank manager send her child to the local multi-ethnic school arm in arm with the child of the Deliveroo rider? The indispensable spirit of mutual recognition and respect, on which this depends, is the most important challenge facing the polity, and comprehensive education, bringing different classes, cultures and races to learn together as citizens and makers, is its principal mission and sacred gift to rebuilding the nation.

Foundations for renewing comprehensive education

Remaking comprehensive education for this demanding task will depend upon two interdependent conditions: a new political settlement and the creation of democratic learning communities, the success of the former depending upon the effectiveness of the latter. The limitations of the 1945 settlement have been ably dissected by McKibbin (2010): it focused upon economic measures to support the working class while leaving the institutions of democracy and society untouched, principally the pillars of privileged education, the private schools. It was their perceived role in securing elite status that was problematic for a polity aiming to secure fairness for all. Retaining schools for the rich made it more difficult to remove the grammar schools, which protected privilege for the middle classes. It was a settlement that believed it could raise the working classes while leaving the class hierarchy in place. Providing jobs, houses, hospitals, schools and pensions might raise the floor for the working class, but unless the institutions of privilege and inequality are reformed, society remains divided, unequal and broken by the spirit of deference. McKibbin's stricture is that privileged elites can only be undermined by carrying through democratic impulses into reform of political structures and social institutions.

1. A new political settlement for a democratic public sphere

The necessary project now is for a new political settlement to restore but expand the achievements of the post-war agreement to generate social justice. Substantial wealth will be needed to rebuild the public domain while responding to the collective action dilemmas of expanding educational opportunity, as well as confronting climate change, migration and the restructuring of work. Picketty (2020a, b) insists upon the immediate need for taxing the multi-millionaire elite, preparatory to restructuring the tax system that will restore high rates equivalent to those following the Second World War, enabling redistribution from the rich to the poor. Such measures need to be accompanied by an annual wealth tax, regulation of inheritance, together with the revaluation of outmoded property taxes. Success with this project, however, depends upon building a coherent democratic consensus.

This is the centre of McKibbin's critique, the need to remake the democratic framework of the public sphere. I judge three developments to be essential: restoring the expansive authority of local government; inaugurating national public education; and re-imagining comprehensive education.

Local government: strategic planning and development will be needed to assess the diversity of needs, and to ensure the fair distribution of resources and opportunities. The central political function of a local authority is to ensure that differences are voiced, deliberated and mediated through processes that ensure public reason, so that the shape of local education, health and economic development as a whole are agreed and believed to be fair and just.

Inaugurating national public education:

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 then the service must become a truly national public institution (Benn, 2018): private schools, church and other religious schools, to be phased out, and all schools to be restored to local authority leadership and control. The role of the Department for Education will be to orchestrate a national conversation for equality of opportunity.

Re-imagining comprehensive education, from school to campus

If comprehensiveness is to be developed, educating together children and adults from different classes and cultures, then its form has to be re-imagined 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-sixteen 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 Midland city, in a study of fourteen to nineteen 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 (Ranson, 2018).

2. Remaking local democracy for deliberative learning communities

Any reformed national political settlement will depend, I want to argue, on citizens persuading themselves of the necessity for this social and cultural reconstruction.

This can only emerge from radical reforms that will enable citizens to participate in the creation of democratic learning communities. Until they have been developed and begun to accomplish their work, of raising consciousness for collective action for the common good, the agenda of a new political settlement for social justice and public education will struggle to be realised.

Progressive comprehensive education in leading local authorities can provide the necessary model. The practice of the comprehensive campus is to develop pedagogies of recognition in learning communities that mediate worlds of difference, enabling young people to journey between the parochial worlds of home and community, and the public spaces of work and democratic participation. The process of learning is inescapably a journey between worlds, developing the capabilities that enable learners to flourish in cosmopolitan cultures. For example, communities, parents, children and teachers entering discussions about how to extend and deepen the curriculum: the different, but presently excluded, histories that have shaped their lives (cf. David Olusoga, 2017) or the different poems and stories that have inspired them (cf. Malorie Blackman, 2001). Tully understands the importance which young citizens will need to place on conversation to reach mutual understanding: 'Exchanges of views in intercultural dialogues nurture the attitude of "diversity awareness" by enabling the interlocutors to regard cases differently and change their way of looking at things … it is a view of how understanding occurs in the real world of overlapping, interacting and negotiated cultural diversity in which we speak, act and associate together' (Tully, 1995, p110).

From my own research I encountered narratives of young people entering learning communities to understand how to remake the wasteland bordering the school (Glasgow), or young people liaising with local communities to design a play area and garden (Birmingham) or discussing how to design a simple electrical mechanism to alert a warden in a care home (Knowsley). These young citizens were learning that worlds can only be made and remade together, and that requires 'recognising' others as valued members of the community and with capabilities to contribute to the activities on which the community depends. Similarly, we can only become ourselves when others recognise and value what we can bring to the practical remaking of our environments (Taylor,1994; Honneth, 1995). If civic worlds are to be remade materially and socially, the young citizens will need to learn to enter the public space to deliberate with others who may hold very different views, rooted perhaps in different cultural traditions, about the direction a project of remaking might take. They will need to express their point of view, but also listen to those of others and to assess the quality of reasoning that supports the different proposals.

Progressive comprehensive authorities, my research indicates, have been developing the spaces for learning communities to unfold and coordinate their practice. They have

created participative neighbourhood cluster forums to deliberate different learning needs of young people, families and communities (Ranson, op. cit.). These clusters would then network and negotiate with democratic forums at the level of the 'locality', a sector of an authority. The local authority, finally, would draw together the deliberations to form agreements and judgements about need, resource and distribution. Such discussions could then inform the national debate in parliament.

Learning communities, the basis for deliberative assemblies

The practice of progressive comprehensive education, I have been arguing, can provide a model for developing the conversation that is required for the nation to reach agreement about a new political settlement equivalent to that forged between 1942 and 1945. That settlement grew out of acknowledging the prospect of catastrophe. We too are looking into an abyss: the collective action dilemmas of climate change, migration, a world without work and collapsing educational opportunity, all requiring public consensus in a context of difference, inequality and conflict. If the present crisis is to be confronted, then its resolution will depend upon citizens entering an inclusive, democratic conversation in their local forums to deliberate and agree the nature and purpose of the common good.

The present crisis, many argue (cf. Rowan Williams, 2019), can draw upon a powerful democratic mechanism to enable the required social and cultural cohesion, a 'citizens' deliberative assembly',[1] which was adopted so successfully in Ireland to mediate a society divided about abortion. The assembly (as reported in *The Guardian* leader on 21 December 2018) comprised a chairperson and ninety-nine citizens selected randomly to be electorally representative. They met twelve times at weekends over eighteen months, considering climate change and an ageing population as well as abortion. Citizens listened to and asked questions of experts, and reached a consensus to make recommendations to parliament. The assembly voted to have no restriction on termination in early pregnancy. This was supported in a subsequent referendum. Politicians who had observed a civil conversation between citizens learned to moderate their traditional rancour, and the law was changed.

Conclusion

Some of the practices of these citizens' deliberative assemblies can contribute to democratic reform. They fail, however, to meet McKibbin's insistence on the need for extensive, radical democratic reform. If the present crisis is to be confronted there needs, similarly, to be much greater participation of citizens nationally. My argument has been that the practices of progressive comprehensive education in introducing tiered deliberative forums can provide the framework for inclusive democratic

participation to inform a cohesive national-political settlement comparable to that in 1945 which lasted thirty years.

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Notes

1. See the work of J. D. Stewart. A central theme of John Stewart's research through his career has been democratic community governance. He wrote a series of papers describing the innovations to local democratic practice, anticipating the idea of citizens' deliberative assemblies: including citizens' juries, deliberative opinion polls and consensus conferences. See, John Stewart (1995) *Innovation in democratic practice,* (1996) *Further Innovation in democratic practice*, and (1999) *From Innovation in democratic practice towards a deliberative democracy*, all published as Occasional Papers, University of Birmingham, School of Public Policy.

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