Something wasn't right ...

Democratic experiences for children in a Scottish primary school

Andrew Killen with Chris Holligan

> Today at a staff meeting I briefly discussed the importance of increasing democracy in school. In particular I encouraged discussion on the possibilities and challenges of children having increased autonomy and becoming more involved in decision making processes. Normally teachers are polite, but noncommittal when I broach this subject, but today there was an air of resistance to any notion of giving children more democracy. It was the most direct I had been about changing our existing structures to ones that were more democratic. (Research diary entry February 2019)

Abstract

Children's treatment in the school environment has barely changed over many decades. Norms of obedience, discipline and control persist to define their 'place' in hierarchies of schooling. This is in direct contrast with freedoms they enjoy outside of school from, for example, their use of information communication technology, use of time and range of choices. This article is an autoethnographic study recounting my experience of working in an urban primary school.[1] Over a two-year period, during which time I held a senior leadership role, I recorded my experiences in a daily journal or diary. My focus was on children, especially children living in areas of intergenerational exclusion. I asked how democratic and therefore inclusive state schooling is. I focused on the experience of children through their interactions and relationships with school structures and its professionalised culture. To that extent their experience was as subordinated social agents of an education policy hinterland whose micro-institutional structures undermine the agency and well-being of unsuspecting working-class children.

Keywords: children; democracy; education; professionalism; policy; Scotland; social justice

Introduction

Research as an academic pursuit in a university was an alien world for me. My identity lay in the craft of being a school practitioner in a community where I experienced a rewarding sense of personal commitment and belonging. I felt more comfortable being with people who were visible daily in the same building and where teamworking norms of schoolwork and craft knowledge set out routines and boundaries whose social glue meant I went to work sharing with others a common purpose. Whilst academics on

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a university campus are also mixing with colleagues, that culture of research outputs and grant capture felt individualistic, selfishly competitive and obsessively status- or rank-oriented. For me, a sense of belonging mattered to my well-being, and I thought I shared this with the children attending my school; having agency and voice gave me that connection.[2]

In my mind, the word 'research' conjured up preoccupation with experiments, hypothesis testing and ideas over people. Research as a 'cold' expertise did not sit comfortably with my desire to serve a community of real people living unique and stressful lives. I entered teaching aged over 40, having been employed in the Post Office for over 20 rewarding years. I enjoyed the physical exercise, being outdoors and banter from the addresses I visited daily. The Post Office's collectivist unionised culture fostered camaraderie. At Christmas, money and other kind gifts were left for me on a myriad of doorsteps. Before the British government's neo-liberal-inspired privatisation agenda and the resulting national strikes, being a postman was a role that – besides autonomy – afforded me a social base from which I contributed to the local community whose members daily conveyed their fondness as we passed on the pavement. My interest in politics and an increasing desire to gain formal qualifications resulted in me accessing university, which led to a new career in school teaching. As evidenced by the policies described later in this article, I had noticed a trend whereby social policy was annexing, through the work of professionals and experts, the socialisation process of children. Government legislation replaced the need to raise issues of politics and morals.[3]

Not long after I qualified as a teacher, and over a two-year period during which I found myself in a senior leadership role as acting headteacher, I recorded my experiences in a daily journal. One experience is set out beneath this article's title. It describes resistance by my school colleagues to supporting a democratic agency for pupils. I wanted to see pupils win more respect from these colleagues through gaining regular opportunities for sharing their voice and influencing processes of school management. The research I have drawn on for this article has grown from my reflective experiences that such a diary entry typified while working in primary schools, and from a growing frustration at the historical norms of authority and obeyance still characterising the national system of Scottish state primary school education. The catalyst for this study was essentially that something 'wasn't right' in primary school education, and, to reflect more systematically upon my concerns, a university-inspired PhD dissertation emerged as an autoethnographic investigation into its nature and cause.

Troubling questions

By stepping beyond the personalised and conformist limitations of reflective practice, and the constraining norms of policy elites, including the General Teaching Council

for Scotland (GTCS), my recourse to a more universalistic academic framing meant I could connect with other traditions of knowledge and associated norms of critique. In these ways I shrugged off stultifying hierarchies that circulate throughout schooling and their prescribed ideals of professionalism. Typical of the questions which troubled me were: What do I envisage as the aspects of democracy that I strive for in my image of a democratic school? What do I expect to change from current practice? In what way might children's experiences now be different from those of earlier generations? Paul Willis describes a lack of empirical research that challenges and reflects upon normative de-contextualised ideas of leadership,[4] examples of which are found in the Scottish government's notion of the strong school leader, a mantra that has swept through the public sector as a question-begging panacea for its supposed failings, as benchmarked by international league table rankings or attainment gap discourse. My research was designed, in part, as an attempt to address the conceptual lack Paul Willis identified, by watching the everyday life of a school, and without feeling bound by neo-liberal articulations of a rhetoric of professionalism imported from business cultures in terms of how I watched and what judgements I made during my diary recordings. Anthropological approaches to capturing cultural values situate this research work as 'deep hanging out', where paramount importance is given to intersubjective encounters.[5]

The children in my school lived in areas of intergenerational deprivation which I noticed affected their esteem, well-being and views on life. From my early days in teaching I became aware of many extended families who are apparently permanently without choice and opportunity living within working-class communities, and subject to the whims of official welfare policies. I grew to share Paul Willis's anxiety about the disappearance of class as an analytic and political category in UK politics.[6] Instead, importing ideals and norms from a business for-profit market was seen as being the panacea to settling the systemic shortcoming of a putative underachieving education system. A report by Shelter Scotland on bad housing and homelessness indicates that market solutions seem to take no account of the wider conditions of children's lives. According to Shelter:

> One in ten (96,000) children are living in overcrowded homes … one in five (179,000) in fuel poverty … [and]186,000 in homes which have condensation or damp, or both, putting these children at a higher risk of respiratory problems.[7]

Throughout my life I have held the strong belief that society is unequitable. I feel that increased democratic social practices throughout everyday school life would produce increased opportunities for well-being for groups especially marginalised by age and class. As headteacher of the school, I also had concerns over the hopelessness and low aspirations that poverty breed. I questioned how children escape deprivation and its anxieties. I was uneasy at the existing school structures and practices of controlling

children, and I was anxious about how teachers communicated with children. I considered that increasing democratic experiences for children might reduce the social and emotional plight of many of them, as these experiences offer markers of respect, voice and opportunities to raise esteem through contributing knowledge and understanding. It seemed to me that schooling projected a deficit model over their lives that originated in prejudice about their community of origin.

As an auto-didact I was influenced by people who had written about these issues, including Paul Willis, Michael Apple, John Dewey, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci and Michael Young. Impulsively perhaps, I would visualise during my school perambulations A.S. Neill's (1883-1973) Summerhill School where pupils took part in daily meetings with staff to decide the curriculum and pedagogy for that day.[8] A core tenet of Summerhill was that children could best guide their own development.[9] Others argue that there is a need to sensitise citizenship learning experiences to the needs of students and staff embedded in their social contexts, a view consistent with critiques of grand narrative education policy concepts.[10]

Ethnography and ethical dilemmas

This paper utilises qualitative data in the form of research diary entries I developed as a newly appointed headteacher at a Scottish primary school. I adopted a process of writing diary entries about daily events, and whatever engaged my attention as important. Often my observations were several pages in length. My fieldwork was immersive and multi-method, and it included participant observation. The substance of the study reported in this paper is on the culture of meanings that school practices illustrated. My professional work environment was found to construct, in certain ways, children as school learners and individuals with an attached implicit status.

Autoethnography inevitably harbours difficult moral and methodological dilemmas. The researcher is a member of the social world being analysed, categorised and evaluated. The participant-observer role in my case connected me to two different political communities. On the one hand, as a serving headteacher my professionalism fell under the gaze of the GTCS and my employer.[11] Each role elicits ethical issues: as a critical academic I have made myself stand apart from my school colleagues, whom I evaluate both in a research role and as their effective line manager. In my identity as research academic, with exceptions, I was not strongly obligated to intervene or seek to change behaviours that were perceived as being professionally unacceptable, in contrast to my role as headteacher where, if things made me uncomfortable, action would be expected of me to correct them in some way. This intersectionality or conjunction of roles proved a source of difficulty for me throughout my research. I grew to observe my complicity in the inadequacies that I noticed.

In one of my first diary records I recognised dilemmas, but did not feel I resolved these entangled roles and identities in a satisfactory manner:

> Today I oversaw the new seating arrangements in the dinner school. The children are now expected to sit in places decided by the teacher on dinner duty and not, as before, wherever they choose. A considerable number of children were displeased with the new arrangements. My understanding is that the teachers on dinner duty dismissed the complaints of the children apparently without any thought of engaging in dialogue with them. Later a group of children came to complain to me that they had been treated unfairly. The children were unhappy because they were not consulted and because of the way in which their complaints were dismissed by staff. My first thoughts were of a realisation and shock that I had acted against my moral principle of including children more in decision making. Why weren't the children involved in the decision process to make these alterations? I could easily have brought it up at a pupil council meeting or during assembly. No-one thought to ask them! How dare I pontificate on the lack of democracy in schools when I was too busy to practise it myself! Although this incident is unlikely to cause any long term or significant emotional or psychological damage to any of the children, it does succinctly highlight for me the issue of lack of democracy and voice in schools. My feeble excuse was that I was too busy with other matters to include the children in this decision. Actually, I probably also thought that this matter was not important enough to consult them.[12]

It seems that I had become subjugated by a professional culture whose hierarchies meant I sided with adults. I neutralised my inaction by producing defences which illustrated behaviours that maintained the status quo to which I objected.

In other diary entries such tensions continued, suggesting I may have felt that I risked becoming a vulnerable outsider had I followed my espoused values and intervened in line with them. I thought my case study school was embedding and practising social and political values which were incongruent with a policy rhetoric premised on an unhelpfully general conception of child well-being. I inferred the professional development of my staff had not included experience of training around promoting democratic agency, nor was that vision a part of my training as headteacher.

I recognised that whilst I was their headteacher and line manager in situ, it was the local authority (LA) that employed my teaching staff. It had ultimate authority over my livelihood, as well as the adequacies of professionalism. I could find no LA policies that addressed my concerns or publications that would otherwise be sources to support my intervening in local school and classroom practices. The book *Summerhill: a radical approach to child-rearing* by A. S. Neill was published in 1960, decades prior to the ideological revolution where schooling became judged through the lens of employability,

competency and skills audit agendas. The political zeitgeist had transformed my educational philosophy into an anachronism, a legacy my fellow Scot A.S. Neill and his supporters had experienced as outsiders even earlier. Besides the historical milieu, the act of observing practices also turns us into outsiders.[13]

Policy oppression

The historical role of schooling, to protect and nurture well-being in a haven, is nothing new. However there are other voices that cast doubt upon the state's interest in maintaining schooling as a form of liberal education that allows for the agency and culture that is valued in this paper.[14] Within and beyond schools in Scotland, Mowat identified the quality and strength of social support networks as being critical to children's well-being.[15] Despite the availability of bodies of academic critique, official policy interventions in Scottish schools have not responded to the impact of critical findings generated by scholarly research. Instead, bureaucratic framings of childhood and its need for protection have dominated the Scottish government's social policy.[16] Michael Apple comments that all too often policy-makers throw slogans 'at problems rather than facing the hard realities of what needs to be done'.[17]

One candidate policy consistent with Apple's analysis is the Scottish government's child-centred policy document 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC). The message of GIRFEC is that state education must support families and mould itself around a needs model of welfare. The stated aim of GIRFEC is to help children grow up feeling loved, safe and respected. Realising potential depends on such care.[18]

Some question this familial characterising of education, arguing it developed in tandem with the rise of micro-managerial politics and the construction of parenting as a skills training pursuit for families in need.[19] Congreve found Scotland has a higher proportion of people in poverty in the social rented sector and a lower proportion of people in the private rental sector than the rest of the UK; poverty in the social rental sector in Scotland has started to rise.[20]

Moreover, in terms of policies developed in such a Scottish demography, the government argues, GIRFEC is based on children's rights and its principles reflect the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Whilst poverty is not an obvious variable in this conjunction of political rights, it can be argued GIRFEC is a measure designed to ameliorate harm. The GIRFEC approach is 'child-focused' where the child is posited as being at 'the centre for decision-making'. And yet, as this paper demonstrates, the schoolchild's life is not experienced as empowering. GIRFEC includes eight factors defined as indictors of child well-being: safety, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included.[21] These eight factors, however, do not penetrate the fabric of experienced childhood within the school. In tandem

with this calculative metric lies the ideological model of heroic efficiency based upon a masculinised model of an effective leader. In June 2008, the Scottish government characterised the solution to pupil (mis) behaviour in schools in terms of a positive school ethos delivered through a national improvement framework. It was stated the latter ensured 'clear priorities' to deliver 'excellence and equity'.[22] Strong school leadership, it claimed, is 'authoritative and distributed'. Such militaristic policy conservativism suggests child welfare policy in Scotland no longer has an agenda for social change.[23]

Policy-makers have sought to promote capitalist neo-liberal goals, and, by importing these into the state education system, govern its direction towards the production of 'suitable' mind sets. My pessimism was recorded in the following research diary entry:

> Teachers are burdened with the expectation to self-evaluate as stipulated by HM Inspectorate of Education. There is also an existing structure of enterprise and citizenship in schools with its expectation of raising awareness and involvement with activities involving people from outside of education. Do we have time to think about increasing democracy when teachers are so occupied with behaviour conflicts, the audit culture and maintaining an appropriate level of continuous professional development? There are these and many other reasons why democracy for children is a peripheral issue in the primary education environment. I believe it should be brought into greater focus.[24]

That concept of enterprise is designed to produce the capitalist mind set at an early age in children. The Inspectorate, rather than being an advocate of innovation, was inhibiting school processes endorsing democracy and citizenship. Obligations prescribed by the GTCS and line mangers to undertake 'continuous professional development' ironically hampered teachers being able to address social justice in situ. Michael Apple describes how education policies are influenced by the neo-liberal international economy that defines the nature of effective education.[25] Ideological dynamics, he argues, have fundamentally restructured education policy, as Waiton demonstrated in terms of Scottish social policy's bureaucratic paternalism.[26]

Diary narratives

Contrary to GIRFEC's sloganeering, I recorded reminders of my emotionally nuanced observations that certain school experiences were anathema to cornerstone values of democracy, one of which is inclusive well-being:

> I am alarmed that many children appear not to enjoy their time at school. Often, I despair at the way they are spoken to, and I worry at the ease with which adults can exclude them from discussions. I worry that in some way this treatment sets a trend which for many of the most vulnerable is replicated throughout their entire

> life. I wonder how many of my colleagues would share my concerns and suspect, for instance, that many in school leadership regard democracy for children with a mixture of apathy and suspicion.[27]

It upset me to record and reproduce this diary entry, which indicated that the hardships found outside school in their communities were being compounded and reproduced, not ameliorated. Paul Willis in *Learning to Labour* (1977) had also argued that school socialises students to remain within their class of origin.[28] I felt alone in my professional judgement that others appeared unaware of the values of their practices in the treatment of these children. I learned how entrenched and conflicted I was personally towards giving children space to choose. I was sufficiently moved to record one such episode in my diary:

> Recently I had first-hand experience of how the resistance and even negativity from children towards those in authority can easily become entrenched, when a group of our pupils felt it necessary to question the school management's judgement and integrity. The pupils were displeased over how I had allocated activities for 'golden time', a time set aside on Fridays for fun activities, and annoyed by another senior member of the management team who had allegedly accused one of them, in front of the whole class, of being a bully. I welcomed the challenge from the pupils – I was genuinely pleased, although I did feel a little uncomfortable when I analysed their grievance and my part in it. On reflection, I do also admit to feeling a little defensive over their accusations that I had acted unfairly towards them. My pride was hurt because children were being critical of what I perceived to be my democratic and thoughtful ways towards them! Thankfully, however, I resisted the natural urge to persuade the children that I had acted appropriately or that they in fact were misguided with their protestations.[29]

My sense was that these observations should not be shared except with my doctoral supervision team. I felt they represented me as someone who was estranged from the mainstream which, as head, I was expected to personify. I grew to believe, encouraged by my diary contents and ruminations on them, that I wanted to connect with a professional life where the liberal education I favoured made voice and belonging fundamental to education. The principle behind A.S. Neill's Summerhill School, founded in 1924, was freedom coupled with choice and the opportunity to challenge adults; there, students and teachers developed collaboratively many policy decisions.[30] Ironically in a democratic state, Summerhill was threatened with closure by the Labour Party's secretary of state for education and employment David Blunkett. I remembered reading in *The Independent* newspaper on 28 May 1999 his policy distaste for this Suffolk-based school as a self-governing democratic community. Giroux, in the vein of Summerhill's ideology, states: '[educators need] to assert a politics that makes the relationship among

authority, ethics, and power central to a pedagogy that expands rather than closes the possibilities of a radical democratic society'. [31]

Giroux inspired me to conclude by coupling what I saw in school with my earlier policy rumination that schooling in Scotland at best conspired against sustaining a radical political vision. Democracy pivots on mutual respect and human connection.

The next theme to emerge from my diary I classified as democracy through relationships. The latter, I conclude, are exercised in places respectful of differences in cultural autonomy. My diary entry resonates with disappointment:

> I seem to worry about the nature of the relationship between teacher and pupil. I have always considered it rather strange that some teachers feel it unnecessary or even inappropriate to establish any meaningful relationship with pupils. I am amazed and frustrated when I observe teachers who are unwilling to even look at children as they pass them by in the corridor or dinner school. I wonder at the impact on a child when their teacher walks passed them without even a glance in their direction. To me it sends out a message to these children that they are not valued by teachers. A basic element of any effective relationship should be a willingness to have dialogue and to communicate in an equitable fashion.[32]

I felt social distancing from children by staff in terms of formal, disciplinary boundaries undermined the emotional and moral support the children needed. I see less distanced relationality as a necessary condition for encouraging the voice of children in decision-making. I wanted to probe into why teaching staff did not – as I perceived – manifest empathic ties, and if critical incidents in their employment had instigated a degree of disengagement. John White relates human flourishing in school education to loving as an activity.[33] If teachers do not love their vocation the love he identified is unlikely to be experienced by children in their care. Fostering the voice of children is, he implies, constituted by forms of loving. I wondered who the reference group was for these teachers and what values they identified against, and if they were aware of the pedagogic and well-being implications of relational distance.

These philosophical issues went unaddressed in the policy Ivory Tower of Scottish elites whose agendas I grew to feel were troubling and deficient. I did not feel empowered or supported by my employer or the profession to sensitively question colleagues. Critics highlight the technocratic tinkering of policy-makers and the power imbalances favouring bodies outside schools whose policies sever human connections with school staff and replace communication by coercive metrics.[34] There is clearly a vast hinterland of meaning to draw upon to illuminate the subtle expressions of professional disengagement referenced. One theme emerging connects with the nature of professionalism in terms of treating children. Should teachers be judged along the

lines of the values I privilege around child-centredness, or is that an area of personal choice?

Conclusion

The treatment of schooling and its teaching personnel has become in recent decades harshly managerial; market liberalism and social disempowerment characterise the dubious strategic renewal of contemporary education.[35] Furthermore, the redefinition of schooling processes in conditions of strategic corporatisation modifies the professional capital of teachers in terms of how they construct children's well-being in these imposed neo-liberal cultures of surveillance and metrical accountability.[36] This model of schooling requires a performativity of selfhood that is competitive and status based.[37] A concomitant effect of a collectivist professional subordination that enacts neo-liberal policy is revealed in the disconcerting discoveries reported in my diary observations. Children's agency and participation suffered. The inevitable outcome of a political culture of complicity between neo-liberal government and ratified professional practices distorts and undermines the educational well-being of children. I felt children's attainment as learners was, as Michael Apple adumbrated, undermined by foreign discourses of managerialism and mantras of internationalisation that erased social class.[38]

Children's social democratic flourishing is denied by imported models of efficiency privileging conformist ideas of employability and skill agendas. As Barker and Hoskins argue,[39] children are guided by their internalised class dispositions which colour their school expectation and self-labelling.[40] Their class position is assimilated daily as a 'lived' structure of feeling.[41] It is an identity within a hierarchic society where they become cultivated to know a 'place'. Paul Willis argues in this vein that state school cultures collude with the classist orientation of school pupils to help ensure their social immobility. [42, 43] A policy and professional culture that seems uninterested in altering authority structures is likely to mean that these learners may continue to assimilate the values of a school environment and policy environment which is strangely distant, whilst at the same time desirous of compelling them to consume educational capital that is rarely debated or questioned by those in the policy bubble in Edinburgh. John White reminded us of the place of love. Schoolchildren need more opportunity to pursue things they love, and not be subjected alongside teachers to policies of audit framed on employability agendas.

Citizenship is about 'who belongs' and the responsibility that accompanies belonging. Meaningful democratic citizenship relies upon vigilant and engaged publics to ensure government is monitored and transparent.[44]

Of course, resistance by those who benefit from the status quo is likely. They will

find the pupil empowerment we favour in schooling threatening to their values and self-interests. This paper's diary monitoring concludes that practices of state schooling are in opposition to a notion of citizenship congruent with developing the human capacities required for democratic participation in families, communities and beyond. The socialisation of teachers, including their initial training and induction into the profession, needs to exercise attention to inculcating values that nurture the voice of children. The induction and education of student teachers ought to embrace approaches where those teachers learn how to collaborate with schoolchildren in equitable social relationships that support them to flourish and to question practices.

Andrew Killen is a lecturer in the School of Education and Social Science at the University of the West of Scotland, in Ayr. He is hugely interested in 'free' schools such as Summerhill in England. Prior to becoming the headteacher of a state primary school, he was a postman for the Royal Mail for over 20 years.

Andrew.killen@uws.ac.uk

Chris Holligan is a professor in the School of Education and Social Science at the University of the West of Scotland, in Ayr. He has published widely in a range of disciplines and has an abiding interest in the ways in which changes of society and the economy impact on education policy and schooling.

chris.holligan@uws.ac.uk

Notes

1. This paper came to be constructed as a collaborative project when Andrew drew Chris's attention to his work in progress. Andrew devised an early draft reporting his autoethnography with Chris, who then developed it into the current paper through sourcing relevant literature and identifying contemporary issues. Chris drew out the relevant connections with policy trends in the UK and Scotland, as reported in educational and sociological research

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