EDUCATION FOR A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY

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What is democracy? What does a healthy democracy look and feel like? And what is the role of education in making it possible?

To put it simply, democracy is a name for any situation in which groups of people are able to make decisions together about the things which affect them, and to enact those decisions. This sounds simple, but every element of this description is important. Democracy is not just about allowing individuals to choose a set of options from a menu; it is about enabling them to make decisions with others as a group.[1] It does not mean politicians or managers consulting them occasionally; it means allowing people actually to participate in meaningful decision-making. It is important to keep in mind here that every group is inherently complex, and every decision-making process is to some extent open-ended and creative (Gilbert 2014). Nobody can see the future, and nobody ever really knows with absolute certainty that they have made the best possible decision. This applies whether we are talking about a group of friends planning a picnic, or about a nation deciding whether to go to war.

What has this got to do with education? On one level, the answer is obvious. Education for a complex world in a supposedly democratic society must seek to equip students with the capacity to handle complexity and uncertainty, to deliberate with others exhaustively, to solve problems creatively, and to reach decisions on the basis of the best available evidence. On a more abstract level, ideas

1 I'm always grateful to Alan Finlayson for this particular metaphor.

about how we should do education are often implicitly informed by ideas about how we should organise any kind of group or social institution, or indeed our society as a whole. In fact, a useful way of understanding the forces shaping education policy in recent years is to see it as a battleground, on which two quite different sets of assumptions have faced each other.

1 THE PROGRESSIVE IDEAL

On the one hand, the progressive tradition, which drove educational reform for much of the 20th century, has always been committed to an idea of education as an inherently collaborative process, whereby the cooperation of students with one another and with educators is crucial to the achievement of desirable outcomes. This tradition regards education as a process which is inherently creative, open-ended and experimental. It is also committed to the view that education is a good in itself, helping people and whole societies to become happier and more productive in multiple ways, many of which cannot easily be quantified.

These core assumptions have informed most progressive thinking on education since the 18th century.[2] They underlay such key 20th-century developments as the comprehensive school movement in the UK and the shaping of the American high school curriculum, and have remained crucial elements of systems of professional training, as well as the shared belief system of most professional educators to this day. These key assumptions have also been shared by those who have reflected on the question of how education should contribute to empowering democratic citizens. As early as 1961, for example, the critic and theorist Raymond Williams (1961) argued that any democratic society ought to ensure that school provides students with some direct experience of how to conduct and participate in decision-making meetings. Indeed, when Williams wrote this, for several years there had already been significant and successful experiments in some British schools using democratic methods to involve staff and students in the management of schools and the design of curricula.[3]

2 NEOLIBERAL SCHOOLING

By contrast, government education policy has, since the 1970s, been driven by a set of agendas which run contrary to these

2 See Warde 1960.

3 Such as St George's-in-the-East School in Stepney under the pioneering headship of Alex Wood; or at a number of Quaker schools around the country. See Fielding 2005.

progressive assumptions. First, it is assumed that education is best understood as a kind of retail product of which students and parents are customers, and which teachers and institutions sell to them. Second, it is assumed that competition – between students to secure the best outcomes for themselves as individuals, between individual teachers, and between schools – is an inherently good thing that will always produce better results than cooperation and collaboration. Third, it is assumed that educational outcomes can be easily quantified and measured and that publishing quantitative data – and ranking schools, teachers and students accordingly – will provide useful and transparent data to consumers, government and the wider public.

Underlying all of these assumptions is a wider set of ideas about the kind of society which schools are supposed to help build, and ultimately about the fundamental nature of human beings and their social interactions. Schools, colleges and universities are expected to function as key mechanisms in the production of a 'meritocratic' society, in which the unique talents of individuals are recognised and cultivated, while social status and material reward are distributed according to the combination of talent and effort which each individual demonstrates.[4] 'Talent' is assumed to be more or less randomly distributed within the population and to be easily identifiable, while effort is assumed to be something which each individual has a more or less equal opportunity to exercise.

These ideas are based on the assumption either that human beings are inherently self-interested individuals, seeking to maximise their own material advantage at the expense of others in almost all situations, or that they have a tendency to collective and individual inertia which can only be overcome if they are forced to compete with each other for rewards by the intelligent engineering of rules and institutions. As such, creating institutional arrangements that encourage competition between individuals and between institutions is assumed to be the best way of achieving social outcomes in almost any given situation. It naturally follows from these assumptions that privatisation is often the best thing that governments can do for public institutions, because the rigour of the marketplace and the exigencies of profit-seeking will naturally tend to push them towards more competitive behaviour, as well as to seek out administrative efficiencies wherever possible (Harvey 2005).

Neoliberal assumptions have informed not just education, but economic, social and welfare policy since the 1970s, both in the

4 See Littler 2016.

UK and globally. All available evidence demonstrates that these assumptions do not generate effective education policy.[5] For instance, standardised testing and league tables do not generate better outcomes for parents or students (Sammons 1999). Meanwhile, the Finnish education system is widely regarded as one of the most effective in the world, and is the one still most shaped by progressive principles and the least touched by neoliberalism (Doyle 2016). 'Talent' and 'intelligence' are not qualities that can be measured like height or weight.[6] Yet despite the evidence, governments in both the UK and the US, and across the political spectrum, have been wedded to neoliberal ideas about education since the 1970s.

3 HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

How did governments of almost all political stripes become committed to this agenda? In the UK, its decisive turning point was Labour prime minister Jim Callaghan's notorious 1976 speech at Ruskin College.[7] This speech was widely understood as a clear statement that things had gone too far in the progressive direction and away from a vocational, industry-led, centrally-controlled and quantified system of teaching and education management.

The speech occurred at a crucial moment in British political history. The Labour government, faced with the most intense social conflicts since the 1920s, had a choice. It could have listened to the radical and democratic demands being made by militant workers, women, young people, black people, gay people and many others for greater levels of both personal autonomy and opportunities for collective deliberation and decision-making, in workplaces, community institutions, local government and public services. But to have done so would have pitted Labour against powerful interests including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the City and Wall Street. Instead it chose to try to stabilise the situation, defending capitalist interests while trying to unify them with those of 'traditional' male industrial workers. The authority of the trade union leaderships was defended, as were the privileges accorded to major manufacturers, but little support was forthcoming for the democratisation of public services and workplaces (Medhurst 2014).

At that time, maintaining a radical direction for education would have required continued financial support for those radical experiments in progressive, democratic education which were

5 See for example Olssen et al 2004.

6 See Connor 2012.

7 See Berliner 2013.

already taking place in increasing numbers of state schools from around the end of the 1960s. At schools like Counteshorpe in Leicestershire, school councils involving staff and students would make key decisions about policy and curriculum, while efforts were made to tailor individual learning programmes to the needs of each particular child. But such progressive education is necessarily resource-heavy, and the Callaghan government was about to embark on the first major austerity drive since the war.

Under those circumstances, there was no way that funding for progressive education could continue. The most radical schools of the 1970s, such as White Lion in Islington, found themselves forced to conform to the strictures of the state system or, eventually, to close completely.[8] By the mid-1980s it had become possible for critics to point to a record of persistent failure in progressive institutions, despite the fact that this narrative simply ignores the question of resources as well as the very impoverished social context that these schools were operating in. This story of progressive 'failure' is still easily repeated by opponents of progressive schooling to this day.[9]

The Thatcher government, of course, endorsed this reactionary narrative. More disappointingly, by the 1990s it was an account which New Labour policymakers were also willing to believe, determined as they were to distance themselves from any of the radical legacy of the 60s and 70s. Unwilling to countenance any return to that radical agenda, and lacking any original alternatives of their own, by the early 2000s Labour policymakers had embraced the neoliberal agenda in education almost without reservation. While they increased funding to schools, they also intensified and enlarged the role of league tables, standardised testing, and semi-privatised provision.

It is surely no accident that this period coincided with a precipitous and well-documented decline in political participation, especially on the part of the young. The neoliberal education agenda is not just designed to produce schooling on the cheap, but to produce the kind of people that neoliberalism thinks we all should be. Of course, the teaching profession has always resisted these imperatives heroically, which is a major reason why so many of our young people are still able to escape them. But there is inevitably a limit to how far teachers and heads can defend their students from an agenda which has been supported for decades by both governments and corporations. Its ultimate logical end is the production of

8 See, for example, de Castella 2014, Watt 1977.

9 See Yarker 2014.

citizens who do not think of themselves as citizens at all, but only as consumers. One logical correlate of this vision is a sort of retail politics, practised according to the classic Bill Clinton strategy of appealing to discrete interest groups (such as 'soccer moms') while eschewing any wider vision of a good society. The trouble is, when faced with major systemic problems – climate change, massive inequality, the social consequences of mass migration – this model of politics simply cannot generate solutions. In 2016, we saw what tends to fill the vacuum left when this consumer model of politics implodes. The need for a vision of education which could help to revitalise our democracy and empower our citizens collectively has never been so urgent.

4. WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE?

It is very encouraging that in recent years a number of different contributions to UK education policy debates have converged upon a quite consistent set of ideas and proposals for a radical reinvigoration of public education for the 21st century. Michael Fielding and Peter Moss (2010) – both senior professors at the Institute for Education, University of London – provide a well-argued and well-evidenced case for a model they call 'the common school', drawing on the best and most successful practices developed in radical community schools going back at least to the 1940s.

Central to such schools are forms of democratic governance that involve students, parents, teachers and other members of the wider community in the management and administration of the institution and curriculum. This has to be a central feature of any progressive alternative to neoliberal education for several reasons. First, in any supposedly democratic polity it is almost self-evident that schools ought to give students some actual direct experience of democratic self-organisation. Second, as Fielding and Moss argue, democratic participation is the only mechanism likely to give parents and students a truly justified confidence in educational institutions that league tables, standardised tests and other external performance measures never actually can. Third, democratic participation can give full expression to the inherently collaborative, inventive and creative nature of all effective education (Gilbert 2014, Fielding and Moss 2010).

IPPR has identified a number of areas of good practice in some contemporary schools consistent with the same set of principles, and proposed a new generation of 'citizen schools' (Audley et al 2013). The Compass education inquiry similarly concluded with a specific call to democratise the management of local education services and promote greater collaboration across the system

(Compass 2014). In recent years, a great deal of social policy development has stressed the importance of understanding 'co-production' as an essential feature of all public service delivery. This phrase refers to the idea that public services can never be adequately conceptualised simply as goods which are 'delivered' by service providers to service users, but must be understood as processes wherein the desired outcomes are 'co-produced' by professionals and service users (teachers and students) through collaborative relationships. As Mark Fisher and I have argued elsewhere, the principle of co-production would imply a radical shift in the internal and external organisation of our educational institutions and an end to the dominance of league tables and standardised testing (Fisher and Gilbert 2014).

Is any of this really achievable? It may sound utopian to believe so. But reflect on this. When I was at school in the 70s and 80s, our parents and teachers told us stories of the 11-Plus and the pre-comprehensive era in the same tone that they would tell us that children were once sent to work in coal mines. It would have seemed then unthinkable to any but the most rabid right-wing ideologue that the kind of return to elitist selection practices and standardised testing, which has characterised the worst of the current era of education, could ever happen. There is no reason why we cannot fight back against neoliberal influences in education in a more organised and deliberate way than we have done so far. For our children's future, and the health of our democracy, it is imperative that we do so.

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