

Another school is possible: school reform in a neo-liberal age

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Abstract

This paper, an expanded version of a keynote presentation at the conference, highlights the links between centrally controlled and restrictive curriculum and teaching methods and neo-liberal politics. It challenges the dominant model of 'School Improvement' in the context of social inequality, and introduces some alternative pedagogies which have the potential foster a more creative, critical and socially engaged learning community.

Key words: neo-liberal, school improvement, pedagogy, alternatives, policy

Introduction

It is some years since Margaret Thatcher coined her slogan 'There is no alternative' (TINA for short). Along with other ideologues of her time – remember Fukuyama's (1992) premature announcement of the 'end of history' – she sought to build a shield of inevitability around the most drastic neo-liberal transformation, exercising power and agency whilst claiming to be simply bowing to the inevitable. It was under this shield that core industries and public services were privatised, and large sections of the welfare state undermined.

The TINA effect can be seen within the field of schooling in the past two decades, and we have lived through the resulting pressures and contradictions. There has been ample change, but precious little worthwhile transformation. We have experienced a bizarre form of 'school improvement' which precludes a serious rethinking. Instead of rethinking education for a new age and to meet the complex social, cultural and environmental challenges of life in the 21st century, we have had intensification of well-worn (worn-out) approaches to schooling. 'Improvement' has been little more than speeding up the educational conveyor belt. We have devoted such energy to developing a sophisticated knowledge of change management, planning, assessment, school cultures, leadership. Now, in this new century, the question is unavoidably – *to what end all this?* Where is the *vision?*

'Economic rationalism' (which is, of course, not entirely separate from other features of globalisation) is facing a growing international critique. Much of the high-level government interest in school improvement has led to an intensification of teaching, accountability, league tables, teachers feeling de-professionalised and disenchanting (or leaving), a relentless drive for more though not always better – and silence on the question of *educational purpose*.

What really matters: new targets to meet? higher maths grades perhaps? or caring and creative learners, a future, a sense of justice, the welfare of the planet and its people? (Wrigley, 2001:1)

For all the talk about 'leadership', we have seen precious few attempts to develop a sense of direction. School 'leaders' have been driven towards such frantic 'capacity building' that many of them haven't stopped to ask where they are going – a very strange kind of leadership. For all the rhetoric about 'vision', this is re-arranging the proverbial deckchairs on the Titanic. Teachers are, simultaneously, being expected to reinforce a single hegemonic version of 'the effective school' whilst swallowing the line that they are involved in a moral enterprise marked by 'vision, mission and values'.

It has become much clearer, in recent years, how much this limited version of 'improvement' has been tied to an economic agenda. Neo-liberal education reform involves reducing schooling to core skills (defined as literacy, numeracy, ICT) whilst removing opportunities for young citizens to understand the world. On top of this, a radical transformation of secondary education, from age 14, into training for work.

Education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education. (Ball, 2008:12)

Stephen Ball in particular has highlighted the Blairite discourse through which educational purpose is redefined. It has a strong sense of inevitability – 'There is no alternative'.

Education is our best economic policy... This country will succeed or fail on the basis of how it changes itself and gears up to this new economy, based on knowledge. Education therefore is now the centre of economic policy making for the future. (Blair 2005, cited by Ball 2008: 12)

It we are to withstand the overwhelming pressure for this hegemonic version of 'improvement' we need to start from fundamental philosophical and political questions:

- How do we understand today's world?
- What sort of world do we want to live in?
- How do we want young people to grow up?

School improvement and school effectiveness

It is important to see School Effectiveness (SE) and School Improvement (SI) as paradigms. They are particular versions of school evaluation and educational change which have achieved dominance in a specific historical context. Despite some confusion when the terms are occasionally used interchangeably, SE is based on a particular kind of quantitative research whereas SI is predominantly qualitative in orientation.

It is not too difficult to develop a critique of School Effectiveness, and two important volumes were published in the late 1990s (Morley and Rassool, 1999; Slee and Weiner with Tomlinson, eds, 1998). School Effectiveness research

- relies on limited types of output, namely test data (already quantitative);
- is generally based on a simplistic and mechanistic input-output model;

- reinforces, indeed serves as the motor, for an accountability regime which distorts educational processes.

I have sought to develop an argument that it is reductionist in various dimensions:

- *methodologically* - in falsely seeking to reduce complexity to numerical factors, it is fatally flawed in its practice of attaching precise numerical values to ambiguous terms such as 'strong leadership' or a 'focus on teaching and learning'. 'Strong leadership' can mean many things, from inspiration and collegial to dictatorial. And does it not matter if our 'focus' on teaching and learning is based on behaviourist or social constructivist psychological premises? Inevitably, in subsequent policy and practice, it is the most conservative meanings of these floating signifiers which get privileged as statistically justified;
- *contextually* – in its failure to look seriously at the wider context, beyond the level of 'controlling for background factors'. (The term 'background' is itself significant.)
- *historically* – in its failure to reflect critically on how its own ideas have developed and taken hold, preferring to repeat its preferred narratives of origin which involve writing off educational sociology as excusing underachievement;
- *morally* – in characteristic positivist fashion, it regards ethical and political dimensions of schooling as uninteresting or irrelevant.

Paradoxically, the leading figures in School Improvement, in the English context, have simultaneously claimed to distance themselves from School Effectiveness whilst organizing a marriage with it. David Hopkins criticises SE for:

- a pragmatic response to policy initiatives;
- a concern with the formal organisation of schools rather than their more informal processes;
- a focus upon outcomes which were accepted as being a 'good' that was not to be questioned;
- a focus upon descriptions of schools as static, steady-state organisations generated by brief research study.

It is worth focusing on a seminal paper, co-authored by Hopkins with SE's David Reynolds and with Louise Stoll (who had worked with Fullan etc. in Toronto), *Linking School Effectiveness Knowledge and School Improvement Practice: Towards a Synergy* (Reynolds, 1993). This paper actively promotes a twinning of SI with SE. The authors speak explicitly of paradigms and paradigmatic change, but view these primarily at a methodological level, to the neglect of ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions. They are silent about the political context they are working in, and their marriage proposal begs many of the questions that my own work, and others', has had to grapple with.

This was part of a larger process of paradigm-twinning which led to SESI, a regime of truth in which the process models drawn from SI were subordinated to the limited curricular and pedagogical perspectives of SE and the political purposes which SE already served very well. This process was not, of course, without contradictions. There have been interesting tensions within ICSEI (International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement), particularly when the conference location has brought in critical voices to school

improvement (e.g. in Toronto, Copenhagen and Barcelona in recent years). The journal on the other hand (School Effectiveness and School Improvement) remains firmly in the control of leading SE advocates.

Until this time, School Improvement had developed quite independently of School Effectiveness, and had explored, in a broad sense, the processes by which curriculum reform, in particular, can be carried through. It had not eschewed discussion about educational aims and, whilst considering how government agencies can best foster the take up of a change initiative, it clearly rejected coercive mechanisms as counterproductive. In the new English context, shortly after the introduction of the National Curriculum, the SATs, Ofsted, and so on, the key understandings drawn from SI were co-opted into an attempt to promote their acceptance from within schools.

I have sometimes wondered if New Labour policy makers have read Foucault and thought to themselves, *we can use some of that*. Helen Gunter, among others, has highlighted the phoney collegiality generated to ensure that teachers accept and 'own' a change agenda which is often alien and imposed.

The neo-liberal version of the performing school requires teachers and students to be followers, but to feel good about it... Teachers talk about 'pseudo participation' where views are sought as a ritual rather than a sincere attempt to listen and take note. (Gunter, 2001:122-3)

The problems of the education system have been laid at the door of teachers while their capacity for finding solutions has been taken away. The rhetoric has been of empowerment, participation and teams, but the reality is that teachers have had to continue to do what they have always done – be empowered to do what they have been told to do. (ibid: 144)

Despite the power of neo-liberal policy spread, School Improvement has acquired rather different meanings in other education systems. In Spain and Sweden, for example, a progressive focus on curriculum remains strong. Even in the USA, some writers (e.g. Sergiovanni, 1999) using the School Improvement label focus very strongly on the community-development mission of schools. Elsewhere (e.g. Germany) the term *improvement* is little used, and discussion about school *development* is still built upon philosophical/pedagogical premises. Some models of change exist which are radically different from SI. In Switzerland, Bueler draws on an ecological rather than linear model, which carefully avoids the excesses of English-style School Improvement.

The evolution of living systems is self-organizing and dynamic (i.e. not simply the result of causes but of a long and accident-prone learning history on the system-environment border).

Developments can only be sustained if they have an equilibrium between innovation, verification and preservation.

Development takes place through exchange effects, more exactly through the synchronisation of processes on the macro and micro levels. (Schools must connect effects on a personal and social plane. School development involves personal, social and organisational learning.)

The evolution comes about through a reciprocal interplay of biological psychic and social development actions. (Learning processes are necessarily holistic – head, heart and hand. If you ignore this, you end up with medium- and long-term damage to personal development. (Bueller, 1998:675, translation in Wrigley, 2003:26)

The fault-lines of neo-liberal Improvement efforts

Although slower to develop than work on School Effectiveness, a critique of SI has been building up from diverse English educational sociologists and philosophers who sought to examine the impact of the educational policy regime on school ethos, the teacher role, and teacher-pupil relationships, for example Helen Gunter's (2001) critical perspectives of *leadership*; Gerald Grace's (1995) Catholic perspective on change; curriculum expert Fred Inglis's (1989; 2000) analysis of managerialism; Mahony and Hextall's (2000) study of the transformation of teacher professionalism; Paul Clarke (2001), one of the more critical SI consultants; and Michael Fielding's (1999; 2001) philosophical discussions of the policy discourse and its impact.

Eventually all paradigms are challenged by data which is incompatible with their model of reality; the real world gets in the way. One of the greatest stumbling blocks for SI is its manifest failure to raise educational attainment in areas of poverty and deprivation.

In a set of ten case studies of successful inner-city schools with large numbers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils (Wrigley, 2000), I developed the argument that their success could only be explained through an empowerment model, rather than the pressure and surveillance discourses and practices which dominated English policy. The practical meaning of 'empowerment' (a much misused term) emerged during the course of the fieldwork.

- I argued that the managerialism (i.e. a privileging of management and marginalising of substantive educational issues) of mainstream School Improvement was an obstacle to understanding these schools, and that we should aim for a balanced exploration of five major aspects: curriculum, pedagogy, ethos, community, and development / leadership.
- Ethos and relationships in a school should not be viewed in an instrumental way, as means to the end of higher test results; personal and social development are key aims of schooling, and schools are places where young people spend a large and formative part of their lives, not simply a rehearsal. Similarly, these schools owed their success in part to reaching out and engaging with the real lives and struggles of families and communities; parents are not simply a vehicle charged with bring the child to school on time and homework in hand.
- Little progress could be made while we regarded curriculum as sacrosanct, determined by central government. Curriculum must be adapted to connect with the concerns of young people, particularly in more deprived environments.
- A richer pedagogy, built on social constructivist rather than behaviourist principles, and with a strong and integrated focus on linguistic and cognitive development, was clearly evident in all the case study schools, raising achievement for all pupils.

- Whilst examination results are crucially important as a passport to future opportunities, problems of underachievement could not be solved by a narrow focus on testable attainment. These schools were rich learning communities, with the creative / performing arts and education for citizenship having a major role in the curriculum.

Culture is a keyword in School Improvement texts, and often used in a very limited managerial sense, in terms of a readiness to accept change – almost a synonym with ‘capacity’. By contrast, and learning from these case study schools (Wrigley, 2000), an empowerment culture would involve:

- teachers who gain the courage and confidence to explore new ways of managing learning;
- curricula which connect up with the real lives of the learner;
- relationships which enable the learners to find a voice;
- a counter-culture to the despair of a community.

In contrast with the reduction of achievement to ‘attainment’ (i.e. to learning which can readily be tested), we need to hold on to a broader view of educational purpose. Some years ago, in an article for Multicultural Teaching, I proposed the following definition, which it would be interesting to discuss and adapt in other situations:

Achievement means much more than examination results. We need young people who are skilled tabla players and computer users, who enjoy Asian films and Western books, who are able to lead themselves and their communities forward through change and storm and a calm sea, who are socially aware and morally committed and no one's fool. We need a very wide definition of achievement. (Wrigley, 1997),

Paradigm crisis and social justice

Kuhn's historic analysis of paradigms in the field of natural science digs down deep to the ontological and epistemological as well as methodological layers. It involves a critical scrutiny of:

- key entities, forces, laws – concepts, relationships and causes;
- models – whether seen as heuristic or ontological;
- what count as legitimate problems and acceptable solutions;
- methods and instruments.

Extending this thinking to the social realm similarly requires that we move beyond methodological debate. All of the above points are relevant, but also:

- the political dimension – does a paradigm privilege some perspectives and interests over others?
- the ethical dimension –the researcher's or practitioner's responsibility for a moral evaluation of practice, not simply ‘what works?’

The dominant SE-based SI paradigm founders as soon as we focus on questions of social justice, and most obviously for the large numbers of children growing up in poverty. The reasons are not easy to see. In particular, privileging leadership/change processes to the

neglect of pedagogy, curriculum, ethos and community is particularly problematic in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It takes little insight to propose the following hypotheses:

- that a centrally prescribed and standardised curriculum might need greater adaptation in order to engage working-class or ethnic minority pupils in meaningful learning;
- that a deeper and better theorised pedagogical enquiry is needed to help underachieving pupils;
- that relationships with parents and the local community are potentially more problematic and require more effort and thought, where there is a greater social and cultural gap between teachers and parents, where the community is in any way troubled, or if parents have reasons to be disillusioned with or antipathetic towards schools.

It is as if the Effectiveness, Improvement and Leadership experts were unaware of other shelves in the education library, whether pedagogy and curriculum studies or sociology and social justice. They have, generally speaking, failed to engage in a discussion about educational purpose or social values.

The problems are well illustrated by some recent books (e.g. Ainscow and West, 2006; Harris et al, 2006) on raising attainment in areas of disadvantage, with a bankruptcy of ideas beyond proposals for new management structures. Fifteen years in which official School Improvement has been incorporated into the highest levels of government have left the extent of poverty- and class-related underachievement as great as ever. The crisis is particularly acute for secondary schools. Recent research shows that, among those pupils on free meals in the top half of the achievement range at 11, one in two have dropped into the bottom half by age 16 (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007).

One way of understanding the government's recourse to Academies, in addition to its drive to privatise public services, is the manifest failure of its educational policies. Despite the hype, and the enormous expense, official statistics show a minimal change in attainment. (See www.antiacademies.org.uk.) The costs include a loss of democratic control or legal restraints, a narrower curriculum, limitations on community use of schools, an orientation towards work training for low-paid jobs, and a new brutalism in school architecture. The wider legacy of neo-liberal school reform involves a radical curriculum shift towards basic skills (primary) and work preparation (secondary), including a population sharply divided at age 14 into academic and vocational tracks. The personal, social and cultural dimensions of school have been squeezed out.

Schooling and capitalism: an old story and a new

Capitalism has always had an ambivalent attitude to popular education. In the early 1800s, Hannah More, the founder of Sunday schools for child workers, justified her initiative as follows:

They learn on weekdays such coarse works as may fit them for servants. I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is... to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety... Beautiful is the order of society when each, according to his place, pays willing honour to his superiors. (Cited in Simon, 1960: 133. This book and Lawson and Silver, 1973, provide an illuminating history of this period.)

Later in the century, when elementary education became compulsory, its prime purposes were to teach the 3Rs, to domesticate working-class children and to glorify the Empire. Around 1900s, legal steps were taken to prevent school boards providing secondary education except to those who could pay a fee. The context may have changed, but the parameters remain largely the same:

The World Bank sees education as a means of producing 'human capital'. We see education as an opportunity to make sense of the world. Our global masters don't want that – it would be far too revealing. (Wrigley, 2006:7)

At the risk of dramatising, young people growing up today are confronted with a three-fold disaster:

- the environment problems of climate chaos;
- poverty at home and across the world;
- war.

My more recent book, *Another School is Possible*, begins as follows:

Our world is in poor shape. The icecaps are melting, the waters rising and poisons are spread across the earth. A holocaust of poverty, hunger and preventable disease kills 30,000 children each day. The war for oil is turning Iraq into a living hell, and the warmongers have further conquests in their sights. The scale of poverty and injustice is monstrous – globally and here at home.

It is increasingly clear that these issues are connected. Ecological disaster, poverty and war are actively produced by the forces of capitalism. The world's owners, relentlessly chasing profits, are acting as if there is no tomorrow. (Wrigley, 2006:7)

In a context of globalisation, capitalism is faced, to a heightened degree, with the same contradiction as always: *it needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on.* (Wrigley, 2006:8)

This is manifested in various ways in school policies, but provides a powerful explanation for a curriculum in which:

- children are tested to destruction, like turkeys for Christmas;
- literacy is treated as an exercise, a technical skill;
- vocational training increasingly dominates from age 14;
- young people are denied the means to understand the world.

The early chapters of the book are devoted, therefore, to testing (the motor which drives the system), the 'full-spectrum surveillance' of school governance, the ideological nature of official School Improvement, increasing social division and polarisation in schools including privatisation, and the ways in which standardised schooling is leading to pupils' effective exclusion.

The government line on testing is that it is necessary as a device to raise standards. Chapter 1 draws together data which demonstrates how testing is actually leading to a

'dumbing down', including an increasing superficiality of learning. For example, the political need to show rising test levels as a result of the imposed Literacy Hour led to an expedient change in Key Stage 2 test criteria; the reading test is now dominated by literal 'fact finding' and inference and interpretation, let alone critical reading, has almost disappeared.

Similarly, the much vaunted rise in attainment of the academies is almost entirely due to a thirteen-fold increase in GNVQ entries. My own research (www.antiacademies.org.uk, Research, 20.6.07) shows that a GNVQ Intermediate pass roughly equates to an E in GCSE, but statistically the government regards it as the equivalent of four C-grades.

Overcoming alienated learning

There are many fine examples of progressive and engaged teaching, even under the problematic conditions of the past twenty years. We are struggling, however, against a strong tradition of passive learning. Teachers talk and children listen (or maybe not). Teachers ask all the questions. There is no real discussion. Learning is more a matter of memorising than thinking. These are the default behaviours that repeat themselves when there is no conscious effort to do otherwise, no critical reflection. More than this, these patterns have been reinforced by recent government initiatives. (See Alexander, 2005: 8-11, including numerous references.)

This amounts to a deeply authoritarian tradition, which systematically denies *voice* and *agency*. Many progressive researchers and teachers have placed an emphasis on student voice in recent years, though the focus has been more on involvement in school governance than on participation in the curriculum. It is important to link voice with agency in developing a critical pedagogical understanding. Too much school work is done to order. The pupils are told what to do and how long to do it for. They hand in a product and receive a mark or grade in return. There is very little sense of product or audience.

There are close parallels here with the Marxist critique of 'alienated labour' under capitalist conditions of commodity production. The factory worker is producing for a distant and unknown market, with which s/he has no connection and of which she has no knowledge. The product may even be of little social benefit, and is produced simply to generate profit. Certainly the worker has had no involvement in deciding what to make. Workers simply sell their 'labour power' for so many hours, receiving a (rarely adequate) wage in return. Without a sense of 'use value', the work process is dominated by 'exchange value'. This is not so very different from life in the classroom.

Since the imposition of a tightly defined national curriculum, and even more so the literacy and numeracy strategies, the space for authentic curriculum planning has been much reduced. Davies and Edwards (2001:104) raise the important question:

How can we reconceptualise and reconstruct the curriculum in such a way that pupils, at least for part of the time, have an opportunity for fashioning some time for themselves so that they can pursue their own ideas and studies?

I was taken aback to read in the Danish curriculum guidelines for social studies the advice not to develop a fixed plan for the year because it can 'undermine your negotiations with your class'. The emphasis was on the need to respond to issues raised by pupils as much as to truly win pupils' engagement with topics proposed by the teacher (Undervisningsministeriet, 1995: 27).

High stakes accountability systems as in England depend far too much upon the motor of extrinsic motivation, for pupils and teachers alike. There are a number of reasons why this is inadequate, and which make it urgent to work together to overcome it. Firstly, we have a sharp contradiction between school learning and youth experiences within a consumer culture. Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen, in their provocatively titled book *Consuming children* (2001), point to the pleasures of consumer culture as 'flashy, fast, frenetic, fantastic and fun'. The very same corporate forces which profit from the consumerisation of youth culture are supporting a centrally controlled imposed curriculum based on testing and dead knowledge. The result, they argue, is that many young people are 'dissatisfied, disengaged, disaffected, disrespectful and disruptive.'

This is not an argument for the trivialisation of school learning, but rather than deep learning can only come from pleasurable engagement. Children's author Philip Pullman, a vocal critic of the Literacy Strategy, has expressed this wonderfully:

True education flowers when delight falls in love with responsibility.
(Pullman, 2005.)

Secondly, the sense of disaffection is inevitably strongest in areas of poverty and deprivation. Partly, this is because young lives are often overwhelmed by more pressing matters than school grades – Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' argument. It may be difficult for young people to believe that better grades will really provide adult opportunities unless there are role models and opportunities to experience life and work beyond the neighbourhood. Moreover, many parents carry negative experiences of schooling.

Michael Fullan argues for a greater emphasis on motivation and resilience than the high-stakes accountability systems can provide:

I would hypothesize that the greater the emphasis on academic achievement through high stakes accountability, the greater the gap becomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Poor performing students do not need more pressure, they need greater attachment to the school and motivation to want to learn. Pressure by itself in this situation actually demotivates poor performing students. (Fullan, 1999: 19)

Thirdly, there is an urgent need to develop learning which fosters a genuine sense of citizenship. Chomsky argues that much school learning is based on 'inert knowledge', fragments of dead facts, whereas we need to create 'real communities of concern in our schools'. Young people should:

not be seen merely as an audience but as part of a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively.
(Chomsky, 2000:21.)

There are many forms of learning which can create a sense of voice and agency, involving realism, participation and critical thinking. It is a pity that the overwhelming focus, in recent years, has been on re-motivating disaffected pupils through a vocational curriculum. This is an important component, but cannot substitute for a broad and balanced curriculum fulfilling a range of personal and social aims, or for the development of new pedagogies in more 'academic' subjects. Whilst vocational training offers realism, it also fixed learners into predetermined roles and behaviours. By contrast, other forms of community-based learning,

expeditionary learning, media production, the creative and performing arts, and simulations and games, are close to reality but open up young minds to new possibilities and enable young people to explore new possibilities.

Wartofsky (1973:208-9) speaks of 'microworlds' such as simulations, virtual realities and novels. These are multi-sensory, providing a rich representation of reality, they are close to real-life experiences. But because they are also 'off-line', without the pressures and economic consequences of error, they provide a chance to play with alternative futures. This is not to suggest that theory is unimportant. Far from it. Abstract theoretical discourses enable us to see beyond the present, to see the bigger patterns, to critique 'common sense' models of reality. But they only work, for many young people, if they are accessible. We need to ground theoretical learning in experience. To take a simple example, we can make the formula $C=2\pi r$ more accessible, memorable and capable of transfer if we start with differently sized bicycle wheels, comparing the spoke with the rim. It is a slower process than simply memorising the formula, but develops stronger mathematical thinking. 'Microworlds', in Wartofsky's sense, provide an alternative and more grounded way of exploring patterns and alternatives than more abstract discourses, but can also provide a basis for abstract thinking. We can, for instance, debrief after the simulation, discuss the story we have read, hot-seat the character in the play.

More grounded forms of learning provide a positive response to the problem which Bernstein grappled with, of the access of manual workers' children to school learning. Bernstein argued that manual-worker families used a 'restricted code' which was experiential, but immediate in its reference. This was widely contested when first published (see in particular Labov, 1969 and Rosen, 1972). It is all very well complaining that some families are too concrete and immediate in their use of language, but of little use if we don't ask how much school learning is inadequately grounded in experience. If there is indeed some gap between more concrete discourses in manual-worker families and the more abstract academic language of schooling, the burden is surely on the education system to bridge this gap by grounding cognitive development in experience.

There are many good examples which any of us could give, but I will provide just two. The first is a simulation to explore formulations of human rights. It is based on the adaptation of generic rights in the rights of the child. I asked the participants to divide into groups, each one of which would formulate five rights for a particular social group, e.g. teenage girls, teenage girls, parents of young children, a religious minority, etc. Then the groups came together in an Assembly to present and justify their proposals, defending them against objections and seeking to reach consensus. This has worked in many situations, but nowhere better than in a conference in Macedonia with a mixed group of teachers and pupils from each Balkan country and the USA.

The second is an example of *authentic assessment*, one of a number of 'rich tasks' developed in Queensland as an alternative form of assessment within the New Basics pilot. These rich tasks are cross-curricular group activities, and designed to be worthwhile learning in themselves rather than artificial tests. It involves sixteen year-olds researching the health needs and provision in their area, and presenting proposals to local politicians, doctors, and other adults. It involves biological and sociological knowledge, statistics, ICT, communication skills, critical and creative thinking.

Open architectures

Critics of the current pedagogical regime are often accused of seeking to turn the clock back to the progressivism of the 1970s. We should object to this demonisation, and the attempt to present schooling before the National Curriculum or the literacy hour as some dark age when there were 'no standards and no innovation' (Drummond, 2005). At the same time, let us recognise that we now have available pedagogies which have a stronger theoretical basis and have been refined in practice, albeit in less rigid education systems. In particular, a social constructivism based on Vygotsky and his followers was not widely available in the 1970s, when much progressive primary practice was underpinned by more individually-oriented 'stages of development' Piagetian models. Moreover, at the worst, some thematic 'topic' or 'project' work degenerated into a kind of collection curriculum (Victorian clothing, cars, animals) with too much time copying and limited problem-solving or cognitive development.

Theories of 'social constructivism' are sometimes called 'child-centred', but this is misleading as they also rely very much on the teacher's well-judged planning and intervention. Key principles of social constructivism, as now understood, include the following:

- Pupils already have their own understanding of their world, and teachers need to discover/uncover what it is, so that they can build on it and if necessary challenge and change it.
- It is valuable to start with an immersion in real experience or a simulation, so that the learners can explore a situation with their different senses, speak about it in language which is familiar, and appreciate some of the issues and problems.
- In discussion with the teacher, and often working in groups, learners gradually come to a more adequate or deeper or more theoretical understanding, including developing new language and concepts.
- Finally, the learners are encouraged to transfer these new ideas to different situations.

Pedagogies based on such principles have a place for both narrative and abstract language; indeed, they depend upon a movement between these two modes. They involve a sensitivity to the learner's worldview and experience, and give scope for discovery and creativity, but reconcile this with the *reality* of the material and social world beyond individual subjectivity. Indeed, learning is often driven by encounters between subjective views and external experiences, between specific stories and general theorisations.

Government interference in teaching and learning has involved an overwhelming focus on the single lesson as the unit of planning, often subdivided into three or four fixed parts. This has helped to foster a culture of dependency which it could be difficult to break. I coined the phrase 'open architectures' to describe several methods which involve individual and small-group research, but within a frame of collective social activity and discussion. The structure gives a sense of security and direction to teachers and pupils alike, but provides substantial flexibility and choice, space for initiative and self-directed learning. When well planned, they are cognitively challenging, and with strong affective, ethical and aesthetic dimensions. (For a more extended discussion, see Wrigley, 2007: 166-181, in Bell *et al.*, 2007)

- 1) *Project method*, developed by Dewey and Kirkpatrick (1918), has been elaborated, with many variations, across Northern Europe, and also, as

'inquiry', in North America. A classic structure is exemplified in the Danish guidance for social studies, showing how the individual/small group research connects to the plenary study.

- the teacher seeks to engage the class's interest in a common theme or situation. Alternatively, a current issue is raised by some of the pupils, e.g. based on recent news or a local situation;
- initial discussion (whole class, also groups) identifies interesting aspects and issues. During this stage, the teacher suggests ways of drawing on disciplinary knowledge and techniques to support understanding and investigation;
- small groups or individuals undertake specific research;
- they present their findings to the whole class. It is suggested that this stage should, where possible, be more than just sharing information, and that pupils should design activities which stimulate further engaged discussion in the class. (Undervisningsministeriet, 1995: 32-9.)

This presents many opportunities for initiative and personal learning, but also for the teacher to develop pupils' ideas or challenge misunderstandings. Many projects also move into a fifth stage of taking the learners' findings and concerns out into the wider community.

I have used this with university students, on the issue of asylum seekers. During the discussion stage, the diverse nature of students' views and prior knowledge emerges. They differentiate themselves, in a sense, for the research stage, some investigating more factual information such as why people flee and where from, and others exploring more complex questions such as xenophobia and national identity.

2) *Storyline* (Bell et al, 2007) is a form of thematic work structured by a narrative. This might be based on a novel, but generally the bare outline of a plot forms the skeleton:

- it typically begins with a situation or location, proposed by the teacher, often using a visual such as a mural or frieze;
- participants invent roles for themselves, e.g. hotel staff, families in a town;
- the teacher moves the story forward, perhaps by announcing an event, or through a provocative intervention by a visitor in role. Each such event is the stimulus for a type of learner activity: research, fictional or formal writing, improvised drama, art, discussion or debate.

Storyline is strongly experiential, using graphic and dramatic representation. Pupils situate themselves in the narrative, creating strong identification. Thus, a storyline about the Viking invasions begins with a frieze of a bay. The pupils research and draw houses for themselves, as family groups. The next day, they find a ship in the bay. At a later stage, the ship has sailed away and one Viking warrior has been left behind – a life-size figure on the wall. Intense debate ensues between villagers who want to kill him, and those who want to assimilate him into their community as their smith.

Storyline was invented by lecturers at Jordanhill College in Glasgow for young children, but is used for all ages in Scandinavia. One Norwegian storyline (Wrigley, 2006: 108-9), invented by a rural secondary school, is set in a multicultural district of Oslo. The students invent characters for themselves, from many different countries. They are outraged when a visiting 'preacher' expresses antagonism towards non-Christians. Two 'Iranian refugees' decide to turn their front room into a small mosque, and have to seek the community's permission. One day, the class arrives to find racist graffiti on the walls of the houses they have painted and stuck to the walls.

- 3) *Design challenges* are a core feature of the method promoted in Britain as *Critical Skills*. This method is, in effect, pulled forward by the proposed final task or product – like throwing out an anchor then pulling you towards it on a rope. Design challenges involve problems that require investigation and creative solutions, which are then shared with the rest of the class or a wider audience. The starting point – like project method – can involve a narrative or dramatic scenario to help learners engage.

I witnessed one example in a Scottish secondary school, designed to engage a class of 12 year-olds in their first month at the school. It lasted two days, involved a small team of teachers, and helped these teachers to identify and assess the prior knowledge of these newcomers to the school: ICT (internet, PowerPoint), writing, library skills and so on. It began with a video message from 'the Emperor of the Galaxy', announcing his plans to build a superhighway across space from the capital to a new holiday resort. Unfortunately, the plan meant destroying Earth. The earthlings' challenge was to prove that their world was worth saving. Each group chose a particular argument to pursue – diversity of animal species, human cultures, etc. It drew upon learning in a range of disciplines.

The organisation which promotes this way of learning places strong emphasis in its training on tight cooperation to complete tasks within a tight deadline, which requires the acquisition of particular organisational skills and roles. This can be a weakness as well as a strength, as the pace can also reduce the scope for reflection and discussion. However, this is not a necessary aspect of design challenges *per se*.

These various 'open architectures' have many features in common, such as:

- engaging learners through a meaningful situation or theme;
- integrating broad skills development with a cross-curricular approach to knowledge;
- encouraging co-operation, negotiation and planning (often called 'soft skills');
- developing key skills (language and literacy, mathematics, ICT, research, visual presentation as well as the above 'soft skills');
- providing a common framework whilst giving space for initiative and creativity;
- working towards a fulfilling outcome, such as a final performance or presentation, with a sense of product and audience.

These methods are holistic, involving interdisciplinarity rather than the neglect of subject learning. Motivation is raised through contextualisation, choice and meaningful outcomes, reducing the need for teachers to provide extrinsic motivation.

A time of opportunity

There is a strong sense at present of widespread disillusionment with the learning patterns of the past twenty years. This is a major reason for the English government's new rhetorical emphasis on children's welfare and on creativity. We should not take these at face value, since they are meant to sit alongside a highly regulated core agenda of tests and 'accountability'. Even the business lobby uses expressions such as initiative and creativity, as well as the ambiguous 'enterprise'.

Employers have different views of what they need: some insist on 'back to basics' – more spelling practice and multiplication tables – while others, more forward looking, would like communication skills and initiative, but not too much of it.

There is a growing recognition that a test-driven regime is not a sustainable way to 'raise standards', quickly leading to boredom and to learners (at all levels) doing just enough to get over the next hurdle. The situation is full of contradictions, but provides an opportunity and pretext for bringing about serious change. In Scotland teachers have the additional advantage of a curriculum reform, Curriculum for Excellence, based on the desire to reduce compulsory content to create space for deeper learning. It is publicly acknowledged that there has been too much rushing to cover the syllabus. Our role, and the role of BESA, is to provide strong support to teachers in schools and to help create supportive networks and learning communities to show that there are better ways to learn. Another school is possible, even in this neo-liberal age. Let us seize the time.

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