

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2007

Another school is possible

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Perhaps I am the first person to give the Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture who did not know Caroline personally. That is a great regret and loss for me, and it is an enormous honour to be chosen to present the lecture today. The diverse contributions in the Tribute volume edited by Melissa Benn and Clyde Chitty testify to her historic contribution to one of the most important democratic struggles of our time, a struggle which connects our personal and professional lives.

In my own case, the struggle for comprehensive schools links my family roots with my professional activity. There is one story I hear each time I visit my 80 year old mother. Born in a very poor Irish immigrant family, growing up in Blackburn at the height of the Depression, she emerged as 'top of the class'. Despite her high marks in the first stage of the Scholarship exam for entry to grammar school, she was told there was no point her sitting the second stage because her family could not possibly afford the school uniform. Ironically, the message came from the headmistress, a nun from the same convent which ran the Catholic girls grammar school from which she was barred. She stayed on until the age of 14 at St Mary's elementary school. When she had read all the books in the cupboard, she was told to read the same books again. To add insult to injury, she remembers visits to her teacher by a former classmate who had gained a place at the convent grammar school despite being 17th in the class. There are parallels today. The German PISA research discovered that even pupils with similar levels of literacy had very different destinations according to their social class background; the child with professional parents was three times as likely to go to the grammar school as the child of semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers.

I owe my own educational success and my professional engagement in large part to my parents' justified anger and their determination that we would not suffer the same fate. I was reminded of her story recently, at the House of Commons Committee of Enquiry on Academies; campaigners from Walsall were able to provide an explanation of how the Academy there had re-engineered its population, to reduce the free school meal percentage from 51% to 11%. Prospective parents were interviewed and told they could not benefit from the education offered by the school if they did not have broadband internet access. They were also told of school uniform requirements. The sports kit alone costs £125.

These personal histories ground us, and protect us against the false histories perpetrated by New Labour ideologues. I read in one document that, before the 1990s, there was no innovation and no standards. I recently challenged the head of the TDA on her version of history: she had told the BELMAS conference that the government had needed to use authoritarian methods to move schools from being awful to being alright, but now we were on the way to excellence, so schools had been given autonomy and there was policy coherence, if only headteachers were good enough leaders to manage it. I asked what evidence she had for her version of history? when precisely were schools just awful, and when did they become OK? It appears they were awful when Michael Barber took over, and the evidence that it's fine now is the test results. More on this later.

The struggle for comprehensive schools must be understood in depth. It is undeniably a struggle about institutions, but it is also a struggle about ethics, political virtues and in the rich Germanic sense of the word, pedagogy. The struggle for comprehensive education is about social justice, equality and (as Steve Sinnott reminds us in a recent NUT publication) the virtue and practice of solidarity. As Caroline Benn and those who worked closely with her constantly remind us, it is a question of school culture and not simply structure – though structure is fundamental: we cannot have an egalitarian culture in an elitist selective structure.

This struggle is not completed by a school reorganisation implemented once and for all. Indeed what we once thought was a secure historic settlement has turned out not to be quite so solid.

In the early days, many saw comprehensive schools as a way of overcoming social division. Actually, there were other forces at work. Islands of ‘civic socialism’ are an illusion while society remains irreconcilably divided between capitalists and workers (by workers I mean all employees, blue or white collar. I am using Marx’s understanding of a society divided fundamentally into two great classes, capitalist and proletariat). This, and all those other divisions which this fundamental opposition generates and sustains, for example the division between manual and white collar and professional workers, cannot be overcome by forms of schooling alone. The wider society intrudes time and again into education. For example, we cannot simply blame divisive patterns of school choice on ‘pushy parents’ without recognizing the deep insecurities brought about by neo-liberalism. Nor should we be surprised that some young people appear uninterested in school, when they and their parents struggle against crushing poverty.

I think we can sum up one strand of the comprehensive school dream with the term ‘meritocracy’, that ‘equality of opportunity’ that occurred so frequently in Blair’s speeches. It did not take long to see that comprehensive schools alone would not transform a hierarchical society, increasingly divided in our present era. Meritocracy – the British version of the American Dream – is not equality but a steep and slippery ladder. It was not the comprehensive school itself which led to underachievement. It was not the schools which were too ‘bog standard’. It was the boggy ground, the social and economic morass which thwarts the aspirations and undermines the achievement of so many young people. As the PISA studies have shown, the UK is one of the most divided societies, and one in which those divisions are most seriously replicated educationally.

Firstly, we have poverty - the sheer Weight of the World, as Bourdieu put it. As part of this, the loss of hope and prospects which is, in many ways, the enduring consequence of the de-industrialisation which Thatcher engineered, and which subsequent neo-liberal governments regard as beyond the scope of governments to alter.

Secondly, and again drawing on Bourdieu, we have the explanatory concepts of cultural capital and social capital. Even when offered the ‘same education’, some children are less able to draw benefit from it. For example, their prior experiences and talents are undervalued in school; they have less access to support networks which help them overcome difficulties along the way. Part of the struggle to develop truly comprehensive schools was about providing a broad curriculum which would value the world of working class pupils, and of the many cultures represented in our city schools. It was also about developing community schools, in reality not just name, which would connect up with the lives and needs of parents, and not just those who played golf with the headmaster. In Bourdieu’s terms, part of the function of comprehensive schools was to re-value what had been de-valued, turning popular interests into cultural capital, and turning social networks into social capital.

The struggle for comprehensive education is tied up with the whole policy environment. Indeed, comprehensive schools are being undermined by wider educational policy.

I wish to consider some of the key ways in which the school system is governed,

- 1) the regime by which they are judged,
- 2) the ways in which central government has sought to raise educational standards.

These are supported by the dominant academic paradigms called School Effectiveness and School Improvement, and there is a strong two-way relationship between the academic fields and the practical real of school governance, though in the last resort government ignores the subtler findings of the academic fields.

The evaluation regime is a strange hybrid of centralised control and local market competition. Central government sets the terms which bring about the local competition, and ensures that it is high stakes. This is governance by numbers, and, as I have argued in the first chapter of Schools of Hope, it is reductionist. The complexities are reduced to percentages on which spurious comparisons are based. There are, of course, historical precedents: Taylorism as a regime of industrial management, and the accountability structures of Stalinist Russia. The latter used as its proxy measure of economic growth the tonnage of pig iron produced. The quality didn’t matter, nor indeed whether the people needed pig iron or more food on the table. Such evaluation methods produce a bog-standard economy.

Similarly, in the English school system, SAT results and the percentage 5 A*-Cs are the proxy measures used to evaluate schools. The motto of the government should be 'Never mind the quality, feel the width'. As Mary Hilton's and Peter Tymms' research, recently taken up by the Primary Review, has shown, KS2 reading tests were made easier to prove that the literacy hour was working, yet Lord Adonis continues to boast of better test results. Similarly, when politicians needed to show that government policies were helping inner-city schools in the key Labour heartlands, they invented the spurious GNVQ=4 A-Cs equivalence – an equivalence which has never been tested by QCA or OfSTED, and which later came in useful in the claim that the Academies programme was bringing results.

I referred earlier to the way in which the subtleties of the academic field are ignored when they are inconvenient. School Effectiveness Research, also deeply reductionist, nevertheless tries to factor in the impact of poverty on school achievement. It is inconceivable that our new Prime Minister did not know or understand this when he threatened the closure of schools not achieving 30% 5A*-Cs with English and Maths. In doing so, he put a failure label on a third of Sheffield's schools, half of Newcastle's, Sunderland's, Liverpool's. Indeed, half of Birmingham's schools, once you leave aside grammar schools. And remember Birmingham was hailed as the flagship authority, to the credit of its director of education Tim Brighouse. In effect, the net of privatisation has suddenly been enlarged. Who will apply for the headship or a teaching post in these schools in the knowledge that they are under threat, and that inspectors and so-called school improvement partners will never be away from the door. Incidentally, the logic of Gordon Brown's announcement would be to remove the sponsors of most existing academies, and put them back in local government control, since they also fail his test!

The problems faced by schools which, in spite of everything, are still nominally comprehensive are largely due to reactionary government policies, yet it is the comprehensive school which gets the blame. The straightjacket of the National Curriculum, the use of testing and league tables to instigate a vicious competition, have undermined the intended parity between schools, but it is the schools and the very concept of comprehensive education which gets blamed. The greatest victims have been schools serving the poorest parts of our cities. Unable to show the high scores of schools in the residential suburbs, they have gradually become concentrations of struggling pupils, far from comprehensive in their intake, yet their comprehensive status has been blamed for low attainment. This is the system which produced the Ridings, and many schools like it – schools which were sandwiched and squeezed between grammar schools, church schools with an ability to select covertly, harbours of white-flight, schools with sixth forms serving more affluent neighbourhoods. Sandwiched and squeezed.

If we wish comprehensive schools to thrive, we need to form united campaigns to get rid of crude accountability regimes and dog-eats-dog competition. Without that, schools will be subject to invidious and unhelpful comparisons and will continue to have a limited educational purpose. It is these crude pig-iron high-stakes evaluation regimes which lead inexorably to bog-standard education. Indeed, this is already apparent in many academies, when we look at the curriculum.

Secondly, the dominant notion of School Improvement is deeply problematic. Whilst paying lip-service to notions of participation and empowerment - central to School Improvement theory as it developed internationally - the hegemonic English version tangles it up in the net of a centralised command structure. Many of its high priests, in government and academia, then speak as if there were no contradiction. The result of this confusion is that headteachers are expected to find ways of making teachers believe they have ownership of policies which are in fact externally imposed, and which may actually be harmful. Teachers must be made to feel empowered to do exactly what they are told to do. This trick is, ironically, called 'Transformative Leadership'. I say ironically because true leadership depends on having a sense of direction. Though School Improvement writers still speak routinely of 'vision,' it means little more than re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

We have to ask some rather basic philosophical questions about School Improvement. Doesn't it depend on a view of what a good school would be like? Whose learning and whose lives are getting better? What kind of world do we want to live in? What kind of young people do we wish to grow? Without these questions, Improvement is merely intensification, speeding up the conveyor belt, a damaging process simply being performed more efficiently.

This form of 'Improvement' is actually not helping comprehensive schools to develop their strengths. It is a hollowing-out process. Sadly, too many academic writers on School Improvement have become the court

priests of government. By remaining silent on the oppressive structures of high stakes accountability, market competition and (more recently) privatisation, they reinforce the power of an oppressive regime and incapacitate the genuine educational leadership which might make English comprehensive schools flourish once again. Beyond this, I have argued, the dominant School Improvement paradigm has the following characteristics:

- it focuses most of its attention on leadership and management;
- it either neglects teaching and learning, or reduces it to the “effective” transmission and absorption of information;
- it regards a centrally determined curriculum as sacrosanct – an off-the-peg suit to be ‘delivered’;
- it has an instrumental view of the internal ethos and relationships of the school, and its links with parents and the wider community – they are merely vehicles to help boost test scores.

Attention to these neglected issues is vital in the improvement of city schools. Pedagogy, curriculum, school ethos, community – these are essential considerations in a version of educational change based on social justice and democratic citizenship. They are also crucial in the struggle to improve standards for all and in any depth.

The emergence of the Academies project is, in many ways, a sign of government failure - the failure of Conservative and New Labour policies a) to alleviate child poverty, and b) to espouse an adequate model of educational change and improvement. However, academies currently represent the sharpest attack on the comprehensive school idea. Schools which sit outside local authorities, which are beyond democratic control and restraint, which can choose their own pupils – and decide whom to evict – cannot for long be expected to sustain a comprehensive intake. Indeed, there has already been a significant switch of population in the academies, which take fewer disadvantaged pupils than the predecessor schools. The academies are neglecting lower-achieving pupils – they have slightly more pupils not getting five A*-G grades than the schools they replaced, around twice the national average – a figure which elsewhere would lead to a ‘special measures’ designation from OfSTED. It is probably well known in this audience that the academies show a very marginal improvement in attainment, once you see beyond the GNVQ trick, and that this slight improvement can be explained largely by a change of population. If it is not, I will happily explain in question time. We must however recognise also that the drive to privatisate now goes well beyond struggling inner-city schools. Indeed, the average 5 A*-C rate of schools which are due to become academies in 2008 and 2009 is around 40%, double that of the first academies. No school is safe – and if not an academy, then a trust school. That is the neo-liberal direction, and as Stephen Ball has argued, England is the epicentre of this process. Privatisation will finally undermine the comprehensive school project. We must unite to fight against it, whether inside or outside the Labour Party. There is no time for divisions on this.

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My writing and research has sometimes been characterised as a ‘critique’. I have never been happy with that judgement, or at least felt it to be partial. It is essential to critique the dominant paradigm of School Evaluation and Improvement in a situation where it has such a massive impact, but I have been equally concerned to demonstrate that things can be different. I think you will see that in the titles of my three books: The Power to Learn, Schools of Hope (recently re-published in Spanish), and Another School is Possible.

The Power to Learn, a set of case studies of successful multi-ethnic schools, illustrates the importance of a curriculum which engages pupils; pedagogies based on social constructivism, creativity and problem-solving; an ethos based on mutual respect; and schools which really connect with the communities they serve. These case study schools certainly did not have a deficit view of ethnic minority communities and cultures, nor indeed of young people.

These issues are then discussed more theoretically in Schools of Hope. Many of the issues are taken up again in Another School is Possible, but which also contains many international examples of innovation. This, my most recent book, was in a sense commissioned. It is written for a popular readership as well as teachers. It is a rare example of a book jointly published by a socialist publishing house and a major educational

publishers. It results from conversations with activists in NUT branches who felt that a defensive struggle was no longer sufficient. Teachers and their allies had to know there was something to fight for. Younger teachers in particular have been trained to fit one model of schooling – however dissatisfied, they often find it hard to imagine that schools can possibly be different than the ones they have experienced. I wanted to pass on some of the vision and idealism which I had felt in the 1970s and 1980s as a comprehensive school teacher.

We are told that vocational courses are new. Back in the 1970s I taught in a school where large numbers of 14-16 year olds chose child care and car mechanics, which was taught in the school flat and garage, or bricklaying and hairdressing at the local Technical College. However, in those days, nobody ever suggested that these same pupils would not also do drama, geography or a foreign language. That is the difference between the comprehensive schools of that time and the 2006 Schools and Inspection Act. The 2006 Act is a frontal attack on the comprehensive school principle, in that it divides 14 year olds rigidly into two, the academic track and the vocational track.

Our curriculum development involved considerable innovation in the humanities and social studies, to enable young people to understand the world. This was suppressed by the National Curriculum, though subsequently restored in a tokenistic way as citizenship lessons. This was not centrally imposed, nor could it have been.

We must support, build upon and publicise the work of those brave and creative teachers in English comprehensive schools who have struggled against the odds to provide an engaging curriculum. However, the straightjacket has been so oppressive that it is necessary to look beyond our shores at education systems which have provided a more fertile context for school development. I would like to introduce three illustrations from the book.

Firstly the appendix. This contains descriptions of the Laboratory School in Bielefeld, a truly inspirational school, and of the Ramiro Solans school in Zaragoza serving a community as poor as any we find here. Its pupils are 70% gypsy, and 25% new immigrants. As one teacher says, these are not just average gypsies – only one of the parents even has a market stall! It has reduced its absence rate from 50% to 10%, through a curriculum based on the creative arts. Literacy and numeracy are also linked to creative arts projects. Each month's learning culminates in a festival or presentation, whether a city festival or school event. Pupils gain a sense of public value through what they bring to these occasions.

Secondly, more open architectures of learning. Schooling in England, in the past ten years, has been dominated by the 'four-part lesson' and similar structures which tightly divide up each hour-long lesson into fixed segments. What I have termed 'open architectures' work on a longer time frame, and give scope for learners partly to direct their own learning. This is what 'personalised learning' should really look like. A different kind of choice is at work than the consumer version of 'school choice' and 'subject choice' here. They include 'project method' as invented by John Dewey, and popular across Northern Europe. Typically, it begins with a stimulus to engage pupils' interest – or frequently with an issue raised by the pupils themselves. (Indeed, a Danish government document warns teachers against planning the year's curriculum too rigidly, because that will undermine your negotiations with your class!) There follows a broad discussion in which understanding is broadened and deepened. The research stage follows, individual or small group, each identifying a particular sub-topic. Finally plenary presentations by the small research groups. The same Danish document emphasises the importance of learners not simply presenting data but leading activities which will engage the rest of the class in further discussion and may result in a wider public action. I think this is important, i.e. that real-world engagement is not limited to charitable activity and voluntary work. I use this approach each year with PGCE students in a project about refugees. I engage them through a simulation in which there is a fictitious military coup in a dystopic future Scotland - where will they flee? what will happen to them? Some pursue research of a basic factual kind – what happens to asylum seekers in Britain? why did they flee? Others are ready to work at a more theoretical level, exploring such issues as national identity and xenophobia. This is personalised learning in a democratic sense, not one which segregates.

Another 'open architecture' is Storyline – invented in Scotland and flourishing in Scandinavia. It was invented for lower primary, but is now used in Norway and Denmark to age 16 and beyond. This is a kind of cross-curricular thematic work based on a loose narrative. A scenario is presented – usually a large mural on the wall. The students invent characters for themselves, locating themselves visually and emotionally in this

scenario. The teacher's role is to organise events, stages in the plot, which will trigger learning activities such as drama, writing, maths or research. A good example is Rainbow Street, invented by a rural school in Norway and set in a multicultural district of Oslo. The students stick paintings of the houses they imagine living in around the wall. At one stage, a visiting speaker appears, posing as a fundamentalist Christian who frowns disapprovingly when anybody answers that they are Hindus or Muslims. One day, the students arrive to find racist graffiti on one of their 'houses' and begin to investigate. Two students in the role of Iranian refugees seek approval from the community to establish a prayer room in their house. I hope you will agree that this is the sort of activity which might really produce high standards.

Finally, there are some reflections in the book on alternative structures within comprehensive schools which provide a better sense of belonging, of community. I think we should take this more seriously in Britain. Various models are available, for example Norwegian schools which are divided into year groups of about 100 pupils, each served by a team of 5-6 teachers providing the teaching, pastoral care, parental liaison, and learning support. There is a massive drive in the USA towards small schools and schools-within-schools. When the city council in my city attempted to close schools smaller than 900 as unviable, I checked the Finnish figures: only one in ten secondary schools in Finland has more than 500, and half are smaller than 300, yet standards are clearly good. The international research evidence shows convincingly that small schools have fewer drop-outs and evictions, fewer alienated young people, and are particularly more beneficial, including academically, for working class and ethnic minority pupils.

I hope I have given you a brief introduction not only to the contents of this book, but to the rich possibilities of schooling. It is appalling that academy sponsors have a licence to do just what they like, whilst most of our schools are so strictly controlled. The centralised regulation by which government claims to improve the quality of schooling reminds me of quality control at MacDonalds. At the best, it will reliably produce identical burgers. Similarly, highly regulated schooling can only provide reliable MacWorkers for MacJobs. Perhaps that is the intention?

Much stands against us in the struggle to defend and develop comprehensive schools, but the greatest obstacle might be the limits of our imagination.