

Chapter 11

Schools for a future

The moment I understand history as possibility, I must also understand education in a different way.

(Antonia Darder, 2002:x)

A story is told that the band continued to play in the ballroom of the Titanic while the ship was starting to sink. The mighty ocean liner was well ahead of schedule, and its officers racing to beat a performance target, so perhaps we should regard the collision with an iceberg as a minor blemish on otherwise excellent leadership.

When I emerge from the latest book on school improvement to switch on the news, I cannot help feeling that something doesn't quite measure up. Famine hits East Africa, schoolchildren in Iraq wonder if bombs will drop tonight, a Palestinian child is shot dead for throwing stones at the tanks which occupy his town... nearer home, young beggars sleep rough in sub-zero temperatures, another factory closes, and a third of our children grow up below the poverty line... I can't help wondering how School Improvement relates to all this.

Schools of hope? Hope isn't easy these days - an inane smile would pass for madness. It takes real courage to believe that our words and actions can make a difference – whether we are trying to improve a school, relieve poverty or stop a war. We need to defy the pessimists, to challenge the indifferent and to gather allies though their morale is low. We need to think critically and creatively, and discuss our strategy in a joined-up way.

Vision and values? We need them now more than ever. The situation we face, so early in the new millennium, requires fresh thinking about educational change. School development needs creativity, integrity and hope – a rethinking of the whole project. Leadership is, above all else, a question of deciding which direction to take.

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School Improvement is at a crossroads. It has developed new metaphors for change management, abandoned linear models to embrace complexity, debated whether vision comes first or later; it has transacted and transformed, restructured and recultured, distributed leadership and internalised school review. There is an unspoken rule, however – not to think too hard about educational aims.

A strange feeling of disorientation comes over me when I spend too many hours reading some Improvement literature. Even when the titles promises a more historical approach, the attempt to locate school change in time and place is rarely sustained beyond the opening chapter. The political pressures of target setting and accountability is mentioned, perhaps, as an unfortunate obstacle in the way of authentic change, but there is no sustained attempt to analyse which way our educational ship is being driven.

Behind a surface tone of exhortation, the texts are often shadowy. Words such as vision and values are never all they seem. Like ghosts, they disintegrate when we try to take hold of them. *Vision* so often comes to mean organisational adjustment. Talk about *values* soon collapses into ‘valuing higher attainment’ or ‘valuing good behaviour’, referring back into the schooling process rather than connecting outwards and forwards into the futures we would like to inhabit. Ideas and ideals collapse so easily into the performance outcomes of test scores.

It is important to reflect on how key words are used. *Change* is almost an end in itself, a way of coping with the random shifts of the school environment. *Capacity* is a troubled term: while academics relate it to complex models of culture and co-operation within a dynamic learning organisation, to many teachers it sounds like a demand to accommodate more and more top-down initiatives or the escalating targets of the accountability machine.

What if our schools need a change of *direction* as much as a boost in *capacity*?

Schools of hope in the inner city

The unrelenting pressure to ‘improve’ schools - along with the denial that we should begin to *rethink* them - has been particularly damaging for schools in high-poverty areas, whether in the inner city or on the public housing estates of the city’s edge. Higher achievement is needed in these schools more than anywhere, but they are precisely the schools which have gained least from the improvement drive of recent years.

It is necessary also to consider more sophisticated strategies for students in disadvantaged situations, in particular applying what we know about student motivation and resilience. With all the interest in accountability and academic achievement, good intentions can easily backfire.

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. The main reason for this is that 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, my italics)

Improvement as intensification merely exaggerates the traditional barriers to learning. Fullan's focus on *attachment to the school* and *motivation to learn* finds echoes in some of the more heretical writers: Sergiovanni's emphasis on community; MacBeath, Rudduck and Fielding on student voice; the insistence on authentic learning which runs through the great coalitions of Essential and Accelerated Schools in North America. It connects too with Maud Blair's analysis of leadership and ethos in multiethnic schools, and my earlier use of the word *empowerment* - a much abused term - to characterise an orientation to learning, community and school development which is based on inclusion and equality.

The complexity of inner city schools cannot be understood from a narrow research platform; we need a better sense of context, a wider conceptual base, and a serious commitment to social justice. David Hopkins and David Jackson correctly state that research into the development paths of schools in different socio-economic contexts is 'not well trodden territory' (2003:93). A major error is to pursue capacity as a substitute for getting to grips with context (as, for example, in Hopkins' otherwise outstanding book *School Improvement for Real*, 2001).

The issue of *attachment* to school needs to be thought through in terms of the school as community and its relationship with wider communities. The more troubled a student's social life may be outside of school – and let us not make any simplistic generalisations about 'dysfunctional working-class neighbourhoods' – the more important it becomes to develop a school environment which is comfortable, inviting and stimulating, a *house for learning*. It is futile to bemoan a lack of social capital while failing to create schools which promote it. The recent emphasis on reculturing within the Improvement literature needs to be contextualised

so as to take account of parental and community perceptions, as well as students' involvement in school evaluation and transformation.

Social justice has to be integral to the project of improving schools. This is true even when we are looking, in a narrow sense, at attainment: the PISA 2000 study shows almost all countries scoring equally in terms of their higher attainers, but differing in their average attainment levels because of wide differences at the lower end of the scale (see Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2001:388). The general exhortation to raise expectations needs to be reframed in terms of a cultural struggle for the meaning of school learning and for personal and collective futures. Student identities and achievements, and the processes by which personal and social development is evaluated, should be re-examined and re-articulated in a spirit of hope, not measured against pre-defined 'standards'. This requires a serious challenge to discourses of deficit, and an insistence on seeing disadvantaged children as *at promise* rather than *at risk*.

Confusion has been sown by overreliance on the handful of research studies selectively highlighted within the School Effectiveness tradition. Such research emphasises a narrow 'back to basics' curriculum combined with tightly scripted instruction and a strict disciplinary regime. A more substantial research base points in other directions, for example:

- an emphasis on authentic curriculum and pedagogy, and cognitive challenge, in extensive networks of schools in the USA (see the summaries of research on the Coalition of Essential Schools and Accelerated Schools Project websites)
- well established patterns of constructivist learning in successful multiethnic schools in Britain (Wrigley 2000, also 2000a)
- the cooperative and community-supported learning in the small rural schools of the Escuela Nueva movement in Columbia and elsewhere (Dalin 1994).

Rather than a singular emphasis on literacy as technical competence, a better way forward would be to combine intensive periods of practice and explicit instruction with a curriculum of meaningful cooperative activities.

Even if it could be proved that rigorous instruction were more 'effective', according to whatever narrow performance measures, this would still represent a highly problematic strategy for school improvement. Andy Hargreaves points to the danger of an apartheid model of school development in countries like England. While schools in more advantaged areas

are being granted greater flexibility to develop as learning communities which prepare their students for the ‘knowledge society’, others will instruct their students for limited short-term gains in preparation for a low-level service role.

Schools and teachers in poor communities in the desolate sprawl of housing estates... struggle in the shadow of impending failure – watchful of test scores, fearful of intervention and with a bellyful of imposed restrictions and requirements... They teach the basic skills of maths and literacy that get their students to improve up to a point in primary school only to see their achievements plateau in the high-school years... Students learn not to create knowledge, develop ingenuity or solve unfamiliar problems in flexible formats; their destiny is to be literate and numerate enough to serve and support the ‘weightless work’ of their affluent superiors in restaurants, tourist hotels, health spas, and other service work where understanding instructions, communicating obsequiously and urging others to have a nice day, have far greater importance than inventiveness or ingenuity. (Hargreaves 2003:191)

Schools of hope in a troubled world

The complex set of processes known as *globalisation* creates unprecedented challenges for education. Confusion arises because the term conflates conflicting emphases. While a depoliticised interpretation stresses the revolution in ICT, faster knowledge transfer and a greater cultural mix, more critical writers point to the consequences of a dramatic concentration of economic and political power. Globalisation is better understood not as something qualitatively different, but as the culmination of a long historical development - ‘capitalism reaching maturity’ (Wood 1998:47).

[Globalization is] the process whereby capitalism is increasingly constituted on a transnational basis, not only in the trade of goods and services but, even more important, in the flow of capital and the trade in currencies and financial instruments. The dominant players in the globalization are the world’s few hundred largest private corporations, which have increasingly integrated production and marketing across national borders over the past decade. (McChesney 1998:1)

The consequences are felt on a planetary scale. ‘Development’ means the transformation of peasants into wage labourers, a switch in land use away from basic food production and towards export crops, and an insupportable debt for misdirected development aid received earlier. A

world economy geared towards fulfilling capitalism's drive to maximise production and consumption leads to ecological crisis and global warming. The concentration of economic power in a few multinational corporations and states, particularly the USA, leads directly to imperialist domination and wars for oil.

In this context, Marx's prognosis of a division of society into the two powerful classes of capital and wage workers is reaching fruition on a global scale. The confusing category 'middle class' covers many white-collar and professional workers whose lives are increasingly insecure, and who are, in reality, simply a different kind of wage labourer. While manual workers' children are the worst victims of the current intensification drive in schools, the children of other types of workers are also damaged. As learning is reduced to an accumulation of examinable knowledge, critical understanding becomes increasingly difficult for all young people.

All children are affected by the commodification of pleasure:

Capitalism requires that free-of-charge happiness be [replaced with] what can be bought and sold. (Dowbor 1997:26)

and by the destruction of freely available resources

clean rivers, air, drinking water, chemical-free food, free time, and the space for adult and children to socialize freely (Darder 2002:40).

This has the effect that 'the notion of society as a collection of possessive individuals is reinforced and any serious sense of the common good is marginalized' (ibid:11).

At the same time, the mass media saturate our consciousness with authorised interpretations of events. For months on end (February 2003) the news media have distributed daily soundbites about suspected 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq, as if America and Britain were armed with water pistols. Every night on television, the iconic face of Saddam Hussein substitutes for the men, women and children of Iraq, as if he alone will die when hell rains down on Baghdad. These interpretations of history are being challenged at street stalls, on demonstrations and some newspapers while our schools are too busy covering the exam syllabus. Through this vast educational process, an assertion of hope and common humanity, globalization may have reached a turning point in the participation of 10,000,000 people across the world in demonstrations against war on February 15 – an event unprecedented in the whole of human history.

All this requires from us a more daring sense of moral purpose, vision and values than hitherto. Vision has to go to the roots of educational provision and processes. This chapter can do no more than give some pointers.

- Hargreaves and Fullan (1998: 42) suggest that ‘schools are one of our last hopes for rebuilding a sense of community’. Since structure constrains culture, we need to take seriously the restructuring as well as the reculturing of schools. The models developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools, reform schools in Germany such as Bielefeld’s Laborschule (Laboratory School), and schools in Denmark and Norway merit our serious attention.
- Critical thinking, critical literacy and media education need to be centrally located in any 21st Century curriculum. This is very different from the pre-packaged Thinking Skills programmes currently being promoted in the name of the knowledge society.
- New forms of situated and concerned learning need to be developed, including community-based projects. For most young people, the postmodern skimming of consciousness by the rapid flashing of media images is paralleled, not challenged, by a drizzle of inert information bytes in school. We have to create new kinds of learning community in which students are

not to 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)
- To support the necessary change, new forms of professional development need to be established which combine the generation of critical understanding with the sharing of practical support. The role of loose but creative networks and coalitions built around a few common principles provides one model (see, for example, Coalition of Essential Schools). The pioneering role of the teachers’ cooperative Rethinking Schools, with its newspaper, books, on-line resources and conferencing, provides another. Similar networks could be built in other countries through alliances of subject associations, teacher unions and other campaigning groups, and would help to generate a counterweight to government pressures.
- Finally, we need to overcome the traditionally apolitical stance of school improvement theory. There are signs that this is beginning to happen. Ideas such as school self-evaluation and student voice in Britain (MacBeath, Rudduck, Fielding) connect to Scandinavian developments in democratic schooling. The recent emphasis on

distributed leadership' (Harris and others) also has democratic potential, though it easily collapses into a simple delegation of management tasks. The concern of Grace, Duignan, Day and others for schooling as moral development and to understand the dilemmas in headship will bear fruit provided that morality isn't restricted to immediate face-to-face relationships. Fullan's concern for moral purpose now shows a greater understanding of the struggle for equity. We need to give direction by focusing on democracy, values, social justice and inclusion, and active and concerned citizenship.

Schools of hope

So much of our thinking about school improvement has been within the bounds of the politically acceptable. It is remarkable how closely its dominant tropes map onto those of capitalist society in general:

- the myth that all schools are individually capable of high levels of success, regardless of systemic inequality, if only they were properly led, echoes the Victorian 'self-made man' – that rare specimen of the entrepreneur who makes his way from rags to riches.
- learning as the 'banking' of knowledge (Freire) to be quantified and accounted for, and where the producers of knowledge are constantly monitored against how much they have 'added value'
- the concept of curriculum as externally imposed and fixed, just as the industrial worker receives instructions to produce goods to a set design for distant customers
- the pupils' sense of reward as extrinsic to the task, and of learning seen as exchange value divorced from use value and which is separate from the emotions, creativity and personal meaning-making of the worker
- the leader as site manager, an accountable agent within a project which is determined by powerful forces higher up the chain of command.

We need to think outside this frame, and reconnect school improvement to a wider set of social values which might transcend the present captive state of our world. We need a sense of leadership as *direction finding*, not just capacity building. We need a fuller sense of transformative leadership which connects up with dynamic *social transformation*. We need to *turn around* our schools until they engage with the contradictions, the hopes and fears of local communities. We need a sense of *achievement* which see beyond the accumulation of factual knowledge, which links hand, heart and mind and involves a moral engagement with the whole of humanity. We need new concepts of intelligence – distributed,

emotional, cultural, political – which involve our engagement in shaping the future of our planet. We need the courage to challenge political decisions which place a ceiling on achievement, whether these are new forms of school selection or student debt or punitive accountability regimes which drive good teachers out of needy schools.

We need commitment to a better future.

We have to be visionary.

We must dare to dream.

We will have to *rethink education*, and not simply ‘improve’ schools.

