PERSONALISATION, EDUCATION AND THE MARKET

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Much of the evidence on the current state of public education in England suggests, if not a deep unease, then a substantial ambivalence about some of the consequences of neo-liberal reform polices. Newspaper headlines like 'Backlash against testing regime' (*Times Educational Supplement* 12 October, 2007 p.14) are increasingly common, and statements from school students themselves that talk of 'overstressed young people desperately slaving away for the grade their school needs to stay at the top of the tables' (*The Guardian* 16th October, 2007 p.6) corroborate the findings of the 2007 UNICEF *Study of child well-being in rich countries*. Along with the increasing immiseration of contemporary 'high performance' schooling through narrow curricula, results-driven pedagogy and the myopic tyranny of externally imposed targets, affecting teachers and families as much as it does students, we have the persistent corrosion of the public realm through the inveterate mendacity of the market and its capacity to, as Stuart Hall suggested at a recent Soundings 'Cultures of Capitalism' seminar, 'change the purpose of organisations without changing their form'. The increasingly tight link between renewal of school buildings through the multi-million pound Building Schools for the Future initiative and the expansion of the Academies programme is emblematic not only of New Labour's capitulation to the blandishments of the market, but also to its abandonment of democratic forms of life predicated on values and traditions that question both the pre-eminent desirability of self-interested consumption and the wider efficacy of invisible hands grasping the meaning or significance of an inclusive common good.

Sensitivities to some of these concerns about reductionist approaches and centralist tendencies, in part necessary to create appropriate conditions for marketisation of state education, have contributed, not only to the government's December 2007 announcement about change in testing regimes, but also to the underlying emphasis on 'personalisation' and its emergence as an increasingly dominant mantra in the 'modernisation', not only of education, but of other public services.

Personalisation, populism and the marginalisation of intellect

Making its first appearance in education under David Miliband's stewardship as Education Minister, personalisation has subsequently been taken up with considerable fervour by the highly influential Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and by the Department for Children, Schools and Families itself. It has also been welcomed in many schools as a sign that, in conjunction with the Every Child Matters Agenda, spaces are opening up which invite a more generous, responsive view of learning in which the voices of young people are accorded a significant place. Thus, what has come to be known as 'student voice' is often taken as one of the key components of personalised learning that includes a very wide spectrum of practice and aspiration. These range, on the one hand, from teachers paying more attention to the perspectives of young people with regard to matters that go beyond uniforms and toilets to include pedagogy and general well-being in school, through increased student choice about the style, pace, topic and broad direction of their learning to, on the other hand, student initiated research and development work with the support of teachers in matters of educational concern to them.

Whilst aspects of what is interpreted and to some degree intended as personalisation are to be welcomed, within the field of education it is a notion that requires a good deal more scrutiny than it has received thus far. Without the kind of serious theoretical attention that one would expect of a proposal that has such a pivotal place in government policy we are in serious danger of sanctioning intellectual presumption and energetic developments that secure us more comfortably to purposes we abhor and practices we come to regret.

There are at least ten reasons why one should look at personalisation with some scepticism. These are that it in its current forms it tends to be ahistorical, superficial, insular, technicist, conservative, individualistic, hyperbolic, episodic, calibrated and dishonestly vacant. It is *ahistorical* because it has no interest in or knowledge of the past and yet our capacity to interrogate the present with any degree of wisdom or any likelihood of creating a more fulfilling future rests significantly on our knowledge and engagement with the past and with the establishment of continuities that much contemporary culture denies. This is not just a matter of intellectual regret: it has more far-reaching consequences for, as Russell Jacoby so eloquently and so terrifyingly reminds us, 'society has lost its memory, and with it, its mind. The inability or refusal to think back takes its toll in the inability to think.' [1] It is *superficial* because it attempts no substantial account of how we become persons, relying only on the hegemonic presumptions of the present or, disgracefully and arrogantly, on selected sound bites of business luminaries. It is as if the intellectual hinterland of education did not exist, as if no-one had anything worthwhile to say prior to 1988, and thereafter primarily in a field (business) with quite different pre-occupations and traditions. It is *insular* because, insofar as it has theoretical substance, it fails to draw on any intellectual or professional traditions outside the UK and the USA.

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[1] Russell Jacoby *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Jung* Harvester Press 1977, pp 3-4

It is *technicist* because its preoccupation with a 'what works' mentality marginalises ethical, social, political and educational considerations that address the most pressing problem the state school system currently faces, namely 'What is education for?' It is *conservative* because there is no fundamental rethinking of the wider social and political system in which we find ourselves. Whilst the Innovation Unit continues to encourage imaginative work of highly committed people of good will it remains a prisoner of the unarticulated, unexamined 'demands of the 21st century'. It currently contains no substantial reference whatever to innovative practices of past generations or from counter-hegemonic traditions; it disgracefully contrasts positive 'visionary and energetic' ideas springing from practice with negative 'theory and 'ideology', and valorises practices such as 'ability-driven curriculum' that deny everything the comprehensive school movement has fought for in the last half-century.

It is *individualistic* because its preoccupation is with individual choosers with little, if any, account taken of the claims of wider social allegiance and the common good. Furthermore its foregrounding of choice, whether at classroom level or in its systemic expression through multiple pathways, masks the deep dishonesty that marginalises the barriers to choice, whether through ability labelling or entry requirement. It is *hyperbolic* because much of the advocacy has a tendency to be overblown and clichéd. The insistent mantra of 'innovation', 'transformation' and 'paradigm shifts' and the valorisation of intention over substance which, in contexts less blighted by the corrosive consequences of cumulative managerialism might grate less harshly, serve only to undermine and alienate all but the most hardy of listeners.

It is *episodic* because there is a marked absence of personal and communal narrative and any sense of the importance of making meaning of our lives. The atomistic individualism from which much of the intellectual and existential energy of personalisation comes has scant understanding of and thus little place for structures, cultures, occasions and dispositions that articulate and celebrate the communal nature of individuality, the situated nature of personhood, the social and political importance of the public realm and the individual's contribution to and benefit from it. Whilst there are increasing continuities emerging through integrated services and other means, these often have, as Priscilla Alderson pointed out in a recent Soundings article, as much to do with surveillance as they have to do with a new found holism[2]. Personalisation has, in other words, little or no opportunity to attend to one of the most important overarching human needs of our contemporary culture, namely to develop what Richard Sennett calls 'a sense of sustainable self'.

It is *calibrated* because the attendant language of 'targets' and 'delivery' foreground the imperatives of measurement and thus too often marginalises the emergent and the exploratory. Whilst it is, of course, possible to develop forms of target setting that are dialogic in form and spirit, and whilst it is also important to have an informed view about the degree to which one's work achieves what is of worth, the push to personalisation in the wider context of performativity is highly vulnerable to spurious calibration or truncated ambition.

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[2] Priscilla Alderson 'Childhood, youth and the economy' *Soundings* Issue 35 Spring 2007, pp 115-126

Finally, it is *dishonestly vacant*. It is *vacant* because dominant approaches to personalisation invite all those involved in formal education, particularly teachers, to accept the sketchy nature of what central prescription there is and then make up their own versions according to preference and circumstance. Intellectual indolence is thus excused by a sudden conversion to faith in the importance of professional judgement that has been virtually obliterated and most certainly disparaged for at least a decade. It is *dishonestly* vacant because, firstly, it sails too closely to the winds of a fair-weather populism and, secondly, because in reality the covert neo-liberal foundations of personalisation remain, not only intact but actively engaged, through the complex mechanisms of discursive framework, regulatory requirement and funding arrangement.

On the practical necessity of philosophy

The roots of the present crisis go considerably deeper than the failure of our current high performance model of schooling and the personalisation phase with which it currently seeks to redress its worst effects and more obvious failings. Our crisis is as much a crisis of the human person and of a commensurate politics of identity, difference and belonging as it is a crisis of economic effectiveness and overly-instrumental schooling. With the demise of imperialism as the prime instrument of capitalist accumulation we are now, as Jonathan Rutherford suggests, experiencing the encroachment of its 'inward turn' into non-market social spheres like education and the increasingly sophisticated commodification of human relations.

In these circumstances it is important, not only to identify a resonant theoretical explanation of the nature and consequences of contemporary difficulties, it is also important to offer alternatives that, in the words of Robin Murray move 'from opposition to proposition'. My own approach to these matters draws on the philosophical work of John Macmurray, arguably one of the greatest 20th century philosophers of the English speaking world whose relational, dynamic account of what it is to be and become a person anticipates much recent contemporary work in the field. Macmurray argued that the two basic elements of human sociality and personhood that influenced the quality of our personal, social, political and communal lives together were comprised of two very different, but inescapably reciprocal, kinds of relations. These he termed 'functional' and 'personal' relations and one of his most enduring contributions was to help us understand the consequences and desirability of different combinations and articulations of their inevitable interdependence. At root, in Macmurray's use of these terms, functional relations are those that are overwhelmingly instrumental in their intention and expression and are defined by their purposes, e.g. buying goods, going to work, travelling from A to B. In contrast, personal relations are not defined by their purpose and, indeed, have no purpose beyond themselves: we enter into personal relation with others because it is through them that we can be and become ourselves. In these kinds of relationships, as, for example, in friendship, we do, of course do things together. However, the joint activities or encounters do not define the relationship; they are expressive of it. Going by train to the seaside is not the purpose of our friendship; the day out is an expression of our care for and delight in each other.

For Macmurray, the interdependence of the functional and the personal is both inevitable and desirable. The functional provides the concrete, instrumental means by which the personal expresses itself - the personal is not other-than-functional, but more-than-functional - and, just as the personal needs the functional to realise itself in action, so too the functional needs some element of the personal to achieve its purposes. What is distinctive and of considerable significance in John Macmurray's work is not just his insistence on the interdependence of the functional and the personal, but the particular account he gives of the nature of that interdependence. For Macmurray, whilst the personal is through the functional – concern, care, delight become real in action through practical expression - crucially *the functional is for the sake of the personal*. Thus, economic activity (the functional) is only legitimate insofar as it helps us to lead more fulfilled lives (the personal); politics and the fight for social justice (the functional) are the servants of communal flourishing (the personal). Within systems of compulsory public education, schooling (the functional) is for the sake of education (the personal); within schools themselves, administrative, management and other organisational arrangements (the functional) are for the sake of a vibrant and creative community (the personal). What is crucial to remember here is not only that each depends upon the other, but also that the form of their interrelationship enables or denies particular kinds of possibility.

Taking the core elements of Macmurray's position[3] I have developed a four-fold educational typology comprising schools as 'impersonal organisations', as 'affective communities', as 'high performance learning organisations', and as 'person centred learning communities' that sees schools and other organisations as differently oriented towards these basic assumptions (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1
Organisational & Communal Orientation of Schools

Schools as **Impersonal** Organisations	Schools as **Affective** Communities	Schools as **High Performance** Learning Organisations	Schools as **Person-Centred** Learning Communities
The Functional marginalises the Personal	*The Personal marginalises the Functional*	*The Personal is used for the sake of the Functional*	*The Functional is used for the sake of the Personal*
Mechanistic Organisation	Affective Community	Learning Organisation	Learning Community
Efficient	Restorative	Effective	Existentially and instrumentally vibrant

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[3] For follow-up reading on Macmurray and for an extended exploration of the theoretical basis of my typology see Michael Fielding, 'The Human Cost and Intellectual Poverty of High Performance Schooling: radical philosophy, John Macmurray and the remaking of person-centred educatio**n'** *Journal of Education Policy* Vol.22, No.4 July 2007, pp 383-409

The first two orientations, namely, the 'impersonal' and the 'affective', take diametrically opposite stances on the relation between the functional and the personal. From the impersonal standpoint, *the functional marginalises the personal* which it sees as largely irrelevant and counter-productive of the core purpose of the school or business. It results in a predominantly mechanistic organisation that is primarily concerned with efficiency. It would typically be dominated by role relations and the prominence given to procedures. In contrast, the affective standpoint *valorises the personal at the expense of the functional*. It is animated by an inclusive, restorative impulse rather than by the sifting, sorting and segregating predilections of efficiency. Its intense concern with the individual needs of young people results in little time or patience for the functional or organisational arrangements needed to translate the warmth and deeply held emotional commitments into practical realities that help young people learn in a variety of ways.

The two orientations particularly relevant to this article concern the school as a 'high-performance learning organisation' and the school as a 'person-centred learning community'. Both share a commitment to young people's achievement, but take very different stances towards how that achievement is conceived and how it is best realised within the context of a school. At first glance these two modes - both of which apply as much to business and commercial contexts as to schools - seem very similar and it is that apparent similarity, or at least the sometimes extreme difficulty in telling the two apart, that suggests there may be important underlying issues to address.

In essence we are talking about one mode which says 'Have a nice day' as part of a human relations mantra and another mode which is genuinely welcoming and engaging of us; one mode which uses extra time for tutorials to jack up test scores and another that places personal encounter through dialogue at the very heart of its daily educational processes and intentions; one in which the new sanctioning of creativity and personalisation is primarily the servant of the same narrow standards agenda and another in which creativity and the engagement with young people as persons is the harbinger of a much richer, more demanding fulfilment of education for and in a democratic society. They are worlds apart; their felt realties are utterly at odds with each other. And yet, it is not always clear which frame is dominant, whose purposes are being served, whether we are the victims of those whose interests are quite other than those we would applaud, or whether we are part of something which is likely to turn out to be fulfilling and worthy of our support. In sum, it is not clear whether personalisation is a seductive re-articulation of corporate insinuation or a genuinely different orientation to what we do and how we might do it.

Naming and transcending the new totalitarianism

Much of the literature on performativity emphasises the extent to which it entails a denial of the personal, how through the 'emptying out' of social relationships any sense of caring for the young people with whom we work or for each other is marginalised or eradicated altogether. Certainly, the activities and worth of the school as a high performance learning organisation are dominated by outcomes, by measured attainment.

Its form of unity is collective, rather than personal or communal. The significance of both students and teachers is derivative and rests primarily in their contribution, usually via high stakes testing, to the public performance of the organisation and in this very real sense high performance learning organisations are totalitarian.

Whilst much of this rings true to me, there is, however, something important that is missing here. Part of the power of contemporary performativity rests on its acceptance, not of a hollowed out ontology awaiting the fabrications of performance, but of its managerial reconstruction through the simulacra of care. The high performing school is an organisation in which the *personal is used for the sake of the functional*: relationships are important; the voices of students are elicited and acknowledged; community is valued, but all primarily for instrumental purposes within the context of the market-place. Social and, indeed, personal relationships are reduced to social capital; 'having relationships' moves subtly towards 'doing relationships', towards relationship management.

In contrast to the school as high performance learning organisation, in its intentional, emergent mode the school as person centred learning community is guided by its commitment to the functional arrangements and interactions of the school being firmly committed to wider human purposes. Certainly, *the functional is* genuinely felt to be *for the sake of the personal*, but, for a whole range of local and circumstantial reasons, the emphasis is on adapting traditional and more familiar arrangements to try to encourage and extend the school's basic commitment to the development of a learning community.

The organisational architecture of the school is heavily influenced by the acknowledged values and aspirations that express its distinctive character. Wide-ranging formal and informal arrangements amongst staff and between students and staff ensure many voices are heard and engaged. Pastoral and academic arrangements relate to each other synergistically with the needs of young people as persons providing the touchstone of aspiration and the arbiter of difficulty or conflict of interest. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is wide-ranging in both its processes and its substance. Often collegial, occasionally communal, it is enquiry driven and learning oriented e.g. hermeneutic or critical approaches to action research.

In its more fully developed, expressive mode the person centred learning community is one in which *the functional is expressive of the personal*, structures and daily practical arrangements having within them distinct traces of person centred ways of being. Invariably one sees the development of organisational forms that deliberately establish a sense of place, purpose and identity within which emergent, fluid forms of learning are encouraged. The revival of schools-within-schools, an implacable opposition to 'ability' grouping, and more integrated, co-constructed approaches to curriculum together with wide-ranging use of the community exemplify commitment to more exploratory modes of being and development. Such schools deliberatively develop more participatory, less hierarchical forms of engagement and decision making. Distinctions between pastoral and academic become more problematic and ultimately less significant. CPD embraces more explicitly dialogic, even narrative forms of engagement such as action learning sets

and self managed learning groups and boundaries between status, role and function are increasingly transgressed through new forms of radical collegiality e.g. the students as researchers movement.

Towards a radical nexus

There is, of course, much more to be said from a left wing perspective about the intellectual and political viability of the notion of person-centred education. How, for example, is it to be distinguished from humanistic management of the 1950s, the individualistic psychology of the post-Freudians so incisively exposed in Russell Jacoby's classic *Social Amnesia,* or the 'soulful' turn in 21st century leadership theory? How does it respond to the kinds of challenge Richard Sennett has been insistently posing to the corrosive retreat from the public? How, in terms of educational theory, is it to be distinguished from the romantic, progressive tradition which, in Quintin Hoare's words 'has failed to transcend its oppositional, escapist character and has failed to do more than salvage a minority from being broken by the system … renouncing implicitly any aspiration to fight or even comprehend the system itself'?[4] How does it meet James Donald's desired emphasis on 'democratic authority, which places at the heart of educational debate the contestability of identity, the provisional nature of institutions, and also the limits of community'?[5]

Two responses, one more developed than the other, seem appropriate. Firstly, Macmurray's philosophical oeuvre and his socialist political engagement are emphatic in their opposition to individualistic accounts, either of the self or of the good society, and his understanding and practice of radical philosophy not only made him the best known philosopher in England in the 1930s, but also led to his vilification by the right-wing press (always a good sign) as 'The Red Professor of Gower Street' and to his eventual marginalisation by the philosophical establishment.

Secondly, my own interpretation of person-centred education is located, not only within radical traditions of state education, it is also deeply enmeshed intellectually, politically and experientially in those strands that valorise the importance of prefigurative practice, persuasively defined by the Gramscian scholar, Carl Boggs, as 'the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal'.[6] This anticipation of future modes of being

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[4] Quintin Hoare, 'Education: Programmes and Men', *New Left Review*, Series 1 Number 32, July-August 1965, p 47.

[5] James Donald, 'Dewey-eyed optimism: The Possibility of Democratic Education', *New Left Review* No.193, June / July, 1993, pp 133-144

[6] Carl Boggs, 'Marxism, prefigurative communism, and the problem of workers' control' *Radical America* Vol.11, No.6 – Vol.12 No.1 1977/78, pp 99-122 (see also www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/boggs.html)

through processes and relations, not just structures, that exemplify and embody the viability and desirability of radical alternatives is one of the most important past and continuing contributions of the radical traditions of state education to the furtherance of democracy in this country and yet it is one that is too often marginalised by the mainstream left. Whilst there are, of course, significant dangers of it slipping into the oppositional 'escapism' alluded to by Hoare above, its catalytic, grounded insistence on the resonance and viability of actually existing radical alternatives is doubly important. It is important, not only for the teachers, students and communities that live the delights, disappointments and tensions of work against the grain. It is also important for those in less fortuitous or adventurous circumstances who struggle, often on their own or with one or two others, to create and sustain similar approaches and practices. Whilst it is true that collective action rooted in wider social and political movements remains the most important factor separating 'escapist' projects from those that offer a more significant challenge to dominant regimes of truth, it is also true that the integrity, bravery and insistent presence of prefigurative practice commands a respect at odds with what too easily becomes a discourse of condescension or derision. Their stories and their realities are as important as the solidarities of their more strategically astute comrades: both draw on and contribute to the historical narratives of the radical traditions of state education in this country and across the world. Both are necessary and without their more deliberate reciprocity radical alternatives will remain less real and less likely than either would wish.

In the spirit of Erik Olsen Wright's recent Soundings article[7], my argument is that these 'waystations', these sites of prefigurative practice, are significant both in their motivational and epistemic relevance. Not only do they inspire admirers to further action and deny opponents the charge of impracticability, they provide cumulative insights of substantial interest to future pioneers. Collectively and over time they provide, if you like, a radical nexus, an interrelated series of desiderata, grounded in struggle and guided by radical views of education and the good society it espouses.

My current thinking suggests the following ten elements as candidates for inclusion[8]: no doubt there are others; no doubt some will be properly disputed; the point, however, is to contribute to debate that will help us move towards an educational and political future expressive of socialist values and aspirations, rather than the current capitulation to the hegemony of neo-liberalism.

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[7] Erik Olin Wright, 'Guidelines of envisioning real utopias' *Soundings* Issue 36 Summer, 2007, pp 26-39

[8] For a fuller exploration of some of these suggestions see Michael Fielding 'On the Necessity of Radical State Education: Democracy and the Common School' *Journal of Philosophy of Education* Vol.41 No.4, 2007, forthcoming

1   *An intended, proclaimed interpersonal and structural integrity of democratic living* which demonstrates the unity of means and ends, not only in matters of organisational structure, but also in the relational dimensions of daily engagement which valorise care, respect and creative engagement as the foundational dispositions of social justice

2   *Radical curriculum and enabling assessment* that together form the basis of an approach to knowledge and practice that is co-constructed, culturally responsive, supportive of multiple, emergent identities, and affirming of a just and joyful social order

3   *Insistent affirmation of possibility* that keeps options open and rests on a generosity of presumption and, for these and other reasons, denies the legitimacy of ability grouping, promotes emulation rather than competition, and prefers intrinsic motivation and communal recognition to the paraphernalia of marks and prizes

4   *Radical collegiality and an intergenerational reciprocity* that reflects radicals' deep-seated belief and delight in the encounter between adults and young people as a potential source of mutual learning, not just in an instrumental, technical sense, but also in a wider existential and more fully educational sense

5   *Affirmation of inclusive identities* through the interdependence and celebration of student and staff diversity through daily re-affirmation of dignity and respect

6   *Personal and communal narrative* encouraged by multiple occasions for continuing conversation through a range of discursive and dialogic spaces (formal / informal; public / private)

7   *A vibrant, inclusive public realm* that provides within-school practices which foreground communal arrangements in which young people and adults make meaning of their work together, returning tenaciously and regularly to the imperatives of purpose, not merely to the mechanics of accomplishment

8   *Political architecture of participatory democracy* which instantiates a permanent unease with hierarchy, and a commitment to shared power and responsibility for the quality of living and learning together

9   *Engaging the local* in ways which invite a confident reciprocity, problematise institutional boundaries, and encourage a mutual re-seeing of presumed identities

10 *Regional, national and global solidarities* made real through the reciprocal ideological, material and interpersonal support of values-driven networks, alliances and communities which draw on and contribute to the dynamic of radical social movements

Of these, it seems to me that the seventh, the development of a vibrant, inclusive public realm, is currently the most important. It would good to hear from Soundings readers who think some or all of the arguments put forward in this article are engaging enough to support or disagree with: the creative development of the Centre for Radical State Education[9] here at the London Institute depends on the energy and commitment of radical engagement.

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[9] For more information on the Centre for Radical State Education at the Institute of Education, University of London see http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=16965