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Review article

Democratic Education and Learning

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Flutter, J. and Rudduck, J. (2004), *Consulting pupils : what's in it for schools?* **London: RoutledgeFalmer.**
Lockyer, A., Crick, B. and Annette, J. (2003), *Education for democratic citizenship: issues of theory and practice*. **Aldershot: Ashgate.**
MacBeath, J. and Moos, L. (2004), *Democratic learning : the challenge to school effectiveness*. **London: RoutledgeFalmer.**

The world is growing more democratic. Between 1980 and 2001, the number of states

holding multiparty elections more than doubled. In this period, civilian governments

replaced 33 military regimes. By 2001 more than half of the world's population was

living in a liberal democratic state (UNDP, 2002). In Britain the end of the 20th century

was a period of fundamental constitutional reforms intended to strengthen democracy.

These included devolution to Scotland and Wales, reform of the House of Lords, the

Human Rights Act and the introduction of education for citizenship to the national

curriculum for England.

In spite of these trends, it would appear that Britain has yet to develop an embedded

culture of democracy. Of course there is a two way process. The development of a

democratic culture requires education. However, effective education for democratic

citizenship is greatly facilitated by a supportive culture in the wider society. This paradox

explains some of the difficulties encountered by those of us who have been closely

involved with the new citizenship education.

Recent literature on democracy and education, represented by the three books reviewed

here, provides somewhat depressing evidence of the deficit in British democratic culture,

as well as helpful insights into the possibilities and advantages of democratising schools and the education system. *Education for democratic citizenship: issues of theory and practice* is an edited collection of essays of variable quality, mainly by specialists in political philosophy and political studies, who comment on and critique the recent work of Bernard Crick, particularly his report *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (QCA, 1998). *Democratic learning : the challenge to school effectiveness* is also an edited collection that addresses its subject from a school improvement and management perspective. *Consulting pupils : what's in it for schools?* summarizes the results and conclusions of a number of important research studies. Few of the British authors acknowledge democracy as a fundamental standard.

Democracy and education

Democracy is now a universal standard. This claim can be made on the basis that human rights are universal norms and standards; a proposition agreed by governments representing 98% of the world's population and 2000 representatives of civil society from across the world meeting at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 (UNHCR, 1994). Democratic government is a right under article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, since 1989, virtually every member state of the United Nations has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Liberal democracy and human rights are in a direct reciprocal relationship. Human rights require a liberal democratic context to flourish, that is a society which guarantees fundamental freedoms and the equal right to respect and dignity for all. The quality of a

democracy is measured by its respect for human rights. Democracy is a system of government, but it is also much more than that, as John Dewey observed: 'A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, [1916] 2002:101).

Democracy is about living together. Education is an essential component of democracy, as it is about learning to live together and the practice of living together. In his contribution to *Education for Democratic Citizenship,* Terry McLaughlin incidentally defines a democratic pluralist society as one: 'where we live among people we disagree with, on the basis of values and forms of reasoning which are (in part) intended precisely to protect difference, within unifying imperatives and forces' (2003: 158). The unifying imperatives, are usually constitutional texts, but in Britain, where there is no single constitutional document, they are laws, including guarantees of equality and human rights.

The Human Rights Act of 1998 incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms into British law. Its preamble stresses the interdependence of democracy, human rights and education. It asserts that fundamental freedoms:

> are best maintained on the one hand by an effective political democracy and on the other by a common understanding and observance of the human rights upon which they depend.

> (ECHR, 1950)

A 'common understanding and observance' of human rights depends significantly on education. One of the primary purposes of state education systems is to transmit common values and principles. In liberal democracies these include the fundamental rights and freedoms on which a democratic system depends, such as: freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of movement; freedom of association and peaceful assembly; a free press; freedom to receive and impart information; an independent system of justice; education for all as a right.

Democratic schooling

The crucial relationship between democracy and education is taken for granted by Nordic colleagues who have little difficulty explaining what they mean by democratic learning. In fact the origin of *Democratic Learning: the challenge for school effectiveness* lies in the 2002 International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement held in Copenhagen with the aim to:

> consider some of the more distinctive aspects of Nordic education and of Nordic society which might lend new insights to the [school effectiveness] 'movement'… Nordic countries have traditionally represented a very special kind of social democracy and community participation in decisions that affect our lives. In this respect schooling is no exception. Indeed it is central to our concept of democracy (Moos, 2004:1).

The Director General of the National Agency of Education of Sweden provides a helpful three part framework for exploring democratic learning. First is 'as a preparation for life

in future situations within a democratic society' (Ekholm: 2004:95). This corresponds to the provision within schools of specific education for democratic citizenship.

But democratic learning has other, wider implications. Secondly, there is the key notion that democracy is strengthened by people from different backgrounds sharing their knowledge and insights. This is a perspective already found in Dewey who argued that democracy requires free association and interaction within and between communities. Dewey defines democracy in terms of society having a large number of values in common so that social control is achieved as a result of a consensus about shared aims and values rather than through coercion. This can readily be applied to schools. Indeed Alma Harris's contribution to *Democratic Learning*, where she examined factors that contribute to school improvement where there are 'challenging circumstances', identifies precisely this factor:

> Of central importance within schools that are improving is an alignment to a shared set of values…The headteachers communicated their vision through relationships with staff and students, and they built these around core values…such as the modelling and promotion of respect for individuals, fairness and equality (Harris, 2004: 168).

Alma Harris identifies the values enacted by the heads she studied as personal values. 'It was evident that their leadership values and visions were primarily moral…' (2004:168). However, respect, fairness and equality are all core principles of human rights, which are universal standards (Osler and Starkey, 1996, 2000; Klug, 2000). It seems to be

characteristic of a number of British writers that there is no recognition that these heads are promoting democracy and human rights and that this is not merely a personal crusade but a publicly valued contribution to the development of a democratic society.

Dewey defined democratic learning in terms of opportunities for maximising communication between individuals and groups: 'In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences' (Dewey, [1916] 2002: 97-8). A democratic education therefore implies opportunities 'to receive and to take from others' and 'a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences'.

Writing from a Norwegian perspective, where there is explicit commitment to equal access to education for all, expressed as a refusal to stream or group by abilities, gender or other factors, Møller acknowledges the influence of Michael Apple and James Beane in perpetuating Dewey's work. He suggests that the Norwegian curriculum provides an elaborated model. 'When examining the Norwegian core curriculum, one will find most of the conditions mentioned by Apple and Beane (1999) present in the text' (Møller, 2004: 153). One such condition is 'the open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible' (Apple and Beane, 1999:7). Democratic schools therefore provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively on tasks in a range of diverse groups. The tasks are shared experiences and they are the occasion for discussion, negotiation, dialogue and communication. There are also

opportunities for dialogue between school leaders and administrators, governors, teachers, ancillary staff and students. From a different Nordic perspective, comprehensive education is essential to democracy since: 'learning to be democratic means that there is an equal distribution of important sub-groups within a school population: the two genders, different ethnic groups or different socio-economic groups' (Ekholm: 2004:95). This perspective drives education policy in a strategic sense, but also decisions about groupings for learning within individual schools and classes.

Ekholm's third perspective is to consider the extent to which schools respect the rights of students.

> To be democratic, the learning that takes place at school needs to be based on real power sharing between the learner and the teacher. The views that children and young people hold need to be accorded respect by staff and learning seen as something students own and have essential influence over (*id.*).

Ekholm's tripartite definition of democratic education and learning can perhaps be simplified as education *for* democracy; education *in* democracy; education *through* democracy. The first of these includes the provision of formal opportunities to learn about democracy and human rights within the curriculum. The second, education in democracy, implies that the structures and ethos of schools and of education provision are based on democratic principles, particularly that there is an emphasis on promoting rights and on equality both of opportunity and of outcomes. The third aspect, education through democracy, makes use of the policies, ethos and structures to provide the practical

experience of democratic life without which education for democratic citizenship is likely to be less effective. This is a widely recognised principle, endorsed by European ministers of education:

> Democracy is best learned in a democratic setting where participation is encouraged, where views can be expressed openly and discussed, where there is freedom of expression for pupils and teachers, and where there is fairness and justice.

> (Council of Europe, 1985)

The British democratic deficit

All three books reviewed here provide evidence that the British educational establishment has difficulties in firmly endorsing democracy as a principle to guide education. As an outside observer, Moos notes, albeit by implication, that: 'In Scandinavian countries democracy is at the heart of education while in other traditions it is often deeply hidden or, in the worst cases, ignored' (2004:8).

Democracy is certainly hidden in the national curriculum for England. Those responsible for its statutory definition, Conservative and Labour, have failed to take the opportunity to set education within a framework of democracy. Section 351 of the Education Act 1996 simply requires that all maintained schools provide a balanced and broadly based curriculum that:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society

- prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

The purposes of schooling in this definition appear to be essentially individualistic. The reference to society is unspecific and scarcely grammatical. However, the Danish contributor to *Democratic Learning*, Per Jørgensen develops an analysis that links democratic learning and personal development. He argues that the learning environment of the school, the 'outer learning environment' shapes the learner's capacity to develop as an individual.

> The connection is a belief that the inner learning environment – mind, thoughts and knowledge – is shaped by the pattern in the outer learning environment – the climate of the classroom, social relationships and the degree to which you are able to exercise personal influence. It is therefore unreasonable to expect mature formation of character in the inner learning environment if we deny children opportunities of influence in the outer learning environment (Jørgensen, 2004: 114).

Schools in Britain developed from authoritarian and hierarchical institutions, as Lockyer (2004) notes in *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, and the democratisation of education is a slow process. However, even to respond to the agenda of individual rather than social development, in fact requires attention to the school environment. As Jørgensen further argues: 'In my view democracy as a way of living is associated with

social involvement and social responsibility and a feeling of belonging. Democracy means giving high priority to the social dimensions of the everyday life of a school' (2004: 123).

There is a strong tradition in Britain of schools as caring institutions and yet the importance of this is not acknowledged or recognised in the statement of values and purposes of the national curriculum for England. The statement does at least mention, though almost as an afterthought, that 'Education is also a route to … a healthy and just democracy' (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 10). However, no link is made in the statement between individual well-being and democratic structures, either in society generally or within the institution of the school.

And yet the link is increasingly made around the world as states reform their education systems. For example 17 of 19 Central and South American states studied by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights now have explicit references to democracy in their curricula (IIHR, 2003: 39). Of course, it is the case that education for citizenship has been part of the national curriculum for England since 2002 and there is an understandable expectation that this fills the gap left by the 1996 Education Act and provides adequate opportunities for learning about democracy. In fact, the programme of study for citizenship makes no mention of democracy until Key Stage 4 and then the context is participation in formal processes, namely: 'the importance of playing an active part in democratic and electoral processes'. In other words it is clear that, in England, democracy is, at best 'deeply hidden' within the legislative framework for education and the

curriculum.

The reasons for this are explored by Elizabeth Frazer in her contribution to *Education for Democratic Citizenship.* She argues that there is, in the UK, an anti-political culture that has been able to develop because of a 'lack of any wide assent to, consensus on or even well-articulated dominant account of the nature of politics, civic life or the constitution' (Frazer, 2003: 64). This analysis accounts for the ferocity of debates in Britain about the UK's relationship to Europe. There is no British constitutional document to provide closure to the debate and so Europe is used as a defining national issue by populist and xenophobic parties and movements.

It is certainly the case that without a written constitutional document to provide agreed fundamental principles both for governance and for living together in society, it has been difficult to identify explicitly British normative positions to define the mission of the education service. Audrey Osler and I have long argued that teachers can find support for a view of the role of education in promoting democracy and equity in the fact that since 1945 all British governments have been firmly committed to the universal standards of United Nations human rights instruments and to their incorporation within the treaty documents of the European Union (Osler and Starkey, 1996; 2000). However, we also argue that this normative position requires an understanding of the possibility of cosmopolitan citizenship, defined as the capacity to identify simultaneously with local, national and global instances of democracy (Osler and Vincent, 2002; Osler and Starkey, 2003). Without such a perspective, even such fundamentals as democracy and human

rights become open to political challenge as non-British or European from the xenophobic right and as Western and exclusive in a multicultural context from the anti-imperialist left.

Thus education for democratic citizenship becomes itself, hardly surprisingly, a site of political struggle. Ironically, the struggle is between those who believe that citizenship education should be explicit about its democratic political aims and those fearful of political conflict or cynical about any government initiative.

For those averse to political conflict, there is a refuge in a discourse of 'values' that refuses to adopt normative positions in the name of liberal tolerance. Frazer argues that "the emphasis on 'values', in the UK context, is an explicitly depoliticising move in the debate about political education" (2003: 65). Whilst I entirely agree that the discourse is depoliticising, I do not notice that it is explicit. Writers are more likely to hide behind an academic discourse and arms length positions. For instance Graham Haydon, in *Education for Democratic Citizenship* contends that: 'The idea of *teaching* moral and social responsibility may seem to many teachers to run the risk of indoctrinating students in society's values, or of imposing the teacher's own values' (2003:79). Since he does not put any counter-arguments, we may assume that this is his own position, namely that the teaching of 'society's values' constitutes indoctrination, even in the context of a liberal democracy. However, he is careful not to state this.

Frazer argues that there is, in fact, an anti-political culture in Britain that permeates particularly those academic traditions that are apparently the most political.

> Feminists in particular, environmentalists, some pacifist groups, those committed to solidarity to the developing world and anti-racists have all found – in both the ideas and theories of the traditional left and right and in the policies of Labour and Conservative governments in power – gaps, silences and perversities (2003:72).

Whilst the scope of politics has expanded, thanks to the attention of such groups, within academic discourse these analyses have 'generated a *sceptical and critical approach to politics altogether*' (Frazer, 2003:73 original emphasis). I would go further and observe that I have frequently encountered teachers and academic colleagues who express total cynicism about any government policy under discussion. And yet education for democratic citizenship requires the support of disillusioned teachers as well as enthusiasts, and that is a real challenge.

Frazer's analysis is further justified in a contribution to *Education for Democratic Citizenship* by the architect of the citizenship curriculum for England, Bernard Crick of the eponymous Report (QCA, 1998). He informs us that he deliberately set out to play down the concept of democracy in the report, and believes that nobody noticed! "None of the contributors [to this volume], however, have pointed to how muted was the Report's discussion of 'teaching democracy', compared with 'teaching citizenship'. I have escaped challenge on that, and it was deliberate" (Crick, 2003:vii).

Actually, some of us did notice and did challenge the failure to promote democracy. Crick notes that: 'There have been objections that, for instance, "anti-racism" was not explicit in the *Citizenship Order* (Osler and Starkey, 1996)'. Leaving aside the erroneous referencing of our work, characteristic of a number of authors in this volume, Crick simply failed to see that we were actually challenging the absence of commitment to education for democracy. For instance we wrote:

> The mainstreaming of antiracism requires an understanding that antiracism is essential to democracy. As the example of Sweden illustrates so clearly, it is by linking antiracism to democracy rather than exclusively to multiculturalism that it can start to receive the widespread acceptance it requires (Osler and Starkey, 2002:157).

Why should Crick be so reluctant to promote democracy? Apparently he is worried about the 'rhetorical ambiguities' of democracy. He fears it may be hi-jacked as a term by populists. He considers the claims of John Dewey to be taken seriously as a political philosopher. After all, Dewey 'saw a radically more democratic schooling as the essential precondition for (in his sense) a genuinely democratic society (Crick, 2003:15). But Crick dismisses him as failing to make the grade within 'the canon of political thought'. He therefore does not share his criticisms of Dewey's conception of democracy nor does he provide his own definition. This is unfortunate, since, as a number of contributors to *Democratic Learning* demonstrate, Dewey's contribution to an understanding of democracy and education is very relevant and, I would maintain, mainstream. Crick's disclosure that it was on political grounds that he made the decision not to stress

democracy, confirms our observation that, in England, there is not yet a consensus that schools have a vital role in preparing citizens for democratic living (Osler and Starkey, 2005).

This failure by government and its advisers in England to acknowledge the centrality of democracy to education is further confirmed by the fact that there is no statutory framework for the participation of students in governing bodies. Nor is there any legal requirement to involve learners in the day-to-day running of their schools, through student councils or other representative structures. As a consequence there is rather a dearth of studies from British sources that address democracy and education and this gives added importance these three studies, which at least provide further opportunities for students to engage critically with the literature.

Creating a democratic ethos, acknowledging that pupils' views are accorded respect and have an influence, could have been the subject of *Consulting pupils : what's in it for schools?* However, it is indicative of the British context that Julia Flutter and Jean Ruddock need to ask the question. Unfortunately, their response is essentially a pragmatic one, namely that teaching and learning may be improved if schools take notice of customer feedback. Whilst acknowledging that there are reasons of principle for listening to pupils, the authors do not seem comfortable with these principles and they do not use them to analyse their data. Like the national curriculum statement quoted above, democracy is an afterthought, indicated by an 'also'. The authors explain: 'The principles of democracy and citizenship are also linked with the notion of pupil participation, as

Gerison Lansdown suggests…'. The authors clearly feel that Lansdown's view is just a suggestion and they personally keep their distance. There is a single reference in the book to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the authors in fact confuse the Convention with the earlier Declaration on the Rights of the Child of 1959.

As we have argued elsewhere (Osler and Starkey, 2005), the research on which this book is largely based missed an opportunity to give the work greater authority by placing it firmly within a context of democracy and children's rights. The evidence provided by the project does not engage with the democratic principles of promoting equality; learning from each other; grouping; ensuring a range of perspectives are represented. There is no attempt to engage with issues of gender, race or class. In the two case studies presented as relevant to citizenship education we learn that the schools diagnosed pupils' low self-esteem as responsible for behavioural problems, but there is no attempt to identify the reasons behind what are described as 'personal problems'. This is in many ways a useful little book, but it is de-politicised.

There is much to learn from our Nordic colleagues, in particular, the centrality of democracy as a guiding principle and value. Since democracy is now a universal standard, we do not have to follow Bernard Crick and doubt this proposition or hide our attachment to it. We have nothing to lose from espousing democracy and everything to gain for education. Attention to the quality of social life in schools will benefit us all.

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