

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **Another Way is Possible – But We Have to Be OPPORTUNISTS! (Keynote, Hungary EUDEC Conference, Budapest 10th March, 2019)**

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What's wrong with what we have now? Well as my time is short I am going to presume two things in this talk. First, that Bertrand Russell and John Dewey were correct when they both said conventional authoritarian schools offer the choice of becoming either submissive or rebellious. They said neither provides a good preparation for living in a democracy or taking responsibility for your own life. Second, we are here today because we agree with them.

To make the point and bring it up to date I will repeat a few words from the brilliant piece written by 16 year-old Harriet Sweatman, in this year's Scottish Schools Young Writer of the Year Award. She writes "...Capitalism tells us that if we are not fit to work, then we are worthless. There is no love in learning any more...we envy the people who have left already...the historian memorises essay structures down to the word, the linguist knows how to write an essay not hold a conversation, the writer wades through Shakespeare trying to pick out an essay from a play that was made to be performed not studied... Whatever happened to expanding your horizons? Now we must ensure that our tunnel vision is pinpoint

thin...Assignments where you can research what you want count for almost nothing...Finding out who I am and what I care about has been deemed unimportant. I have been flattened by a concrete curriculum so structured and unforgiving that I have forgotten how to function without it. With no bell throbbing at even intervals and no marking scheme to build our lives around how will we cope?...They say that high school is the best years of your life—but not in this world, where qualifications matter more than personal qualities. I feel that I have grown backwards, as if I know less about myself and who or what I could be than when I started...The curriculum must release its chokehold on the throats of this nations' children and let them breathe...But for us it is too late. For now, we just have to wait until the final bell rings and we walk out of the school door for ever." (Sweatman, 2019)

I once said at a Council of Europe conference "learning about democracy and human rights when I was at school was like reading holiday brochures in prison." According to Harriet, little has changed.

But I found another way. The "other way" I found both necessary and possible

as a teacher could be described as “democratic education.” What do I mean by this phrase? I mean two things. The first I call SPDM (student participation in decision making: about what and how they will learn.) The second I call SPDDM (student participation in democratic decision making: about how the class and school communities will be managed.) Both are needed for young people to discover their own purposes and to be able to create their own identity. This is already important. It will become more so as the Fourth Industrial Revolution—the high-tech world—threatens the capacity of work or paid employment to provide security of identity for more than one or two percent of us. The rest of us supported, by some form of universal basic income, as recently trialled with success in Canada and Finland, will need to be able to create our own identities for ourselves. Democratic schools will enable young people to do this. At the same time they will help us manage democratic societies which respect human rights. Coercive authoritarian schools cannot do this.

The task of creating the necessary change is not easy. We have to be supreme opportunists! How we do it will depend on how we can adapt the two key principles of a non-coercive participative approach to curriculum and class and school management based on democratic process to the realities in which we find ourselves. Some small private schools like Summerhill or Sudbury Valley will race ahead and provide us with models. These schools are “pioneers of possibility.” Those of us working with the majority of young people in our state school systems will have to be more “fox-like”—the fox being

the ultimate opportunist in my experience as a farmer.

Ideally I suppose school students would demand their own changes to the school curriculum. Not all young people are as depressed about their surrender to the status quo as Harriet Sweatman. OBESSU (the organising bureau of European school student unions) has been arguing for student participation in curriculum design and school democracy for 40 years. Alas, with little effect beyond the Nordic countries. They have been waiting for a uniting issue such as the overwhelming imperative of resisting climate change. I am very excited by the “Greta Thunberg phenomenon” where demands for a more relevant curriculum and more opportunities for practical engagement are indeed being driven by the students themselves, led by a courageous sixteen year old from Sweden. I am sure that you have all heard of her and her school climate strike movement, spreading around the world like wildfire.

I joined 1500 school students in my home town of Brighton two weeks ago. Many of the young strikers that I spoke to seemed to know more about climate change issues than their teachers, parents or political leaders. In the UK 200 academic experts in the field have backed the students in the press. In Germany Angela Merkel has contradicted German education officials to support the students, as has Leo Varadkar, Irish Minister for Defence in Ireland. In the UK the government and most head teachers threatened the students with punishment. That will not stop many more young people participating next week in hundreds of towns and cities worldwide—including your own “Fridays for the Future” Hungary movement which

has begun weekly strikes outside your parliament here in Budapest.

Demand for school change for a less coercive approach to curriculum and more school democracy is also being driven by parents in many countries. The recently opened East Kent Sudbury School in England, on whose board I am proud to sit, is a good example together many similar schools across Europe and the World. Thirty Five new democratic schools have emerged in the last three years in France alone.

My own story is one of opportunism, communication and learning to find friends, to create change at the teacher level—first as a class teacher, then a senior teacher and later as a school vice-principal.

In my first post as a young teacher I was able to bring about change at class level and then at school level. I initially trained as a primary school teacher, in England ages 5-11, because I liked the idea of being able to create an integrated curriculum taking into account the interests of children. But I couldn't find a school with a vacancy. I was very lucky to discover a secondary modern school with a progressive head teacher. Secondary modern schools exist in England in those parts of the country that test children at age 11 to decide which 15-20% should go to the "grammar" type school (gymnasium), for an academic conveyor belt to university, and which should not. For aspiring middle class parents "failure" to get into a grammar school is a catastrophe. It is also too often very much felt to be a catastrophe by their children. In order to attempt to repair this damage my job was to teach all the humanities subjects to one class of 35 of these failures, which made me responsible for 65% of their

curriculum. At our first meeting on my first day as a teacher I arranged all the chairs in a circle. Although the heads of all the subjects concerned had given me a prescribed curriculum for their subject with the tacit approval of the head teacher, I decided to ignore them. He wanted me to experiment with the creation of an integrated curriculum. What he did not expect was for me to do this with the children. I sat in the circle and introduced myself. I explained that History was about the past, Geography was about different places and the people who lived there, Religious Knowledge was about what people believed, Social Studies was about how people lived together in groups, and English was about how people communicated. I then explained that anyone could ask questions and discuss what I had said but please only speak when you are holding "my special book." One boy immediately said "...I think that covers everything in the world. Does that mean we can learn about anything we want to in the world." "Well I suppose it does" I replied, making sure I was holding the book before speaking.

And so it began. Individuals and groups began projects on a wide range of topics. The special book was quickly replaced by an elected class chairman. Our lessons were on five mornings per week and one whole day—Friday. We agreed by majority vote to have a short class meeting at the start of every day with a longer meeting on Friday afternoons. The need for a class secretary quickly emerged to keep a record of decisions made at class meetings. Gradually many jobs were created and during the two years we were together everyone did more than one. Projects could last as long as they lasted but it became a

rule that when a project was finished the owner would give a short lesson to the rest of the class and make a display that would appear in the class “newspaper.” The newspaper began as the back wall of our classroom but quickly grew to cover doors, cupboards and windows. Project displays appeared in the features section which I usually edited, but there were many other sections each with different editors.

I made it clear that I wanted to be the class teacher, helping everyone with their learning, and although I could also be the class policeman if I had to be, I would rather not be. It became apparent that to manage such a hive of activity some rules would be needed. These were discussed and voted upon at Friday meetings. I used these discussions to introduce ideas such as the “rule of law,” democracy, one person one vote, minority rights, etcetera. Many class laws were created. Some I agreed with and others I thought silly—but almost always I accepted the decision of the meeting, unless it broke the school rules or the laws of England. Of course when you have laws you have to decide what to do when they are broken. This led to the creation of the “class court” with elected magistrates and the class jury. Some of the laws I would never have thought of in a million years—such as the “five hands up and five minutes quiet” law. If five people found the classroom too noisy they would put their hands up and the elected class “timekeeper” would call for 5 minutes quiet. If anyone spoke during these minutes their name would be noted by the class “book keeper” and they would be summoned before the next Friday court if they were noted five times or more in a week. Many laws were created and the system worked brilliantly.

I was afraid that when the head teacher found out what I was doing I would be fired. On the contrary because several parents noticed the transformation of confidence in their children they began to inform him how happy they were with my methods. Head teachers love to hear good news from parents! He was a bit worried that I wasn’t doing much formal teaching though and as there were six other parallel classes working in a more formal way he decided to give all seven classes a verbal reasoning test. I was embarrassed when my class scored more highly than the others—but he was relieved and let me continue to go my own way. This of course created some challenges with my colleagues whose students began to ask why they did not have class meetings and a class court. I realised I needed to explain what I was doing to rest of the humanities team. They were mostly young but with more experience than me. It is to their credit that far from treating me as a lunatic they also began to try some of my class democracy. After the first year I was put in charge of all seven classes as they moved up to what is our Year 8 and we introduced the democratic student led approach to the whole year group. An elected year council was created to organise inter-class sports, quizzes, discos, parties, trips. The whole teaching team were volunteers, which was great and included some fresh from college. Relations with the heads of subjects who realised they were losing control of their curriculum areas became more difficult however. I learned some relational lessons that were useful when I moved to more senior posts.

I am still in touch with some 60 year-old kids who were in my first class for those two years between 1969-1971. They

have helped me to write a book about the experience. Several went on to university despite their initial academic failure at the 11+ test. All remember with pride our co-created class democracy and freely chosen curriculum. All say it turned around their sense of failure and helped them to believe in themselves again. All say it helped them create a strong sense of purpose and identity. One actually became a head teacher himself with a strong belief in “student voice.” My two years at the school were quite inspiring and ended with the creation of a school council for the whole school of 1500 students.

Next I will say a little about the creation of a Community School where democratic change at community level was brought about. School and community became “turned on” to themselves and each other there, through democratic structures and processes growing out from the school. In my case this began as a bet between myself as vice-principal and some older students of a rural school serving a country town supporting stone quarries and sheep farms. They found the town boring. They said there were only about 20 clubs and societies with few open to young people. I bet them that there at least twice as many. They conducted a survey. They found over 100 organisations! The student council and the parents association invited them all to a massive conference in the school to explore how the clubs and societies could be more available to young people and how the resources of the school could be more available in return. The results were amazing, leading to many new organisations such as a community newspaper run jointly by students and adults and a community orchestra with all ages playing together. Both these

organisations still exist forty years later. All the activity was and still is managed and coordinated by a Community Education Council always chaired by a school student. We went on to help create an English Community Education Association to create change at national level.

After this I became a school inspector. Not my best career move as I did not like much of what I saw, though I was able to encourage creative practice wherever I found it. Alas, however, national policy was pushing in the opposite direction with more and more high-stakes testing and all the other anxiety generating uncreative nonsense we are all too familiar with. But, it gave me the opportunity to help to defend the most famous English pioneer of possibility—Summerhill School—which in 1999 was threatened with closure by the then chief inspector. It was the only case where a threatened school has defended itself against inspectors in court. We won. It was the high point of my career as an inspector, though it did not make me very popular with the chief inspector who shortly afterwards was forced to resign.

I will conclude by mentioning examples of where opportunism has made it possible to change policy at school system level.

Fifteen years ago with a team from the University of Sussex we created student councils in all the city secondary schools of Portsmouth, a socially and economically deprived city in the affluent South with poor and declining academic performance. These met together and formed COPS: the City of Portsmouth Students. This has now evolved into a not for profit company called UNLOC which employs 10 young

people and provides training in student participation across the South of England.

Another example of opportunistic change this time at national level. By chance in 2001 I found myself advising the minister's adviser for the creation of a democratic citizenship curriculum for English schools. This came about for me as a result of work that I had been doing for the Council of Europe. Put simply I argued that if you wanted students to learn about democracy and human rights you have to practice them in school and not just talk about them for examinations. The minister agreed. However, he was attacked by the chief inspector and the right-wing press for threatening to lower standards while kids wasted time in democratic meetings and decision making. I was asked to carry out some research to see if schools that were already trying to be a little democratic had worse academic results because of this practice. I found exactly the opposite. Schools that were more democratic than most actually had better examination results, better attendance and fewer exclusions for anti-social behaviour, compared with the average for schools in similar socio-economic environments. This became known as the "Hannam Report" (Hannam, 2001) and is still available from several websites in several languages online for example: <http://alternativestoschool.com/pdfs/The%20Hannam%20Report.pdf>. The planned curriculum changes went ahead though they have since been undone by recent Conservative ministers.

In my opinion much more research is needed into the outcomes of more democratic participative approaches in public school systems. I was very pleased that in a recent meta-review into student

participation by Mager and Nowak (2012) my modest study of twelve schools was included in the final 30 most useful of the 3000 studies reviewed.

In the following year I had the opportunity to persuade another minister to change the law to enable students to sit as members of school boards. This happened in the 2002 Education Act. Research showed schools who chose to implement the opportunity had improved governance as a result of listening to the students.

Finally I should just mention an exciting project I am involved with in Greece: The Sympraxis Project. Democratic educators in Greece have found 200 volunteer teachers from all levels and types of school who share an enthusiasm to work in a more democratic and creative way with their classes. Now they are coming together in conferences to share experiences, to form clusters and networks to bring about change in whole schools and groups of schools. They are moving from one classroom to whole school to system change, supported by international change agents such as the Council of Europe and IDEC/EUDEC.

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned, against the grain of the kind of person I am, is the importance of not being alone. I think our potential power is something like the square of the size of our group of like minds. As the song says "one is one and all alone and ever more shall be so" whereas two have the strength of four, three as nine, and so on. Find some friends. Choose them carefully. Then study the behaviour of the fox! There is always something that can be done, despite the anti-teacher paranoia of politicians and policy makers. Sometimes if you try, the results will be seen years later.

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