Another School is Possible

**Abstract:** Following the outcome of the 2010 general election, teacher trade unionists must renew their efforts to forge a different kind of school to the one foisted on staff and learners by recent governments, argues the author. He goes on to offer a schematic plan to focus both the unacceptable current orthodoxies and the shape of another more appropriate vision.

Another form of schooling is both necessary and possible. By that, I mean a service to learners rooted in child development and human potential that is implemented with collective and co-operative methods in pursuit of a just, equitable, peaceful and sustainable future.

So the general election outcome has to be significant for us teacher trade unionists in a couple of crucial inter-related respects.

To start with I have some sympathy with what a Jamaican-born voter told me when I canvassed as a Parliamentary candidate in 2001. “Politics is poli-tricks”. I see far too much consensus on social, economic and ideological questions within the Westminster village. What divides the major parties is insignificant compared to their joint adherence to self-perpetuating core values. ‘Duck houses’. Say no more.

However, lunching recently in the Country Girl pub next to Selly Oak hospital, amongst three separate severely disabled, very young men attempting a sunny afternoon’s return to normality with relatives, I realised that politics is far too important and life-changing to be left to the politicians. Their bodies, minds and futures are irreversible marked by their time in Afghanistan.

Firstly, we are mostly employed in a state-funded public service, even though, perversely, the NUT seems more vigorously ready to defend the principles of democratic management and accountability than Parliament itself. The increasing spectrum of deviant systems introduced in the last 20 years could soon expand beyond Academies and Trusts to the Conservative’s ‘Free’ schools, or the ‘Accredited Schools’ in Labour’s manifesto.

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Secondly, we are afloat in the uncharted waters of adversity due to the severest capitalist crisis since the 1930s, with the sharks of private profit smelling blood. The good ship Comprehensive Education is already listing from torpedoes fired by HMS Choice and Diversity.

The public sector as a whole is being touted as the object of serious retrenchment rather than expansion. Neither Harold Wilson in the 1970s nor Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s geared up to dismantle the post-1945 Welfare State in quite the manner expected of whichever Prime Minister sees in 2011.

One small detail tells everything about the Conservative's deceitful public relations. Their flagship schools policy is being imported from Sweden, but deliberately mis-translated as being about 'Free' schools when the more accurate term is 'Independent' schools. That word has too much Conservative baggage, implying private schools, and contradicts the laughable 'power to the people' hype.

Education is big business globally, especially where governments are prepared to de-regulate and open up existing public provision to profit-taking.

Ghana, for example, has been ravaged by privateers whose key profit source is derived from the charges for access to testing and examination systems.

In vast areas of the world such as India or Africa, the poor pre-existing level of tax-funded education makes the amount of charity and religious-based funding of schooling more prevalent than in Europe. However, some local co-ops exist to fill the gap in state funding. I visited two, fee-paying village schools in the Punjab in 2008, operating with no profit, poor wages and basic equipment. The schools were open when children were not needed for harvesting duties.

So, whilst the extremes of multiple redundancies, debilitating pension reform and school closures may not impact on us straight away, the size of teaching groups and workload generally, the demise of generous support staffing and a shrinkage of teacher supply due to lost places in Higher Education, will hit us hard and quick.

Most school workers already function to the limits of their physical and mental health due largely to the excessive and ever-changing external performance pressures, and the relegation of all sorts of equality issues in the workplace. The very fabric of our own organisational structures will face terrific strain as school reps face greater victimisation and local officers less and less facility time.

Our strategies into the coming governmental era have to be informed by our own unique vision of change and how work and learning can be truly liberating.
Yet I want to assert here that now is not the time for us to match such conservative thinking. The very defence of our union and its comprehensive ideals requires us to see the coming severe challenges dialectically – as a great opportunity.

But that in turn is contingent upon an acceptance of the thoroughly ideological function that schools perform, most eloquently summarised by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), in reproducing human capital, preparing young citizens for their slot in the social status quo.

Practically speaking I am referring to the smiley faces reward systems and ability-based table-setting of Early Years, the internalisation by primary learners of SATs levels and national curriculum sub-level progress as a measure of their total self-esteem, the spoon-feeding that masquerades as learning, the very existence of government invective about creativity in classrooms, managerial careerism trumping pedagogic skills, the scramble for admissions to ‘popular’ secondary places, and the dips in performance and interest that accompanies the realisation by so many secondary students that learning is never going to be fun.

The predominant approach shaping the jungle of current systems is instrumentalist, designed to affect both social control and some level of job-skilling, but not about true universal child development or human liberation. Indeed, it is not the best of times to be young (Vernell, 2010).

So another kind of school is possible, as a vibrant negation of the increasingly regimented hothouses where everyone marches to the Ofsted drum. We must and can delineate what we want, not merely what we oppose.

Barack Obama and David Cameron may have now finally emptied the rhetoric of change of any meaningful purchase on reality. Certainly for decades now the dominant mode of change-management in our schools has been an authoritarian, top-down, relentlessly self-justifying nightmare known only too intimately by the nation’s general practitioners who assess its steady flow of casualties in their daily surgeries.

From numerous casework scenarios involving bullying managers that I have dealt with as an NUT Division Secretary it is common for our members to be left exasperated by the conflicting directives being given to them. The managers involved either don’t recognise their own professional inconsistency and subjectivity or, more typically as time goes by, don’t care, or even deliberately confuse targeted staff as a tactic of harassment.

Thus willing and conscientious colleagues are tipped into a vortex of mental torture, self-doubt and illness. I have never understood how this culture of fear is productive, other than being a short cut to rapid advancement for ambitious managers. Yet it is of course a feature of so many modern workplaces, personified in the vicious antics of British Airways boss Willie Walsh.
I have lost count of the number of times I have asked school leaders who think that bullying is legitimate, why on earth they think that strategies to get the best out of their staff seem to run directly counter to the strategies teachers typically use to get the best out of their students. Which learner thrives on being shouted at, isolated, overloaded with contradictory tasks and sent home miserable at the end of every day?

Our strategies into the coming governmental era have to be informed by our own unique vision of change and how work and learning can be truly liberating.

No policy stone about funding, governance, curriculum, admissions, accountability, pedagogy and student voice should remain unturned. Our vision for change, not theirs, needs revealing in high-definition sound and colour.

In developing a schematic approach to this contrast between the suffocating jungle of present provision and the paradise of potential systems it is worth acknowledging some very basic notions about how change happens.

Within any size of social group from a nursery class, to a school departmental staffing team to a whole social class of citizens, conscious involvement in the why, what, how and who of change is crucial.

All participants need to understand why change is necessary, and the exact features that are untenable or stale about the current situation.

The group has to then identify what they aspire to achieve at the completion of change.

The bridge between here and there has to be agreed as the how of getting from old to new arrangements.

Lastly the agency of change, who will accomplish it, needs to be fully understood.

None of the links in this process can work without all others. Failure to convince participants about why change is necessary will undermine the effectiveness of all other stages. Not agreeing precise transitional steps about how to change will undo any teleological consensus.

The following table tries to map the rift between jungle and paradise according to the competing ideological forces.

‘They’ represents the government and business institutions as well as the social partner unions, whose change agenda is regressive, utilitarian and claustrophobic in terms of closing down creative spaces.

‘We’ represents the NUT and progressive campaigning groups for whom the motivation and purpose of schooling is quite contrary.
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<th>CHANGE</th>
<th>THEY say JUNGLE</th>
<th>WE say PARADISE</th>
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| WHY    | Individual is paramount in learning and competition is the core ethos  
Students need to be delivered fit for the class relations and skills required by job market  
Schools are a panacea for a range of social ills (obesity, violence, pregnancy, community cohesion)  
Schools must adopt new status as remaining locus of otherwise obliterated local public services (health, social care, careers, nursery/adult/community ed) | Learning is essentially a social process and co-operation the core ethos  
Students need full emotional and intellectual potential released by appropriate curricula, and institutional freedoms  
Learning for social justice on a collective model can replace atomised individualism of testing and examinations paradigm  
School can be a pro-active social resource for whole community with equal partners beyond its gates |
| WHAT   | Increased instrumentalism  
Greater commodification of learning for purposes of measurement  
Entrenched polarity between academic and vocational study  
Citizenship for conformity - if not social authoritarianism  
Schools extended to replace full range of social/community services | Greater academic liberation  
Global citizenship and empowerment  
Greater freedom to design and enact learning by learners and teachers  
Topic teaching at all levels  
Increased school democracy in context of local public democracy  
Full range of public services |
| HOW    | A fixed-ability paradigm from outset (setting, selection, gifted & talented)  
Standardisation, not ‘standards’  
High of producer surveillance (Ofsted, PRP, League Tables)  
A cult of managerialism  
Greater role for private sector (Academies, Trusts, BSF)  
Emasculated public sector and trade unions  
Consumer sovereignty | Finnish Model (Kindergarten until age 7, smaller 7-16 schools, no selection or testing, fresh food, highly-qualified staff, higher spending on frontline)  
Global, social justice learning projects produced collectively  
mixed ability, high-opportunity paradigms formatively rather than summatively assessed  
Holistic approach to human potential (practical and academic)  
Limitless standards of expectation and outcome |
| WHO    | Private companies and corporations  
Top down from Whitehall quangos and private consultants, LA SIPs  
Senior managers, especially heads  
Compliant social partners - in abusive, one-sided relationship with government! | Bottom up from learners  
Starting with teachers and learners supported by their caring and academic communities  
Public forms of management and truly reciprocal social partnerships  
Publicly funded and managed, with union participation at all levels |
There are of course a minority of counter-initiatives within the current schools system and related academia where exemplary practices are being eeked out against the tide of orthodoxy and stultification represented by Ofsted, SATs, reduced funding, privatisation and endless governmental diktat (Yandell, 2010).

The refreshing approach to the Early Years curriculum in Wales is perhaps the most progressive widespread development of note. A few dozen schools have taken the issues of climate change to heart by designing curricular themes around its scientific and social aspects, as well as organising alternative energy and waste systems within their control. The Alternative Futures project led by colleagues at Filton High School, south Gloucestershire, has repeated a successful and inspiring strategy of deconstructing present curricula in favour of themes based on issues of global social justice.

Yet these are most often the product of dissident staff or administrators whose selfless bravery risks the eventual wrath of inspectors, if not parents or Local Authorities, and the indignation of ignorant journalists. The pressures to achieve mediocre outcomes, despite all the false, shrill rhetoric of excellence, are huge.

It is not at all easy to remain focussed on the true values of education when all around are being trained and rewarded for their adherence to a tick-box, marketised, competitive ethos of drive-by lesson observations and the arbitrary promotions of unworthy leadership candidates.

The real crisis in quality management recruitment, especially in the primary sector, has lead not to a re-evaluation by the government of why so few now want to take on such an impossible job, but the barmy opposite conclusion that ’good’ managers should be given more and more schools to manage!

Our greatest solace has to be that the importation of production-line methods and mechanical, private-sector originated management models will never fit the organic and meandering processes of education, and are failing to do so. For a start no individual’s learning trajectory is ever production-linear except to a number-crunching Whitehall or Town Hall apparatchik!

For example, the Academies programme in England is modelled on US Charter Schools. Barack Obama’s first Washington appointee was his chum Arne Duncan who had spearheaded this trend in his Chicago base.

But Charter Schools have made no real impact on the learning of the very kids they claim to enhance, when compared with traditional public sector schools there. The most forensic comparative monitoring of their

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progress in 16 US states carried out by Stanford University, California last summer, does not make good reading for Charter advocates.

“If charter schools are to flourish and deliver on promises made by proponents, a deliberate and sustained effort to increase the proportion of high quality schools is essential. The replication of successful school models is one important element of this effort. On the other side of the equation, however, authorizers must be willing and able to fulfill their end of the original charter school bargain: accountability in exchange for flexibility. When schools consistently fail, they should be closed.

Though simple in formulation, this task has proven to be extremely difficult in practice. Simply put, neither market mechanisms nor regulatory oversight (have) been a sufficient force to deal with underperforming schools.” (Stanford University, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009)

The other more recent US model for change has been the Knowledge Is Power Programme (KIPP), which purports to have had dramatic impacts in high ethnic-minority enclaves. Bearing in mind that funding for public services has always been so much lower in the US than the UK, the degree of anxiety about their quality is understandably more pervasive there.

But KIPP schools are highly exploitative of staff, commonly open six days a week and 12 hours a day with staff on call 24/7 via mobile phones, and aggressively test-focused. ‘Drill and kill’ fits this regime as much as any military boot camp. Anyone wanting a vivid exposure of the impact of testing on urban US schools can look no further than series four of the wonderful HBO series ‘The Wire’.

Evidence from Sweden shows clearly that the model of Independent schools there, much-favoured by the Tories here, again show no real improvement of academic outcome but do show greater social stratification along religious, ethnic and class lines. The private sector pressures have brought reductions in qualified teacher posts and a sharp increase in cheaper ancillary staffing. Most perniciously, this is all done in the name of parental free choice, not, as is patently obvious once we engage with its protagonists, corporate profit grab.

Readers needing any further inspiration to keep their heads high should always turn to a much better US source – the Rethinking Schools team. Their website and journal should be a common calling place for all our thoughts of resistance to the rising tide of reaction in the coming years (Rethinking Schools, 2010). Their ideas are always classroom tested, equality-minded and child-centred. Every learner really does matter to them.

From the scheme that I have outlined above perhaps the most difficult but necessary aspect of the change we want to see concerns agency.

It will be no mean feat to invert the status quo, turning the top-down
autocracy of current systems into a bottom-up process using public funds for the benefit of all communities. The democratic deficit whereby politics remains alien to the masses will not be rectified by sham Tory populism. Their free-market decimation of public services with schools handed over to privateers will take us in completely the wrong direction.

But it will mean all the public sector unions taking on a greater role in the political life of the country to the point that new political forces will become more and more necessary to represent their real interests. The NUT’s current anti-fascist commitments enshrined in its Political Fund will have to be extended to articulate our role in shaping and supporting pro-democracy political organisation in the coming years.

So let’s commit ourselves to forging a new school for our learners, as part of a wider new democracy.

We, and they, have nothing to lose but our change.

References
Yandell, J. (2010) Myths of Assessment Education for Liberation, no. 1, April 2010. Available e-mail: ed4lib@yahoo.co.uk