

Guest Author

In every edition of *Research in Teacher Education* we publish a contribution from a guest writer who has links with the Cass School of Education and Communities. Currently Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London and Visiting Professor of Education at the University of Bristol, Michael Fielding taught for 19 years in some of the UK's pioneer radical secondary comprehensive schools and for a similar period and with identical commitments at the universities of Cambridge, London and Sussex. Widely published in the fields of student voice, educational leadership and radical democratic education, some of his innovative research work (he coined the term Joint Practice Development) is currently influencing professional learning in schools. His latest book, co-authored with Peter Moss, *Radical education and the common school – a democratic alternative* (Routledge 2011), seeks to reclaim education as a democratic project and a community responsibility and school as a public space of encounter for all citizens. It was nominated Best Book of 2011 by the Society for Educational Studies. Within the context of a powerful critique on the effects of transnational capitalism on education, Michael discusses the pioneering work of Alex Bloom and its implications for radical democratic education.

Beyond the betrayal of democracy in schools: lessons from the past, hopes for the future¹

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Democracy and its discontents

We live in interesting times, not least because democracy is both under threat and, in part as a consequence, fitfully and potentially resurgent. In the UK the presumptions of privilege and greed that have for some years disfigured the workings of parliamentary democracy and the, increasingly visible, predatory ambitions and moral indifference of transnational capitalism have prompted Occupy and other similar movements. Not only is there an increasingly widespread willingness to refute and refuse the political passivity and tacit subservience such systems require. There is also a companion resurgence of interest in too readily forgotten traditions of participatory democracy and their more deliberate and wide-ranging insistence on multiple sites and opportunities for democratic engagement.

One of the issues this raises for those of us working in the field of education concerns not just the overarching relationship between education and democracy in terms of organisational systems of provision and curricular guidance, but also how a serious commitment to democracy translates into the daily patterns and practices of schools. Perhaps surprisingly, and certainly reprehensibly, it is not, generally, one that is addressed explicitly, honestly or with any degree of sophistication or seriousness. With the current government, as with many of its predecessors, foundational aims limp deferentially and tangentially along behind the overriding ambitions of a narrowly conceived, brashly articulated, economic instrumentalism. Likewise, and predictably, consideration of democracy as a way of young people and adults living and learning together on a daily basis is largely absent.

Alex Bloom – pioneer of radical democratic education

There have been, and, for as long as democracy remains both an inspiration and an aspiration, there always will be, brave people whose integrity, commitment and

solidarity combine with the particularities of time and place to enable them to create real alternatives to the disgraceful familiarities of our neglect or betrayal. One such person was Alex Bloom, who, for ten years after the end of the Second World War, ran, not far from UEL, one of the most remarkable democratic schools the UK has ever seen. On 1 October 1945 he opened St George-in-the-East, a new secondary modern school² in old buildings in Cable Street, Stepney, at that time a very poor, tough, multiracial area in the East End of London, littered with bomb craters and the devastations of war. It was to be, in his own words, 'A consciously democratic community... without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition' (Bloom 1948: 121). It was one of only two schools within the state sector to be visited and supported by A. S. Neill, and Bloom's work developed a significant national reputation among progressive educators. Within three years of its opening, the school hosted numerous international visitors, including Dr Gertrude Panzer, a concentration camp escapee and one of the key figures in the educational reconstruction of post-war Germany, who remarked to Sir Robert Birley – later headmaster of Eton and 1949 Reith Lecturer – 'If I could have in Berlin three schools like St. George-in-the-East, Stepney, I could revolutionize the education of this city' (Birley 1978: 63).

In September 1955, a month short of its tenth anniversary, Bloom died at the school. He was 60 years old. Not only did his obituary appear in *The Times* and on the front page of the London *Evening News*, the mass circulation *Daily Mirror* ran a double-page spread with vivid pictures of distraught adults and children mourning his passing, an event which prompted Roy Nash, education correspondent of another national daily, the *News Chronicle*, to remark, 'It was an incredible thing to happen, absolutely unique in State education history. In my time I've reported funerals of prominent people, but I've never seen such genuine grief as on that day in the East End' (Berg 1971: 37).

Democracy cannot be taught: it must be lived

Bloom, then, is a very remarkable figure and one from whom we still have much to learn. He took seriously the view, not only that democracy was of foundational importance, but that its spirit – what I call a commitment to democratic fellowship – should inform all aspects of the school's daily life.

'It is a vital part of our belief that the modus vivendi claims paramount importance. We are convinced that not only must the overall school pattern – the democratic way of living – precede all planning, but

that it proclaims the main purpose of education in a democracy. Our aim is that children should learn to live creatively, not for themselves alone, but also for their community'. (Bloom 1949, 170)

For him, lessons in moral education, or, in his own words, 'giving instruction in ethics', is a 'fatal mistake' (Bloom 1952: 136). Since education was 'fundamentally a matter of relationships', his abiding concern was 'with the practice of right human relations' since '[h]e is educated who is able to recognise relationships between things and to experience just relationships with persons' (ibid). Education was thus a way of being and living in the world, and 'since this *ars vivendi* cannot be taught, it must be learnt. And it can be learnt only through and by actual living. Through living one learns to live. School therefore should be a place where such learning is not merely possible but is made possible' (ibid). A school, then, has to embody a democratic way of being, not only in its curricular offerings, but in its institutional structures and its daily encounters. It is through the nature and quality of our encounter with others within the framework of a democratic community that democracy is learned and lived.

The kind of relationships and ways of being Bloom encouraged in the school presumed, affirmed and exemplified an open, shared humanity as both the end and the means, of education in and for democracy. Again and again he argues for two basic requirements: firstly, the removal of fear and, secondly, the absolute necessity of affirmation and significance through the authenticity and energy of one's contribution. Taken together they point to the deeper necessity of 'friendship, security, and the recognition of each child's worth' (ibid, 136–7).

No punishment

Given the values underpinning these kinds of foundational commitments and operative imperatives his rejection of corporal punishment and competition becomes more intelligible. At a time when corporal punishment was very common indeed in both primary and secondary schools, not only did Bloom forbid caning and any other form of physical punishment, he effectively dispensed with punishment altogether. Explaining the realities of the St George's approach to a reporter from the *Times Educational Supplement* he affirmed, 'Our only form of punishment, if punishment it can be called, is a request to the child to leave the group.' Anticipating puzzlement about what then transpires, he went on to say,

'We find they don't leave the school premises. After wandering about the playground or sitting by the

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hall fire for a bit, they are asked to rejoin the group and generally do. In the case of persistent anti-social behaviour our first step is to make contact with the parents to try to find out the reason'. (Anon. 1951)

The school thus ran on the basis of dialogic engagement and communal restitution, rather than the physical and psychological violence condoned and invariably expected of schools and schoolteachers at that time.

No competition

With regard to competition, Bloom's approach gained wider public attention through an article about St George's that appeared in the *Times Educational Supplement*. Here readers were told:

'Competition is out. No individual prizes for work, conduct or sport distract the constant aim of doing a thing for its own sake, trying to beat, not other people's standards but one's own, producing one's best not to shine above the rest but with the maturer pleasure of co-operative achievement'. (ibid)

Particularly interesting is Bloom's response the following week in which he expanded on, not only the rationale of his rejection of competition, but how that principled stance connected to a set of foundational practices that refused to label children by so-called 'ability' and instead created an open approach to learning and living, or, as Bloom has it, to 'adventure'.

'Let me assure you, first, that our purpose in removing the normal incentives to effort is not to hide from the child his weaknesses. So many children enter the secondary modern school trailing dark clouds of failure. These mists and the inhibiting effect of the fear of failure have to be dispelled. The positive compulsions of streaming, marks, prizes, competition and the negative compulsion of imposed punishment – the teacher's "artful aids" – these cannot help to restore the child's self-esteem. By removing them we enable and encourage him to adventure, and if he fails he fails with impunity... and with a smile, but with every social inducement to improve his skills.' (Bloom 1951)

Curriculum, pedagogy and the living structures of radical democracy

Curriculum and pedagogy at St George's were equally radical. Bloom's insistence that 'I never give an analysis of a typical day spent by the children at school – life being much too individual and varied to make this possible' (Bloom 1949: 10) boldly encapsulates his approach. That said, there was, nonetheless, a sophisticated structure of opportunities for individual, group and communal exploration that evolved over Bloom's ten-year period at the school (see Fielding 2005).

Lastly, a word about one of the most remarkable features of St George-in-the-East: the highly sophisticated development of joint student and staff involvement *on a weekly basis*, in the decision-making, ensuing action, and communal accountability that shaped the aspirations and actions of the school as a living democratic community. Among the most interesting features was Bloom's development of the whole-school meeting or what he called the School Council. Here, the entire school celebrated its work, reflected on its achievements and its unfulfilled aspirations. Here, students and staff, each as significant persons and citizens in their own right, challenged each other, warmed to each other, laughed with each other, renewed and reaffirmed democracy as a way of living and learning together.

'Democracy is not only something to fight for, it is something to fight with'

The fact that in the 60 years following Bloom's death there have been only a very small number of examples of serious commitment to the creation of the school as 'a consciously democratic community' does not speak well for the authenticity or the generosity of our democratic aspirations. The more so since research from the great Harvard pioneer Lawrence Kohlberg demonstrated that it was the school's duty to provide appropriate contexts for and experience of full participation. Why? Because representative democracy privileges those who are already politically mature. Unless young people experience participatory engagement in a rich way at school, when they leave they are likely to avoid opportunities for participation and public responsibility, not seek them.

We would do well to remember Francis Williams's insistence in 1941 at the height of the London blitz that 'Democracy is not only something to fight for, it is something to fight with' (Williams 1941: vi). For me it is clear that if democracy matters it must be seen to matter in our schools, in one of the most important institutions we have yet devised for its understanding and renewal. Democracy's aspirations require the dignity and eloquence of articulation; its legitimacy requires enacted practical arrangements and humane dispositions which embody its living reality.

Notes

¹It is a delight and an honour to contribute to RITE. Among the many reasons, two stand out for me. Firstly, when I was doing my PhD, I had the good fortune to do a little part-time teaching at UEL's predecessor, North East London Polytechnic, in the mid-/late 1970s, largely through the good offices of my late, dear friend Michael Graham who taught at NELP for many years. Secondly, NELP/UEL has a rich tradition of very radical approaches to education which merits wide national and international recognition.

²In the English post-war selective system of state secondary education, modern schools catered for about 80% of the population, a putatively more academic 15% going to grammar schools, and approximately 3–4% going to vocational technical schools.

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