

## GUEST AUTHOR

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she held a Chair in Education at the London Institute of Education. She has also worked as a researcher at the Open University, where she gained her PhD. The first ten years of her career were as a teacher in three secondary schools. Her research and teaching have been in the field of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the professional development of teachers and school leaders. She was a member of the UK Assessment Reform Group

from 1992 to 2010. In the 2000s, she directed the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s 'Learning How to Learn' project, within the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, of which she was deputy director. From 2011 to 2013 she was President of the British Educational Research Association. She has published more than 100 books, chapters and articles and her 'selected works' are published by Routledge.

# Where have all the flowers gone?

## A case for community gardening for education

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After half a century as a teacher, researcher and academic, the temptation to look back and assess the present in the light of the past is irresistible. Whilst attempting to prune my collection of books and papers, I came across some draft chapters, written in the early 1980s, for a part-time PhD. I never completed this because I moved to another full-time project, which eventually earned me a PhD on a different but related topic. Such was my experience as an early career 'contract' researcher who needed to make a living: I grabbed opportunities where I could.

The draft chapters arose from a study carried out by a group of colleagues at the Open University (OU) jointly with teachers at Bridgewater Hall, the first secondary school on Stantonbury Campus, Milton Keynes (MK). Together we were investigating Bridgewater's approach to what was called 'interpersonal education'. My part of the project was to research the professional development of teachers, especially how newly qualified teachers

understood, and responded to, the distinctive philosophy, environment and practice of this innovative school located in an equally pioneering new town.

The creation of the campus was driven by the vision of its first Director, Geoff Cooksey, who was appointed three years before it opened in order to oversee the build. In all senses he was the architect; indeed he acknowledged the importance of structures. His overriding concern was that the schools on the campus should achieve coherence with the community they served. So, planning was guided by a desire to avoid separation between education and other aspects of living. In talks, and in my interview with him, he emphasised the roles of place, time, teams, resources and relationships. The buildings were adaptations of domestic architecture: no fences, and freedom of movement for the public along paths beaten by them through the campus; two-storey brick buildings with pitched and hipped roofs; some internal open plan spaces; carpets.

Cooksey believed that the seven or eight periods school day flew in the face of common sense about how people normally work and learn, so he introduced a timetable based on 75-minute blocks of time, often doubled to give half-day sessions. And no bells! Bells only divide the day in prisons and convents, he said. Day 10 and Week 10 were instituted to allow extended and integrated activities outside the normal curriculum, including residential experience at an expedition centre in the Scottish borders.

Teaching and tutorial support was blurred and 12-year-olds spent much of their time with their tutors in Lower School to ease the transition from primary school. Courses were developed by teams of teachers who prepared their own resources. 'Shared Time' in the Lower School was an opportunity for interdisciplinary teaching and learning. There was some setting in a few subjects, such as mathematics, but much teaching was mixed ability. In order to maintain

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this into the fifth form (now Year 11), staff developed Mode III GCE and CSE assessments accredited by examinations boards. It enabled them to keep the two qualification routes together. In a sense this was this was a forerunner of the combined GCSE. A record of achievement was also developed so that all school-leavers had a record of their achievements, at a time when up to 40% of school students nationwide left school with no qualifications. This development activity was carried out in twice-weekly staff meetings. Teachers were expected to commit to a working day that ended not before five o'clock. A community resource centre was the first building on the campus.

All these structures were balanced by an equal emphasis on relationships. Mutual respect between adults and students was expected. Coherent with Cooksey's central principle of continuity between schooling and life, first names were used and there were no uniforms.

This was not the only innovative school at the time. Bob Moon, the Deputy Director of Stantonbury Campus and the first headteacher of Bridgewater Hall, published case studies of six such innovative schools of the time: Abraham Moss Centre, Carisbrooke High School, Countesthorpe College, Sidney Stringer School and Community College, Stantonbury Campus and The Sutton Centre. Each study was written in a self-critical way by someone who worked inside them (Moon 1983).

The move to comprehensive education from the mid-1960s, and the raising of the school-leaving age in 1973, also triggered numerous curriculum projects funded by the Schools Council (eg the Humanities Curriculum Project) and the Nuffield Foundation (eg Nuffield Science). These were manifestations of lively debate around curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and organisational innovation at the level of the curriculum, the classroom and the school. Teachers, school leaders, local authorities, examinations boards and

university researchers were all involved. These were heady days, as the 1960s and 1970s were in other respects. But already rumblings of disquiet were heard.

Where a thousand flowers had been allowed to bloom there were almost inevitably weeds. Concerns were expressed that innovative structures and practices were not raising 'standards'. In 1969 and 1970, the so-called Black Papers by C. B. Cox and A. R. Dyson proclaimed a crisis in education, and in 1976 Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan, in his Ruskin College speech, exhorted teachers to satisfy parents and industry that what they were doing met their requirements and the needs of their children. The age of accountability had arrived. This was given impetus by the 1976 Auld Inquiry into the teaching, organisation and management of the William Tyndale Junior School in Islington, which was seen as chaotic. The main issue was who was accountable to whom for what. The main criticism was targeted at the local education authority, but the wider ramifications of the Auld Report soon became clear: the definition and lines of accountability needed to be sorted out.

During the Thatcher years, from 1979, an accountability structure was nailed down. Liberal progressivism was to be obliterated and traditional conservative educational values were to be reinstated. The chief instrument of this reform was the 1988 Education Reform Act, which specified: that parents should be able to choose schools (open enrolment); that funding should follow the pupil and be locally managed (local financial management); and that a national curriculum and assessment arrangements should provide parents with the information on which their choices could be based. This would enable schools to expand or contract or close as rolls increased or fell. Performance tables of test and examination results were created and published and these were used as a basis for a new system of inspections by a new body, Ofsted, created in 1992.

Although there have been some changes through subsequent Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments, these national structures in England remain. Indeed the Cameron, May and Johnson Conservative governments have nailed the accountability system down even further. Despite the 2010 rhetoric of giving teachers and school leaders more professional control over the school curriculum (as distinct from the national curriculum), and over pedagogy, the prescribed programmes of study leave little scope for teachers to innovate. Most recently the Government's agenda has been reinforced by its consultation (in August 2021) on the recommendations of a 'market' review of initial teacher education. The intention appears to be to impose a national curriculum for ITT. This is seen by many, including university partners, as likely to reduce teachers to technicians. Some universities are threatening to pull out of ITT altogether because the proposed changes would contravene their idea of what a university is for. The public response from Cambridge University claims that the Market Review confuses quality with uniformity and conformity. Thus the Conservative Government's free market ideology is undermined. As Henry Ford said of the Model T automobile: 'You can have any color you like ... as long as it's black!'

Why has it been possible for successive governments to move so rapidly from the idealistic days of the 1960s and 1970s to the situation in which we find ourselves today? There are many reasons: some global, some national and some local. The legitimisation crisis of late capitalism and suspicion of professionals and elites, and the concomitant rise of populism, is one. Concerns over the UK's economic and political standing in the world and its educational standards as measured by international indicator systems are another. Persistent or increasing gaps between the rich and the poor, between genders and different ethnic groups, in access to opportunities and in educational outcomes, is a third. These are obvious

problems that seek solution, but is the current system of education in England the one that will achieve this?

The current government in England is immovable. It is set firm on a course of academisation of all schools with central government in ultimate control. Indeed it has taken so much power to itself that there is little space for alternatives to be thought through and tested in the field. The Education Endowment Foundation, an independent charity but initially set up in 2011 with a grant of £125m from the Department for Education (the whole of the DfE's budget for research at the time), supports the evaluation of specific interventions at classroom level judged on test results. The aim was to find ways of raising attainment for the poorest pupils in challenging schools. This is a worthy aim but it does not give scope for truly blue-skies thinking in education. Most particularly the Government's assessment and accountability system has imposed such powerful incentives and disincentives that few individuals and organisations have any space to manoeuvre.

What has concerned me most is that the whole weight of this system rests on assessments of individual children and young people. In England, unlike any other country that I know, students' scores in mandated tests and public examinations, which should be a marker of their achievements (assessment of learning) and an indicator of what and how they might improve (assessment for learning), are aggregated and published and the resulting tables are used to evaluate and reward or punish the performance of their teachers, their headteachers, their school, the local authority or multi-academy trust (MAT). If the results are not good enough, and do not achieve the set targets, then individuals can lose their jobs and schools can close or be taken over. The stakes are so high that students are inevitably drilled for tests, and they often see the purpose of education as simply to 'get the grades'. What these grades mean and what they are for, except to take the next step in

the system, is not at all clear. Like Atlas, children and young people are left holding up the sky.

What happened to Stantonbury Campus over time is a sad story. Geoff Cooksey retired in 1984 and died in 2012. Many of the schools' leaders (e.g. Bob Moon, Mike Davies, Mervyn Flecknoe, Ivor Goodson, Michael Fielding) went on to notable careers in headships of other schools, or in universities, or both. After a string of good Ofsted reports, the Campus received a poor one in 2012. A new principal introduced fences, gates, uniform and lanyards in the name of safety and security. It became an academy within a MAT (Griffin). These 'reforms' didn't work. In 2018, the school, now named Stantonbury International, 'required improvement' and in 2020 it was judged as 'inadequate' and put in special measures by Ofsted. The heavy workload of teachers, a badly planned and taught curriculum and lack of leadership were all criticised. However, the safety and security of students was the major issue after violence among students resulted in a (non-fatal) stabbing. This is doubly tragic as the original school placed so much emphasis on community relationships. In September 2021 the school reopened under the management of a new principal and a new MAT (Tove). How it fares will be interesting to watch.

Those who study educational change and school improvement have long known that the design and development of innovation is one thing but implementation, institutionalisation and renewal is often quite another. Rarely do radical innovations last long in their early manifestation although they can inform the zeitgeist and influence changes in culture. Underneath imposed structures, cultural movements can work some magic.

During the years of the Blair premiership, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust encouraged enterprising school leaders to try new forms of organisation, curriculum and pedagogy – within limits. Associations have also developed new curricula in association with schools.

For example, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) has developed an 'Opening Minds' competence-based curriculum that has been used in 200 schools.

Some researchers in university departments of education continued to work with teachers and schools to develop new practices. For example, inspired by Professor Donald McIntyre of Cambridge University, a group of teachers and researchers worked on a project called 'Learning without Limits' (Swann et al. 2012). This challenged the orthodoxy that standards are raised by setting explicit targets with reference to scores and grades in tests and examinations. The washback effect of such target-setting is often that students are divided into ability groups according to expectations of their performance and drilled hard to meet these predictions. The most straightforward way to do this is to 'teach the test' rather than teaching the whole curriculum. Learning without Limits resisted this idea, subscribing to the view that all children can learn and make progress; they should not be limited by ability labels. Moreover, if the curriculum is planned well, if students are taught well, and if they actually learn, then they will be able to perform on tests when required, and probably above expectation.

Alison Peacock, now a Dame and Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, was one of the teachers in this project. In 2003 she was appointed head of Wroxham Primary School, Hertfordshire, which was then in 'special measures'. Within two and a half years it was rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted; in re-inspections, in 2009 and 2013, it retained the same rating in all categories. Peacock ascribes the success of the school to Learning without Limits, an approach that continues to this day. Overarching principles are: that students should be judged by their progress; that this requires clarity over frameworks of progression that can challenge children and make success transparent; that formative assessment related to the curriculum is essential;

and that families should be partners in children's learning. Communication is key, and involves narrative dialogue through interactive reporting and regular conversations. Numerical targets are not mentioned and very rarely does any parent ask for them as they are so well informed about the curriculum and their child's progress in relation to it. When it comes to doing mandated tests, the children succeed because they have learned. This seems obvious, but it is surprising how little confidence many teachers and schools have in teaching the curriculum rather than teaching the test. The influence of 'the government in the classroom', as Atkin (1980) once described it, is oppressive.

So, as Lenin once famously put it, what is to be done? Well, probably not revolutionary overthrow of the Government, however much, in sleepless moments at night, one might wish it. History teaches us that one tyranny can, too easily, be replaced by another. The key might be embedded in the stories of Stantonbury Campus and Wroxham School. In both, the concept of community is central.

In a recent book, David Hargreaves (2019) makes a characteristically provocative argument for 'murdering' the State by other means than revolution. He draws on anarchist thought, particularly that of William Godwin, better known as the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and father of Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*. In writing about political justice, Godwin (1793 [1976]) offers a powerful indictment of the State, including its role in schooling. It is unlikely that he could have envisaged the extent of centralisation in England in the twenty-first century, but Hargreaves makes the link and draws a sharp distinction between education and schooling. He argues that the former does not depend on the latter; he then offers an alternative based on community action for education in which specialist teachers might have a role but so would parents and other members of the community, who have funds of

knowledge and skill to share. Community resource centres would be important, as in Henry Morris's Cambridgeshire Village Colleges, but the school as an institution might not be needed. He writes of the possibility of a stronger place for home education facilitated perhaps by a universal basic income that could free up time for all adults to be involved in the education of the young, teaching them in ways that integrate theoretical with applied learning, as in the currently neglected crafts.

All this might seem wildly optimistic and utopian, but in the two years since Hargreaves's book was published we have seen communities mobilise around Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Extinction Rebellion, LGBTQ+, Marcus Rashford's efforts to end child hunger, crowd sourcing and funding of assets such as Wikipedia. The coronavirus pandemic has also had a profound effect on education, work and people's lives in general. Whilst some might wish to 'get back to normal', others see recent crises as opportunities to do things differently in the future. For example, hybrid forms of working – part home, part workplace – have been tried; not all have been found wanting. Productivity can be achieved without presenteeism. In schools, flexible and blended learning – part in the classroom, part online – can work well. People have discovered, or rediscovered, the outdoors for recreation, health and learning about the natural world – and have met neighbours they never knew. So a renaissance of community is possible. If motivation, engagement and action follow then the overweening power of centralised forces could be diminished or made redundant.

In an email to me in 2012, Mike Davies, Bob Moon's successor as headteacher at Stantonbury, responded to reading my draft chapter, mentioned at the beginning of this article. He wrote:

The pioneering spirit of the new town sustained us, 'new city, new life', a hint at a better future and grid squares with

community houses for folk to meet ... an investment in local neighbourhood civic participation that was mirrored in a school looking to work in more joined up, respectful and democratic ways. In the 1970/80s the spirit of MK, strongly supported by the OU, was about better futures, with the future not simply defined in economic terms. Stantonbury did not see itself, as I recall, primarily serving the needs of new and growing businesses but rather with modelling new ways of relating and learning.

Davies ends with a question:

*Can we achieve a contemporary version of the Campus in 2012? What would its features be? Or was it the product of a special set of geoeducational circumstances that were as much bound up with MK and the pink gloss of the baby boomers as in the hopes and aspirations of a set of educationalists?*

As a 'baby boomer' I think I should ask an equivalent question of all the educational innovations I have witnessed over the past 50 years. Would it be possible, in the third decade of the 21st century, to see a new age of innovation in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, part-generated, appreciated and supported by local communities, and perhaps actively encouraged by a more hands-off government? ■

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