Winter 2003 **News and Review** **Issue Number 42**

Personalised Education Now

The proposed merger of *Education Now* and *The Centre for Personalised Education* (CPE), which was highlighted in the last edition of *News and Review,* has now taken place. Members attending the AGM of *Education Now* on 21st September, together with those who attended the CPE conference on 11th/12th October, the Directors of *Education Now* and the Trustees of CPE, wholeheartedly supported this development.

Extremely positive discussion on the implications of this initiative took place at the AGM and continued at the CPE conference, and there was unanimous approval of the decisions that were reached. Of immediate concern to members were:

- an acceptable trading name for the merged organisation
- the continuation of a *News and Review*
- further *Learning Exchanges*
- a yearly residential conference.

After much thoughtful discussion it was agreed that the trading name for the *Centre for Personalised Education Trust Ltd* would be ***Personalised Education Now***.

The *News and Review* of ***Personalised Education Now***, edited by Chris Shute, will come into being after the next two issues in 2004. Chris will be supported by the present *News and Review* editors.

Members were very eager to continue with *Learning Exchanges*, although these may be reduced to one each year. There was also considerable support for a Midlands location, and if possible for the use of the excellent provision at Burleigh Community College in Loughborough. There was also unanimous support for a yearly residential conference such as the one at Toddington. These events have been based in a variety of locations around the country over the past four years.

The *Learning Exchange* which took place at Burleigh Community College in September took as its focus *Spotlighting Creativity*. It began with the music of Paul Scott, a long-standing member of *Education Now*, also a bassist and educator, and his son Tommy, a home educated, twenty-year-old piano virtuoso, who performed their jazz, ***Music For The Heart…And Head***. Their latest project uses musical improvisation to help explore issues relating to creativity, and to examine how 'thinking tools' can improve and enrich the lives of both children and adults alike. The duo played compositions from their forthcoming CD, *Future Positive*, which celebrates the work of creativity guru Edward de Bono.

This was followed by ***A Space to Grow,*** presented by members Michael Foot and Peter Holt, based on their book, (with co-author Tony Brown), *Let Our Children Learn.* Michael and Peter told us a true story –"*Once upon a time a group of 28 children and 5 adults came together in a primary school for a couple of days and travelled on a journey together"*. Within the 2 days each person created their own book. Michael and Peter enthralled us with their reflections on the How? Why? What value? What did the adults contribute and learn? We enjoyed the humour, sensitivity and thoughtful questioning of their experience, but overall their faith in valuing learners as "*unique beings all at different stages on their journey towards greater personal empowerment and fulfilment"*.

It was an afternoon of music and story which was thought-provoking, inspiring and entertaining – everyone went home feeling both refreshed and uplifted.

The CPE conference, which was made possible by a grant from the *Potential Trust*, proved to be a most worthwhile and enjoyable event. The opportunity for members from diverse parts of Great Britain to meet, discuss and take ideas forward was highly valued. People felt supported by the experience of each other and the strength of being part of a network. The planned inputs were appreciated for being informative and stimulating.

Everyone valued the ambience of the Planned Environment and Therapy Trust conference centre – the setting, its comfort, and importantly, the friendly, thoughtful, flexible approach of the staff. There was unanimous support for the idea of returning to the centre for another conference in a year's time if funding can be found. It was agreed that the theme for this conference would be ***Assessment: beyond stultifying testing to the celebration of learning.***

Democratising Shakespeare

> *"I could actually understand for the first time what was happening in a Shakespeare play without having it explained to me."* (Thirteen-year-old Nottingham schoolgirl)

Many people go through their lives quite happily never having read or seen any of Shakespeare's plays. Others, force-fed Shakespeare at school, develop an antipathy that can last a lifetime. As lovers of Shakespeare, we feel these people are deprived of something truly valuable and our aim in the *Inessential Shakespeare* series has been to entice them to his plays and give them a glimpse of the riches and rewards to be found there.

The problem with Shakespeare is not his relevance. The subjects of his plays – power, ambition, love, the struggle between good and evil – are perennially significant and as relevant today as they were 400 years ago. The difficulty with Shakespeare is his language, the changes in vocabulary, syntax and grammar that have taken place over the years. Grappling with unfamiliar words and expressions while trying to follow the intricacies of plot and character can be daunting, and following the wit and humour (of which Shakespeare has plenty) can be no laughing matter.

So what we have done is to put the plays into modern English, which means you can read them without having to go to notes at the back of the book, or skim over passages while hoping you're still following what's going on.[1] We were pleased when a reviewer in the *Times Educational Supplement* described our versions as: *"Shakespeare made entertaining and simple, faithful to the characters and scenes and capturing the* ***essence of the originals****"*, and particularly pleased with the final phrase, despite the fact that these are prose adaptations in modern English.

Because they are in dramatic form our plays can be tackled by young actors for whom the originals can pose great problems. Youth groups and schools (both secondary and primary) have used them either to read in class or to put on as productions. The plays last about one and a half hours and both actors and audiences have found them immensely enjoyable. They have been successfully produced in this country and abroad. Nutley Youth theatre producer Frances Armstrong wrote, *"We read your Midsummer Night's Dream and immediately decided this was the script for us"*, and here is what some of the children said about that performance.

> *"Really fun!"* Jessica, aged 11½.
>
> *"I thought that a Shakespeare play would be very hard with all the old English, but this was great. The best play I have ever done."* Harriet, aged 13.
>
> *"It was my first play to a big audience*." Emma, aged 12.
>
> *"The play was really good because I wouldn't have understood it in Shakespeare language."* Woody, aged 13.

For many people it is the poetry as much as the archaic language that is a barrier. We argue that getting to know the shape of a play, the plot and the characters, helps one to appreciate the power of the poetry. It is so easy to get bogged down in the details and fail to see the wood for the trees. But as a *Guardian* reviewer said, *"Though shortened and simplified, everything is there except the poetry, which is not lost but waiting for a later and now more aware discovery."* From feedback we've received we know that these adaptations have been used by adults as preparation for a visit to the theatre, and even encouraged people who have had 'blocks' about Shakespeare to go and see his plays or read them.

We'll end by giving you a small sample of the kind of things adult readers have said about the *Inessential Shakespeare* series.

> *"The consensus of opinion from U3A members was that your books should be required reading and acting for all schools. I would love to see one of your plays presented on peak time television!"*

After a presentation to about 70 members of the Nottingham U3A group.

> *"Compulsive reading, which was exciting while recalling the original text to mind."*
>
> Mgt Gowling, local historian.
>
> *"Perfect for my Youth Group."* Drama Teacher, Bilborough College - about Twelfth Night.
>
> *"I once did Hamlet as a set book at training college, and thought I knew it better than any of the plays. But your work has lit up dark corners of which I was hardly aware"*. Desmond Draper, retired head teacher.

---

[1] Nothing kills a joke more effectively than a footnote or explanation.

John and Leela Hort have written six plays in their *Inessential Shakespeare* series: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry V* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Julius Caesar* is in preparation.

The plays can be ordered from *The Kabet Press*, 239 Bramcote Lane, Wollaton, Nottingham NG8 2QL (Telephone 0115 9283001), price £3.75 each (post free to readers of *Education Now*).

kabet@johnandleela.uklinux.net
www.startingshakespeare.co.uk

From our grandfather correspondent

Since my last despatch from the grandfather front, Gemma Megan Grace has arrived, a sister for James William. We are therefore enjoying the further delights of watching another young person begin to make sense of and to wonder at her world.

And 'wonder' is entirely the appropriate word. For James William, aged two, the world is like a 'theme park', except that it is not artificially created so as to stimulate and to entertain, but it is - in all its extraordinariness - full of excitements and adventures and challenges. How I hope that he retains as much as possible of his present dynamically positive approach to the everyday wonderful!

One particular aspect of his recent development has been his graduation at mealtimes from a high chair to a standard chair, complete with cushion, pulled up to the table. He is mostly able to feed himself and any food that falls on the floor is always the result of an accident, never a deliberate act. Recently, however, circumstances when he and his family were visiting friends caused him to be seated for his meal in a high chair. As a response to which, he reverted to throwing his food on the floor. It was a graphic illustration of the combined effect upon behaviour of environment and expectation.

I find myself wondering and worrying about the number of metaphorical high chairs that James and Gemma will be required to sit in when they go to school. Wondering and worrying about how much their development might be hampered by an inappropriate environment and by inappropriate expectations. Like, for example, Key Stage 1 Sats when he is seven.

I recall that when they were first introduced, it was done in such a way that the DES (as was) was able to argue that they would be administered as part of the 'normal' class time and activity, so that children would not be put under any additional stress. By implication, there was an acknowledgement that to conduct Sats for seven-year-olds in a traditional and formal examination would not be in the best interests of children.

Now, even this pretence to serve the best interests of children, this lip service towards children's needs, has been abandoned. I have been made sick at heart and angry to my essence on hearing a detailed description of what happens in Key Stage 1 Reading Sats.

I have heard something about the prescriptive and formalised way that they have to be administered. Something about the right/wrong answers that are asked of the children, questions that demean, even deny, the great imaginative and creative qualities of stories. And then to set all that I have heard within the context of seven-year-olds is to realise the extent of the corruption that has taken place.

Please will politicians and other policy-makers pause a while and think again before they continue to trumpet the 'success' of highest ever reading scores in primary schools. Please will politicians and other policy-makers consider what we lose, what children lose, in a testing and teaching regime which is rooted in 'conform and obey, don't think', where the paths to being 'right' and therefore successful are narrowly confined.

Talking of politicians, did you see the following sentence which appeared in the *Guardian* on Monday 7 July?

"Education will only succeed if pupils are avid learners."

It is such a powerful and important truth that it bears repetition so that it can be savoured more fully - *"Education will only succeed if pupils are avid learners"*.

The words belong to Peter Mandelson. Yes, they belong to Peter Mandelson. And sadly, because of their attribution, I do find in this instance that their great and essential truth is dishonoured, because I am sure that for Mandelson they present little more than grand sounding rhetoric.

I doubt that Mandelson even begins to consider the implications of his great and essential truth. I wonder whether he realises that at birth all children - not just James and Gemma whom I can present as examples – are avid learners. **That all children are born avid learners, and therefore successful learners.** Does he ever wonder why it is that so many children when they become 'pupils' lose so much of their avidity and become less successful learners? I wonder if Mandelson would understand about metaphorical high chairs!

Thus it is that the mood on this grandfather front remains a mixture of delight and wonder and anxiety. Delight and wonder as I watch the delight and wonder and immense development of early childhood. But delight and wonder combined with an anxiety about the effect that school might have upon that unbounded enthusiasm for life and learning.

Thankfully, this heady cocktail of delight and wonder and anxiety is shared in full measure by James' and Gemma's parents who will, therefore, when necessary, compensate for any worst aspects of their schooling. And dare I hope that there might be the beginnings of a more widespread realisation of the sad and unacceptable realities of our present system, that it might, therefore, improve, might become more humane and more appropriate to children's needs? It's not easy to be optimistic, but I do clutch at possibilities.

Like for example, the recent report from the commission on human rights of the United Nations, which argues that our current system of testing children at seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen was designed to fulfil government objectives rather than to meet the needs of children. In an interview, the report's author is quoted as follows:

"Education has to be in the best interests of the child, but it (government policy) *is not. It's not about learning, about enabling children to learn and develop, it is about skills in test-taking…*

"Whenever testing is introduced it tends to overwhelm the whole design of education. Teachers have to teach the test because that's how children are evaluated and teachers are evaluated. The voice of children is missing."

So there is some reason for hope. And here's some more. The notice which welcomes us to the *Eden Project* in Cornwall describes it as a place which is:

"…all about education but doesn't feel like school."

Michael Foot

Philadelphia Story: the IALA conference June 2003

And what, you may ask, is the IALA? That's what I wanted to know when Roland Meighan announced he was unable to present a paper at its annual conference, held this year in Pennsylvania, and suggested that as I was to be in the USA during the summer I should do so instead. I'm glad I did: the experience was exhilarating.

The IALA is the International Association for Learning Alternatives. Its 33rd annual conference lasted for three days at Valley Forge (where American troops camped during the winter of 1777-78 ready to repel the British imperialists in the spring!) and discussed different ways of doing things in and out of American schools. It was fascinating, hospitable and friendly and, as one would expect from anything organised by Americans, brooked no half measures!

Over 500 delegates from many states met in a huge hotel complex in The King of Prussia (the nearby town) 25 miles from Philadelphia. The pace was frenetic. One could begin at seven with Tai Chi or Chi King (some actually did!), take breakfast at 7.30 and attend the first session at 8.15. Talks and seminars continued until late afternoon when, after a break, irresistible evening activities began: an excellent meal in semi-darkness at Warm Daddy's where a live jazz and blues group entertained vibrantly twelve feet away, a visit to Philadelphia's leading art gallery followed by Philly steaks at a downtown restaurant before, after dark, a city walk to re-live the story of America's War of Independence depicted by wall size images projected onto immense city-centre buildings. Very American! Very un-British!

And there was work. Each morning a keynote speech was followed by a day broken into three sessions in each of which ten optional papers were offered. Topics ranged from: '*Learning to Live without Schools'* to *'Communicating and Dealing with Hostile Parents', 'Imagineering a New Educational Planet', 'Home Schooling Resource Centres', 'Alternative Education: Lessons Learned',* and '*School Violence Prevention*'. If I have a criticism it was of 'over-choice': there were so many ideas abounding in the presentations it was frustrating not to be able to attend all. But that was probably my fault: as an educationalist in Britain I am unused to such variety of educational choice so openly and fervently discussed!

The first keynote speech was from Don Glines, teacher, broadcaster and prolific author who, with writer John Gatto, and the chair of the IALA, Wayne Jennings, is among the foremost USA alternative education proponents. His intolerance of the 'one size fits all' educational philosophy was pressed home with a sincerity I have seldom encountered. Don's attack on lack of choice, obsession with testing and curriculum standardisation drew a standing five hundred ovation.

Also impressive, John Taylor Gatto, - three-times New York City Teacher of the Year, film script writer, taxi-driver, jewelry designer and hotdog vendor before he entered teaching - gave the second day's address: *'A Different Kind of School'*. It seemed to me that John was addressing the possibility that an expensively educated and powerful elite might see little need for radical educational change and that traditional schools might be around for some time. There needed to be, therefore, rigorous examination of what those schools actually do.

This supported my feeling that the conference, deliberately or not, had two distinct strands. The first interpreted 'alternative' education as that which seeks changes – perhaps drastic changes – *within* the school-based system, i.e., '*We're stuck with teaching in schools, so what do we do?'* The second, and the meaning I give to 'alternative education', which calls for the replacement of schools by a different, individually-structured, family-involved approach to all children's learning. I could see that new thinking might radically transform schools into something better than we have now, but was fearful that *any* school-based system would separate child from family - and that 'education' would still be seen as *'something you do, perhaps reluctantly, at school'* rather than as an exciting activity open to all throughout life.

Don Glines' *'one size fits all'* schools were rushed into existence in the 1870s and 80s to meet the supposed economic needs of a society in transition, and *not* to meet each child's needs for love, security and an individual exploration of life. Society is now wholly different from 1870 and there are incredibly more attractive and personalised ways of helping children learn. To seek help, as many delegates understandably did, in dealing with 'disruptive youth' and 'behavioural problems' in those compulsorily- attended schools which may themselves be the root of the problem, prolongs distress. There has to come a time when teachers say, *"We don't need to go on like this. In the new world of 2003 we can find an alternative system in which we can use our love and concern and professional skills to help all children and their families"*.

And I guess most teachers in most countries would buy that *right now*!

John Adcock

Book review

School Councils, School Democracy, School Improvement – Why, What, How

by Bernard Trafford

SHA Publications 2003

I feel that this is an impressive book. Firstly, it is very practical and does exactly what it says in its title – it explains the What, Why and How of School Councils, School Democracy which, Bernard argues leads to School Improvement. It is a SHA publication and appears to be aimed at head teachers as they are viewed as the main agents of change in their schools, but it is accessible and relevant to anyone, at any level, who works and/or learns in a school. Bernard, appropriately, in many parts of the book speaks in the current language of schools and is keen to address Heads' concerns about the effects of democratisation on such areas as timetabling, exam results, teacher morale and pupil discipline. It is informative and persuasive and the reader is left with no good reasons not to try it except that of maintaining the status quo. Heads will receive from Bernard a clear impression of an accomplished professional who has improved his school immeasurably through the introduction of democratic practices and many may feel inspired to initiate the democratic journey in their schools.

Secondly, it is a book about passion, commitment and belief, and Bernard skilfully weaves these more colourful qualities into the tapestry of the book. For Bernard it is clear that the development of democracy within his school has been for him an adventurous journey and he recounts this with humour, humility and enthusiasm. It would seem from his account that the processes which a head, staff and pupils might go through, in order to work towards a more democratic school, would involve personal challenge and change even with the help of his book. When writing about starting school councils Bernard says:

Bernard charts the recent, hesitant steps which have been taken in this country to establish an acceptance that children should be listened to and then that they should have a voice.

"To be honest, although my heart sank at times, much of the period was characterised by a sense of adventure, a frisson added by risk and the adrenaline-surge of having to handle some tricky situations, all in a cause to which I was committed."

It is refreshing and unusual to read of a head teacher writing in this way about his experience. Sadly, adventure, frisson and risk are not usually words we hear in connection with formal education and schools. Heads who are still alive to the excitement of education, even though they have worked and risen through what I would call the education 'industry', should respond enthusiastically to the possibilities Bernard describes.

Thirdly, particularly for those Heads who may need encouragement that what Bernard is suggesting is, to a large extent, in keeping with what they are supposed to be doing, he clearly explains the Why, What and How in accessible stages. In Part One: **Why** consult Pupils? Bernard charts the recent, hesitant steps which have been taken in this country to establish an acceptance that children should be listened to and then that they should have a voice. He establishes that pupils should be consulted as a matter of principle and, since the Education Act 2002, as a matter of necessity.

He goes on to say that Citizenship Education should be *"an active experience, not a passive process"* and then connects his theme with child protection issues. He then links the development of democratic processes with what heads will want to hear - advances in school improvement, inclusion and discipline and school effectiveness. Each chapter ends with a concise and persuasive summary of the main points covered.

In Part Two: **What** is School Democracy? Bernard describes, in terms of atmosphere, qualities and activities the features that characterise a school that could describe itself as democratic in its operation. A particular feature of this section is Bernard's keenness to allay concerns about the processes he describes. He anticipates six key fears which might arise, e.g. criticism of teaching, and carefully and sympathetically addresses each one.

In Part Three: **How** Do We Do School Democracy? Bernard explains how he actually made the first steps in creating a democratic ethos in his school. He links leading from the top to shedding status! He explores issues of age and the ability to participate and explains in detail the development and workings of his school council.

Bernard explores the ideas of a wide range of thinkers and writers in his book even dedicating it to Roland Meighan, - a critic of schooling, but who supports the democratisation of schools as staging post on the road to the next learning system! This exploration, which runs throughout the book ranges from issues such as children's rights and child protection to circle time and pupil governors and adds richness and authority to Bernard's writing.

I am impressed by Bernard's vision and his ability to realise it in his school although I am sure he would say that democracy is about process and that one achievement only leads to the next process. His concern for children and their experience **now** and in the future shines through. I like the fact that it is a book about ideas and yet is it extremely practical. Finally, I sense that Bernard is saying that democracy is a lived experience: once you get started in your school the book

will become, at most, a reference point as your school will be on its own journey.

Josh Gifford

Radical Educational Texts Revisited:
Teaching as a Subversive Activity by N. Postman and C. Weingartner

From the perspective of today, manacled by a system which has succeeded in snuffing out the last vestiges of child-centred education, it is perhaps hard for younger teachers to imagine the atmosphere which reigned during the 1960s. We have largely forgotten how during those interesting years serious writing about education included books which questioned not only the methodology of schooling, but also its very need to exist. Ideas which had up to then only circulated among the small community of freethinkers and pacifists, who patronised Summerhill and similar places, began to be discussed in ordinary schools. They were not always well received, because they seemed to revolve around a heretical insistence that children were more than empty buckets into which teachers were expected to pour raw knowledge, year after year, world without end. They appeared to call into question the very structural basis of schooling - adults at the top, running everything, deciding who, how, when and what, and children underneath, obeying orders, hearing, seeing and doing only what the adults have decided, and suffering punishment if they refused or tried to do things in their own way. It is not hard to imagine how disturbing would be the loss of status and power to people who have devoted their lives to being central figures in the lives of children if they had to move out of the command position and instead become consultants, helping children to achieve goals which they had chosen for themselves, in their own way.

One of the most striking pieces of writing I remember reading as I began my career in the school industry was *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. It was American, rather technical in its diction, and it confidently swept aside everything I had been brought up to believe about education. It was also unchallengeable in its logic. Faced with ideas which I knew were impossible to implement in the old-fashioned grammar school where I was working at the time, I filed them away under 'interesting but unrealistic' and carried on with the job in hand, but now is, I think, the time to revisit them.

Postman and Weingartner's central thesis is that schools, by establishing a framework of meaning for all the language which they use, and all the purposes they set for themselves, stop the essential process by which children establish their own meanings. Since in a school words mean, and must always mean, what the school determines they shall mean, pupils cannot be allowed to explore those meanings for themselves. One of the most valuable means of investigating meaning is asking questions, yet it is remarkable that schools expect teachers to interrogate children, not the other way round. Teachers already know the answers to the questions they ask, so their questioning is a veiled command to their pupils to show that they have already learnt what they are supposed to learn. They are not engaged in an investigation, or a search for truth. They have already decided what truth is in any given situation. They only have to make sure their pupils get the same bit of knowledge by heart.

That is why Postman and Weingartner chose the provocative title for their book: teaching which genuinely seeks to allow the learners to discover how their own mind interacts with their surroundings cannot be relied upon to produce 'right-thinking' (what does 'right' mean?), conventional (whose 'convention'?), young adults. The political implications of this are easy to perceive. States identify their own interest with having citizens who can be persuaded to accept their governors wishes and projects as their own. That means, of course, being ready to recognise as friend or enemy whoever their government has already decided to favour or attack. As long as we have schools which forbid children to create meanings which are different from those which the teachers have inherited, either from their own studies or the National Curriculum, we shall have populations which can be sent to war, even against their private judgement, and communities which can be easily persuaded to turn on minorities whenever a scapegoat is needed for some problem in society.

This book could change any teacher's approach to their job, but only if they were prepared to step outside the universe of discourse in which they have worked until now. They have been used to using the word 'think' to mean 'concur with my opinions and apply them to the problem in hand'. They would have to be prepared to let 'think' mean 'attribute meaning to events, objects and experiences as you feel able'. They could not any longer predict the outcome of lessons, and plan them in detail, because they would be looking to their pupils to provide the insights which would become the matter of their collective discourse. There could be no syllabus, because the methodology of their work would be implicit in the questions which emerged from their contact with their classes. It is easy to imagine how traditional teachers would criticise the authors' approach. It seems absurd to people who have been through ordinary schools and experienced years of book-learning that children should, apparently, be encouraged to 'pool their ignorance'. But that only happens if the prime purpose of teaching is perceived to be the acquisition of compendious knowledge. Postman and Weingartner assert that true education is the liberation of the mind from fruitless activity in order that it might be used by its owner to make sense of everything which lies around him. That 'everything' may well include specific knowledge, but if a person has no reason of their own for learning that knowledge, the time spent on getting it by heart is comprehensively wasted.

Clearly we have still a long way to go before education begins to meet the real needs children have. Perhaps we shall have to wait until children cease to be seen as a part of their parents' property, who must be seen to go through a process of education recognisably similar to the mind-numbing exercise in rote-learning their elders endured in school. This book contains an invigorating blueprint for a better way of developing children's minds.

Chris Shute

Education Now Context For democratic education

> ***"I'm quite proud of myself like, and its given me more confidence. You don't feel at the bottom, with the teacher at the top. You feel more important when you are asked to choose things like the syllabus. You feel valued and important as a person."***

When asked to write a review of my degree thesis my first thought was how to reduce 100,000 words down to 3,500! What should I include and indeed what should be left out of this piece of writing. A thesis consists of many sections, the first includes a review of other people's contributions to the debate so far in terms of theoretical debate and practical examples. Whilst the second section is more concerned with the writers original research. After much thought on this matter I have decided to focus on the second part of my thesis as many other writers have written at great length and with much clarity on the theoretical arguments relating to democratic education.

The central theme of my thesis focused on the role of democratic education within a number of different educational environments. The research on which the thesis was based, looked at democratic practice in education in three contexts. Firstly, democratic practice on an initial teachers training course, which took place at Birmingham University. Secondly, a case study of a democratic classroom at the school where I teach, which can be described as a traditional authoritarian school, and finally a democratic school within an authoritarian society.

"… democracy involves the power of decision making and the power to implement decisions."

Purpose of the research

The main aim of this research topic was to develop an appreciative understanding of democratic education in the United Kingdom, focusing on how young people perceive their educational experiences of democratic learning environments compared to the more traditional authoritarian learning environments. I also aimed to develop a list of 'indicators for democratic practice in education' which would act as a comparative instrument to measure, monitor and evaluate the extent of democratic practice in three separate learning environments.

Democratic theory

In my view, democracy, is best defined by using a political approach in suggesting that the key dimension is one of power; that is, it is about the capacity of individuals, groups and institutions to maintain or transform their environment. More specifically, democracy involves the power of decision making and the power to implement decisions. In order to be fully democratic the following requirements must also be met. Firstly, votes must be allocated on an equal basis among all participants or citizens. Throughout the democratic process each participant should be able to participate effectively, they should be given an adequate and equal opportunity to express a preference in relation to the final outcome. In order to express preferences accurately, each participant or citizen must have adequate and equal access to information, a process Dahl (1985:59-60), refers to as an 'enlightened understanding'. Finally, participants should be fully involved in the decision making process. They should be involved in determining what matters are discussed and what are not discussed by processes that satisfy the first criteria. As Rousseau (1937), Wollstonecraft (1982) and J.S. Mill (1951) all contended, democracy includes enhanced participation. We learn to participate by participating, and that participation does help foster an active and knowledgeable citizenry.

"The language of co-operation: negotiation, tolerance, choice, mutual support and democracy become essential, not optional."

A brief definition of democratic education

Democratic education can be defined as a situation where all members of a learning community share power, be it in a single classroom or through the development of a whole school approach. There is likely to be a sense of community between the groups of learners and a working partnership between teachers and students. The teachers need to trust their students' capabilities and creative ability. The language of co-operation: negotiation, tolerance, choice, mutual support and democracy become essential, not optional.

Learning cannot be imposed, but is the responsibility of all the participants. Power sharing must be in operation before any learning environment can be classified as democratic and it can take many forms and occur in varying degrees.

It is also possible to develop a set of 'indicators for democratic practice in education'. This will inevitably involve a shift of power from the teaching staff to the students who will have greater ownership of their own learning. The 'indicators of democratic practice' therefore focus on the key elements of democratic practice in education. Important areas of consideration like **'the power to take part in decision making'** need to be considered. The formal structures adopted within a learning environment also provide an indication of a commitment to democratic practice. **'Practice in democracy'** is another important indicator of democratic practice such as formal methods of election, and grievance procedures, alongside levels of involvement and participation in lessons, discussions, open debate, compromise, dialogue and co-operative decision making. This is highlighted by Harber (1992) in his book *Democratic Learning and Learning Democratically* when he implies that democratic learning requires the dual task of both learning about democracy through effective political education and learning how to do democracy by acquiring the necessary patterns and skills. This leads to the indicator entitled **'Preparation for active citizenship'** which monitors staff and student knowledge of the contemporary political scene, structure and leaders, the students' confidence and ability to express opinions, and presence of the skills and knowledge required by the group to maintain and develop a co-operative culture. The next indicator of democracy is that of **'Resources'**. This links with another key element of democratic practice that of the **'relationships'** adopted in the learning environment to promote a democratic ethos. A friendly, relaxed, non-authoritarian ethos forms a significant part of the democratic process ensuring that democratic dialogue and co-operative learning takes place. This brings us to **'autonomy and taking decisions'** as an indicator of democratic practice and leads to questions concerning student use of the library or resource centre, the number of students organising lessons, visiting speakers, educational visits and instances of parents being seen as part of the resources available. **'Democratic discipline'** is another key indicator of democracy, aptly defined by Meighan as where:

> *"… order is based on rules agreed after discussion based on evidence, human rights values and the logic of consequences. Power is shared among the people in the situation."*(Meighan 1997:229)

Instances of democratically agreed rules and principles and the presence of a democratic learning contract, a chairperson to chair lessons and the presence of system of grievance procedures are all indicators of democratic practice.

A brief personal history!

Having left school and completed my first degree, I enrolled on the PGCE Course at Birmingham University. My expectations did not prepare me for what was to be the most exciting, positive and satisfying educational experience I have ever encountered. When I reached Birmingham I had a very specific view of how teaching should be carried out. Fortunately, Clive Harber and Roland Meighan were instrumental in changing this view of how to teach or facilitate the learning experience of young people. I had not expected to eventually participate in power sharing within the classroom.

Upon entering the teaching profession I soon came to realise that we need to trust our students and to enable them to express openly their perceptions of what they need to succeed. It had also become apparent that the capacity to learn from experience and to apply the lessons of co-operation are a vital component of education.

After four years of teaching, at two different schools, I became unhappy about continuing with the authoritarian form of education described by Shotton as a mode of education in which:

> *"… children are expected to be submissive, passive, obedient, deferential to authority and to conform to the values inevitably implicit in any school ..."*
> (Shotton, 1993:6)

I wanted my students to be empowered through democratic practice in the classroom which is vital to enable young people to develop their

democratic potential. If the purpose of education is defined as creating citizens for a society that is both caring and democratic then it should be about experience, reflected upon, articulated and based upon consciously undertaken action.

The idea of a democratic learning environment is to give students the power to choose what to learn, when to learn and how to learn. These are decisions which are usually taken by the staff in a traditional authoritarian school. In a democratic learning environment students are given the power to make some, most or even all of the decisions in the classroom thereby addressing young people's intellectual needs alongside the emotional. The first two case studies adopted in my thesis (on a PGCE course at Birmingham University and at the school where I teach) can be described as practising democratic education because they are more concerned with empowering students to participate and make informed choices about their own learning. It is, therefore, about power sharing in the classroom itself.

Possibly one of the most important practices in democratic learning environments is that of dialogue between students and teachers, questioning and discussing together how they might improve their practice. If democracy in the classroom is about anything, it is the free exchange of ideas. Without this open continuous debate, power sharing is pointless.

Moreover, a comprehensive review of the available literature reveals that democratic methods of education in this country are still a rarity. If we look at the research into teaching styles carried out by Gibbs and Harland (1987), Davies et al (1999) and Harber (2001) we find that the democratic approach to learning is not considered to be one of major educational significance. In fact, with greater centralised control over teacher education by the Teacher Training Agency and OFSTED, it is becoming even more difficult to adopt such an approach in Higher Education.

If this is a correct reading of the situation then it is short-sighted and unfortunate since this research has indicated that the democratic learning approach has a number of strengths which could usefully be incorporated into a wide variety of educational environments. For example, students at Park Hall School have been given the opportunity to choose how they learn Advanced Level Sociology and Politics for many years. The students were invited to choose the syllabus they were to study, the areas of study, whether to opt for courses based on 100% examination or for coursework components.

After initial discussion about the type of course the students wished to study, they were given the opportunity to choose how they would like to learn. The first method was the traditional teacher based situation, where students are recipients of knowledge. The second was the teacher-based consultative model, where the teacher retains control over a proportion of the sessions but students choose what they would like to do for the other sessions. Thirdly, the students were introduced to an alternative method of learning: the democratic learning co-operative.

The idea behind this option is that the students could develop their own course programme using the teacher(s) as a resource and facilitator rather than the major source of ideas. A specimen co-operative contract was given to the later groups. The fourth, final model was based on the Open University type of course.

The aim of setting up a democratic learning environment was to enable young people to take responsibility for their own learning, to enable them to decide their own agenda, then to work individually or in small groups, to prepare lessons, visits, presentations and to organise visiting speakers which would be of relevant interest for the Politics course. Other aims were to increase the students' self reliance, to increase confidence, to develop skills of articulation and investigation, and to remove the myth that the teacher is the expert in all things when there is much that a teacher cannot know and where students have valid experiences and opinions of their own.

Like Harber & Meighan, however, I faced an ideological dilemma, because even though one of the aims:

> *" … of political education is to encourage a more democratic classroom environment ... is it not undemocratic to force a particular method on students, albeit a democratic one?"* (1986:3)

Because democracy implies choice, I would argue that wherever possible students should be given the choice of teaching methods, course content and assessment methods. For it is only when such choices have been given that we can claim to have a mandate about how to proceed. As Meighan points out this is known as the:

> *"pre-democratic, or bridging or authoritarian-consultative regime that represents an attempt to move from an existing authoritarian situation into a democratic without actually sharing much power at that stage."* (Meighan, 1992:103)

It was, therefore, decided that for each Advanced Level group in the department the primary principle would indeed be one of choice. At the beginning of 1989/91, the Advanced level politics course students were the first groups of students presented with a number of choices, the first being the choice of syllabi. These syllabi ranged from the prescriptive to others that allowed choice of subject areas and choice of 100% exam or a mixture of exams and coursework. Students were also given the choice of how to organise their course. They were given a similar range of choices to those posed by Clive Harber

and Roland Meighan on the Social and Political Studies P.G.C.E. at the University of Birmingham.

After much debate three groups of students chose to pursue the democratic mode of learning. A lot of thought then went into devising the ground rules for our democratic learning environment. For the first time the students had to really think about their own education and what they required from it, instead of being mere recipients of schooling and knowledge.

After completing the contract we proceeded to devise a time table of areas of study, select a syllabus that the students thought would be of interest. Then individuals and groups of students went on to select areas they wished to be responsible for. All students took part in a number of presentations. The box of work prepared by the group and the groups' logbook were kept in one of the Sociology rooms to be consulted and used as appropriate.

Presentations made use of the full range of teaching and learning styles. In fact the range was far greater than would normally be the case. These included the use of artistic presentations and the use of cartoon strips prepared by a student with outstanding skills in this area, the use of photo packs, traditional handouts, role plays devised by a group of students also studying Drama, the use of short video clips and follow up activities, small group work activities, a visiting speaker, computer simulations, a card game/simulation exercise as well as the more traditional discussion and worksheet activities - all prepared by the group.

The learning experience

The main strength of the democratic learning experience is that it helped groups of young people to overcome fears of different kinds, which may prevent them from taking a democratic role in society, such as the fear of speaking in groups, the fear of admitting ignorance, or the fear of expressing an unpopular opinion.

Possibly one of the most important practices of the democratic learning environments was that of dialogue between students and facilitators, of questioning and discussing what we were about and how we might improve our practice. If democracy in the classroom is about anything, it is the free exchange of ideas. Without this open continuous debate, power-sharing is pointless: with it, the place of power in education can be perceived as relating appropriately to teaching and learning.

Moreover, the democratic nature of learning produced greater responsibility and group effort than is demonstrated in the more traditional authoritarian classroom. As time progressed, there developed both a sense of belonging and a desire not to let anyone down. Students shared the workload, and had a part in planning their own course. A further beneficial element of the democratic learning environment is the way in which it greatly improves students self confidence through speaking in front of a group.

Having experienced successful democratic learning environments I often wonder why others find it so threatening. It is a much more interesting and useful way of working, than I have experienced before. Sometimes I feel it is making an issue out of something quite simple. It is difficult to appreciate that it is a unique approach, however, until you talk to other groups of students and teachers who employ traditional methods. **For many students the transfer of power is long overdue, while most teachers seemed horrified at the possibility of relinquishing their captive audience**.

This research shows that individual teachers, in an authoritarian school, can operate a democratic classroom environment. Moreover, an external examination need not be an impediment to this type of learning environment, as long as the facilitator of learning is prepared to let the students choose the examination syllabus, the content of the course, the assessment format, and finally the presentation of individual sessions. There is a need to share the responsibilities of the course with everyone concerned, to show that their choices are respected and the tutors are prepared to have faith in their decisions. This leads to shared responsibility in a consciously planned environment. In order for our school-based democratic learning environments to function best, we had to make sure that this shared responsibility could evolve into a structure which, could be modified in the light of changing circumstances.

Indicators of democratic education

It is important to stress that it proved difficult to compare the three learning environments because two were based on democratic learning environments within an authoritarian setting, whilst the third consisted of a whole school approach which has never claimed to possess formal participatory structures. According to the criteria highlighted at the start of this review, however, it could be described as being at the emergent phase of democratic practice in education because the students had a limited degree of power on specified days throughout the year, but not in the majority of their lessons. The school has always strived to be democratic in the sense of fostering certain types of relationships and of organising its daily life around the principles of liberty and equality. This school, therefore, has a commitment to fostering relationships based on dialogue, negotiation and co-operation throughout the whole learning community.

The two learning environments at Birmingham University and Park Hall School are clearly operating at the advanced phase and follow the democratic principles of sharing power between all members of the group. They face, however, the problem of operating within traditionally authoritarian organisations. This can pose dilemmas such as forms of assessment being imposed from above and reporting to parents. Such issues can be addressed through open discussion and sharing all information with students. Honest and open discussion can make such issues part of the democratic process by giving everyone a sense of ownership of the process.

Possibly one of the most important elements of a democratic learning environment is the continuous interaction between teachers and students involving discussion of democratic practices and how they can be improved. Without such open debate, power-sharing is pointless; with it, the place of power in education can be perceived as relating appropriately to teaching and learning.

The results of democratic learning experiences indicate the need to encourage the processes of democratic practice, rather than assuming that they are already present or arise spontaneously. This is particularly important if we are to offer the opportunity of democratic practice to students. Here it is clear that unless we are content for students to be 'represented' by the most articulate (i.e. those who have already learnt most about what democratic practice requires) they need teaching and extended practice in the process.

Through democratic participation in learning, young people learn to work both independently and as a team of equals in co-operation. They gain plenty of experience in decision making and the review of outcomes, and develop personal confidence as well as the open-mindedness to assess the ideas and contributions of others in a constructive way. Democratic education through its processes, the experiences it offers, and the expectations it makes, could bring about a more equal, just and fulfilling society. Democratic education should aim to show that society can be characterised by communal as well as individual values, that all people merit equal treatment and equal dignity and that academic ability is not the only measure of a person.

Finally, it seems appropriate to conclude by making reference to the experiences of one of the young people involved in the democratic learning environment, Jamie Baldaro who is now pursuing a career in teaching:

> *"The relative success of the group in external examination results, despite seeming to mean 'everything' at the time, is actually secondary. The real success of the democratic learning co-operative lies in how it instilled key notions of co-operation, mutual support and tolerance in a group of 16-19 year-olds. These are skills which reach far beyond the short-term goals of A Level examinations and university graduation. Coupled with the confidence developed through the DLC's reliance on continued public speech, teaching and discussion with others, I believe our experiences equipped us with essential transferable skills. In my own case it was an experience which has ironically helped to change and shape my own perceptions and expectations of teaching as I embark on a career in education."* (Baldaro, quoted in Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford 1997:227)

It can therefore be argued that the continuing doubts and insecurities in all walks of life ensure that democratic education is even more vital, more practical and economically essential than traditional authoritarian learning. This latter mode is unsuccessful in providing students with the means necessary to effect social change and to cope in a fluid society. If our young people are denied participation in democratic practice they will be vulnerable to the hazards of modern life.

Democratic education offers a unique opportunity to experience the processes of democracy rather than the narrow goal oriented methods of authoritarian education. It does not merely reflect the world of which it is a part, it offers a mechanism for coping with a variety of problems. Some values, like those of democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only with experience of them.

Student comments

"When we first started the course it came as a bit of a shock. Yeah, it wasn't one of those lessons where you stand at the front and talk for an hour and ten minutes. It's much better than a normal like, er standard course. It makes you think more, doesn't it, it makes you feel a bit more responsible. Rather than saying, well, I didn't really want to do this so it's not my fault. Where if you choose something yourself the emphasis is on you to do well."

"It was refreshing to be able to choose the syllabus and topics that interested you."

"I think its really good. But I think more classes need to be like this. It's more our course. We are teaching each other. You've gotta do it, not the teacher. I'm quite proud of myself like, and its given me more confidence. You don't feel at the bottom, with the teacher at the top. You feel more important when you are asked to choose things like the syllabus. You feel valued and important as a person."

"Democratic responsibility, as opposed to sitting back and always receiving, means that we have a chance to

use existing skills as well as learning new ones. This method of learning has allowed us to develop and gain confidence."

"Everyone did a little bit, we all help each other, if I hadn't done my part other people would have suffered. I felt responsible for them. This made me try harder."

"It will succeed, it's our course, it's up to us."

Lesley Browne

Dr. Lesley Browne teaches at Park Hall School, Solihull, West Midlands