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Improving Schools 2009; 12; 11

DOI: 10.1177/1365480208100242

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Sustainability and improvement: a problem 'of' education and 'for' education

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Abstract

In this short discussion article I develop some earlier writing on the theme of education, improvement and sustainability (see references). It builds upon my primary criticism of the school improvement movement that it is accustomed to thinking of education as good in and of itself. As David Orr suggests candidly in his essay in the early 1990s, 'It is not education that will save us, but education of a certain kind (Orr, 1994/2004). My assertion is that the type of education that is being advanced through the school improvement movement is simply not the kind that we need to tackle some of the most pressing challenges we now face in the form of environmental change and the looming post-oil economy (Stern Review, 2006).

Keywords: environment, improvement, learning communities, sustainability

A problem 'of' educational improvement

It is fair to say that amongst most people, education is generally thought of as a good thing. Indeed, it is thought of as such a good thing by many people that they willingly send their young children to participate in it for the majority of their childhood. In turn, governments commit vast amounts of money each year to support and develop the education system offering a diverse curriculum to ensure that we have 'a talented and vibrant workforce' (Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Education). This commitment to education as a good thing in itself is not a recent feature of industrialized nations, as Ivan Illich (1973) reminds us:

John Amos Comenius, a Moravian bishop of the seventeenth century, a self-styled pansophist and pedagogue, is rightly considered one of the founders of the modern school. He was among the first to propose seven or twelve grades of compulsory learning. In his *Magna Didactica* he described schools as devices to 'teach everybody everything' and outlined a blueprint for the assembly-line production of knowledge, which according to his method would make education cheaper and better and make growth into full humanity possible for all. (p. 13)

Comenius was also an alchemist who adapted the language of his craft to the pursuit of rearing children. Through a succession of 12 refinements the alchemist sought enlightenment in the pursuit of creating gold. Needless to say the process failed, but each time it failed the alchemists presented new reasons for the failure and they tried again.

Education has become a form of modern alchemy. It promises to bring forth citizens who will be fit for the receiving environment created by the magic of modern educational science. With successive years of compulsory schooling, students are expected to progress to a point where they will be deemed successfully educated and ready to participate in the wider world. Yet despite successive waves of initiatives and improvement efforts, the industrial mode of education continues to fail many of these people. Instead of asking the question of the science, we continue to propose new ways to work the alchemy. Our latest is in the form of the National Challenge (DCFS, 2008¹, previously the London Challenge, The Manchester Challenge and the Black Country Challenge). As a result, education, and more particularly educational improvement has become institutionalized and closely associated with an economic and consumerist model of human progress. And as it is a necessity for students to have qualifications in order to participate in the consumer society; we consider schooling as an 'entitlement'. However, such a view compounds the poverty of those who are unschooled, at home and abroad, and maintains a gulf between developed and developing nations, cultures and communities – a defining feature to distinguish between those who practise education in a manner that we recognize, against those who do not (Reimer, 1971). If we accept the authority of an institution to define how educated we are, we accept someone else's measure of ourselves. When we collude with the institution in this way, we define ourselves through its definition of success, we commit and adhere to its way of operating – thus ensuring the status quo. In becoming mainstream and institutionalized, school improvement has lost its radical edge; education that is not radical, critical and emancipatory in outlook is simply dogmatic.

My suggestion is simple. Alternatives to the current alchemy of education do exist, but it is very difficult to present these different ideas on what education might be within the existing measures of the school improvement and school effectiveness movement, primarily because the movement is locked into the institutional view that school, and therefore schooled education, is the only game in town. I do not make these claims as an outsider: I am someone who has been a contributor to this movement for a good many years.

I have changed my mind. It is in recognition of the limitations of my own arguments for learning communities, that I felt the need to begin to explore further into the possibility of a different discourse and practice of education and thus we need to proffer a different concept of improvement (Wrigley, 2005).

A problem 'for' educational improvement

In his most recent book the eminent scientist James Lovelock (2006) points out that as nations and individuals we are currently trapped in a vicious circle of positive feedback where our preoccupation of self impedes our vision of our wider effect.

What happens in one place very soon affects what happens in others. We are dangerously ignorant of our own ignorance, and rarely see things as a whole. (Lovelock, 2006: xiv)

Whereas earlier ideas proposed the notion of a learning school functioning as a network in a deliberate, orchestrated strategy for improving the quality of educational provision (Clarke, 2000), I now recognize that this in itself is severely limited as it implicitly accepts an educational hegemony that is now recognizably unsustainable. Over a decade

of work in the field in the pursuit of creating Learning Communities has taught me that there are new and essential issues to tackle if we are to make progress in a pursuit of an educated citizen – a commitment to interconnectedness, and a willingness to develop strategic understanding of the consequences of interconnectedness take us much further into the interplay between individual and group, between one living community and another and as such, it has caused me to have to rethink the place of education within a much wider sphere of human encounters and activities. To do anything less is simply to magnify the already intolerable level of failure that exists in the system.

Whereas much of the school improvement movement's earlier work was concerned with reform, I now think we have to focus completely upon transformation – further reform is not enough (Sullivan, 1999). A decade ago, I was not alone in thinking that a coherent argument in favour of sustainable development would be sufficient to galvanize a range of opinion and practice and create a vibrant and innovative way of responding to change. I now think that we have to be advocates for transformation, as sustainable development has simply created the comfortable pathway for maintenance of the status quo. Transformation means seeing the problem through a completely different set of lenses. The reformist lens no longer provides enough interconnection to enable the challenge of sustainability to be appreciated.

A decade ago I was concerned, as many were, with sustainable development – a reform of existing policy which would be pioneered through learning communities. Now I think we are in a race for survival and *sustainable retreat* (Lovelock, 2006) is our preferred route, our transformational journey and that schools in the form of part of a living community may play a part, but in playing that part they will change profoundly from their current position. Despite many valiant efforts (for example, the NCSL Networked Communities Programme, and our own IQEA networks), it is clear that the enterprise of learning community development *on its own* is fundamentally flawed, not least, in the notion that a community simply focused on learning is in any way equipped to develop appropriate responses to a changing environment. There are many reasons, but one central failure of the learning community development has been the growth of institutionalized learning – what is learnt and why it is learnt are too often taken as 'given' rather than being held up to careful critical scrutiny. The practice of business as usual would be fine if everything around were stable and resources were infinite, but evidence is mounting that they are not (Stern Review, 2006). The current curriculum that students 'learn' is bounded by the existing dominant structures and cultural associations of school, and establishment founded on corporate dominance and centralized agendas for change. If education is to be transformed for the challenge of climate warming, peak oil and resource depletion it is not enough to hope that these mega-structures will move quickly enough to address the scale of the challenge, as Monbiot (2005) says:

Our hopes of a soft landing rest on just two propositions; that the oil producers' figures are correct, and that governments act before they have to. I hope that reassures you.

It is clear that a post-oil civilization, which is what anyone under the age of 30 can expect to live the majority of their lives under (Steffen, 2008), will be very different from the world we currently experience. In response to the challenges that this will

bring, it seems sensible to look at how to build local resilience² to maintain employment, to ensure that people are fed, that they have energy and that they have the necessary skills to lead fulfilling lives. Whilst this might come from a revised version of an education system, it might just as easily be found in the networks of people, families, technologies, creative industries and businesses that make up our existing communities. We need to establish resilience way beyond the bounds of our schools, we need to re-educate ourselves across entire communities and regions by reconnecting.

I propose that this is a problem for school improvement, which until now has played alongside political agendas and has often been cherry-picked of suitable material that create an illusion of improvement. I would like to see the improvement movement position itself for something radically different, a concept I have begun to call a sustainable living community – *not a school, not primarily focused on the intention or need of the school*, but something deeper and wider that serves its community with an ethic that stresses ‘all education is environmental education’ from the outset. It is more deeply embedded in responding to cultural, social, ecological, economic and spiritual need: it is concerned with connection to local food, local work, local innovation and re-engagement with earth, interconnected networks of similar communities, communities looking at new forms of building for sustainable living and of course, exploring how we educate all members of the community to begin to participate in what Peter Senge (2006) calls ‘metanoia’ – a shift of mind and practice in response to a changed environment.

Sustainable retreat in action

The term ‘sustainable’³ is becoming more a part of the new school improvement lexicon. But it is frequently cited in connection with the maintenance of existing practice, and is locked to the notion of development and therefore the continued exploitation of finite resources (DCSF, 2008). Sustainable development is fashionable as it makes reassuring noises and fits the old world order that still believes in the main that global warming is fixable, and favours business as usual with a trust in technology as the solution to the current problems we face. But as Lovelock comments, sustainable development puts us in the comfort zone of pretending we are making real change when in fact we are deluding ourselves, and colluding with existing arrangements:

Sustainable development is a moving target. It represents the continuous effort to balance and integrate three pillars of social well-being, economic prosperity and environmental protection for the benefit of present and future generations. Many consider this noble policy morally superior to the laissez-faire of business as usual. Unfortunately for us, these wholly different approaches, one the expression of international decency, the other of unfeeling market forces, have the same outcome: the probability of disastrous global change. The error they share is the belief that further development is possible and that the Earth will continue, more or less as now, for at least the first half of this century. Two hundred years ago, when change was slow or non-existent, we might have had time to establish sustainable development, or even have continued for a while with business as usual, but now is much too late, the damage has already been done. (Lovelock, 2006: 3–4)

Lovelock’s argument is that it is much too late for sustainable development. He makes a compelling case for what he calls ‘sustainable retreat’ (p. 8). In his critique of science as a ‘cosy, friendly club of specialists who follow their numerous different stars’, he observes that they are ‘wonderfully productive but never certain and always hampered

by the persistence of incomplete world-views' (p. 5). We might usefully draw the analogy across every sector, and particularly shine it upon current educational policy, be it focused on sustainable development or simply upon the future. It is much too late for educational 'reform' under its current guise as it is wedded to the view that we create citizens in the form of participants in the knowledge economy, worldly consumers, reliant upon economic development and an exploitative model of progress. It is an institutionalized version of the old order. This, the old order, has crumbled, we prop up schools as if there is no alternative, yet we fail to see that the damage is already done, that we need to transform the whole notion of education for a clear need, survival.

If we think of education for survival – for sustainable retreat – we can explore it on personal and societal terms, how we relate to our planet, and how we begin to construct a new transformative discourse and practice of change. In what Joanna Macy calls 'The Great Turning', she describes the essential adventure for our time – a shift from the 'Industrial Growth Society' to a 'Life-sustaining civilization'. It is a re-evaluation of how we live together on a grand scale, and as such it is a fine place from which to begin to consider the problem for the new role of education. She continues:

People are recognising that our needs cannot be met without destroying our world. We have the technical knowledge, the communication tools, and material resources to grow enough food, ensure clean air and water, and meet rational energy needs. Future generations, if there is a livable world for them, will look back at the epochal transition we are making to a life-sustaining society. And they may well call this the time of the Great Turning. It is happening now. (Macy and Young Brown, 1998)

She continues:

. . . Whether or not it is recognized by corporate-controlled media, the Great Turning is a reality. Although we cannot know yet if it will take hold in time for humans and other complex life forms to survive, we can know that it is under way. And it is gaining momentum, through the actions of countless individuals and groups around the world. To see this as the larger context of our lives clears our vision and summons our courage.

Sustainable retreat is not a negative concept. It revisits the meaning of wealth creation in the form of intelligence, matter and energy and uses the knowledge we have available to better effect. Examples of work in the field are plentiful ranging from the practicalities of the Transition Movement (Hopkins, 2008) and community design (Lewenz, 2007), to the re-modelling of social interaction (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) and leadership through emergence theory (Scharmer, 2007)

I think that the challenge is to reclaim education from centralized, predetermined packages of learning – to take education from those who see it as a servant of industry and therefore model it around industrially established measures and parameters, and instead to embed it in ecology. Humans need to learn that they are related to all other life, and that our future depends upon the well-being of the planet. Stephen Sterling (2006) calls this alternative 'authentic education', a form of education rooted in tradition, in meaningful contexts and in the pursuit of community. It is the pursuit of knowledge that is revelatory – seeking to deepen understanding and connection, it is open, participatory, engaging, and passionate. It encourages us to learn a curriculum suited to the quantum age, not the industrial, therefore we use what we best know of the ecosystem as our guide – balance, dynamics, reciprocity, mutuality, symbiosis, complexity all reveal

powerful insights into the interrelationship of us and our environment. This challenge is what Thomas Berry calls ‘the great work’ which involves us in remaking the human presence on earth and how we ‘provision ourselves with food, energy, materials, water, livelihood, health and shelter’ (Angyal, 2003).

The pursuit of sustainability comes through both intelligent ecological renewal and what others describe as spiritual reconnection (Scharmer, 2007) with self, others and environment. It is time for this change, it is time for this challenge to be taken up by educators, and for education. When used in relation to educational practice, this is how improvement should now be defined.

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Notes

1 The National Challenge was launched by the Secretary of State on 10 June 2008. It is a programme of support to secure higher standards in all secondary schools so that, by 2011, at least 30 percent of pupils in every school will gain five or more GCSEs at A*–C, including both English and mathematics.

2 I describe resilience as the ability of a system, from individual people to entire economies, to hold together and maintain their ability to function in the face of change and shock from external sources. I think that there is a very important characteristic implicit in this definition – that of adaptability. Whilst it might appear that there is really very little that we might do on a personal level to influence the actions of major multinational corporations in their ongoing quest for oil, we can, I think, begin to explore quite legitimately and with integrity, the ingredients of resilience that will enable us to survive in a time of sustainable retreat. Simon Levin (1999, 2003) identifies three features that make ecosystems resilient: Diversity, Modularity and Tight Feedback.

Let us take a look at each.

Diversity: concerns the number of elements that compose a system – this may be people, species, different businesses or schools. Resilience arising from diversity is related not only to number of participants/members – so the more diverse, the more resilient – but also from the number of different types of connections that exist between the different participant/members. A second line of diversity is in the form of difference between systems, so the idea of exact solutions being taken from one place and dropped into another is not a way to build resilience. Instead we would anticipate a more resilient approach to the use of successfully identified practices being to locate them into new systems and adapting them according to local configuration and need – each community, for example, will nurture and generate its own solutions even when it connects with systems elsewhere. Overall, diversity demonstrates resilience through lots of niche responses and subtle changes to locally defined needs, in effect – local matters.

Modularity: this is concerned with how connections are made. In particular, I think this is concerned with networks and the sharing of information and know how. A resilient system is one that self-organizes in the event of a shock. In Robert Axelrod and Michael Cohen’s work (2000) they cite the example of apprenticeships as a good way of thinking about how ideas are passed on, developed but not remaining dependent upon any one source. There are many other examples, but the main point is that social networks can generate resilience through their shared protocols and acceptance of diversity.

Tight feedback: Where the consequences of action are quickly recognized there is less likelihood of inappropriate and continuous adoption of poor solutions. Tight feedback brings home the effect of what we do in any given situation. The selected level of feedback will relate to the types of connections we make with others, and the number of connections we establish – thus the three themes feeding into resilience are themselves interdependent, without each other, the system breaks down and is weaker than with them all acting as a coherent whole.

3 Sustainability, in a general sense, is the capacity to maintain a certain process or state indefinitely. In recent years the concept has been applied more specifically to living organisms and systems. As applied to the human community, sustainability has been expressed as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The term has its roots in ecology as the ability of an ecosystem to maintain ecological processes, functions, biodiversity and productivity into the future. To be sustainable, nature’s resources must only be used at a rate at which they can be replenished naturally.

There is now clear scientific evidence (from environmental science) that humanity is living in an unsustainable way, by consuming the Earth's limited natural resources more rapidly than they are being replaced by nature. Consequently, a collective human effort to keep human use of natural resources within the sustainable development aspect of the Earth's finite resource limits is now an issue of utmost importance to the present and future of humanity. This also helps to identify what sustainability is not – namely, it is not a term that can be usefully applied to practices that in any way serve to detract from meeting the needs of future generations, and nor can it be applied independently of its ecological origins.

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