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Practising democracy in two inner city schools

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Introduction

The Government invited the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education to conduct a Mission in the United Kingdom during October 1999 (Tomasevski, 1999). The Special Rapporteur welcomed the Government's initiative in making human rights central to global development, education and relief of poverty. The Government had committed itself to `using its influence to seek the realisation of the social and economic rights contained in the Universal Declaration for all the people in the world' (FCO/DFID, 1998).

The Special Rapporteur pointed out, however, discrepancies between Britain's foreign policy and domestic policy which ignores children's rights. She said that availability of schools and teachers is not enough. When children's rights are respected, schools are also accessible, acceptable and adaptable (Tomasevski, 1999:13). The Special Rapporteur criticised the Government's policy on the so-far undefined `social exclusion', which tends to individualise problems and blame, or at least concentrate on trying to correct, the excluded people, rather than recognising and addressing the statal exclusions and discriminations which oppress them. She also criticised policy on citizenship education (QCA, 1998) for seeing children only as future citizens and not also as present practising citizens. She said that in the QCA Report, human rights are `perceived as different from and alien to the rights and freedoms that learners will recognise in their everyday lives [such as] equal opportunities and gender equality' (Tomasevski, 1999:25) `Individualism and competitiveness as root values clash against solidarity and community' and mutual acceptance (p.25) It is a `paradox' to expect schools to instil these conflicting values at the same time. The 1998 Human Rights Act will make a great difference in time, meanwhile the Special Rapporteur sees the CRC (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) as particularly well suited to learners from the youngest ages in offering a `clear and easy identification with its spirit and wording and the immediate possibility of its translation into practice through the creation of human-rights friendly schools thorough imaginative and flexible changes ((Tomasevski, 1999:26).

During a research project on British children's views about their rights in schools (Alderson 1999a, 1999b), through questionnaires and small discussion groups the students aged 7 to 17 showed the wisdom of the Special Rapporteur's Report and the adverse effects of denying children's rights in schools. Articles from the CRC, such as the right to respect for the child's worth and dignity, the right to privacy, to develop skills and talents, to express a view in matters which affect the child, were expressed in practical questions about the students' daily experiences. Many students reported not feeling respected `they make you feel an inch high', not being able to trust teachers to keep a secret, or to ensure fair discipline, or to listen to the students' views. Simply having a school council can often seem worse to students, if it is undemocratic, than not having a school council at all (Alderson in press).

The few published examples of head teachers in Britain who have tried to make their schools more democratic show how hard this task can be (Trafford 1997). This chapter illustrates, through research in two unusual primary schools, how the Special Rapporteur's concerns can be put into practice in English schools. Highfield school (1997), emphasises democracy as peaceful consultation, listening to and learning from all concerned, everyone having the chance to contribute to policy making which is negotiated and tested before it is agreed. Cleves School (1999), especially attends to non-discrimination and to equal respect and opportunity in gender, ethnicity and ability. Both schools are in very disadvantaged areas and over half their pupils have identified learning difficulties. They both avoid excluding pupils, although many disturbed and distressed children attend them. The following two sections consider how the schools, as the Special Rapporteur advised, alter structures in education which are hostile to difference and disability, and aim to make themselves accessible, acceptable and adaptable.

Creating democratic structures

Some years ago, Highfield junior school was renown for being a very difficult school and the staff reported mayhem and vandalism. A new head teacher arrived and over five years the school changed into becoming well known for its high standards of positive behaviour. The staff and pupils told the story of this change in a book (Highfield 1997). The staff began by introducing a firm discipline code. The children agreed they liked feeling safer but `we'll always cause problems because we don't like adults ordering us to do things.' So the adults and children began to work together on sharing agreements about rules and plans to improve the school. They used methods such as class circle times, when each person has a chance to speak in turn while everyone else listens, sometimes when playing games, sometimes as a forum for negotiating plans and decisions. The younger children decided the main rules for their class room, the older ones gradually came to think about conventions: `a rule is a convention if you've made it your own....it's inside us'.

Circle times were also used to resolve problems such as bullying, when bullies were confronted and asked to explain their case. To ensure that plans to prevent bullying worked, some children were appointed as bully busters, although this did not continue for long. Instead some children became guardian angels, to fly to rescue victims and bullies when necessary, and help them to change. The children talked a lot about feelings and behaviour, through games and more formal lessons, and thereby increased their conscious awareness of self and others, community and solidarity. Each class began to take on the task of resolving behaviour problems, which used to take up most of the head teacher's time. Sometimes classes invited parents to attend a circle time to discuss their child's problems and agree together on positive, non-punitive plans for change.

The circle times worked well for problems within classes, but many problems arise between classes, such as during break time. The staff and children established a school council which also met as a whole school circle time. The council discussed business reported by class representatives who then reported back to their class circle time and collected new matters to raise at the council. Everyone in the school could feel fairly closely linked to the council, able to raise matters, receive reports, and send further comments back if they were not satisfied. Another crucial method for

democratic resolution of problems was the growing use of trained peer mediators and, in time, children in every age group became skilled mediators. The lunch time supervisors, one per seventy children, especially appreciated and relied on the mediators. The children `help to run the school' fulfilling many useful duties in named posts for which they write job descriptions and apply to be appointed during induction weeks each school year. The staff are keen to involve everyone including difficult children, many of whom become very active and enthusiastic, including some who have been excluded from other schools.

Working for democratic inclusion

Cleves School staff and pupils have also told their story in a book (Cleves 1999). Cleves is a mainstream school in a local authority with an inclusive policy where every child is welcomed into their local school. Some of the schools include more disabled children than others do. For example, deaf children attend certain mainstream schools where they can enjoy being members of their deaf community as well as belonging to the general school community where everyone uses some sign language.

Cleves is surrounded by short term housing for several inner city boroughs, and there is a continual flow through the school, where 27 language are spoken, of refugee and asylum seeker children. The staff believe that all the structures and detailed practices set up to welcome and educate these children benefit everyone in the school, by alerting staff to each child's individual needs and ensuring there are resources and knowledge to meet a great range of needs. The resources include consulting many experts in education, health, social and community services in the borough. The children are aged from 3 to 11 years, and one in ten of them has profound and multiple learning difficulties. The local authority's support and reuse of resources, through closing almost all the special schools and making special education integral to mainstream learning, is essential for Cleves School's success (Alderson and Goodey 1998). There is one teacher and one assistant for every 20 children. In each of the four wings of the beautifully designed school, 12 staff share in team teaching up to 120 children. The children `direct their own learning' such as by filling in their daily diaries and marking their order of activities. The teaching teams constantly balance each child's individual learning needs with the activities of the whole `base group' (class of 30) and the whole wing.

Daily activities show how fully the children take part in democratic inclusion, in their kindness and mutual respect whatever their ethnicity or ability. One example is the boy in a wheelchair who enjoys using the climbing frame and slide in the park adjacent to the school. Another is the weekly school assemblies where everyone celebrates being together, and which the OFSTED inspectors described as `wonder-full'. One argument in favour of sending disabled children to special schools is to shelter the children from the taunts, bullying and other cruelties of non-disabled children. However, the children at Cleves school show, not only that there can be warm friendships and absence of cruel discriminations in mainstream schools, but also that it is the children who make inclusion really work, through their relationships and solidarity which adults alone could not orchestrate.

Lessons from the two schools

The two schools illustrate how it is possible to achieve high standards of democratic community in English schools, and in schools in disadvantaged areas. Perhaps there are extra incentives for the staff to experiment in areas of `failing' schools. Both schools had inspired head teachers but they were not `top-down super heads' brought in to impose new ideas. These two women were convinced that it is essential to work in solidarity with their staff and pupils; it is illogical to attempt to impose democracy, which can only grow systemically through the contributions of all concerned, albeit with the head teacher's active guidance when overcoming racist, sexist and anti-disability structures and traditions. Both schools were supported by committed governors. The chair of the Cleves governors, for example, who is blind is convinced of the importance of inclusive education. Although they did not explicitly refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, both schools honoured the CRC in spirit, and Highfield emphasised the children's citizenship of their local estate, city, country, `of Europe and the world'. The staff worked with the pupils to create human-rights friendly schools and towards realising the UN Special Rapporteur's standards of schools which are accessible, acceptable and adaptable (Tomasevski, 1999:13). The examples of Highfield and Cleves (with the resignations in March 2000 of some of the autocratic `super-heads' who failed to `turn around failing schools') suggest that improving schools can only fully be achieved when adults work more equally with children as contributing citizens in democratic school communities.

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