

EUDEC TALK – 20th June 2021 – version for Progressive Education - Derry Hannam.

Books about Self-Directed Learning and Democratic Education are like London Buses – none appear for ages then they all come at once. Does this mean that we are looking at a Post-Pandemic Overton Window for our ideas? And how do we feel about ‘for-profit’ democratic schools?

I grew up in South London and my dad was a bus driver. There was supposed to be a number 47 to my school every three minutes but sometimes 20 minutes would go by then five buses would arrive at the same time. The past 15 months has been like that for books in English that criticise state education. Many go on to recommend some degree of student directed learning and curriculum choice. Some advocate a context of greater regard for student voice, democracy and respect for the rights of young people. Until about 2018 I might get one or two such books a year with an invitation to a book launch or a request for a review or a few words for the back cover. Recently I have had 21 such books sitting on my desk with one of my own adding to the pile!

Something is going on. But what? Are people suddenly feeling generous and wanting to send presents to this old guy as he fades away into hasbeenness? Unlikely. Or is a tsunami of interest in our ideas building up precipitated by a spreading awareness that most public schools systems are just not delivering the goods economically or in terms of human flourishing? Millions of parents have seen just what uninspiring content has been sent on-line for their children to digest (or not) at home during lock-downs. Some of these will not be sending their children back to school and many more will be ignoring the school content and encouraging children to spread their interests more widely while at home. Research in England is showing that when free to choose their own reading material many children are choosing harder texts than they would meet at school and are spending more time reading them with deeper understanding. There seems to be a growing feeling that things should not just go back to ‘more of the same’ after Covid.

You may be familiar with the notion of the ‘Overton Window.’

An **Overton window** is the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time. The term is named after American policy analyst [Joseph P. Overton](#), who stated that an idea's political viability depends mainly on whether it falls within this range, rather than on politicians' individual preferences.^{[2][3]} According to Overton, the window frames the range of policies that a politician can recommend without appearing too extreme to get elected given the climate of [public opinion](#) at that time.

These windows of opportunity open and also close as public moods swing. Around the turn of the century I found myself in such a moment when I became involved in developing education for citizenship in England. I had long argued for greater student participation in decision making in the curriculum and the day to day running of state schools. At the very least there should be a non-tokenistic students council in every school. I had been working with the Council of Europe in several countries along these lines but nothing was happening in England. Suddenly with a new centre-left government, a new minister, new advisers it was possible to insert the word ‘democratic’ in front of the word ‘citizenship’ and to repeat over

and over again the idea that teaching ‘about’ democracy was a waste of time unless young people had the opportunity to ‘do’ democracy. It worked. ‘Participation in democratic decision making and responsible action’ became a part of the English national curriculum for all 14-16 year olds. Money was provided for teacher training, inspectors were appointed to ensure that it happened, and a large-scale longitudinal research project was funded. 25% of secondary schools implemented the policy with enthusiasm and general support from parents – though many did not. The right wing press challenged the development in 2001 claiming it would undermine standards in ‘important’ subjects like maths. This worried some parents. The minister panicked I was funded to research the issue. I found evidence that far from undermining ‘standards’ schools that involved large numbers, or all, their students in school democracy actually achieved higher examination results, had better attendance and fewer exclusions for anti-social behaviour than the average for all schools in similar socio-economic environments. This became known as the ‘Hannam Report’. It is still available and my findings were supported by a further study carried out by our National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) in 2006.

But by 2010 the public mood had shifted and a new conservative government brought these democratic developments to a stop. The nightmare of competition between schools, obsessive testing, high levels of anxiety, and loss of well-being in students and their teachers returned. The Overton Window for school democracy had firmly closed.

Now 12 years later as I stare at this pile of books on my desk I wonder if another Overton Window is opening. They include a spectrum of authors from those on the more creative and reflective parts of the mainstream establishment to those who are well outside it. Those who have worked within state systems as ‘responsible subversives’ and those who have created ‘pioneers of possibility’ ventures in the private sector. Those whose principal focus is with learning and those more concerned with rights. The pile does not include wonderful texts such as Peter Gray’s “Free To Learn,” Ken Robinson’s “Creative Schools,” Yaacov Hecht’s “Democratic Education,” Peter Hartkamp’s “Beyond Coercive Education” or the Sudbury Valley books or anything by David Gribble that pre-date these recent arrivals.

So where to start?

Well the flood started with the arrival without explanation of an extraordinary text called “EduShifts: The Future of Education is Now” just before Christmas 2019. I have no idea who sent it to me, and it contains no publication date or place. It should have a code number but it hasn’t. After an introduction futuristically written in 2184 by Philippe Greier (who like many Austrians probably achieved longevity from the mountain air of his childhood) the book contains a chapter 2 which consists of 20 blank pages which should, but don’t, contain the handwritten thoughts of whoever sent it to me together with an instruction to add my own ideas before I pass it on. It is a brilliant book which I think started its life at a conference in Brazil in 2017. Why it took so long to arrive in Seaford I don’t know but the sections by Helena Singer (Brazil), neuro-biologist Gerald Huether (Germany), Jose Pacheco (Portugal and Brazil) and Yaacov Hecht (Israel) all contain transformative visions of what education should and will hopefully become – pretty much what members of EUDEC would wish for. So far I have been too possessive to pass it on as I keep re-reading parts of it.

I will get my own book out of the way next. It is called "Another Way is Possible: Becoming a Democratic Teacher in a State School." It fits in the EUDEC frame of student directed learning in a context of democracy and human rights. As a young teacher I tried to create an AS Neill/Summerhill inspired democratic learning community of 35 11-year olds who had just failed the high-stakes 11+ test in an English secondary school. I was kicked into finally getting it into publication as an e-book and paperback by Katy Zago and Max Sauber from ALLI ASBL (Association Luxembourgeoise pour la liberté d'Instruction). I am eternally grateful to Katy and Max because I have had feedback from student teachers and teachers in eight countries saying they have been encouraged by the ideas which were lacking in their university courses.

Most closely aligned with my own book is Geraldine Rowe's "It's Our School, It's Our Time." She is an English educational psychologist who, for her PhD, studied examples of teachers who systematically involved children in class and school decision making. Like my book it is aimed at helping state school teachers resist damaging academic performance pressure. The book is for those in the state system working in a gradualist fashion to enhance learning through participation, but it is nonetheless firmly committed to children's rights. It was a pleasure to be invited to attend the launch of the book and to review it.

One of the reviewers of my book then sent me his magnum opus from the United States. Wayne Jennings has been founder and principal of a number of influential student participative alternative charter schools in Minneapolis/St Paul, Minnesota. His book "School Transformation" is of biblical proportions with informative footnotes. Piecemeal reforms are not good enough he believes. Schools that ignore human differences cannot possibly prepare young people for uncertain futures. The book is a magnificent summary of all that we know about learning, creativity and the failure of existing school systems to foster them. It has the elegance and breadth of vision of Peter Gray and Ken Robinson yet is relatively unknown outside the United States. The most telling part of the book for me is his demolition of the hypocrisy of school 'mission statements.' They claim to prepare for the future workplace, but allow little autonomy, communication, collaboration, control; they claim to prepare democratic citizens, but most schools are run as dictatorships with little voice for the students or teachers; they claim to prepare for life-long learning, but all too often destroy the innate love of learning of young humans; and they claim to develop the potential of every child, but don't bother to find out what it is!! This especially resonated with my work as an English school inspector!

Days after the arrival of Wayne Jennings book "Get Out of the Way and Let Kids Learn" by Carl Rust arrived from Indiana, USA. Carl sets out how we can transform schools and re-introduce natural learning. Like me he describes his own learning journey. The book is a down-to-earth practical guide for teachers in mainstream schools on how to start the process. I was recently in a meeting with Carl listening to a complex theoretical exposition. At question time he asked "So – what do we do on Monday morning?" His book contains a series of answers. Get out of the classroom. Get rid of tests. Get rid of coercion. Get rid of much teacher talk. Get rid of one-size fits all curriculum. Bring in student directed learning and democratic decision making. It's a lovely book and deserves to be a best seller.

Shortly after reading my book a retired teacher trainer wrote to me with a copy of “The Futility of School Reform” by John Pearce. It is another great read. In it he demolishes conventional subject-based curriculum, most of what passes for teaching, and school as an organisation committed to control. He believes that through social media young people are seeing that school is more concerned with control than learning. They are beginning to challenge much prescribed curriculum for what they see as more important and interesting areas of knowledge. Greta Thunberg inspired climate change movements such as ‘Teach the Future’ and rights demanding groups such as ‘Pupil Power’ in the UK, the ‘Teach the Teacher’ programme in Victoria Australia, ‘Up For Learning’ in Vermont USA, ‘OBESSU’ and the national school student organisations in Europe, the global YouthxYouth movement, all bear witness to John Pearce’s beliefs. Pearce concludes with his vision of the Optimum School based on community rather than hierarchy, which is liberatory rather than controlling. Again just about everything that EUDEC stands for.

Next to the Netherlands. “Human Kind: A Hopeful History” by Rutger Bregman. Zoe Readhead, says that sceptical visitors to Summerhill school often refer to William Golding’s dystopian novel “Lord of the Flies” where a group children stranded on an island soon forget “civilised behaviour” and start to murder and seek power over each other. “No, that is not how self-governing kids behave,” says Zoe. I agree with her and Bregman sets out why we are right, demonstrating that collaborative kindness rather than hatred is crucial to being human. He tells a true story of children shipwrecked on an island who develop behaviours totally the reverse of Golding’s and much more aligned to Summerhill or my own classes. While in the Netherlands it is worth mentioning that Bas Rosenbrand’s beautiful book “Co-create School with the Children: A New Morning’ has recently emerged in its third edition.

Moving East my next book comes from Bavaria, Germany. “Education is an Admirable Thing – Wake up Call” by Charles Warcup. Charles was one of the core group of adults behind the beautiful Ammersee Sudbury School near Munich brutally closed by the Bavarian inspection officials despite the vocal support of parents and the local Burgermeister. I was invited to join their support group along with Peter Gray, Peter Hartkamp, and Yaacov Hecht – but we were unable to save the school. Charles’ book is more ‘inner’ or ‘spiritual’ perhaps than the others described so far, yet he also aims to transform German schooling to one more concerned for sustainability. What he calls ‘cross-pollinated learning’ with adults and young people together creating curriculum and defining what both regard as ‘useful knowledge.’ Another great book that I am currently re-reading.

Back to the USA for two books that support the 20% concept – where 20% of curriculum time in all state schools should be allocated to the interests, concerns, questions and passions of the students. Of course in democratic schools 20% is a ridiculously small amount of time for student directed learning but for the majority of state schools everywhere it would be a major step forward. Esther Wojicki is the author of “How To Raise Successful People” and also head of the media arts department at Palo Alto High School, California, where she has for many years implemented the 20% principle with her classes to amazingly good effect. Her catchword is TRICK – trust, respect, independence, collaboration and kindness. Wojicki’s book is as much about parenting as schooling though one of her students who is also one of her daughters, went on to join Google, where the 20% principle

operates, to create some of the most profitable innovations for the company in her self-directed but paid time.

Kevin Brookhouser's book "The 20Time Project: How Educators can launch Google's formula for future-ready innovation" arrived on my desk at the same time as Wojcicki's book. It is a 'roadmap' of how to implement the 20% principle in lessons and in whole school scheduling. It is a practical Carl Rust-like 'what to do on Monday morning' kind of book. As somebody commented to me last week – when we create 20% departments in all state schools we should call them "Passion Departments."

Now back to the UK for a book by Freya Aquarone and her students "We're trying to do things differently." While working on her own PhD research into democratic approaches to learning for students aged 16 and over Freya is teaching on the Kings College, London social sciences BA programme. She and her students decided to write this book together about the challenges of relationship and recognition in Higher Education. This book comes at a time when undergraduate students at universities in England amass enormous debt for which they get poorer and poorer value in teaching as staff are pressed to focus on publications and grant winning research. It asks questions that would be transformative if taken seriously. How to foreground democratic partnership and emotional care, how to define the role of free speech. How to turn the research lens onto the experience of undergraduate learning itself. One of the many amazing things about this book is that it is free!

Remaining in the UK with a diversion to South Africa I come to three fine books on self-directed learning which together constitute an extremely powerful package. First clinical psychologist and parent Naomi Fisher's "Changing Our Minds: How Children can take control of their own Learning." Here is a magnificent compendium of knowledge around what neuro-science and psychological research have to tell us about the potential children have to organise their own learning and the almost complete failure of school systems to utilise this knowledge. The book is a bible of guidance and re-assurance for parents considering home education and I was pleased to attend her book launch and wrote a blurb for the book. Naomi says that she was delighted and surprised when Peter Gray agreed to write a preface to her book. Well I understand her delight as Peter writes "We are on a trajectory with self-directed education...I don't know when the gates will open...but this book will help." I am not surprised that he valued it highly and agreed to contribute to it.

The next book in the pile is Ian Cunningham's "Self-Managed Learning and the New Educational Paradigm." Ian suggests that to be qualified to comment on the failures of the current English school system and to convincingly propose alternatives, you need to have 'skin in the game.' To be a 'player.' Since coordinating the alternative inspection of Summerhill School twenty years ago, which played a key role its defence from closure and to which I was proud to contribute, his 'skin in the game' has been the creation of a learning centre for young people in the Brighton area of South England. Ian uses the experience gained from creating self management in higher education and company training to create a "college" of self managed learning for home educated school-aged young people. Unlike most of the other privately funded alternative educational settings in England he has no

interest in becoming a school or subjecting the college to the attentions of the inspection system Ofsted – though his team have run some highly successful programmes in mainstream schools. Inspectors have arrived unannounced on several occasions and departed culture-shocked but satisfied. If there is a distinction to be made between ‘self-managed’ and ‘self-directed’ ‘learning’ or ‘education’ it is probably to be made around Ian’s concept of ‘learning groups’ and the role of adults. As far as the young people are concerned however they are free to discover and pursue their own interests and goals at their own pace. This is the new education paradigm to replace existing authoritarian, coercive, prescriptive and involuntarily tested schooling.

Now to stay with the theory and practice of Self-Directed Education (SDE) I go South to South Africa to find Je’anna Clements wonderful e-books on Smashwords (now also in paperback) - “Helping the Butterfly Hatch” Books one and two. They are quite thin so I am counting them as one book in my pile. Book one is about the what and why of SDE and book two covers the how – what support learners can usefully get from adults and each other as they engage on their learning adventures. The books are strongly rights based and not just concerned with learning. Je,anna quotes Ken Danford of North Star Massachusetts ‘Learning is natural, School is optional’ and, as with Ian Cunningham, she has founded a learning community that she avoids calling a school but rather a Sudbury modelled ‘Riverstone Village.’ You can be captured by the creative inspiration of Je’anna’s books by reading 20% of each free at Smashwords – then buy the paperbacks - production once again supported by Katy and Max at ALLI ASBE/FHREE.

Now on South to Australia for Keith Heggart’s new “Activist Citizenship Education: A Framework for Creating Justice Citizens.” In the noughties I had been involved in developments in Citizenship education led by ministerial adviser Bernard Crick, and a raft of interesting books emerged – by John Potter in the UK, or James Youniss in the USA or Joel Westheimer in Canada for example. So I was delighted to be invited to Keith Heggart’s virtual book launch as he is firmly in the ‘if you want kids to understand democracy then they have to do it in the everyday life of the school and not just listen to teachers talk about it’ tradition. The price of \$120A is a bit of a deterrent but I will lend my copy to anyone interested!

Back to the UK but staying with Democracy I recommend “Making Education Fit for Democracy: Closing the Gap.” I couldn’t work out why Routledge had sent me a review copy as at first sight the book looked dry and academic and I couldn’t find out much about the author Brenda Watson. But one of the back cover blurbs was written by Matthew Taylor who had run the left-leaning think tank IPPR for which I have done some work. It caught my eye so I moved the book up the ‘pending’ pile. I am glad I did! It is in fact one of a number of books beginning to emerge from more mainstream establishment places that radically challenge existing systems and are beginning to speak ‘our’ language. She writes ‘persons should be at the heart of education not content; ...schools should resemble well run modern libraries;...I would like to see ‘learning villages’ piloted;...self-directed learning should be encouraged...’

Two more books have just arrived from more mainstream sources. Retired headteacher and inspector Meena Woods and headteacher Nick Haddon’s new book, “Secondary Curriculum

Transformed; Enabling All to Achieve” seems to be moving in our direction. Their critique of the status quo is powerful though their remedies are less so –but - they also referred to the need for some (20%?) self-directed time in all schools.

The second book of this pair is by Tony Breslin, one time CEO of the UK Citizenship Foundation. His new book is almost up-to date with the title “Lessons from Lockdown; The Educational Legacy of Covid-19.” It is based on interviews with students, teachers, parents and administrators about what has changed during the lock-downs. Once again there are numerous references to the need for more self-directed learning and listening to student voice to avoid a post covid return to the same old prescribed regime of narrow academic content and endless testing.

The last book in the pile and perhaps the most provocative is Zachary Stein’s “Education in a Time Between Worlds; Essays on the Future of Schools, Technology and Society.” I am reading it alongside James Moffett’s 25 year-old “The Universal Schoolhouse.” Stein sees civilisation, as predicted by Moffett, as being in a state of collapse, but now at a planetary level for the first time. He is very aware of the contribution of climate change and that exploitative late capitalism whether of the US, European or Chinese variety, is finally running up against a world of finite resources. He sees the old institutions such as education systems as being beyond reform. If we are fortunate, empathetic and smart enough we can avoid accelerating inequality, war and extinction to create abundance in education, energy and everything else. He envisages the new emerging from the fringes of the old. A new combination of locally grounded but globally interconnected learning hubs instead of schools where self-directed education in democratic and rights respecting contexts can be freely available to all. Not dissimilar to Moffett’s universal schoolhouse. In fact I am surprised that Moffett’s book does not appear in Stein’s bibliography. In many respects this vision reflects that of the English Community Education movement of which I was a part in the 1980’s and about which I am now writing a book. We envisaged our schools becoming community learning centres where town and school would become a seamless opportunity for each to be a resource for the other. Yaacov Hecht’s Education Cities develop the idea. Many of Stein’s themes link to the ideas that I was struggling to express in my keynotes at the Crete and Kiev EUDEC conferences where I argued that self-directed democratic education would be crucial preparation for a world where individual lives could no longer find their purpose and identity in careers of full-time paid employment. Stein gives this kind of thinking a coherence that I lacked setting out ‘thirteen social miracles for Educational abundance.’ These include some that I referred to such universal basic income and some that I did not such as world disarmament and mutual recognition of shared humanity to replace extremism in the world’s religions. A rediscovery of the ‘perennial philosophy’ popularised by Aldous Huxley and central to Moffett’s thinking.

So that’s it!! That’s my pile of books and I hope you will give some of them a try. Perhaps collectively they do indicate an Overton window allowing education policy to move towards the paradigm shift that we are all working for.

I would like to close by sharing a connected issue. Despite bad news from France, in England two seriously radical state schools, like the AGORA schools in the Netherlands, and at least six new democratic private ventures have emerged recently. I am also very encouraged by

the EUDEC Erasmus project that Magi from Bulgaria has invited me to join with Yaacov Hecht bringing together democratic schools and state primary schools in Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain. I have long believed that dialogue between 'pioneer of possibility' private democratic schools and state schools is the way forward for the benefit of all young people and not just those from richer families.

So am I right to be concerned by the emergence of the Acton Academies - a chain of for-profit franchised schools featuring self-directed learning and a degree of democratic decision making. The first outside the USA is now running in Ottawa, Canada and the first in Europe is being set up in Guildford, England scheduled to open in September. Its owners presently run expensive elitist conventional private schools. If you join the Acton franchise and pay a fairly substantial fee you gain access to the brand, learning materials, promotional literature and videos, and handbooks to use to set up your school and train your teachers. You are then expected to return a proportion of your fee income to Acton Centre in exchange for which you gain access to a community of practice. The first Acton Academy was set up for the best possible reason – by parents who were unhappy with what they saw on offer to their children from the public schools of Texas. These parents just happened to be from business school backgrounds who also saw an Overton window opening. A gap in the market. I would probably be pleased for my grandchildren to attend an Acton Academy and anyway Summerhill, Sands, Sudbury Valley, Netzwerk, L'Ecole Dynamique all charge fees so what's the problem? Why do I have this niggling fear of 'for-profit' as the motive for starting and franchising a democratic model? Am I right to fear that though self-directed and even democratic and rights respecting this for-profit franchised model will keep fees high and ensure that the entitlement of all children to a creative school experience moves further and further towards the impossible with enhanced social division and inequality as a result? Is this approach part of the problem rather than the way forward? Democratic, self-directed creative schools for the wealthy few and coercive day prisons for the rest!! Or am I just an unreconstructed lefty who needs a bit more Deweyan pragmatism in his mindset?



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