Review: Rebuilding Engagement through the Arts: Responding to disaffected students

This book is concerned with ways in which disaffected young people can reengage with learning in school through involvement in the arts and specifically through acting as 'student teachers'. It describes a project which adds to recent research in three specific areas:

'pupil voice and participation, exploring the possibilities of young people exchanging negative attitudes to learning and negative leadership roles for more positive ones;

peer tutoring: a sharing of talents in formal teaching situations with other pupils;

the power of the arts to enhance or rekindle commitment.'

The five authors are members of the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University. The book describes how four of the team each selected a school and pupils within it who were identified by their teachers as disaffected and disruptive in lessons; and having shown a specific talent relating to one of the arts subjects: Art and Design; Design and Technology; Drama or Music.

Eleven pupils in all from Years 8 and 9, referred to throughout the project as 'student teachers', took part. Their talents related to aspects of the subject areas not always acknowledged within the curriculum. One participant was a majorette out of school, another interested in graffiti art. One had cooking skills learned at home.

Chapter 1 outlines the rationale behind the value of arts subjects within the framework of the project as by their very nature they require active participation. Joan Ruddock asserts that,

'Where extrinsic motivation binds students into a task through the promise of praise, of high grades or other reward, the arts are strong on intrinsic motivation' – the capacity to engage young people in an activity because it is interesting, involving, satisfying or personally challenging.'

As one of the boys participating in the project puts it,

'Most lessons you're just sitting down answering questions out of a textbook. And really kids of our age prefer to be doing something else.'

He goes on to explain the emphasis on the 'doing'. He also says that Expressive Arts teachers are encouraging, explaining that they have to be, otherwise students wouldn't risk expressing themselves.

The main body of the book, Chapters 2-5 of 8 chapters in all, is a coming together of the four researchers' findings. They provide highly detailed accounts of how the 'student teachers', with guidance, planned, prepared for and led teaching sessions with groups of pupils ranging from Y2 to, in one case, a group from the student's own Y9 class. These middle chapters with titles like, 'Oh You're Naughty, Oh You're Cool' amount to a quick and lively read. Participants' changing insights into their own behaviour and image in school are well documented with verbatim recall, as are gratifying accounts of emerging empathy with the lot of the teacher:

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'[Teaching] five times a day, five days a week. That must be tough […].

Several accounts from students testify how they feel locked into the reputation they established for themselves in Y7, a reputation which they feel is then held in place by both peers and teachers. These chapters document the empowerment students feel through being given responsibility and trusted to deliver as well as feeling that their talents are being recognised. All students seem to have risen to the task, showing initiative in preparing booklets for use in the lessons in one case and writing a play for Y6 pupils to learn in another, despite being students who persistently fail to hand in schoolwork.

Recipients of the teaching episodes were also questioned for feedback. A particularly insightful remark from a Y7 pupil on language is included:

'It was interesting, like their [the student teachers] vocabulary and how they kind of said it. Because if a teacher had have said it to you they'd have used more, like different language. […] they said it quite clearly so you could understand them'.

References to teachers talking too much abound. The projects assertions resonate with that of a Head of Year,

'Some teachers will just stand in front of a class and think, "It's my right to teach you, you have to sit there and shut up" […] That's not going to work with […] these kids.'

John Finney's discussion on the curriculum and institutional constraints imposed by existing school systems in chapter 7 is important and thought provoking. It constitutes a call for a radical rethink of the way we perceive both children and education. The findings of the project go a long way towards supporting this view.

Joan Ruddock (2001) is cited in her assertion that,

'schools in their deep structures and patterns of relationships have changed less in the last 20 years or so than young people have changed and that school improvement is about creating a better match between school and young people.

Co-author Richard Hickman expresses discomfort with the notion of

'manipulating circumstances' so that challenging behaviour can be channelled into 'socialisation into the accepted norms of the institution'.

He says

'Schools may espouse democracy and egalitarian ideals, but many are at best benignly authoritarian and are essentially hierarchical.'

Finney blames the establishment of the National Curriculum for creating a climate in which,

'narrowly defined goals drive students and teachers', and 'silence the basic need for self expression and creativity'.

'What counts as success continues to deny a broad range of personal attributes and capabilities.'

He quotes Seymour B Sarason's view of a target-orientated model of education as 'passionless conformity'. (1990)

The final chapter does not attempt to suggest ways in which the project's successful outcomes could be replicated throughout the curriculum or ways in which schools need to change to address the increasing lack of compliance within schools. Instead it poses a series of questions for schools to consider concerning the causes of disengagement and ways of addressing them. These include issues around student self esteem, taking account of vulnerabilities and strengths, redirecting negative energies and making learning a more collaborative process.

In earlier chapters the team documents resistance within the schools they worked with to rethinking strategies for re-engaging disruptive students; the benefits or otherwise of the isolation room, for example. There were signs at the end of the project that gains made with participating students were not going to be sustainable.

Given the climate of disengagement in so many schools today this project raises important questions about the nature of disengagement. There is an urgent need for schools to adopt a creative and collaborative approach, giving all students a stake in their education by valuing their creativity, leadership

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qualities and need for self expression. D&T teachers have long recognised the power of involving their students in teaching of their peers. This book provides a documented insight into the benefits to both 'student teacher' and the students they teach. This may even lead some experienced teachers to reflect and emerge uncomfortable about the opportunities they may have missed to apply similar tactics when faced with challenging behaviour in their classes. The book also provides an excellent opportunity for teachers engaged in initial teacher education to explore the school pupils' views and perceptions of teaching and learning. This alone makes this short book compelling reading for all those working with challenging students and particularly those who display talent working in the art or design and technology.

REVIEWS