

Andrew Wilkins - II,6

From Human Education in the 3rd Millennium

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II. Democracy (Why is public participation in matters of education important? And how can it be ensured? Mission of education for democracy)

6) The role of technocratic cultures and elites as drivers of education governance.

Title

An anarchist philosophy of school governance: Debating inclusive strategies and solutions to making education governance public

Background

Across the globe different education systems and sub-systems are modelled on the use of data infrastructures, comparative-competitive frameworks, test-based accountabilities, consumer logics, and philanthropic networks as tools of education governance. Moreover, education systems and sub-systems are mediated by complex forms of ‘networked governance’ in which policy decisions and instrumentation reflect ever-deepening relationships between education and the interests and influence of businesses, social enterprises and charities.

While these tools of education governance are typically mediated by national and local politics and projects – and therefore do not move uniformly and predictably across spaces, places, institutions, and peoples – they compel certain kinds of organisation of the school that are evident everywhere, specifically schools that are attentive to market concepts of supply and demand. Such reforms make possible and desirable – even necessary – the involvement of techno-bureaucratic elites and cultures in education. Communities and ordinary citizens, as a result, find themselves increasingly marginalised from the business of governance and its expert administration. These reforms therefore give rise to a social arrangements, institutional orders and dominant discourses that appear to sustain as well as legitimate certain anti-democratic principles and practices.

Key points

1. School governance is increasingly defined by managerial deference, technocratic efficiency, upward accountability, and performativity. A consequence of these reforms are the hiving of governance activities and spaces through ‘enclosures’ that limit participation to those who are bearers of relevant knowledge, skills and expertise. Depoliticization of schools are crucial to such developments.
2. These reforms include restricting governance to those with significantly better epistemic capabilities – relevant knowledge and skills – which means limiting governance participation to the control of a single authority or body of professionals, usually realised through the involvement of new actors and organisations from business and philanthropy.
3. These methods or techniques of governance – what might be termed ‘routines of neoliberal governance’ – function to organise schools as navigable spaces of replicable and measurable ‘quality’, of commensurability, equivalence and comparative performance.
4. The drive to improve quality of education governance, typically through permitting large private companies to run clusters of schools, can be understood as a strategy for coping with complexity and variegation – itself a condition and symptom of a marketized education system.

5. The drive to modernise and professionalise education governance means that participatory democracy is not only undesirable in some cases but is only permissible where it contributes to the smooth functioning of the school as a business. For example, proportional representation on a school governing body and the inclusion of different voices is sometimes considered unwieldy and therefore counterproductive to achieving 'consensus'.

6. Such tools of governance are complementary to market conceptions of 'public accountability', conceived through the lexicon of contract, corporate, performative and consumer terminology. The notion of accountability – and what it means to be accountable – therefore is vulnerable to capture from narrowly instrumental languages and priorities.

7. These trends are evidence of a 'crisis of legitimacy' in as much as governance legitimacy is not judged against evidence of civic participation and democratic control but rather depends on the extent to which schools are ancillaries to government rule and corporate and contract measures of accountability.

Entry points to debate

1. There are major gaps in education policy and the wider literature where there is a paucity (and neglect) of evidence-based studies looking at the range and impact of 'whole community' approaches to school governance.

2. These inclusive strategies to school governance include community conferences, student parliaments and parent forums, all of which share a focus on building democratic cultures and dialogues that make school leaders and governors more directly accountable to students, parents and members of the wider community.

3. Such strategies are essential to building trust and transparency, something that is woefully neglected among many schools that have abandoned local accountability priorities in favour of enhancing upward accountability to funders and regulators.

4. It is important to operationalise inclusive strategies to school governance that are designed to improve community representation and voice, but also to evaluate the contribution of these strategies to strengthening trust, transparency and downward accountability.

5. There are some non-profit organisations like the Schools Cooperative Society (CSC) who are committed to power-sharing and co-operation by enabling pupils, teachers, parents, local people, employers, and other member groups (universities and schools) to join the board of trustees. Yet, these practices are shared by only a handful of schools and there is very little research on the efficacy of these models for improving local accountability and equality in governance participation.

6. To combat these anti-democratic tendencies in education policy and practice, a new research and policy agenda is required, one which works directly with families and communities to provide evidenced-based solutions to designing and implementing reactive and participative school governance.

7. More radically, these policy proposals should sustain the idea of schools as self-governing communes – an anarchist philosophy of school governance which rejects the idea of 'school autonomy' as a handmaiden to state control.

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