

School Governors in Britain and the Concept of Lifelong Learning

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It would be true to say that, in general, but particularly in governmental usage, the terms 'Education' and 'Lifelong learning' are now permanently linked. It was not always so. In 19th Century Britain, education for the lower classes was intended to produce workers in the market place, even able technocrats. If education touched their lives, it was merely to enable them to make a living. In terms of the quality of their lives, it related only to the food and shelter they could afford for themselves and their families.

Whilst it is true that more liberal and compassionate views were available, market forces and a class system were resolute, and even in the 30's in Britain, with three millions unemployed, the search was still on for a job for life, preferably superannuated. Security was everything, and once it was achieved, probably in one of the public services, one could relax. The realities were that jobs for life were available and the social order did not seem likely to change.

That is not to say that opportunities for learning were not available once school days were over. In the trades and crafts, apprentices could enrol in night schools and work their way up a very long ladder to national certificates that could open up limited career opportunities. But, these were, in effect, only grist to the labour mill. The opportunity to discover a new skill or an undiscovered talent did not exist, nor was there much incentive to enrich drab lives in which work was a means to an end, involving a minimum of pride or pleasure.

So much of that has changed. An analysis of the causes is much less important than the recognition of the new practical imperatives which are part of a continuing concern for the quality of people's lives. There are now very few jobs for life; the pace of change in all aspects of daily lives demands new skills; many conventional values need to be reinforced or re-assessed; the education of the children of the 21st Century must equip them with adaptable knowledge and skills; more than ever, there is the need to instil a strong sense of social responsibility. Because their parents, indeed all adults, need all the same qualities to survive, the concept of 'lifelong learning' has become all the more important and relevant.

In Britain, the past 15 years has seen an education system transformed. A national curriculum, on the one hand, defines a curriculum entitlement for every child, and on the other, provides a fairly rigid definition of what schools must do. National testing, national targets for improvement, and regular inspection may

seem intrusive. They certainly provoke opposition, but have become almost a way of life for teachers and pupils. To oversee and manage these reforms, every school has a governing body, representative of parents, workers in the school and the Local Education Authority. Their tools for these tasks include the management of the schools resources, human and financial. They set targets for the pupils, as well as personal targets for the Head teacher. More important, perhaps, than these essentially practical management tools, they are expected to have a clear vision of the way in which the school is preparing its pupils to cope with life outside, with a working life in the 21st Century. More and more, the constraints of a national curriculum are evident. More and more, the need for flexibility in curriculum design and delivery, that enables schools to take account of different abilities and changing needs, becomes apparent. Any discussion of curriculum development must also take some account of the aspirations of pupils and their parents.

The diverse circumstances of different schools made it inevitable that school governors would need to seek inspiration from each other, and organise so that feedback and dialogue between them and the Government would be possible. In Wales we have a devolved Government with limited but effective powers over most aspects of public service. Governors Wales was formed nine years ago and, with the support of the Welsh Assembly Government, has considerably expanded its remit to include the support of governing bodies with advice, the promotion of high standards of school governance, and the ability to comment upon proposals for innovation and change contemplated by the Assembly.

When the opportunity arrived for governors to consider a definitive policy on the shape of schools of the future together with the acknowledged need for a strong culture of lifelong learning, that all children will need, our discussions could not avoid the conclusion that, when schools addressed the needs of children and a culture of lifelong learning, we were actually discussing needs that were shared by their parents and the wider community in which they lived. Further, the closer involvement of schools with their parents in respect of the essential needs of their children could provide a starting point capable of delivering a much more positive attitude to lifelong learning. In considering that starting point, the following principles seemed basic to our needs and ideals:

- * The fundamental purpose of schools and their potential value as a resource for community building and learning;
- * The primacy of the needs of individual pupils as the driving force in curriculum designs and its delivery;
- * The apparent dynamic between curriculum design and its appropriateness, community endorsement; the values of the school, curriculum delivery and standards of achievement;
- * The school is a community learning resource and can provide the paradigm

of a culture of lifelong learning;

- * Equality of opportunity, social inclusion and widening participation;
- * The potential for better exploitation of information technology.

Alongside first principles, however, we recognised that schools were already facing real problems, which had to be addressed. These included an immediate consideration of factors which might explain the disinterest of many pupils in a curriculum which did not appear to respond to individual needs, and therefore, failed to motivate and interest them. The importance of motivational links between pupils' needs and the curriculum is clear. It is also conceivable that parents' values and perceptions are also a factor. There is certainly a strong motivational link with job and long-term career opportunities. In areas where long-term unemployment is common and job opportunities are few, it is not surprising if young people, and their parents, perceive education as an irrelevance. It certainly strengthens the view that schools, pupils and their parents need to share a common, positive perception of the benefits of education.

That realisation, combined with the experience of small schools in rural Wales, seemed to provide an exemplar of the potential for schools to act, not only as the place where their children were educated, but as a focal point for community activities, interests and concerns. In these villages, the schools are a valuable community resource where clubs and societies can meet, where social functions are held by people who know each other well, who share views and opinions, uninhibited by any social barriers. These activities foster a relationship with the school which is close, frank and informal. It is a condition that could easily translate, with all its potential to an urban setting.

With the material resources of the school available; with a determination to make them accessible to parents and others; with a clear understanding of the value of new close relationships based on a shared interest in the education of a community's children, our rationale was extended as follows:

- * Education plant, having been provided from the public purse should be fully utilised and freely available for public use.
- * The processes of education and its impact upon individual and community life is too precious for its accessibility to be limited to children and young people.
- * Other agencies in the community including voluntary organisations and a wealth of other independent groups, societies and clubs active in the life and culture of the community surrounding the school can and do make a contribution to learning. The participation of these informal agents of community learning and development should be recognised and valued as contributors to educational opportunity, harnessed by schools.
- * The need to engage parents as partners in the process of educating their children is vital. They will need to be helped to realise the nature of the

responsibility they bear in supporting their children, and equally significantly, the opportunities they can take as a means of promoting their own learning and personal development through both formal and informal means.

For the school, the first priority is to develop a strategy to reach out to parents in this way, and to welcome them into the school. Home-school liaison is essential to ensure parents are helped to understand educational development, are kept informed about their children's progress, and even engage with the curriculum and their children's learning.

Whether one regards this process as essentially breaking down the barriers between a better understanding of education and schools by parents, or the development of fragile links that already exist, the task is ultimately to put the school decisively at the centre of a community, with the belief and the acceptance by the school of the leadership role in raising the profile of education in the perceptions of the whole community. This has to be recognised as the foundation stone of a culture of lifelong learning.

The bridge to parents, and through them this raised perception of education within the community, is the same route by which more people, involved in otherwise independent groups and societies, should travel, reinforcing the idea of the school as a focal point for the wider community. It is for the school then to respond as facilitator, organiser and leader, making the community dimension part of its core business.

In summary, with no subliminal motives, a process would begin which seeks to identify and then fulfil all needs. It is a process that will require total belief, patience and significant material resources to bring it about. The whole rationale and prospectus now has more components:

- * Education relates to the individual living in the community – local, national and global. It is, therefore, a community priority and should be taken seriously.
- * Learning should be continuous, lifelong and can be shared and enjoyed by adults and children together.
- * The education of the rising generation is the responsibility of everyone in the community in partnership with professional educators.
- * Parents and the community at large have a vested interest in the academic and other dimensions of a school's performance.
- * The school's buildings and equipment, where provided from public funds, belong to the community which has an interest in their general standard, adequacy, maintenance and care.
- * The whole community is a stakeholder exercising an interest in the

operations of the school.

- * The school is a focus for learning conducted in both formal and informal contexts.
- * The school may serve social and recreational purposes as well as educational ones.
- * The school identifies with and responds to, needs peculiar to the locality.
- * The school is a focus for agencies active in the community.
- * The school reaches out in its effort to serve community needs and interests in addition to welcoming the community into the school.
- * The school serves the needs of all ages and whilst appreciating that children, adolescents and adults may have distinct needs and characteristics, they share many similarities and should enjoy equal status.
- * Those with special needs are given an appropriate priority in the allocation of resources.
- * Education is both lifelong and continuous and its processes should not be confined by conventional notions of "school", "school day", "formal" and "informal", "education", "leisure", "pupil".
- * The Community School efficiently harnesses resources derived from a range of agencies and providers in order that needs can be met rather than ideals frustrated.

In seeing this as a way forward, Governors Wales has no illusions that it will not require greater commitment by schools and their teachers to community responsibilities. The new challenges will need to be met and they may involve additional skills and training. There may need to be more flexible patterns of teacher deployment, better provision of teacher support staff and technical staff, and certainly the application of additional resources, bearing in mind that the core activity of the school is the teaching and learning of pupils. Neither can it escape the fact it will place much greater demands on school governors themselves.

Nevertheless, Governors Wales contends that schools that serve a purely utilitarian purpose will never provide the supports, or the life changing opportunities or moments when perceptions of unimagined and unachieved potential are glimpsed. We believe that schools of the future need to offer more than "learning for earning" but that the successful community school will be able to demonstrate its contribution to local and national social and economic interests.

The views expressed in this article have been derived exclusively from a policy document, entitled "Schools of the Future", prepared by Governors Wales for the consideration of the Welsh Assembly Government. Its author was Mr Colin Thomas, Director of Governors Wales and his help and advice has been invaluable.