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RADICAL DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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Executive Summary

This essay is both about public education in ruins and the creation of a radical democratic alternative. Under neo-liberalism, education in England (and beyond) is withdrawing from a contracting public sphere and moving into an expanding market sphere. The dominant relationship in this emergent education is between autonomous parents and autonomous schools, with the state governing at a distance through systems of surveillance and audit. The dominant images are the child as knowledge reproducer, the parent as consumer, the teacher as technician, and the school as business competing in the market place through the application of human technologies to the attainment of predetermined and standardised outcomes. The dominant purpose is the production of autonomous subjects for an inescapable neoliberal world: the calculating and risk-bearing consumer, the flexible and lifelong-learning worker, homo economicus incarnate, equipped for a life of perpetual competition and instant responsiveness to the flickering of market signals.
The ruination of public education and its replacement by markets and governing at a distance is catastrophic. It removes the idea that education is a subject of civic interest and a responsibility of all citizens - the public in public education. It drains education of overt political content, recasting it as a predominantly technical exercise, consigned to experts, technicians and businesses whose task it is to define, assess and improve standards of performance. The emphasis on standardisation and technical practice impedes education’s ability to work with new and important understandings of children, knowledge and learning, which emphasise diversity and complexity. Last, it removes one vital public resource for addressing the multiple crisis threatening our species and environment. When, more than ever before, we need to act collaboratively and with a strong sense of the public good, we are creating an education system incapable of meeting this need; indeed a system that, like its neoliberal progenitor, makes matters worse, not better.

What then might we offer as an alternative? How might a public education might be renewed and re-constructed? How might we develop a radical education with democracy as a fundamental value and the common school as a basic public institution in a truly democratic society? We understand democracy as a multi-dimensional concept, with many different forms and practices; formal and procedural democracy, democratic governance, is important, but so too is democracy as a way of thinking, being and acting, of relating and living together, as a quality of personal life and relationships. We understand the common school as a public space for all citizens living in its local catchment area: a truly ‘comprehensive school’ contesting the fragmenting, competitive and selective drive of neoliberal education, with its proliferation of selective schools - academies, charter schools, faith schools. The common school is age integrated and multi-generational; human scale; a place of depth and connectedness over width of coverage, interdisciplinary, inquiry-based, experiential; project based, both in its pedagogical approach and in its relationship with its community; and organised around team working by educators with diverse perspectives and interests. It is a ‘multi-purpose’ institution providing education-in-its-broadest-sense and serving as a social and democratic resource to its local community.

For full enactment, radical democratic education must be practiced through and in many institutions and settings. National and state governments need to espouse democracy, proclaiming it a fundamental value in education, practicing it in their approach to education, and supporting its practice in other institutions and settings. Democratically elected and accountable local bodies – such as local authorities or school boards – need to (re)assume public responsibility for education in their area and, like higher levels of government,
proclaim and practice democracy in their approach to education and support its practice throughout the public education system.

But schools are at the heart of our utopian project, vital sites of radical democratic education. We identify and briefly elaborate ten key design features of a school in which democracy is enacted as participation, ‘a mode of associated living’ and a lived everyday experience, following Lawrence Kohlberg’s maxim that “the only way school can help graduating students become persons who can make society a just community is to let them try experimentally to make the school themselves”. These features are:

- A proclaimed democratic vitality;
- Radical structures and spaces;
- Radical roles and images;
- Radical relationships;
- Personal and communal narrative;
- Radical curriculum, radical pedagogy and enabling assessment;
- Insistent affirmation of possibility;
- Engaging the local;
- Accountability as shared responsibility;
- The common school.

Erik Olin Wright proposes three criteria to be applied to any consideration of institutional alternatives: desirability, viability and achievability. We focus on viability, “a scientifically grounded conception of viable alternative institutions”. But we end by introducing three further concepts:

- **democratic experimentalism**, Roberto Unger’s concept, an essential element of what he terms ‘high energy democracy’, releasing the creative powers of ordinary people by eradicating the distortions and subjugations of class, hierarchy and the myopic presumptions of prescribed role.

- **prefigurative practice**, the anticipation of future modes of being through processes and relations, not just structures, that exemplify and embody the viability and desirability of radical alternatives. Because this concept can too easily be laid claim to, letting in the merely different rather than the genuinely transformative, we propose criteria with which to develop and evaluate a prefigurative practice that strives to enact a new way of being in the world.
- Sustainability, to confront the chastening history of much radical education, so many examples of which have collapsed after a few years. One lesson from more long-lived examples is the importance of regional, national and global solidarities.

These three concepts are important to the process of transformative change, complementing Wright’s three criteria and his view of transformational change as a cumulative, step-by-step process. We need to construct, both from theoretical models and case studies, a better understanding not only of how transformative change can be set in motion - but of how to create the capacity to continue to experiment and to future build.
1. Public education in ruins

This essay is about a public education in ruins and how a new public education might be re-constructed, on the basis of democracy and the common school. It draws mainly on experience from England, though this may resonate in other English-speaking contexts, such as the United States. Moreover, many elements of what we see as the ruin of public education can today be found seeping into other countries. In speaking of public education in ruins, we are not wishing to restore the ruins. Nonetheless, there are important principles and experiences from the past that can contribute to the construction of a new public education. We need to combine these with new materials that speak to our contemporary conditions, needs and desires. In this, as in all other matters that contribute to the kind of emancipatory undertaking to which Real Utopian projects aspire, it is important to learn from the successes and failures within radical democratic traditions in order to advance more radical forms of schooling within a renewed public education.

Under neo-liberalism and the alliance it has formed with neo-conservatism and certain fractions of the managerial and professional middle classes (Apple, 2004), education is withdrawing from a contracting public sphere – defined by David Marquand as “a space, protected from the adjacent market and private domains, where strangers encounter each other as equal partners in the common life of society” (Biesta, 2010, pp.98-9) – and moving into an expanding market sphere with its growing presence of private providers and contractors. The dominant relationship in this emergent education is between autonomous parents and autonomous schools, with the state governing at a distance through systems of surveillance and audit – what Biesta refers to as “the odd combination of marketized individualism and central control” (p.56). The dominant images, or social constructions, are the child as knowledge reproducer, the parent as consumer, the teacher as technician, and the school as business competing in the market place through the application of human technologies to the attainment of predetermined outcomes. The dominant values are cognition (above all other facets of human being), competition (between children, teachers, schools), calculation (of best returns on investment), commodification (in which everything can be costed, calculated and contracted), choice (of the individual consumer variety), and
inequality (to fuel competition). The dominant rationality is instrumental performativity, leaving no room for uncertainty, provisionality, surprise or wonder, and expressed through technical questions enunciated and pursued through distortingly reductive approaches to research and practice (e.g. what works?). The dominant purpose is the production of autonomous subjects for a predetermined and inescapable neoliberal world: the calculating and risk-bearing consumer, the flexible and lifelong-learning worker, *homo economicus* incarnate, equipped for a life of perpetual competition and instant responsiveness to the flickering of market signals. Underpinning everything are totalising systems of thought: positivism with its conflation of natural and social science, its belief in a knowable world and its assumption of one right answer to every question, and neoliberalism with its blind self-confidence that it can always provide that answer.

The ruination of public education and its replacement by markets and governing at a distance is catastrophic, for a number of reasons. First, because it removes the public in public education, the idea that education is a subject of civic interest and a responsibility of all citizens. What should be a political relationship between all citizens (not only parents), schools, and democratically accountable bodies becomes an economic relationship between consumers, providers and funders.

Second, because the “the sphere of the political itself has been eroded” (Biesta, 2010, p. 54). Education has been drained of overt political content and re-cast as a predominantly technical exercise, consigned to a coterie of experts, technicians and businesses whose main task is to define, improve and assess correct standards of performance. Of course, the whole neoliberal project is saturated with politics. But its status as a dominant discourse means that its values, assumptions and beliefs are rendered invisible, naturalised and neutralised, the taken-for-grANTED currency of everyday education. What has been lost, when most needed, is vigorous and agonistic public debate about political questions. We return to these political questions shortly.

Third, because the emphasis on standardisation and technical practice obstructs our ability to work with new and important understandings of children, knowledge and learning. The more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children’s diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, “the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities of this learning and knowing” and “policy makers look for general structures and one-dimensional standards for practices” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Faced by the potentialities of complexity, diversity and perspectivism, the dominant approach holds fast to a representational view of knowledge, understanding
knowledge to be an objective, stable and accurate representation of a pre-existing reality; and to a pedagogy of transmission and reproduction that believes in the possibility of transferring knowledge of a real and stable world from one mind (the teacher) to another (the pupil) in a process that “is unambiguous and unmediated and results in unproblematic transference with full conservation of intent” (Roy, 2004, p.297).

Last, and in many ways most disturbing, because the ruination of public education and its privatised and marketised replacement removes one vital public resource for addressing the crisis facing our species and environment - or rather “this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem” (Morin, 1999, p.74). We refer to an economic system that is unsustainable and inimical to human flourishing (Jackson, 2009); growing inequality and other injustices in a ‘winner-takes-all’ system; nuclear proliferation; and the cumulative ‘perfect storm’ of biodiversity loss, resource depletion, environmental degradation and global warming. At a time when, more than ever before, we need to act collaboratively and with a strong sense of the public good, we are creating an education system incapable of meeting this need; indeed a system that, like its neoliberal progenitor, makes the ‘one vital problem’ worse, not better.

Rather than viewing education’s role as fitting the young for an inevitable and predetermined future of more of the same, a future not only inimical to human flourishing but implausible, a public education is needed that provides “a powerful democratic resource and public space that allows its young people and communities to contest the visions of the future that they are being presented with, and to work together through the spaces of traditional and emergent democratic practice, to fight for viable futures for all” (Facer, 2011, p.15). Not a ‘future proofing’ education, but a ‘future building’ education.

2. Democracy as a fundamental educational value

It is in this context that the two of us have been working on an alternative educational proposal. Not ‘the’ but ‘an’ alternative, since the first stage in re-building a public education is to create a vibrant democratic politics of education, which values diverse perspectives and alternatives, and which places political questions back at the centre of education. Our starting point, the foundation for our real utopia proposal, is such political questions: “not mere technical issues to be solved by experts... [but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives” (Mouffe, 2007, np).
Some are ontological. What is our understanding, or image, of the child, the educator, the pre-school? How do we understand education? Some are epistemological. What is knowledge? How do we learn? Some are philosophical. What are the purposes of education? What should be its fundamental values? What ethics? And, perhaps most important of all, what kind of society do we want to build? What do we want for our children, here and now and in the future?

In our book – *Radical Education and the Common School: a Democratic Alternative* (Fielding and Moss, 2011) – we build our alternative, our concept of a new public education, on answers offered to these questions. Space precludes that here. Our focus will be the question of fundamental values and on one value in particular, which we consider to be at the heart of our concept of a new public education: democracy. In doing so, we follow the footsteps of important pioneers: the progressive education tradition; Alex Bloom and his work in St.George’s-in-the-East school in post-war London; Loris Malaguzzi and his fellow educators in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia; the philosopher of education John Dewey; and many more.

So central is democracy to our thinking that we label our alternative public education ‘radical democratic education’. We say ‘radical’ to indicate that our alternative education is transformational, but not what Foucault terms ‘superficial transformation’: “transformation that remains within the same mode of thought, a transformation that is only a way of adjusting the same thought more closely to the reality of things”. Real transformation for us, like Foucault, is when “one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them”; or, as Roberto Unger (1998) describes, changing the basic arrangements, both the formative structures of institutions and enacted beliefs.

As we shall attempt to show, democratic education of the kind we propose is transformational in the sense Foucault and Unger understand the term. It is ‘radical’ change that forms part of a real utopian project. But before we turn to consider the design of a radical education project, we must first say what we mean by democracy. For like Alasdair McIntyre (McIntyre 1973) and Steven Lukes (Lukes 1974) we are much persuaded by the elegant and incisive work of W.B.Gallie (Gallie 1956) who argues that democracy is an essentially contested concept, that is to say, contestation about its meaning is part of the process of its conceptualisation and enactment.

Democracy is a multi-dimensional concept, with different forms and practices linked to each dimension. A recent attempt to ground some of the key issues can be found in Skidmore and
Bound’s ‘Everyday Democracy Index’ (2008) that covers six dimensions, ranging from ‘electoral and procedural democracy’ through ‘activism and civic participation’ and ‘aspiration and deliberation’ to democracy in the family, the workplace and public services. They argue that modern democracies must “be rooted in a culture in which democratic values and practices shape not just the formal sphere of politics, but the informal spheres of everyday life: families, communities, workplaces, and schools and other public services” (Skidmore and Bound, 2008, p.9). So while formal and procedural democracy, democratic governance, is vitally important, democracy has a more pervasive presence: as a way of thinking, being and acting, of relating and living together, as a quality of personal life and relationships.

This is democracy, in the words of John Dewey, as “a mode of associated living embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life” and as “a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature…[and] faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgement and action if proper conditions are furnished” (Dewey, 1939). This is democracy, as Hannah Arendt sees it, as a form of subjectivity expressed as a quality of human interaction (Biesta, 2007). This is democracy as a relational ethic that can and should pervade all aspects of everyday life, a way of “thinking of oneself in relation to others and the world” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.156), a relationship of solidarity and mutual affection and care for one another, of democratic fellowship. A relationship, too, that recognises and welcomes plurality of values and perspectives, respecting the alterity of others, not trying to grasp it to make the Other into the Same. A democracy, in sum, of what John Gray (2009) calls *modus vivendi*, inscribed with value pluralism, in contrast to a democracy of rational consensus, which presumes one right answer to any question.

We can also say what we don't understand democracy to be. It is not a process of aggregating individual preferences and the ensuing competition between different private interests, epitomised in systems of parental school choice. Democracy is certainly agonistic, recognising a “dimension of antagonism inherent in human relations” (Mouffe, 2000: 101). But it involves “public deliberation and contestation about the common good” (Biesta, 2010, p.54) and “the translation of private troubles into collective issues” (p.100). Nor is democratic education primarily about teaching courses on citizenship. Rather, it is about experiencing and living democracy in schools that are democratic; as Dewey believed, individuals “learn to understand themselves as democratic individuals by becoming members of a community in which the problems of communal life are resolved through collective deliberation and a shared concern for the common good” (Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p.63).
We would make two further points about our understanding of democracy. It is intimately related to justice and equality. It is harder for democracy to take root and flourish in unjust and unequal societies. Lawrence Kohlberg, the neglected pioneer of moral education, insisted that “education for justice requires making schools more just and encouraging students to take an active role in making schools more just...a complete approach to moral education means full student participation in a school in which justice is a living matter” (Kohlberg, 1971, p.82). Michael Sandel, in his 2009 BBC Reith lectures, stated the same relationship in more general terms:

[Democracy] is about much more than maximising GDP, or satisfying consumer preferences. It’s also about seeking distributive justice; promoting the health of democratic institutions; and cultivating the solidarity, and sense of community that democracy requires. Market-mimicking governance – at its best – can satisfy us as consumers. But it can do nothing to make us democratic citizens (2009, p.4).

The issue is about putting markets in their place, drawing a line between what is the market sphere and what is the public sphere and ensuring markets do not become so dominant they erode the public sphere and undermine democracy. From our perspective, education is clearly in the public sphere, with democracy at its heart. We agree with Carr and Hartnett when they write that “[a]ny vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces and treat education as a commodity to be purchased and consumed (1996, p.192).

Lastly, we must acknowledge that democracy is in a sickly state. Representative democracy – the electoral and procedural – is sclerotic and corrupted, increasingly in thrall to powerful vested interests, struggling to respond to the contemporary challenges of a complex and threatened world and to retain the engagement of citizens. Participatory democracy is eroded by consumerism, individualism and time poverty. Occupy and other social movements offer some hope that the democratic spirit can be renewed, yet they too struggle to develop broad programmes for radical change and convert them to doable politics and are, as in the case of Spain, easy prey to right-wing opportunism. Democracy, as Dewey said, needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife; the need for renewal and for education’s active role in that process has never been more pressing.
3. Designing a radical democratic education

For full enactment, radical democratic education needs to be practiced through and in many institutions and settings. Democratically elected and accountable national and state governments need to espouse democracy, proclaiming it a fundamental value in education, practicing it in their approach to education, and supporting its practice in other institutions and settings. Democratically elected and accountable local bodies – whether local authorities or school boards – need to (re)assume public responsibility for education in their area, representing the responsibility of all citizens for the education of children, and like higher levels of government, proclaim and practice democracy in their approach to education and support its practice elsewhere. The city of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy provides a vivid example of the democratic ‘educative commune’ (Moss, 2011), both in its active support for democratic education in its network of municipal schools and in its strong public statement of responsibility and purpose:

Education is the right of all, of all children, and as such is a responsibility of the community. Education is an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of the individual and the collective; it is a resource for gaining knowledge and for learning to live together; it is a meeting place where freedom, democracy and solidarity are practiced and where the value of peace is promoted. Within the plurality of cultural, ideological, political, and religious conceptions, education lives by listening, dialogue, and participation; it is based on mutual respect, valuing the diversity of identities, competencies, and knowledge held by each individual and is therefore qualified as secular, open to exchange and cooperation (Regolamento Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia del Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2009).

Elected local authorities can further their commitment to a democratic education by the creation of public spaces for the practice of a democratic politics of education, such as Richard Hatcher’s proposal for Local Education Forums: “a body open to all with an interest in education...to discuss and take positions on all key policy issues...and developing, perhaps in a two-year cycle, an Education Plan for the local system of schools and colleges”. Hatcher further proposes Neighbourhood Education Forums, at a very local level, which “could bring local concerns to bear on the schools and ideally become a vehicle for participative governance” (Hatcher forthcoming, 2012).

But at the heart of a radical democratic education is the school, in which we include institutions for young people below compulsory school age, of compulsory school age and
prior to higher education. In saying this, we recognise that some question the case for a continuing role for the school, given the growing potential for distanced and networked learning, suggesting “that the school itself should simply be dissolved into the learning landscape and replaced by personalized learning environments” (Facer, 2011, p.27). We also recognise, and share, concerns about the potential destructive power of the school through its ability to govern, discipline and normalise child and teacher alike. For us, however, the school has a vital role to play not only in education, but especially in a radical democratic education, agreeing with Keri Facer when she argues for continuing investment in the school

as a physical space and a local organization, ...because I believe that it may be one of the most important institutions we have to help us build a democratic conversation about the future. A physical, local school where community members are encouraged to encounter each other and learn from each other is one of the last public spaces in which we can begin to build the intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability needed to ensure fairness in the context of sociotechnical change. Moreover, the public educational institution may be the only resource we have to counter the inequalities and injustice of the informal learning landscape outside school... It is therefore the time both to defend the idea of a school as a public resource and to radically re-imagine how it might evolve if it is to equip communities to respond to and shape the socio-technical changes of the next few years (ibid., pp.28-29).

So schools retain our allegiance as a pivotal public institution, not in their often divisive and repressive unreconstructed form, but as sites of radical democratic education. Meaning what in practice? We identify and briefly elaborate ten key design features of a radical democratic school, in which democracy is enacted as participation, ‘a mode of associated living’ and a lived everyday experience, following Lawrence Kohlberg’s maxim that “the only way school can help graduating young people become persons who can make society a just community is to let them try experimentally to make the school themselves” (1980, p.35).

1 Proclaimed democratic vitality
A school for radical democratic education will wish to foreground its interdependent commitments to (a) education as the most important rationale for schooling, and (b) democracy as both end and means, the purpose and the practice, of education. The key point here is that education in and for deep or ‘high-energy’ democracy has to be not just the starting point, but what Elsa Wasserman, in her reflections on the work of Lawrence
Kohlberg and the Just Community School movement in the USA, calls the “central educational goal” (Wasserman, 1980, p.268) of the school for which we are arguing. There has to be a proclaimed, not just an intended, democratic vitality, albeit one that bears in mind the vicissitudes of context and circumstance.

What this actually means will, of course, be something that those working in the school will need and wish to exemplify and share with their internal and external communities. But the narratives and exchanges that develop will be energised by a declared commitment to democracy that calls for profound change in how we live and work now as a bridge to more just and more creative futures. Witness, for example, Alex Bloom, the great, radical pioneer London secondary school head teacher, and his stated intention to create on 1st October 1945 "(a) consciously democratic community...without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition" (Bloom, 1948, p.121).

2  Radical structures and spaces
Our next three indicators comprise complementary aspects of the interpersonal and structural integrity of democratic living. They demonstrate the unity of means and ends, not only in matters of organisational structure, but also in the relational dimensions of daily engagement, which underscore the importance of care, respect and creative encounter as the foundational dispositions of democracy and social justice.

Structurally the radical democratic school will be mindful of what might be called ‘positional restlessness’, that is to say, a libertarian and egalitarian insistence on the openness of opportunity, and the need to unsettle patterns and dispositions of presumption and to open up much wider and more generous vistas of possibility for all members of a school community. Such a school will pursue a range of organisational articulations of participatory democracy at the heart of which lies an insistence on a permanent and proper provisionality. At both adult and young person levels this will include a permanent unease with hierarchy and a strong desire to create transparent structures that encourage ways of working that transcend boundaries and invite new combinations and possibilities. We need to look again at power, purpose and possibility, too often deceptively embellished with mercurial fashions of involvement and empowerment, full of sound and fury, signifying little of worth and nothing that changes the underlying presumptions and intentions of their host societies.

On the one hand, this will entail revisiting the few examples we have within publicly funded systems of education in which principals have effectively renounced or profoundly rearticulated their pyramidal positions and developed flatter organisational structures or
more fluid conduits of power and structural forms that privilege communal responsibility and collective endeavour. Here, as elsewhere in the struggle for change, the importance of radical democratic traditions becomes apparent: in societies dominated by “the dictatorship of no alternative” (Unger, 2005a), the power of enacted, documented alternatives acquires an increasing rather than a decreasing significance. On the other hand, it will involve the continuing development of the small but growing corpus of literature that attends to these matters with genuinely emancipatory intent e.g. the recent work of scholars like John Smyth (Smyth 2006, 2009) and Philip Woods (Woods, 2005, 2011) on democratic leadership.

In addition to substantial engagement with past and present models of democratic leadership there will also be substantial emphasis on the spatiality of democracy, on interpersonal and architectural spaces that encourage a multiplicity of different forms of formal and informal engagement with a multiplicity of persons. These will include ‘subaltern spaces’ or spaces in which minority, marginalised or emergent groups can develop the confidence, capacity and dispositions that enable them to explore and name what is important to them and also gain the confidence and desire to engage with larger, different groups of people within and beyond the school community. Pre-eminent amongst these larger spaces is the General Meeting (see, e.g. Fielding 2010), the communal space within which the whole school community reflects on its shared life, achievements and aspirations. Here, young people and adults make meaning of their work together, returning tenaciously and regularly to the imperatives of purpose, not merely to the mechanics of accomplishment.

Lastly, the kinds of roles and relationships we see as central to a radical democratic project privilege organisational arrangements that enable encounters that transcend traditional role boundaries and develop more holistic, emergent forms of encounter. We thus argue either for small schools or for larger schools that are broken down into smaller interdependent units, variously termed sub-schools, mini-schools, or schools-within-schools.

3 Radical roles and images
Just as the structures and spaces within a common school practising a radical democratic education open up new possibilities, so too do the roles of those who work within them. But before considering some of these possibilities, it is necessary to remind ourselves that, whilst essential, roles tend to acquire a life of their own, exhibiting a propensity to imprison and diminish human capacities and capabilities in the interest of those in power. Thus, in developing our account of radical democratic education, and remembering our previous call for ‘positional restlessness’, we follow Roberto Unger in valorising the need for
a cultural-revolutionary attack on rigid roles...a practice of role-defiance and role jumbling ... a loosened sense of what it means to occupy a role...(that) helps to disrupt frozen connections among social stations, life experiences, and stereotyped forms of insight and sensibility (Unger, 2004, pp.563, 564).

In addition to renewed interest in democratic forms of the leadership role, which entail the re-imagining and re-articulation of what it means to be a principal, there will also be a commensurate range of alternative roles and practices amongst staff. The radical democratic school will encourage this kind of fluidity and exploration, not only amongst adults, but also between staff and young people. It will include, amongst other things, a delight and belief in radical collegiality (Fielding, 1999) and intergenerational reciprocity that reflects deep-seated faith in the encounter between adults and young people as a potential source of mutual learning, not just in an instrumental, technical sense, but eventually in a wider existential and more fully educational sense.

Some possible roles for young people are set out in a ‘Patterns of Partnership’ typology, inspired in part by the pioneering work of Roger Hart (Hart 1992) and Harry Shier (Shier 2001) in the wider field of youth participation. Each suggests a qualitatively different way of young people and teachers working together. This six-fold pattern is thus a prompt to possibility grounded in the realities of different approaches to daily work, which often co-exist within institutions, and in which Mode 6 is an aspirational approach to living and learning together, with the other five modes as staging posts in journeys in and for democracy.

In mode 1, young people as data source, staff utilise information about the progress and well-being of young people. Here, there is a real teacher commitment to pay attention to the voices of young people speaking through the practical realities of work done and targets agreed. It acknowledges that for teaching and learning to improve there is a need to take more explicit account of relevant data about individual and group or class achievement.

In mode 2, young people as active respondents, staff invite dialogue and discussion to deepen learning / professional decisions. Staff move beyond the accumulation of passive data and, in order to deepen the learning of young people and enrich staff professional decisions, they feel a need to hear what young people have to say about their own experience in lessons or their active engagement in its development via, for example, assessment for learning approaches. Young people are discussants rather than recipients of current approaches and thereby contribute to the development of teaching and learning in their school.
In mode 3, *young people as co-enquirers*, staff take the lead role with high-profile, active support from young people. Here, we see an increase in the involvement of both young people and teachers and a greater degree of partnership than modes 1 and 2. Whilst the roles of young people and teachers are not equal, they are shifting strongly in an egalitarian direction. Young people move from being discussants to being co-enquirers into matters of agreed significance and importance. While teachers define the focus and boundaries of exploration, the commitment and agreement of young people is essential.

In mode 4, *young people as knowledge creators*, young people take the lead role with active staff support. This deepens and extends the egalitarian thrust of the co-enquiry approach. Partnership and dialogue remain the dominant ways of working, but now the voice of the young person comes to the fore in a leadership or initiating, not just a responsive, role. It is young people who identify the issues to be researched and young people who undertake the enquiry with the support of staff.

In mode 5, *young people as joint authors*, young people and staff decide on a joint course of action together. The joint enquiry model involves a genuinely shared, fully collaborative partnership between young people and staff. Leadership, planning and conduct of research and the subsequent commitment to responsive action are embraced as both a mutual responsibility and energising adventure.

Lastly, in mode 6, *intergenerational learning as participatory democracy*, the explicit commitment to participatory democracy extends the shared and collaborative partnership between young people and staff in ways which (a) emphasise a joint commitment to the common good, and (b) include occasions and opportunities for an equal sharing of power and responsibility.

Two final points. First, we recognise that ‘partnership’ can be and often is co-opted for neo-liberal purposes; we thus argue for the development of democratic fellowship as a presumptive nexus of values and intentions that gives very different readings and enacted realities to the calculus of consumption and acquisition that emerges from market driven approaches. Second, underpinning and indeed preceding roles is the social construction or image of the participants in the radical democratic school; radical roles emerge from how young people and adults are conceptualised. Thus 50 years of democratic experimentation in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia is grounded in a political question – what is our
image of the child? – and the answer that has been collectively forged. As Loris Malaguzzi, the first head of Reggio’s schools, insisted:

One of the strong points [of our schools] has always been that of starting from a very open, explicit declaration of our image of the child, where image is understood as a strong and optimistic interpretation of the child. A child born with many resources and extraordinary potentials that have never ceased to amaze us, with an autonomous capacity for constructing thoughts, ideas, questions and attempts at answers.

4 Radical relationships

When teachers and young people begin to work in these new ways, suggested by the egalitarian mutuality of the more complex modes in the Patterns of Partnership typology, they are not just redrawing the boundaries of what is permissible and extending a sense of what is possible. They are also giving each other the desire and the strength to do so through their regard and care for each other. Just as the roles are more fluid and more diverse, so, within radical democratic education, the relationships between young people and between adults and young people are not only less bounded and more exploratory, but also more openly informed by the dispositions and dynamics of care.

Such relationships enable us to ‘re-see’ each other as persons rather than as role occupants, and in so doing nurture not only a new understanding, sense of possibility and felt respect between adults and young people, but also a joy in each other’s being and a greater sense of shared delight and responsibility. An ethics and enactment of care are also more often than not dialogic in both form and intention and thus profoundly affect developments like giving voice to young people. Arguably, a dialogic approach in this case – a pedagogy of listening - implies a five-fold, multifaceted engagement between adults and young people: firstly, a genuine openness towards each other, a reciprocity that is interested and attentive, rather than a cursory and inquisitive consultation; secondly, what we have elsewhere called a ‘permanent provisionality’, an understanding that we are not talking about a one-off event with little or no feedback or future engagement, but rather a pattern of continuing dialogue in which understandings and meanings are always open to new perspectives and interpretations and “where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.184); thirdly, a willingness to be surprised, to welcome the unanticipated as a mark of the partnership’s potential to honour and deal with difference in ways that resist the silencing, homogenising tendencies of position and power; fourthly, a pervasive rather than a compartmentalised approach, in which all young people in the school have many opportunities during the day for the kinds of encounters we have mentioned
above; lastly, whilst a dialogic approach to listening to young people is, as much as any other, concerned about getting things done and tackling real issues of current concern, its concrete accomplishments are achieved within a wider, more holistic frame of reference. It is also about how we make meaning together, how we understand the significance of our current work and our future aspirations.

These five elements of a dialogic approach all connect with a number of assumptions about education, including education being a relational field in which care, respect for and knowledge of persons are centrally important. Their pervasive reciprocity also nudge us away from the individualistic preoccupations of personalisation and high performance schooling towards a person-centred approach that sees individual flourishing as intimately bound up with relations with others, not as a relational lubricant for a smoother running organisation; and towards a more communal orientation that sees democratic fellowship as both the means and the end of a broadly conceived, tenaciously intended radical education.

5 **Personal and communal narrative**

The notion of narrative is central to radical education in the democratic common school for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is important both personally and communally because it connects in a fundamental way with one of the core processes of education, namely with the making of meaning. Narrative learning is mindful of the fragility of human endeavour, the need for recognition and significance, not in any flashy or self-aggrandising sense, but rather in terms of the moral and educational legitimacy of one’s endeavours. It is precisely because narrative is about making meaning that the needs it expresses and the aspirations it voices lie at the heart of anything that can properly be called an educational undertaking.

Education is firstly and finally about how we learn to lead good lives together, lives that enable us individually and collectively to survive and flourish. Without some means of recreating a constant link to those profound matters of purpose education becomes impossible and we have to make do with the thin and dispiriting substitutes of competitive schooling. As one secondary school principal remarked to us recently, in the context of ever-increasing pressures to boost school performance, “personal histories are tremendously important – giving yourself permission to have conversations with yourself. Keeping a handle on the past and what is right”.

Within the radical democratic school there will be multiple spaces and opportunities for individuals, both young people and adults, to make meaning of their work, at a personal and a communal level. Indeed the two are connected. The anthropology of the self presumed by
most radical traditions of education is communal rather than atomistic. The anthropology of an inclusive notion of community to which we are committed is one that honours difference and presumes the sanctity of the individual person. Moreover these multiple spaces and opportunities will recognise and support narrative as meaning making, using the full range of ‘the hundred languages of childhood’ (Rinaldi, 2006)

The second reason narrative is important has to do with the necessary connection with the radical traditions of education within which the work of the democratic school is located. Not only does history have much to teach its contemporary inheritors in a cautionary sense, it also provides many examples of counter-hegemonic significance and power that remind us not only of what has been, but also that, in Terry Wrigley’s resonant phrase, ‘Another school is possible’ (2006). One of the most corrosive accomplishments of neo-liberalism, particularly within the field of education and schooling, is the near-abandonment of historical scholarship and sensibilities as significant voices in contemporary debate and teacher education. We cannot help but share E.P.Thompson’s disquiet about ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’ (1968: 13) and Russell Jacoby’s still pertinent judgement that our ‘society has lost its memory, and with it, its mind. The inability or refusal to think back takes its toll in the inability to think’ (Jacoby 1997, 3-4).

Notwithstanding these important cautionary caveats our resolve remains, in part because, as William Morris reminds us, we must remember

> How men (sic) fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name (Morris, 1968 [1886/87]: 53)

### 6 Radical curriculum, radical pedagogy and enabling assessment

At the heart of radical education’s approach to the formal and informal curriculum must lie four imperatives. The first is a focus on the purposes of education, what John White and others would term an ‘aims-based’ rather than a ‘subjects-based’ curriculum. For us this means organising the curriculum around that which is required for a sustainable, flourishing and democratic way of life. For example, the manifesto produced by Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat (2005), a Catalan teachers organisation, in their 2005 manifesto *For a New Public Education*, argues that the curriculum must be organised “on the basis of that which is absolutely necessary in order for a person to exercise their citizenship”, that its content
“must be taught in a way that brings with it emancipation”, and for this very reason “it must not be presented as eternal and immutable, but as a construction of humanity in its process of emancipation, of construction of one’s own personality”. Developing their theme, they propose that “knowledge can be grouped into six major types:

1. Education for gestural, oral, visual, written communication, etc. so that one can enter into a peaceful relationship with the Other.
2. Education on the major cultural works that have marked the ascendance of humanity.
3. Scientific and technological education that allows one to understand the contemporary world.
4. Education in health, the environment, and sustainable development so that the world will last beyond our presence.
5. Education for being a citizen and for discovering the history of the emergence of democracy.
6. Education in creativity, imagination, curiosity, etc., which will allow everyone to find their place in the world.

The second imperative has to do with the necessity of equipping young people and adults with the desire and capacity to seriously and critically interrogate what is given and co-construct a knowledge that assists us in leading good and joyful lives together.

The third argues that whilst knowledge must transcend the local, it must, nonetheless, start with the cultures, concerns and hopes of the communities that schools serve. A curriculum for a democratic and community-oriented education should include substantial scope for local input and design, what the Royal Society of Arts in London has termed an ‘Area Based Curriculum’, which uses “the local area to illustrate curriculum content, and [uses] local stakeholders (including young people) to co-design the curriculum...supporting schools to partner with organisations or groups from the local area to design aspects of the curriculum utilising the local area as a resource” (Thomas, 2011, Forum p.298).

Lastly, a consequence of taking these first three desiderata seriously leads to a curriculum that emphasises connectedness: that is holistic in approach; organised around interconnected and interdisciplinary themes and project work, rather than separate subjects; and that encourages integrated forms of enquiry with young people and staff working in small communities of enquiry. A curriculum that contests “a form of knowledge which divides,
categorises, separates, and struggles to make connections (or maybe does not want to) between different disciplines” (Vecchi, 2004, p.18).

A radical curriculum in a radical democratic education needs a radical pedagogy, produced from answers to political questions about ontology – what is our image of the child? - and epistemology - what do we mean by knowledge and learning? Today’s ‘neoliberal’ schooling is based on two key assumptions:

The first is a representational view of knowledge, understanding knowledge to be an objective, stable and accurate representation of a pre-existing reality, a literal reproduction. The second is that because knowledge is representative of a real and relatively stable world, it can be transferred exactly, for example from one mind (the teacher) to another (the pupil). This assumption – ‘that communication is unambiguous and unmediated and results in unproblematic transference with full conservation of intent’ (Roy, 2004, p. 297) – inscribes the prevailing instrumentalist and techno-rational approach to education (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.25).

Deborah Osberg and Gert Biesta propose a ‘pedagogy of invention’ as an alternative to this transmission model of pedagogy, an alternative more fitted to a democratic education, related to the ‘notion of emergence’, where knowledge is

\[ \text{the creation of new properties...a process whereby properties that have never existed before and, more importantly, are inconceivable from what has come before, are created or somehow come into being for the first time...We believe that a complexity inspired epistemology suggests a ‘pedagogy of invention’ (we borrow this phrase from Ulmer, 1985) for it brings into view the idea that knowledge does not bring us closer to what is already present but, rather, moves us into a new reality, which is incalculable from what came before. Because knowledge enables us to transcend what came before, this means it allows us to penetrate deeper into that which does not seem possible from the perspective of the present. Knowledge, in other words, is not conservative, but radically inventionalist (Biesta and Osberg, 2007, pp. 33, 46–47: original emphases).} \]

A similar approach to learning pervades the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, valuing new thinking, new ideas and new perspectives and desirous of the wonder and amazement of the unintended outcome. Vea Vecchi (2010) argues that it is important to society
that schools and we as teachers are clearly aware how much space we leave children for original thinking, without rushing to restrict it with predetermined schemes that define what is correct according to a school culture. How much do we support children to have ideas different from those of other people and how do we accustom them to arguing and discussing their ideas with their classmates? (p.138).

Schools, she adds, need to consciously take a position on “which knowledge they intend to promote”: in short, there are alternatives, and choices of a political and ethical nature must be made between them. Contesting an idea of teaching that chooses to “transmit circumscribed ‘truths’ in various ‘disciplines’”, her choice is clear: “to stand by children’s sides together constructing contexts in which they can explore their own ideas and hypotheses individually or in groups and discuss them with friends or teachers” (ibid., p.28). She and her fellow educators work with what they term a ‘pedagogy of listening and relationships’, based on “understanding of problems through experiment, trial, error and testing”, where the learner develops theories, shares them with others, redevelops them in a pedagogy that emphasises the importance of relationships, listening (“one of the foundations of our work is the careful, respectful, tender ‘listening’ with solidarity to children’s strategies and ways of thinking”) and avoiding predetermined results.

When radical approaches to the curriculum and pedagogy have worked well they have invariably been enabled by forms of assessment at both local and national levels that have had the flexibility to respond to the particularities of context and significant professional involvement of teachers in the assessment, moderation and examination process. At classroom level they have incorporated high levels of peer and teacher involvement through assessment-for-learning approaches and additional community and family involvement through public, portfolio-based presentations. Once again, the compulsory education sector might have much to learn from the experience of early childhood education, in particular the latter’s use of ‘pedagogical documentation’ as a participatory process of evaluation that keeps open the issue of outcome rather than confining evaluation to the standardised and predefined (Rinaldi, 2006).

7 Insistent affirmation of possibility
Energised both by rage against “the abandonment of ordinary humanity to perpetual belittlement” (Unger, 2005a, p.46) and by profound belief in “the powers of ordinary men and women” (ibid., p.63) to create new and better ways of being in the world, an insistent affirmation of possibility requires us to keep options open, to counter the confinement of customary or casual expectation. This means removing, for example, the corrosive practices
of tracking or setting (Boaler, 2005, 2008) and exposing the false presumptions of this kind of labeling (see Hart et al., 2004). In their stead we celebrate views of human flourishing that see creativity and excellence as emulative rather than competitive in both genesis and accomplishment; that see curiosity and playfulness as more compelling initiators and more satisfying and productive enablers than the interminable treadmill of stickers, stars and prizes. In the words of Alex Bloom, “objective rewards and punishments are false stimuli, for, unless the right thing is done for the right reason one lives unethically ... Similarly, objective competition is wrong; it is not only unethical but it tends to destroy a communal spirit.” Furthermore, in eradicating it, “because there are neither carrots nor goads, there will be no donkeys, for when children are treated as we would have them be, they tend to reach out accordingly” (Bloom, 1949, p.171).

In sum, commitment to an insistent affirmation of possibility denies the legitimacy of ability grouping, promotes emulation rather than competition, and prefers intrinsic motivation and communal recognition to the paraphernalia of marks and prizes. It espouses and enacts a view of the world in general, and the educational world in particular, that is inclusive, enabling and ennobling of all for the benefit of all.

8 Engaging the local
A radical democratic school will seek to develop a vibrant reciprocity with its local community and to be an agent of democratic flourishing within that wider context. It will be a place where a common democratic identity is formed and constantly validated and expressed, both amongst members of the school community itself but also amongst other members of the local community that the school serves. It will be

a place for everyone, a meeting place in the physical and also the social, cultural and political sense of the word. A forum or site for meeting and relating, where children and adults meet and commit to something, where they can dialogue, listen, and discuss in order to share meanings: it is a place of infinite cultural, linguistic, social, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic possibilities. A place of ethical and political praxis, a space for democratic learning. A place for research and creativity, coexistence and pleasure, critical thought and emancipation (Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat, 2005, p. 10)

This means the common school operating as a ‘multi-purpose’ institution – a place of ‘infinite possibilities’ - providing education-in-its-broadest-sense and acting as a social and democratic resource to its local community, responding to the needs, the ideas, and the
desire to experiment of that community. We are much taken by the persuasive, imaginative work of engaged scholars like Keri Facer who argue strongly that “a physical local school where community members are encouraged to encounter and learn from each other is one of the last public spaces in which we can build intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability” (Facer, 2011, p.28). Her argument, and ours, is for the role of schools as a powerful local democratic resource and public space for creating conversations that contest visions of future and work together for viable futures, a role strengthened, not undermined, by the potential of new technologies.

The development of a rich online education landscape, the increasing visibility and accessibility of folk educators, and the changing scripts for public services have the potential to open up new relationships between schools and their communities. These new relationships would be premised upon a search to understand the roles that parents, young people, community and cultural organizations and online educators might play as co-educators (ibid., p.25, original emphasis).

Accountability as shared responsibility

A radical democratic education must be accountable, but to whom and how? Neither earlier forms of professional accountability nor today’s neo-liberal corporate forms will do, for both are based on sub-contracting, to professionals or to managers and technicians, allowing citizens to slough off their responsibility for education. Located within participatory traditions of democracy, our understanding of accountability underscores the link between educational renewal and public responsibility; we cannot know what we are responsible for in anything other than a thin, box-ticking sense unless we return to shared educational purposes and from there co-author an account of core beliefs and the kinds of practices we believe will exemplify their realisation in an appropriately demanding and life-affirming way.

‘High energy’ notions of democratic accountability are better conceived and enacted as forms of ‘shared responsibility’, which will enable “different accounts of public purpose and practice to be deliberated in a democratic public sphere: constituted to include difference, enable participation, voice and dissent, through to collective judgement and decision” (Ransom, 2003). Because education is a shared concern and responsibility, for all citizens, then everyone potentially can and should be engaged in deliberation on ‘different accounts’ of public education, through dialogue, contestation, reflection and interpretation, taking responsibility for the process and the meanings arrived at. Understood in this democratic way, accountability is morally and politically situated, not merely technically and procedurally delivered (Fielding, 2001). It makes a claim on our ethical and civic responsibilities, which
cannot be adequately understood or provided for by a delegated mandate which provides too convenient an absolution.

One important corollary of the democratic school is, thus, the requirement that we develop new forms of accountability better suited to a more engaged understanding of democratic living. We can glimpse some of the possibilities. Pedagogical documentation, as practised in early childhood education in Reggio Emilia (and many other places), gives “the possibility to discuss and dialogue ‘everything with everyone’” (Hoyuelos, 2004, p.7), by making learning and learning processes visible and subject to deliberation, provides one example of how shared responsibility is not only a form of democratic accountability, but also a means of collective learning. Young people can and should be involved in such processes, as well as adults – educators, parents, politicians, all citizens.

Another example of such participatory practice is Bishops Park College, an 11-16 school in England where a Research Forum was developed towards the end of its radical phase, comprising a core group of young people, parents, governors, school staff and a small university research and development team, from which emerged a framework of aspirations and practices that formed the basis of the College’s accountability framework (Fielding et al., 2006). While more generally, Bent Flyvbjerg’s ‘phronetic model of social science’ offers further insight into the possible meaning of democratic accountability, premised on the Aristotelian maxim that social issues are best decided by means of the public sphere, not by science. Though imperfect, no better device than public deliberation following the rules of constitutional democracy has been arrived at for settling social issues...The phronetic model sees social scientists and social science professionals as analysts who produce food for thought for the ongoing process of public deliberation, participation, and decision making (2006, p.39).

Democratic accountability in education is not some form of balance sheet presented to investors. It is the exercise of mutual responsibility – of schools to their citizens, and of citizens to their school – which must involve public participation, deliberation and decision making, on the basis of various forms of documentation supplied by various documenters, and conducted in the context of democratic answers to political questions.

10. The common school
This final feature is, in many ways, a summation of much that has gone before. It is a design for the basic structure of a school that embodies and enables a radical democratic education
and is compatible with, even conducive to, the preceding features. This 'common' school
contests the fragmenting, competitive and selective drive of neoliberal education, with its
proliferation of selective schools - academies, charter schools, faith schools – intended only
to serve the autonomous consumer. It is, instead, a public space for all citizens living in its
local catchment area, children, young people and adults, without admission criteria except
residence and without specialisms that enforce selective attendance - a truly 'comprehensive
school'. It is age integrated (e.g. 0-11; 1-16; 6-16) and, because open to all, multi-
genерational; human scale in size, either one small school or small schools-within-schools; a
place of depth and connectedness over width of coverage – interdisciplinary, inquiry-based,
experiential; project based, both in its pedagogical approach and in its relationship with its
community; and based on team working, involving educators and other workers with diverse
perspectives and interests.

Such common schools have their own governing board and work in close relationship with
the community they serve. But they are not autonomous, competing entities. They
collaborate with other schools within networks of schools within the area of their
democratically elected local authority. They participate in local educational forums. Although
some are provided as co-operatives or by non-profit organisations, others are provided by
the local authority itself – as municipal schools – since it is not possible for democratically
elected and accountable bodies to be responsible for public education without being directly
involved in its practice. All schools, whoever provides them, are in a relationship of
democratic accountability with that authority, as well as with the community they serve. All
schools contribute to creating and implementing a local educational project: “a shared and
democratic exploration of the meaning and practice of education and the potential of the
school...[providing] an educational context and ethos, as well as a forum for exchange,
confrontation, dialogue and learning between schools” (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.125).
And all benefit from an infrastructure provided by the local authority for supporting the
implementation and evaluation of the local educational project, including teams of
pedagogistas, experienced educators each working with one or two schools, offering their
staff opportunities for exchange, reflection and discussion, introducing them to new thinking
and practices, and facilitating contact between local authority, local communities and
schools.
4. Some concluding thoughts on democratic experimentalism, prefigurative practice and sustainability

Erik Olin Wright proposes three criteria to be applied to any consideration of institutional alternatives: desirability, viability and achievability. Following our brief, we have focused in this essay on viability, “a scientifically grounded conception of viable alternative institutions”. But we want to end by introducing three further concepts into the conversation: democratic experimentalism, prefigurative practice and sustainability. We see these as important parts of the process of transformative change that many of us are committed to; but also as being complementary to Wright’s three criteria and his view of transformational change as a cumulative, step-by-step process involving “utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change”.

Democratic experimentalism
The Brazilian social theorist Roberto Unger has coined the term ‘democratic experimentalism’ to capture an important means for bringing about transformative institutional change:

The provision of public services must be an innovative collective practice, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below...Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain (Unger, 2005b, pp.179, 182).

He views democratic experimentalism as an essential element of what he terms ‘high energy democracy’, which is about releasing the creative powers of ordinary people by eradicating the distortions and subjugations of class, gender, hierarchy and the myopic presumptions of prescribed role. For Unger, like Dewey, the essential doctrine of democracy is “faith in the constructive powers of ordinary men and women” (ibid., p.63) and “recognition of the genius of ordinary men and women” (Unger, 2004, p.lxxii). High energy democracy encourages a high level of organised civic engagement and “seeks to strengthen our experimental capacities – our ability to try out alternative arrangements among ourselves”; and this assumes, finds and nourishes “greatness in ordinary humanity” (ibid.).
Unger insists that democratic experimentalism is more than just *ad hoc* local projects that occasionally and by their own exertions break free from the constraints of orthodoxy, examples of which are always around us. He envisages the possibility of a state that actively encourages experimentation as part of a commitment to high energy democracy, in short an emancipatory state at ease with diversity. The state can act in various ways to achieve this end, including “producing new social agents” that can create innovative services; monitoring and helping “to propagate the most successful practices, accelerating the process of experimental winnowing out of what does not work”; and last, and perhaps most surprising in the current climate, by providing services directly but only “those services which are too innovative, too difficult or to unrewarded by the market to be provided directly” (Unger, 2005b, p.179) – government itself as a social agent of experimentation.

Such democratic experimentation, it seems to us, contributes to Wright’s criterion of viability, providing “empirical studies of cases, both historical and contemporary, where at least some aspects of (our) proposal have been tried” and so helping to develop “systemic theoretical models of how particular social structures and institutions would work”. But such experimentation can also impel the process of transformative change in another way, by offering “small-scale, fragmentary versions of future society...kinds of experimental anticipations”. As such, democratic experimentation has much in common with our second concept, *prefigurative practice*..

**Prefigurative practice**

One of the key texts of the New Left was a paper on prefigurative practice by the Gramscian scholar, Carl Boggs. His account describes it as “the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs, 1977/78, p.100). Similar kinds of arguments were also being made and lived out in internal socialist struggles within the ascendant feminist movement. Sheila Rowbotham insisted that the prefigurative practices of the women’s movement recognise the importance of “making something which might become the means to making something more” (ibid., 140). In arguing that “(w)e need to make the creation of prefigurative forms an explicit part of our movement against capitalism” (ibid., 147), she was not arguing for a utopian project that would bring everyone to their knees, but rather that “some changes have to start now else there is no beginning for us”. We need to “release the imagination of what could be. The effort to go beyond what we know now has to be part of our experience of what we might know” (ibid.).
This insistence that we “release the imagination of what could be”; and this anticipation of future modes of being through processes and relations, not just structures, that exemplify and embody the viability and desirability of radical alternatives – these are some of the most important contributions of progressive traditions of public education to the furtherance of democracy. Thus, Roger Dale argued that:

[R]ather than waiting until all the necessary social engineering has been done, and the planned widespread social change brought about, this approach to social change suggests that education through its processes, the experiences it offers, and the expectations it makes, should prefigure, in microcosm, the more equal, just and fulfilling society that the originations of comprehensivism aimed to bring about. Schools should not merely reflect the world of which they are a part, but be critical of it, and show in their own processes that its shortcomings are not inevitable, but can be changed. They aim to show that society can be characterized by communal as well as individual values, that all people merit equal treatment and equal dignity, that academic ability is not the only measure of a person, that racism and sexism are neither inevitable not acceptable (Dale, 1988, p.17, emphasis added).

Returning to this theme recently, Keri Facer has written of the ‘future-building schools’ as “a school that recognizes its role as a prefigurative space for building socio-technical futures. In other words, it sees itself as a place in which young people, teachers and the wider community can come together to understand how to live well and wisely with our emergent technological capabilities” (2011, p.127; emphasis added).

The concept of prefigurative practice can too easily be laid claim to, letting in the merely different rather than the genuinely transformative. In our book, therefore, we have proposed criteria with which to develop and evaluate a prefigurative practice that strives to enact a new way of being in the world. These criteria cluster around three themes, the first of which is praxis:

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<td>3 Positional restlessness</td>
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<td>4 Permanent provisionality</td>
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These insist, firstly, that the kinds of change with which we are concerned are profoundly challenging of the *status quo*, not palliative responses to whatever crisis happens to be pre-occupying dominant regimes of truth. Secondly, we argue for the necessity of education’s involvement in the processes of radical social change. Thirdly, within such processes the practices that characterise their daily realities need to exemplify a commitment both to an abiding suspicion of hierarchy and, fourthly, to a Promethean embrace of provisionality that permanently strives for a fuller realisation of a more just, creative and human fulfilling future.

That holistic emphasis is underscored by the fifth of our criteria, which argues that the role jumbling and expansive sense of possibility that energise the daily dynamic of prefigurative work is enhanced, not only by a resistance to pigeon-holing or circumscribing our work, but by an enacted commitment to a lived, expansive unity of being. If this holistic way of working is to be sustained and sustaining it also needs an overarching form of public space that draws on and encourages a range of subaltern spaces within which individuals and groups can develop multiple identities and practices. Our sixth criterion thus argues for the necessity of transformed and transformative practices of community that resist the totalising imperatives of collectivism and the atomising fragmentation of the market. If we are to develop our practice in these ways, our seventh criterion of prefigurative practice insists on the need to break free from the ahistorical presumptions of neo-liberalism’s self-proclaimed triumph and choose alternative histories which celebrate and contest a quite different view of human flourishing. At the heart of that contested history must lie an unswerving commitment to our eighth criteria, which we call the persistent pull of personalism: not just to Unger’s ‘specialness of ordinary men and women’ to which we have referred before, but also to resisting their betrayal and belittlement by so many regimes and ways of life.

Our second theme, *strategy*, underscores the importance of prefigurative practice addressing issues of social and political change at a strategic level.

| 9 Radical incrementalism | 10 Strategic engagement |

Contrary to much of the socialist and Marxist traditions, our ninth criterion argues for the possibility of a deep break with the hegemonic dominance of capitalism through anticipatory enactments of fundamentally different ways of being in the world. The claims, not only of prefigurative practice but also of democratic experimentalism, to radical credentials, rest on their cumulative and transgressive persistence, on their achievement of changed
understandings of “interests, ideas and identities” (Unger, 1998, p.19), and ultimately on their contribution to the possibility of ‘non-reformist reforms’.

It is important to recognise that the ambitions of radical incrementalism operate as much at a horizontal as a vertical level, “to increase popular participation and bring people together in problem-solving deliberations” (Wright, 2007, p.38). This catalytic power goes beyond the generation of transgressional energy and its cumulative incorporation in radical incremental change. It thus underscores the importance of our tenth criterion’ which has to do with the necessity for strategic circumspection.

Our third theme attends to matters of motivational engagement, which provide the necessary bridge from macro-ideals to the meso-realities of the daily contexts of enactment.

| 11 Institutional transformation | 12 Narrative engagement |

In order to fulfil its emancipatory potential, prefigurative practice must provide “an anticipatory image of broader transformations” (Unger, 2004, p.412). It must, in Erik Wright’s terms, be viable and, above all, achievable. Transformative alternatives must thus illustrate, albeit in small, ongoing ways, our eleventh criterion, i.e. the grounded possibility of doing things significantly differently. Insofar as they do this they are likely to have pride of place in any radical strategy because they have the power of presence, the irrefutability of contemporary reality, that gives the lie to the familiar fabrications of ‘there is no alternative’.

Our last criterion, narrative engagement, picks up on the psychological necessity of not merely describing an alternative set of practices, but doing so in a way that is emotionally and intellectually compelling, in a way which excites our narrative sensibilities.

**Sustainability**

If democratic experimentalism and prefigurative practice contribute to the process of transformative change, our third concept might be considered post-transformative. After desirability, viability and achievability, sustainability confronts the chastening history of much radical education, so many examples of which fail to last the course, collapsing after a few years. In what might be termed the radical democratic camp, there are a few exceptions, most notably the network of municipal schools for young children in Reggio Emilia in Italy, whose democratic experimentation has survived for
nearly 50 years. In what might be termed the radical neoliberal camp, the experiment in marketisation has been running and indeed increasingly mainstreamed since the 1980s.

What we can learn from both examples is the importance of regional, national and global solidarities. Radical neoliberal reforms have been sustained and accelerated by the many academic, business and political connections that thread nations and international organisations, mutually reinforcing action and building belief and morale. Education in and for a radical democracy must learn from such experience, as well as from the lessons of its own histories, and the failure to connect and ally on a broad scale as a source of sustenance and inspiration. Regional, national and global solidarities need to be made real and telling by building reciprocal ideological, material and interpersonal support through values-driven networks and alliances, which draw on and contribute to the dynamic of radical social movements. In order to sustain and extend radical democratic approaches to education in, at least initially, a largely unsympathetic or uncomprehending climate, the importance not just of networks but of particular kinds of networks becomes apparent. The support provided by emancipatory alliances are of special importance because they offer a values-driven solidarity and a commonality of orientation so essential to those who work against the grain. The Coalition of Essential Schools in the USA and Human Scale Education in England provide two such examples.

But such solidarities are just one building block in a larger process of sustainability. What we need to construct, both from theoretical models and case studies, is a better understanding not only of how transformative change can be set in motion, but of how to create the capacity to continue to experiment and to future build. How can movements and experiments become sustainable institutions, without becoming static and reproductive? How can a dynamic democratic politics and provision of education not only be achieved but sustained, deliberating political questions and exercising participatory evaluation? How can citizen participation in the politics and the practice of education, with all its attendant demands, be nurtured and sustained?
References


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