

## INTERVIEW

# Leadership matters in democratic education: Calibrating the role of Principal in one democratic school

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**Abstract**

Through a series of conversations, Fintan McCutcheon and Joanna Haynes explore McCutcheon's reflections on school leadership in the contexts of the Educate Together movement (in the Republic of Ireland) and, specifically, in his aspiration to build an optimally democratic school in Balbriggan. Much of the academic and professional literature on school leadership depicts the role of school leaders as expressing a strong vision for the school, with charismatic communication and strategic skills, and putting explicit emphasis on high educational standards. On the ground, the school leader is required to maintain executive governance standards, is accountable to a range of hierarchies and audiences and is in a custodian role to traditions of school culture and human resource relationships. Taken together, these academic, professional and contractual obligations can corral the school leader into practice of limited scope, obstructed by protocol, risk-averse and curtailed in creativity and, in relation to developing a democratic school, lacking in the necessary room for innovation. The conversation focuses on the rough ground of incident and messiness, identified through critical moments of school life when the aspirations to be democratic, to lead democratically, to teach democracy and to create a sustaining democratic school culture are lived-out. Through this dialogue, the conversants observe a practice of school leadership grounded in practical reason. The dialogue touches on and threads congruence between the

on-the-ground risk-taking, rule-breaking, action orientation, nuanced dialogue, passionate engagement and deep reflection that characterise day-to-day school leadership practice. It concludes with ideas concerning the dynamics of forms of democracy that can prevail.

#### KEYWORDS

democratic school, Educate Together, leadership

## BACKGROUND

This paper was written, through a series of recorded online conversations, between Fintan McCutcheon, Principal of Case Study Educate Together (ET) School, and Joanna Haynes, Associate Professor at Plymouth University Institute of Education. We came to know one another through joint supervision of Gillen Motherway, our doctoral student (now successfully completed), who has also contributed an article to this issue of the journal and who carried out research into ET teachers' practice of Philosophy for/with Children and connections between this practice and their enactment of the democratic principles of the ET movement. Joanna Haynes made several all day visits to Balbriggan Educate Together School and contributed to some professional development events.

## BEGINNINGS

**Joanna:** I know that one of the four key principles expressed in the mission statement of Educate Together (Educate Together, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2012) is that each school should be democratically run, encouraging active participation from parents and pupils. In our conversations, we have created the term 'checklist' or 'charter' democracy to encapsulate some common ways in which schools with democratic aspirations set out to make a school's administration more participatory. Without diminishing these rights-based options, we have shared reservations about such formulae for the representation and participation of parents and pupils. We are not alone in expressing such reservations and a desire for something deeper (see, for example, Fielding, 2012). Perhaps this has partly to do with how we understand the phrase 'the running of the school' and what kinds of structures and systems that includes. We have talked about how the aspiration to run things democratically can be meaningful and lively on the ground, in the everyday life of the school, in ways that are evident, lived and felt across all areas of experience, avoiding tokenism and prescriptiveness. Through our conversations, we have been searching for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what it means to aspire to and enact democratic education, and to begin that right now. One of the ways we have pursued this is by asking what it is like for children, parents or staff to experience democracy in everyday school life. The Educate Together movement, and your experiences as Principal of one ET school, have been very critical for you in terms of seeking to answer this question. In reviewing the kinds of dilemmas and questions that have arisen during your period of school leadership, you have introduced the phrase 'optimally democratic'. Can you tell us more about the origins of Balbriggan ET School that you think may have been significant in its development and the ongoing process of becoming optimally democratic?

**Fintan:** Balbriggan Educate Together National School (Republic of Ireland) is an interesting case study for an examination of primary schools as democratic places and spaces in a privileged western European society in the early part of the 21st century, generally, and for contemplation of school leadership challenges with regard to the optimally democratic school, specifically. When I use the term 'optimally democratic', I want to imply that democratic practices can

always extend their reach and move beyond structures and routines. Frequently, when the literature touches on what democratic schools might look like on the ground, or their external evaluation, suggestions of best practice can be limited to the introduction of additional consultation processes, for example, operating a student council, students meeting with the governing body, opportunities for voting and plebiscites of school activities, minority representations on school governing bodies, etc. (Osler, 2005). Notwithstanding the value of these initiatives, school practitioners interested in the genuine degree of democracy being lived-out in the school will and do feel dissatisfied. For school-based practitioners, ongoing evidence of the democratic school must be evident more centrally and on an ongoing basis in the normal day-to-day pedagogic practice. It should be evident in teachers' classroom management styles; children's experiences of classroom and schoolyard; the sense of approachability to each other, by teachers, parents and children alike; the naturalness of the presence and movement of all persons in the school building, staffroom and campus; the happiness, freedom, conviviality and joyousness of interactions between groups as they go about normal business. This is what I mean by 'optimally democratic'. It is a reference to the fertile ground for voice, action, dialogue, participation, reasonableness, safety and critical reflection that we might expect and enjoy in a democratic place.

To give some background, in 2004, a group of interested parents in the town of Balbriggan, County Dublin, set about making a case to the state's Department of Education for the establishment of a primary school. The parent group's right to do this is enshrined in the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) against a backdrop where the Irish State does not provide schools per se but provides through subvention for schools to be provided by identified and State-approved patrons. This school was to be non-denominational and specifically not owned or governed by the majority Catholic Church, who owned and governed five of the six pre-existing schools in the area. The school proposed was to belong to a growing family of schools under the umbrella of a patron manager Educate Together (ET). This is a 30-year-old movement, with PLC governance structure and a registered charity, with the expressed goal of providing multi-denominational schools, characterised by child-centredness and a commitment to democratic practices.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, coincidental with the foundation of this new school in the summer of 2004, the Catholic Church authorities instigated an enrolment policy for their schools that, in the event of oversubscription, prioritised the enrolment of children who had been baptised in the Catholic faith. Simultaneously for this parent group in Balbriggan in North County Dublin, through private and public house building programmes, and proximity to the country's biggest asylum-seeking accommodation centre, the population of the town experienced rapid growth and changes in ethnic and cultural composition. The backdrop to the opening of this particular school in 2005 was the arrival of newly immigrant populations, mainly from Nigeria and other African countries seeking asylum status, and from Poland and Romania as EU economic migrants, in the context of an Irish society unaccustomed to demographic changes associated with greater religious, linguistic, socio-economic and cultural diversity. To add further complexity, the Department of Education failed to act quickly to provide for enough new schools or school expansions to accommodate this growing demand, so the pre-existing schools in the area suddenly became chronically oversubscribed. The net result was that this new school, still to open its doors, had a large number of children of new immigrant and refugee families on its pre-enrolment lists, who had not been accepted by other schools in the area.

In the school's early intake of children, only a minority of parents were concerned about points of ethos or governance, and concerns about the establishment of a school based on Educate Together principles were left exclusively to the original lobbying parent group. The majority of parents were primarily concerned to get a school place for their child, having been unable to acquire one in the more established denominational schools in the town. The school grew very rapidly over the next seven years to a staff of 40 with 400 children. As school leaders, governors and teachers, we were concerned with how to make real and lived the principles of the educational movement Educate Together. This was especially so amidst some ambivalence towards its priorities amongst the majority of its parent population, many of whom were dubious that they had been offered school places in a 'project' or 'experimental' new school and, in some instances, felt ill at ease alongside each other's minority groupings. Similarly, some were uncomfortable or unaccustomed to some of the liberal priorities that informed the Educate Together school ethos and, particularly, its ethical

education programme *Learn Together* (Educate Together, 2011) comprising of the four strands: moral development, world belief systems, equality and justice, and ethics and the environment.

Alongside this ambivalence, however, there was a sense of excitement amongst myself and the early-appointed teachers and parent governors about the possibilities and opportunities that existed in building this school, 'making a school' in the MacIntyre (2011) sense that school-building is a practice. We were determined that it could be a democratic place, a seat and site of democracy that would develop democratic citizenship not only for its own specific school community but also for the emerging new and changing town in which it was located.

**Joanna:** Having worked in a purpose-built community primary school in the 1980s in inner city Bristol, I certainly recognise the effects of demographic catchment changes that you depict in a neighbourhood (socio-economic, linguistic, cultural and faith-based), and the very variable interests and ideas of parents and community activists as to what they wanted the school to prioritise. Through working as a community teacher, I met parents who held strong views about how a community school should live up to its community designation and status, share its facilities, be creative, open its doors to wider involvement of parents and other members of the community, and do more than be a school. Sometimes less vocal, or at risk of being less well heard, were those parents who had to attend wholly to urgent concerns related to managing work, childcare and ensuring the standard of their children's learning. These different preoccupations and associated scope for involvement certainly generated tensions. They also led to a lively and invigorating atmosphere of learning and often drew positive offers from parents, community workers, voluntary organisations, play workers, artists and musicians who were keen to contribute, to try new things and to explore alternative forms of education. It was often such projects that proved revealing of how community members might come together to enjoy shared activities, achieve specific goals and through that process get to know one another better and share knowledge (Haynes, 2013).

## INFLUENCES ON LEADERSHIP

**Joanna:** I also remember that the impact of very different parental concerns that you have talked about often fell disproportionately on the Head Teacher in the community school where I worked. Perhaps this is because in most schools, the Principal or Head Teacher is seen as the person with the individual authority to make decisions and act and to do so according to more traditional and hierarchical models of management. This produces some tricky but valuable tensions, in terms of figuring out how to take the diverse aspirations of communities into account in the space of the school. Looking back at this point in your career and life as an educator, what kinds of experience and professional development did you bring to the role of ET Principal? Have there been other inspirations, models and influences that have shaped your interpretation and enactment of the ET principles and your leadership practice at Balbriggan School?

**Fintan:** At the time of taking up the post, I had 23 years of teaching experience, the majority of which was in the same town, in its previous monocultural state. It also included some years of teaching in London during the late 1980s, and a series of secondments as lecturer and programme designer, in teacher-formation courses and continuing professional development courses for in-service teachers. In my own teaching, I had always taken a keen interest and taught innovative citizenship education programmes in Development Education and Teaching for Social Justice, including further study to master's level early in my career. Through these experiences, I had formed many lay theories on schools as democratic places (or not-democratic places). I had worked with various role models of school leadership in Ireland and the UK. As a father and humanist, I had reformed my own identity from baptised Catholic to someone who had begun to consider my traditional Irish-national identity narrative as increasingly ill-fitting to this changing demography and discussion of nationhood, democracy, inclusion and state provision that was taking place in Ireland and was of heightened currency in the school and the town.

My job in the immediate couple of years prior to undertaking the role of founding principal of this school had been as a lecturer in education in the country's largest teacher training college. Here, I had started a Doctorate in Education. Formally, through my readings, writing and discussions with my research supervisor at Dublin City

University, Joseph Dunne, I settled on the doctoral research topic of school leadership in an ET school with a diverse demography. This study was simultaneous to my first three years of working as principal in the school. Engaging with modules on the philosophical conceptualisation of multiculturalism and citizenship and adopting journaling as a research methodology ran parallel with the full-time day-to-day business of trying to grow the school as an optimally democratic place, amidst the hubbub and messiness of school life in this new and rapidly expanding school. The simultaneity of these tasks offered me a rich process of ongoing engagement with the scholarship of teaching and leadership that informed day-to-day practice and vice versa.

**Joanna:** It is really interesting what you say about combining your doctoral enquiry with 'figuring out' how to take up your role of new principal at Balbriggan School, and how these dimensions of your life became intertwined and mutually informing, creating a particularly grounded approach to scholarship. You convey a sense of the academic reading coming to life and being searched for insights to the everyday questions you encountered at work, and the journaling providing the means to keep a record of this unfolding and allowing you to explore your practice through writing. Perhaps it was just something you felt compelled to do in the circumstances. Can you tell us about some of the pressing issues you encountered at Balbriggan ET School and how an exploration of these questions within the community and drawing on philosophical ideas about teaching and leadership inform your understanding and practice of democratic education?

## THE ROUGH GROUND OF BECOMING A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

**Fintan:** There is rarely anything that happens in daily school life that doesn't call up the school's sense of its values and the need to check in with those in light of such events, even as ordinary an event as a spot of bother in the car park. Everything that happens is thought-provoking, and it is an ongoing dimension of working in a democratic school that the commonplace incidents of the school day demand to be carefully thought about and considered anew. Schools are difficult and complex places in which to create democratic space, even as we accept Dewey's notion of schools being microcosms of society and places where children can learn about democracy and practise democratic skills (see Dewey, 2004). One aspect of this complexity is to do with the number and variety of stakeholders, and with how the delicately balanced relationships between different categories of stakeholders bear strongly on school community dynamics and ethics. Equally, many commentaries on schools tend to oversimplify these categories of stakeholders, each according to their constituency but few according to their collectivity, all of whom need to experience democracy.

To become a democratic place where democracy is modelled, lived *and* experienced is an exceptional challenge, not least because some of the historical and social milieux influencing school life, such as teacher training, curriculum or school governance policy, are often very far from democratic. In terms of human rights practice, even as we put this at the centre of our curriculum, the position is made all the more complex through the questions children raise, for example about their experiences of spaces such as the classroom, playground or sports hall, or about the groups, classes or clubs within which they are asked to learn.

With specific reference to issues of both 'the democratic school' and 'teaching for democracy', 'the rough ground' (Dunne, 1993, 2005) of a practice rationality presented itself through a series of dilemmas and incidents. Dunne's powerful notion of the rough ground, following on Heidegger and Wittgenstein, provides a basis to resist the safety and pull of technique and to move into the more uncertain but rewarding space of practical, philosophical responsiveness to context and unpredictability. Some of these incidents were free-standing, but many were interwoven, informed by multiple sources and all hugely engaging and growth promoting for stakeholders involved: children, parents, teachers, school leaders and interested others from wider society and research communities who have spent time in the school.

First, what does democracy (or indeed the lack of it) feel like to a person who is experiencing it, and, specifically, how should it feel for the stakeholders in this school on an ongoing and lived basis? How can noble democratic aspirations such as liberty, equality and solidarity be experienced in the day-to-day lives of children, their parents and staff? At

Balbriggan School, these questions guided our responses to events that were causing any members of the school community to feel distressed or diminished. Here are some examples of events and issues I have drawn from my journals of those early years:

- How to stop homophobic bullying in the playground when the offender is a child using language that is modelled in their home or church? An example of the occasional gulf in values between the liberal principles of the patron body and the values of the home.
- How to break down discrepancies in power relations between the status of the teaching staff and the parents, generally, and parents who are new to the country, specifically? This is an example of the uneven amounts of power 'owned' by stakeholders in any school setting making democracy a challenging concept to encapsulate and achieve.
- How to grow and diversify the group of volunteer parents to include members of minorities within the school and not only those who have the time and confidence to become involved? This is an example of how, on the one hand, influence and cultural capital can be acquired by those most readily placed to accept it often at the expense of those who are not, and on the other hand, the very human concern of a sense of frustration when the few volunteers are burdened with the work for the many and often unappreciated. It is also an example of how traditional practices of home-school liaison are often blunt and, occasionally, unhelpful structures for the aspirational democratic school especially when there is a diverse demography.
- How can the school maintain a positive 'democratic' relationship with a mother whom a teacher becomes mandatorily obliged to report to social services, because the child has given her an account of a physical beating or child neglect in the home? This is an example of when the school, for good child-welfare reasons, acts as an arm of the state in issues tangential but not core to the process of education.
- How can the children experience a classroom and playground free from domination by other children or electively self-formed groups of children, often along lines of ethnic, gender or social identity? To what extent does this have implications for the design and use of spaces? This is an example of the real concern that children brought forcibly to the fore when they became engaged in the deliberation of democracy in their school.
- How can understanding of ways to address educational disadvantages, prevalent in the previously monocultural Ireland, be reimagined in the light of children and families bringing new life experiences to the school, and particularly those associated with immigration or refugee experiences? This is an example of how, on occasions, the wheel does actually need to be reinvented when initiatives and actions that experience tells us should work fail to do so and require being contextualised and reimagined.

Addressing these real-life scenarios, I am mindful of Charles Taylor's (2007) concept of 'social imaginaries', in an affirming but also a challenging manner. The school at the time was a place described not by a single overarching vision, but instead was an amalgam of the good-faith and earnest democracy-informed practices put in place to deal with the specifics of each dilemma, such as those listed above. Alasdair MacIntyre's acknowledgement of school-building as a practice (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002) covers the leadership aspiration for the school to be a place that is growing in accordance with practical reason, informed through action orientation, critical reflection and transformational and incremental growth as the praxis of the school leaders and teachers develops. Rather than appealing to a 'vision', articulated in a charter or prospectus and imposed upon the school (or indeed used to 'market' the school), and purporting to cover every problem or incident, we became practised in bringing democracy-informed, rights-informed and experience-informed, intuitive responses to dilemmas as they emerged, all of which were complex in detail, and exquisitely contextual. In terms of school leadership literature, I found this way of being and school leading to be somewhat captured in Robert Starrat's (2004) model of Ethical School Leadership. For Starrat, ethical leadership, the leadership responses that the dilemmas and decisions on hand require to be optimally ethical, results from a positionality of the school leader that is deeply engaged in the context of the situ, dialogical, and open to the transformational possibilities for herself, her institution and her complete set of persons to whom she is ethically accountable. His

delineation of the school leader refers to the simultaneous occupation of five non-hierarchical, but conceptually different positions: that of a human being, a teacher, a public servant, a manager and a leader—each carrying with it components that may need to be heightened on any given decision-making occasion following on Taylor (2007) for prompts towards authenticity.

The emergence of ‘messy’ situations such as those listed above, sometimes in angry or aggressive exchanges and sometimes in reasonably articulated discussion, is likely to happen in a school until the time when stakeholders are properly engaged in the formulation of a policy or a practice that will make them less likely to happen in the future. From this perspective, the failure of the school to be optimally democratic occurs when an issue is ignored time and time again or when the collaborative processes of resolution and design of ongoing solutions are poorly constructed, ill-informed or tokenistic. Behind each of these incidents, that may not have consistently positive outcomes, is a practice or habit that once was a good idea with its own democratic merit. With reference to the journal incidents reported above, the idea of giving children freedom from classroom regulation in the schoolyard is a good democratic idea, one sought by the children themselves, but it also creates the space for verbal and subtle peer-to-peer bullying or intimidation. Similarly, the idea of teachers and parents collaboratively engaging in informally self-assembled and self-designed networks on leadership projects is a good idea but can result in actions or experiences that bring discrepancies to the fore, within power relations amongst teachers or parents, that can be experienced by some as undemocratic. Ensuring that children are protected from violence and cruelty in their homes by the school playing its mandatory role as a place where children can report such incidents in safety and with a remedial consequence is a good idea, but one that can also have a serious negative impact on the school’s relationship with that family. Parental involvement in classroom work that enriches the children’s experiences of school is a good democratic idea, but when, on the ground, these parent volunteers come to be drawn from only the subset of parents who have the time, confidence and familiarity with such practice, in our case drawing almost exclusively on our white Irish population, then this becomes problematic. From a practice-orientated school leadership perspective, there are not, and should not be, easy solutions to any of these incidents. Instead, the school leader must work assiduously and courageously towards developing the calibre of interpersonal relations with all the stakeholders in these dilemmas to find reasonable, fair, insightful and nuanced solutions, heavily contextualised and maximally action-orientated.

The challenge for school leaders in schools such as Balbriggan Educate Together is to respond to a range of different stakeholder expectations and to balance those expectations. In particular, in Balbriggan Educate Together, the role of the ‘visionary’ person and the role of the ‘expert’ are two such assumptions that are made of school leaders, especially at any given starting point in the school’s story.

School leadership books, of both academic and professional intent, are laden with references to the school leader as, in the first instance, a person with a grand vision for the school, and, then, having the ability and skill set for making real that vision for the school, for example, those discussions of different school leadership paradigms in works such as Davies (2005). More nuanced leadership texts observe the principal as collaborative or informing of such a vision. Other leadership narratives, especially those gathered through life-history methodology, often describe struggles that school leaders have had with inheriting fixed visions for schools and the difficulties in trying to deviate or change them in any way (see, for example, Sugrue’s (2005) discussion of risk, rule breaking, passion and learning from school leaders).

As a movement, Educate Together, to which Balbriggan Educate Together School belongs, is essentially a ‘bottom-up’ organisation, through its practices of collaborative general meetings, open to all public and to which all stakeholders from all schools are invited as stakeholders and voters. It offers enough vision to provide broad guidance through its publications of policy, but not so detailed or prescribed so as to present as a template to be followed. At Balbriggan, we were able to contextualise deeply the development of our school in its demography and the particular geographies of the locality. This offered the school’s governance group, and myself as school leader and, in due course, teachers and parent-leaders, the opportunity to take risks, to be creative, to undertake the challenges of [dealing with the] public perception of the school and to grow the school with a focus on becoming a democratic institution.



For me, at that point in time, there was no ill-fit or discomfort in such an activist role. Given my teaching experiences, my ongoing academic work and my own emerging understandings of multiculturalism, educational values associated with democracy and conceptions of teacher identity, I felt comfortable and came to flourish in the messiness of the incidents and dilemmas alluded to here.

To turn from 'vision' to the related idea of school leader as 'expert', again I refer to the literature of school leadership that expounds on the necessity of 'evidence-based' narratives in effective school leadership mostly found in discussions of strategic leadership or instructional leadership accounts. In many technicist and managerialist leadership narratives, the school leader is imagined as having a very definite target-led, data-informed path to school effectiveness to which she will design incremental and clear timelines and success criteria. In Balbriggan School, the limits of such thinking were easily critiqued and observed as not particularly helpful; lacking in nuance and context and overtly oversimplifying of issues and concerns of what constituted quality teaching and learning in our context.

Ironically, I found the most productive way to handle the mantle of 'expert' was to declare humility about 'not knowing the answer to every question', proposing actions where the outcomes could not be necessarily predicted and acknowledging that there might be unforeseen negative or positive spin-offs to such actions. Alongside this, we committed to self- and institutional reflection that went beyond narrow understandings of school self-evaluation. Instead, we leaned towards intuitive efforts at transformations of practice, that more readily contributed to unmeasurable success criteria such as children's or teachers' happiness, or parental satisfaction or to any evidence of flourishing of any stakeholders, measured by observation, listening or anecdote, often with reference to individual teachers, children or parents. When we could see such happiness, progress or success, we sought to expand the degree and frequency of whatever action we felt had brought it about. We were finding our way in a deliberate attention to democratic processes of voice, action, participation, dialogue, caring and protecting the vulnerable. We were concerned with scanning children and parents for happy or troubled faces, with listening to their 'quick word' in the playground or classroom doorway for the 'story' it told, comforting or discomforting. Above all, we were taking the temperature of the children for their happiness, in the Noddings (2003) sense, to check for their flourishing. Processes such as classroom and staffroom Thinking Time (Donnelly, 2001) (an Irish reconceptualisation of Philosophy for Children) became my leadership barometer as well as lengthy 'bumped into you' chats with parents and childminders and locals in car parks and supermarkets.

To conceptualise this academically, the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* offers a compelling philosophical leadership process starting point (Dunne, 2003, 2005). *Phronesis*, which might here be translated as 'right-judgement', comes about as an incremental growth of wisdom on the part of the practitioner, in this case the school leader. It takes place perhaps as a result of an exquisitely deep reading of the context, the launch of an optimistic action, engagement in a dialogue stemming from the process of the action, a self-reflection based on the emotion of this dialogue, leading to incremental transformation, towards insight and knowledge, based on what has been felt and learned from this cyclical experience. The 'expert' is thus not the visionary sage on the stage, or the data-armed surefooted strategist proposed in much school leadership literature but, instead, the open-minded insider who draws on her own experience, and the experience of others gained through dialogue, to engage in increasingly likely-to-succeed and well-judged optimistic future actions.

**Joanna:** I like the way you have drawn attention to the everyday, and to the notion that democratic education is about the details of lived experience, particularly where any member of the school community reports on a feeling of unfairness, or being left out and the many ways these feelings might manifest themselves. You have also talked about processes of being able to name and to know the meaning of injustice through attention to the details of people's experiences on a day-to-day basis, of learning to listen to one another as a matter of course. So what did teachers do?

**Fintan:** From the school leadership perspective, the opportunity came about from undertaking, in line with school policy, citizenship education programmes, such as those articulated as Human Rights Education (HRE) and Children's Rights Education (CRE) programmes, that are to be taught in all classrooms, throughout the eight years of the child's tenure in the school, with nuanced progression and sophistication as the children get older. At Balbriggan Educate Together, when teaching anti-racism there are Black children who have experienced racist name-calling by others,



perhaps even by their classmates; when exploring anti-Islamism there are Muslim children similarly who have been subjected to terrorism taunts by classmates in the schoolyard. There are children who, when learning about homophobia in a class lesson, have had their own same-sex family structure or, perhaps, their own early identifications of being gay or trans openly discussed pejoratively by their peers. In fact, such lessons can often inadvertently give rise to a sudden increase in the frequency of such bullying, in the busy day of the school and crowded footpaths on the way home in the evenings. Nonetheless, such HRE and CRE programmes do provide a platform for what one might call the knowledge aspect of democracy; to understand law, to understand discrimination, to understand how to articulate claims for justice through concrete and direct experience, to name and to know injustice. This is one aspect of what the teachers did. (The school produced its own publication outlining in greater detail examples of the work described here; see Hickey & McCutcheon, 2018.)

However, such programmes and endeavours only go so far. Instead, we discovered that the school needed to conceptualise education for democracy in a much more comprehensive way: permeating the child's experience throughout the whole school day as opposed to slotting as lesson programmes into SPHE, or other relevant curricula such as history or geography. Instead, the school devised an understanding of citizenship education that was to be achieved through lived experiences for the children, drawing from an Aristotelian perspective of citizenship prioritising voice, participation and agency, combined with a Rousseau-informed understanding of childhood, where the child is held as capable and skilled in making sense of his/her own world through inquiry and interaction. Armed with this understanding of citizenship education, the school looked to ongoing classroom management practice, pedagogic patterns, school-discipline protocols, supervision arrangements, selection of text resources across all curricula in order to make citizenship education, in this case, a feeling for democracy, part of the normal everyday life of each classroom, modelled in all interpersonal relationships as well as taught. Through continuous professional development, teachers came to understand that properly conceived inquiry-based learning worked for the children in promoting their voice. It motivated critical thinking questions, dialoguing with peer partners and small groups, growing their rhetorical skills, giving them the confidence to speak and participate and making them aware of the necessity for empathy, patience, tolerance and open-mindedness, when engaging in such a pedagogical approach. Class discussions, which heretofore had been dominated by the linguistically precocious or hampered for those children for whom English is an additional language, were also identified as limiting of the democratic experience of the majority of children and new ways of taking part, through play, story and drama, were devised to make classroom dialogue more democratic. In particular, the school prioritised the upskilling of teachers in Philosophy for Children as a standard pedagogic approach to numerous aspects of the curriculum and, in particular, as a fair and particular means of discussing controversial topics during SESE and citizenship education classes.

## TEACHERS' WELFARE AND SELF-CULTIVATION

**Joanna:** It is very illuminating the way you talk about the ET curriculum and pedagogies that have been adopted at the school to harmonise with this. From my visits to the school and engagement with ET, I know that your school has adopted a particular approach to Philosophy for Children and called it Thinking Time. This also seems to be in keeping with your sense that to create optimal democracy, aspiring democratic schools need to attend not only to political dimensions of decision-making but also to social and epistemic dimensions of everyday classroom practice and relationships, searching for ways to make these more consistently inclusive and democratic. Gillen Motherway's doctoral study (2020) and his paper included in this collection (2022) document the synergies between ET and P4C values and how they are interpreted and enacted by teachers. You have highlighted the calls that this attention to democratic principles in everyday life makes on teachers and other staff working with children in classrooms. One of the things you talked about was how, in an earlier part of your career, you found yourself working with teachers who were struggling in different ways, drained of energy or feeling themselves to be failing. I got the impression that this work was important for you when it came to thinking about teachers' lives, their own needs to be fulfilled and satisfied through

their teaching and that creating a community that sustains teachers and others working with children is part and parcel of running things democratically and understanding that education is not charitable work?

**Fintan:** In contexts such as Balbriggan Educate Together, school leaders face issues around the unarticulated power, authority and potentially biasing background and disposition of the teacher. Such an individual teacher might, on a bad day, or in the midst of a sustained bad life phase, engage in actions ruinous of the school's efforts to be a place where children, parents or teaching colleagues may experience democracy. It may instead result in deeply undemocratic events that live long in the memory, and especially so if this person is the principal himself. Aside from carefulness in recruitment and giving attention to standard teacher evaluation and professional standards, we felt that a more holistic approach was needed to ensure that teachers did not fall into daily habits or practice that could result in undemocratic experiences for others. As a school leader, I was certainly informed by a previous career experience of working with tired, disillusioned and self-identifying stressed or underperforming teachers. It was clear to me that teachers in such a state were neither experiencing democracy in their school lives nor were they likely to be promoting it in their day-to-day classroom and staffroom lives, indeed quite the opposite.

In conceptualising this issue and proposing a way forward for our school, I was drawn to the work of Chris Higgins (2011). Higgins offers a way of conceptualising this phenomenon that is helpful in a formulation of a particularly robust teacher democracy-informed self-identity. It has hugely influenced principal-teacher and teacher-teacher relationships in Balbriggan Educate Together National School, to the benefit of teacher-teacher relations, teacher-child relations and teacher-parent relations. A reading of Higgins' work would propose in the first instance that the notion of teaching as a vocation, or on the basis of altruism, is unhelpful as a starting point for conceptualising one's own teacher identity and others' identification of the teachers' role and status. The notion of both teacher as altruist, nay charitable, and teaching as a vocation, almost along religious-vocation dimensions, is very strong and ingrained in both teachers themselves and in Irish society. Higgins argues that understanding teaching as a vocation, to give selflessly of oneself, is a slippery slope towards not experiencing the 'good life' that, as human beings, we instinctively seek. Furthermore, it generates dynamics of charity in informing one's work with disadvantaged others and nudges feelings of piety and 'saintliness', which he asserts are detrimental in the long run towards a properly balanced and respectful understanding of teaching per se and of quality and sustainable teaching relationships. He argues that such a self-sacrificing disposition will, sooner or later, run dry and result in burn-out, leading in due course to a burn-in, where the teacher, unable or unwilling to leave the profession, stays in situ and engages in very self-serving and self-preserving practices, aimed at not repeating the previously experienced burn-out. It is easy to see how such a teacher, in burn-in mode, would not exercise democratic principles in his classroom nor in any of his crucial interpersonal school relationships. For such a teacher, with an agenda of self-preservation, children's voices or questioning or critical thinking would be an irritant, levels of participation in livelier activities would be minimal, and stern and unfair disciplinary expectations and procedures would be predominant. Parental engagement would be avoided and dialogue with any parent about any aspect of the children's lives, especially in the face of a parental query or complaint would be met defensively. Collaborative interaction with teaching colleagues would also be avoided for fear of exposure or criticism or simply understood as too much bother. Self-preserving work practices and negative interaction with leadership or colleagues would become the norm.

Instead, Chris Higgins argues for a reconceptualisation of teaching and, I would argue (though he does not), a reconceptualisation of school leadership removed from the notion of vocation and altruism. His argument is that, if you are expected to provide children with a safe, caring, stimulating, fulfilling and democratic-informed educational experience, you cannot do this if your experience in the school is not lived-out in such a manner. He argues that as a teacher, or I would argue school leader, you must engage in, and be supported to engage in, your own self-cultivation. If you are being treated unfairly or undemocratically as a teacher, then you will inevitably, in turn, treat the children, parents and colleagues the same. If you are not stimulated by what you are doing, the children will not be stimulated by what you do. If your day is not self-fulfilling and nourishing for you as a human being, then this will also not be the experience of the children in your care or the colleagues you work with or the parents you must dialogue with and whose children's flourishing is your very core responsibility.

At Balbriggan Educate Together School, we worked hard to develop this alternative conceptualisation of teacher identity and, by extension, to develop a way of teachers working together that optimises each teacher's self-fulfilment and nourishing within the workings of the normal school day and seasonality of the normal school year. So while recruiting in the first instance teachers who have a demonstrable disposition towards working in schools with diverse demographics, simply out of such interest and not on the basis of charity, altruism or vocation, such teachers then, when in situ, are optimally empowered, facilitated and resourced to undertake practice that is self-cultivating. From my journal of the time, I note frequent joyous teacher engagement in designing lessons, programmes of learning and school events that engaged us all in a very self-cultivating manner. Teachers, too, taking pro-democratic risks in their classroom management processes were supported by understanding that the school leadership was happy and understanding for optimistic actions to promote children's voice, children's participation, children's activism, fieldwork and educational visits, innovative use of ICT, bringing in teaching collaborators from their own fields of interest and expertise to happen on an ongoing basis and with acknowledgement that not all would be successful. Following on Higgins' argument for 'a good life in teaching', school leadership must also be vigilant of teacher exhaustion, stress or frustration as the practice of teaching large classes inevitably brings with timely presence, mentoring and attention to care. A balance throughout the school year of events and milestones that require preparation, planning and execution must be achieved so as not to lead to staff being overwhelmed, as well as to allow each such action to have an appropriate amount of focus and deliberation. Similarly, distribution of tasks and responsibilities between all members of the teaching body must be found and guarded so as to ensure that no one person or small group of teachers is overburdened. Unreasonableness on the part of any teaching colleague or parent and gratuitously difficult behaviour by any child must be addressed fairly, with a view to it being resolved and better future interaction promoted. The school building, the school's purchase and maintenance of quality resources, and the enhancement of the physical environment of the school must be such as to facilitate this teacherly self-cultivation.

I argue that school leadership for an optimally democratic school requires the practice that MacIntyre refers to as school building, Dunne refers to as a practice rationality and Higgins proposes in the facilitation of the self-cultivation of teachers. This art of apprenticeship, professional dexterity, creativity, self-criticality, nuanced choreography, confidence and mastery draws on practice rationality for the school leader that can be accrued only with time, patience, open-mindedness and sustained commitment. It requires from the school leader comfort with risk and a judicious and tempered exercise of passion. From the school leader and teacher alike, it requires a disposition that they are never quite fully 'there' at a faultless endpoint or telos, but always open to incremental further growth, in the comfort and affirmation of being as far as one might be reasonably expected to be, and as experienced as one can be, at any given point in time.

## INTERDEPENDENCE

**Joanna:** Clearly, you attach a lot of importance to children's experiences of learning about democratic citizenship, socio-cultural diversity and social justice. You told me about a research study undertaken at Balbriggan School, and we read and discussed Anne Marie Kavanagh's chapter about her doctoral project, based on her critical case study of intercultural education at the school (Kavanagh, 2021). The focus of this study is on the realisation of positive change in society through the teaching of social justice, and it is shaped by questions related to those dimensions of learning and curriculum. Kavanagh talks about her approach being a model of critical theory in action. Kavanagh draws on two main areas of theory: critical multiculturalism and transformative leadership. In the discussion of critically informed multicultural education, she refers to Nieto's (2004) framing of this within critical pedagogy and a praxis-orientated approach to decision-making (p. 216), to tackle institutional and systemic injustices. Transformative leadership theory acknowledges the emotional labour involved in advocacy for social justice, wherever it occurs, and depicts both the intra-personal and extra-personal aspects of leadership work in such contexts.

The chapter proposes a particular approach to the evaluation of social justice education based on dimensions of relationality, participation and distribution. Kavanagh gives a very positive account of the school's work and proposes a comprehensive and staged framework for ongoing evaluation of social justice education in practice, including auditing all policies, practices and processes (2021, pp. 227–228). There is clearly a strong desire here for transformation.

From our conversations, I understand that you feel the particular take on critical theory underpinning that project leaves some gaps and questions when it comes to what might be counted as 'evidence' of holistic social justice education in and through democratic schooling. Is this to do with how nuances of lived experience have been missed in the way that the evaluation study and proposed model of audit have been structured? These seem to be important questions to think about. How might we evaluate democratic schooling and how can processes of self-evaluation be created and renewed, given the experimental nature of democratic school building and the nuances of context?

**Fintan:** Indeed, I note an under-examined use of terms such as 'transforming' and 'transformational'. My understanding of transformation derives from Freire, the idea of learning that occurs in relationship, through humility (particularly when imbalances of power exist, as they do for example between adults and children), learning to love and learning to dialogue. I find that critical theory, such as that used as the theoretical framework of Kavanagh (2021), tends to stop short of describing what transformation might look like and stops at calling for it. In my experience, transformation is highly particular—but it is a concept that becomes clichéd and oversimplified. I draw again on the work of Higgins, following on McIntyre, who makes the point that we need to be democratic, because we are dependent on each other. Higgins draws on Arendt's notions of work as action and how everyone's work means that the space (in this case of school) becomes co-owned, relations are reborn and reframed through joint action. A school aspiring to be democratic is one where everyone comes to recognise the necessity of this dependence and acts increasingly interdependently. My criticism of Kavanagh's (2021) essay on Balbriggan school merely concerns her particular deployment of a critical theory lens, which, I feel, leaves the practitioner reader with no feeling or insight as to how dissatisfactions might be addressed. I hope that this conversation, with its practical reason argument, may be of some help to those on the ground and endeavouring to build democratic schools, and in acknowledgement of the groundbreakers of Summerhill.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>For international readers, it must be clarified that, in the Republic of Ireland, all primary education is provided by private corporate entities but subvented by the State when the corporate entity is approved under legislation that originates back to the 19th century. The biggest corporate entities running the vast majority of the Irish primary schools are the churches, notably the Catholic Church (approximately 95%) through regional/diocesan networks supporting individual school Boards of Managements in keeping with current legislation. Educate Together (currently 96 primary schools) works along the same corporate structure and within the same legislative framework but, in keeping with a commitment to accountability and processes of being democratically run, hosts Annual General Meetings, at which motions from grassroots schools concerning issues of ethos, governance, practice, pedagogy and school policy are proposed, debated and voted upon. At the same AGM, the CEO, Treasurer and Chair of the Board of Directors deliver reports and key addresses, which are debated from the floor and are published on the ET website. The organisation also hosts termly General Meetings and Assemblies where specifically current issues facing the organisation and its schools are given a conference-style format for discussion, debate and learning. The 'private' PLC/Charity status of ET in the Irish context is, we argue, somewhat different from, say, private education provision in other countries where there is a more traditional state-school system, or to recent movements in the United States and the UK such as independent schools or academy schools. The genesis of Educate Together as an education movement from a single school to a national movement is tracked in great detail in Hyland and Green (2022).

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