

School Students need Time and Space to Think and to Pursue their Interests and Questions – A Modest Proposal by Derry Hannam

It seems to me that the crucial commodity that children and young people need in order to find and deepen their interests and identity is TIME. Time to think, time to wonder, time to create, time to hang out with their friends, time to find out who they are, time to relax and just be idle for a while – and a space to do it in.

Yet this is the one thing that English state funded secondary schools, and increasingly primary schools as well, deprive them of. Lunch hours and playtimes are shortened or cut. The encroachment on their free time is not just during the school day but also at home, in the evenings and at week-ends with endless homework and test/exam revision. Even in this time of Corona Virus and school closure many schools are aiming to teach and task-set on a full school day basis. Some parents are expecting and requiring this, though a growing number are not. We know that it is perfectly possible to have a school system with high attainment that does not do this. Finland, for example, under the banner of “Less Is More” has a shorter school day than ours with minimal homework - a legal maximum of 30 minutes per night in total and none at week-ends which are held to belong to the students – and no high-stakes national tests until the final year of school. Despite this academic performance is better on average in Finland than England.

When I was deputy head of an English comprehensive school in the 1980s the students proposed that we should have occasional ‘activities’ days when they and the teachers together could create a wide programme of activities which students of any age could choose from. Parents were supportive and many became involved. The variety was amazing as was the enthusiasm! It was very successful and very popular so we extended it to an ‘activities week’ in the summer term. The process of negotiation involved was itself an education in democracy and mutual respect. Relationships were transformed with much use of first names. At the point where I left the school to become an inspector the idea was being discussed of having an ‘activities week’ every term – which would have represented about 8% of annual curriculum

time. No-one regarded this as time lost or wasted – far from it. Some students previously disengaged from school changed their attitudes entirely.

As an inspector I once inspected a secondary school of 1300 students in a rural area where many students could not take part in extra-curricular activities because of long bus journeys home. The head, staff, governors, parents and students' council decided to move 'extra-curricular' into curriculum time. They allocated half a day per week (10% of curriculum time) to a large and wide ranging programme of 'electives.' These were negotiated between students and staff around the interests and enthusiasms of both. As in my school these negotiations were themselves an education for democracy and relationships were transformed. Students of different ages could join any group they chose. Some were led by students themselves. The programme was very popular with all the groups involved. A parent told me that their children would 'get off their death beds to get to school on electives day!' In fact part of my job as an inspector was to check the student attendance figures for each half-day of the week. The highest figure was consistently for 'electives' afternoon. I also checked the school's examination record. It was significantly better than might have been expected for a school in such a socio-economic environment.

So – my modest proposal. All state-funded schools, both primary and secondary, should be encouraged to allocate at least 10% of curriculum time to be negotiated around the interests of the students and staff. Time for individual or collaborative self directed education with the teachers being available as facilitators or 'experts' if their services were requested by the students. Sometimes the students themselves might be facilitators for other students – or even teachers. A teacher recently wrote in my union magazine about how much more her students knew about climate change issues than she did.

I predict that the negotiation process itself will be educational, the motivation and morale of all will rise, and the new engagement which will result will more than compensate for any feared loss of learning from reduction in formal subject teaching time. In fact standards will rise. Results will improve. Students will learn how to take responsibility for at least part of their learning and learn how to manage at least part of their own time – both crucial to deal with

the changes and uncertainties that the Fourth Industrial Revolution is already presenting us with.

So – actually – why not 20%. The state will still have the other 80%! When the Israeli educator Yaacov Hecht and I launched this idea at a Council Of Europe conference on Education and Democracy at Strasbourg in 2016 he asked for a vote on the issue when concluding his keynote speech. The 2000 administrators, policy makers and teachers voted overwhelmingly in favour. Afterwards I asked some who had voted against what they didn't like about the idea.

“20% is not enough,” they said. “It should be more!”

I agreed with them.

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