Making Schools Our Business

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In November 2014, school governors across England received news about a new campaign – 'Make Schools Your Business' – to place more people with business skills on governing bodies. It is one of a number of campaigns being run by the government and nongovernmental organisations to promote the idea that people with a variety of knowledge and skills should be helping schools work. Head teachers and governors around the country, under pressure from the government to demonstrate that their schools are successful, are paying attention to campaigns like this.[1]

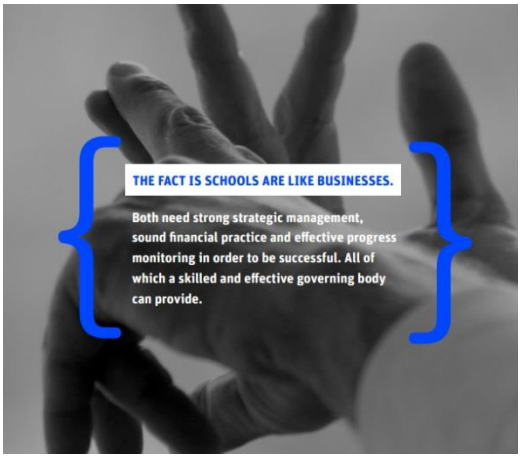
The 'Make Schools Your Business' campaign is run by 'School Governors One-Stop Shop' (SGOSS), an independent education charity funded by the UK Department for Education

On the surface, it looks like a sensible campaign. What teacher, parent or school leader doesn't want to improve children's education by ensuring that school life is informed by the very best knowledge and skills, particularly in a complicated economic and political climate? Who can be comfortable making decisions about children's futures if they feel they lack the understanding or competence to do so? The common-sense appeal of 'making schools our business' is almost irresistible: it either seems like an obviously good thing, or – especially in a competitive environment – something that is too necessary to question.

But it is important to discuss it. There is more to this campaign than meets the eye. And the more-than-meets-the-eye things matter because they have big consequences for our children's education and life chances, for teachers' work, for what our schools are and become, and for the future of our society. They matter because, as the campaign reminds us, 'every school in England [should] have a diverse and effective governing body driving school improvement'. Governing bodies need people who understand where different definitions of 'school improvement' come from and whose interests they serve, and how to make sure education remains in the interests of children and of a democratic society, just as much as they need people who understand the business of schooling.

It is therefore important to see the 'Make Schools Your Business' campaign from perspectives that help us understand how it came about, why it seems attractive, what positive and negative effects it might have on learning, and what it is being presented as an alternative or response to. Fortunately, such perspectives are readily available; social researchers, teachers, parents and students around the world have been developing them for decades. These show us how a new 'business common sense' has been created and how it is changing our institutions and communities. They help us see how the campaign fits into a larger project of corporate school reform in England and other countries. They explain how powerful groups make their particular ideas and interests appear to be good for everybody. And some of them point to alternative ways of thinking about what makes schools good. Following are some examples of how we can use these tools to think critically about the 'Make Schools Your Business' campaign, and to build confidence in designing school governance in democratic ways.

Is it a fact that schools are like businesses?



This is a bold statement. Many people think of schools as places where children learn and businesses as organisations which are concerned with making, buying or selling products and services in exchange for profit. So how did it become possible to talk about education in the language of business? How did ideas about educational success become tied to values of 'strategic management', sound financial practice and progress monitoring?

The answers to these questions are rooted in debates about what schools are for and who should pay for them. Debates about whether schools should be publicly or privately funded; serve business interests or democratic citizenship; and be controlled by teachers, parents, young people or government – these go back well over a century. The ones directly influencing schools in England today, however, began forming over thirty years ago when the government began introducing new policies that would make public services look, act and be judged more like private businesses. This was part of a larger project (promoted in different ways by Conservative, New Labour and Liberal-Conservative coalition governments alike) to reduce state responsibility for social welfare and services, health care, and education (often called budget-cutting or 'austerity'), and increase the power of the private sector in these areas. New kinds of management, based on models of industrial and financial management, were introduced into education.

Many of the practices which are taken for granted as part of education today, such as a focus on 'efficiencies' and 'outputs', decentralised budgets, target-based accountability, performance-related achievement and pay, league tables, market-like competition between individuals and groups of schools, and the use of economic principles and values to determine the worth of non-economic activities (including children's learning) have been created in recent decades in order to *make* schools look and act like businesses. These have developed alongside other kinds of corporate education reform, including the privatisation of schooling, the growth of for-profit schooling, the building of close relations between corporations and educational institutions, the increasing role of private educational services and consultancies, and the 'outsourcing' of school management, teacher education, curriculum and teaching to private companies.

As more policies ask teachers, head teachers and governors to think and talk about education in this way, and as it becomes financially and politically riskier for them not to, opportunities to talk about whether schools are, or could be or should be like businesses, are closed down. But this in no way means it is a 'fact' that they are, nor that everyone agrees they should (or even can) be.

Why are businesses interested in governing schools?

The 'Make Schools Your Business' campaign has two explicit aims. One is to encourage people with business skills to 'do something about education' by volunteering as school governors. The other is to encourage businesses to contribute to school governance as part of their 'corporate social responsibility'. But what do these people need to do about education, and in what way is making decisions about children's education the responsibility of corporations?

One reason is that the schools registered with the charity have requested volunteers with such skills, and that registered volunteers are looking for ways to make use of their own

capabilities. A second is that the Department for Education has 'called for school governors to be "more business-like" in the future'. And a third is that many businesses believe schools should prepare children more directly for work. According to the campaign, therefore, 'schools need access to skilled volunteers from the world of business' who can 'offer their expertise to the operations of a governing body'.

These reasons appeal to certain kinds of common-sense, like the idea that being successful and professional means being 'business-like' and that an organisation must be business-like to be considered good. In the current climate, where policies are made as if this was a solid truth, even people who know it isn't necessarily so often feel that they *should* think it is, or that they have no choice but to act accordingly. Then there is the widely held belief that the main purpose of school is to make people 'employable'. It can be hard to question this without sounding unreasonable – who doesn't want every child to live well in a world that they play a part in making through fulfilling work? Yet at school gates, the adults who look after these children discuss the problems of schools that focus too much on testing, skills, competition, and making 'employable' people, and too little on the development of children's personalities, confidence, creative talents and deep understandings of other people and the world. This is especially true for parents and carers whose children do not fit easily, or at all, into the prevailing norms of 'sensibility' or 'expected levels of progress'. Apart from this, we seem to have trouble talking about the bigger problem that stable and fulfilling employment has become less available rather than more. Today, schools need to draw on a range of specialised capacities not only to survive in a harsh economic and political climate, but also to help children and society create different and better climates in the future – worlds that they can not only survive, but in which they can collectively thrive.

Children learn much more than knowledge and skills in school. They also learn things which are not taught directly – how to think, values, beliefs and norms that come through what researchers call the 'hidden curriculum'. The teaching of business skills is underpinned not only by a technical need for them in the present economy, but also by an interest in promoting business values. These can have an important place in business and business-like activities, and come in many different forms from profiteering to social enterprise and co-operativism. Yet it is a problem if business values shape aspects of school life which are not business-related, such as caring, learning, teaching, educational planning, community building, political governance or social change. These things rely on other kinds of knowledge, skill and value, and often times these knowledges, skills and values are not regarded as important for business. It is also a problem because, when not approached critically, 'business skills' may endorse individualism or economically-motivated partnership over other kinds of relationship, a belief that competition is healthy and necessary, a faith that whatever matters can be measured and given value, an acceptance of educational and social inequality, and a concern for 'financial independence' (working with less public funding) and, in some cases, profitability.

The last point gives special pause for thought about the 'Make Schools Your Business' campaign. While it is clear why individuals may want to volunteer as school governors, what's in it for businesses? While SGOSS is funded by the UK Department for Education, consider its roster of trustees – Lloyds Bank, Allen and Overy (an international law firm 'providing services for global business and industry'), KPMG (an audit, tax and financial advising service), the City of London, United Biscuits, and WPP marketing and communications, and its partners, which in addition to a number of school governance and educational organisations include BP (the multinational oil and gas corporation): Harlequins Rugby Union, and TKAT (a multi-academy trust). Why are these organisations, most of which are not in the business of educating children and young people, interested in getting more people with business skills and values onto the governing boards of schools?

One argument is that it is easier to change schooling in the model and interests of business if teachers' and head teachers' activities are shaped and overseen by people who either

assume that schools are like (or should be) businesses, and who expect that the people who work in them should become business-people. This is a method of corporate education reform. One example of its influence is the rise of the for-profit school, a trend which has been ongoing in the United States for some time. It is more of a debate in England, with former Education minister Michael Gove having encouraged the development of for-profit academies (particularly those which were 'failing' schools 'taken over' from local government by corporate providers) and the current minister Nicky Morgan more recently arguing that there is no 'place for the profit element in education'. Yet even in the majority of schools which remain not-for-profit, and especially in the growing number of quasi-independent academy schools, many educational activities, labour and services are outsourced to private profit-making companies. In a competitive market and working with often reduced budgets, head teachers and governing bodies may feel forced to make 'efficiency savings' with these contracts to meet 'performance targets' even in cases where they know that doing so means settling for poorer education or unethical practice. Internationally, there have long been concerns that corporate power in education threatens teachers' practice and professional autonomy – including with regard to the UK's largest and only private examination board, Edexcel, as it is owned by the for-profit multinational corporation Pearson which also dominates the multi-billion-dollar market of controversial but mandatory standardised testing in many US states.

> Co-operative school governance involves 'the direct representation of core stakeholder groups – pupils, teachers, parents, community and alumni who meet in a forum that feeds directly into the governance structure'.[2]

Under current regulations, all schools in the UK are required to reconstitute their governing bodies by September 2015. One reason is to ensure these boards work as well as they should for children and schools, and because the government wants to 'create consistency across the country under a single more flexible regulatory framework'. This process definitely offers schools some excellent opportunities to improve their governing bodies, and time to figure out what this means in practice. Yet there is also a need for caution in how discussions about this process are being shaped. The official guidance, for example, explains that governing bodies should be smaller, more technically skills-based, focused on strategic leadership and financing, and not necessarily – not even desirably – representative of parents, teachers or the wider communities in which a school is located. They say little about education itself. There are of course certain benefits in organising committees that make decisions quickly and skilfully. But this common sense can also be used to justify an even further move away from democratic governance, away from appreciation for the value of public dialogue about education, away from planning that emerges from local knowledge, and away from student, teacher, parent and community participation in the organisation of learning and school life. The point that school governors should serve children's interests rather than their own is indisputable, but it must also be understood that everyone's interpretation of what these interests are how they can best be served is shaped by their personal experience and position in society, particularly with regard to education, and by their beliefs about how schooling and learning works. This is why it is important that critical and public debate remains (or, where it is not common, becomes) a core value of school governance – especially when surrounded by arguments that it is an 'unprofessional' or 'inefficient' use of time and resources.

Are there other ways of thinking about good school governance?

Other models of school governance are worth considering, and other ways of thinking about the business of schooling are possible. These do not deny that schools need inspirational and effective leaders. They do not deny that schools also need to be governed by people

who understand the ins-and-outs of finance, organisation, planning and accounting just as much as they need the contributions of those with experience and expertise in children's special needs, pedagogy, play and curriculum design, and the contributions of those who have even more specialised knowledges of and interests in the children themselves. The alternatives simply do not assume that the 'business-end' of school governance is more important than any other part, or that this part should look *like* corporate business, or that teachers should have to prove that they are succeeding on business-like terms or in the interests of business. The models assume that schools are not like businesses and that children and learning are not products, no matter how much people try to make them so.

> 'In place of the officially favoured hierarchical chains which pay homage to profit motivated businesses, co-operative models, implicitly and explicitly, focus upon participation, community and values-based education.'[4]

For example, the co-operative model of school governance is becoming popular in England. Since 2008, nearly 800 schools have become part of the UK Co-operative Network (it is now the third largest network of schools in the country).[3] While co-operative education has a long tradition here, it is attracting new interest as an alternative to academisation (especially in situations where schools risk being forcibly removed from local authority and placed under the control of an academy chain which may be privately owned). While this model does not ensure the defence or overall improvement of the state education system – and this is one of the criticisms of it – it does ensure that schools are not treated like businesses, and helps 'reconnect educational futures with shared community futures'.[5] Co-operative governing bodies adhere to a set of internationally agreed values (self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, and solidarity) and principles (such as voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; a commitment to education, training and information; co-operation amongst co-operatives and concern for community).

There are other examples of good governance for public education in England, as well as in other parts of the world where teachers and those interested in inclusive and democratic schooling have resisted corporate educational reforms or created completely different alternatives.[6] In his writing about St. Georges in the East school in London, which was democratically governed from 1945–1955, Michael Fielding draws inspiration from its head teacher, Alex Bloom, who wanted to

> 'assure those many hesitant folk working under similar conditions that, within the framework of State education and despite the limitations of space, staff and substance, progressive education is possible. It may well be that, because of these limitations, the need for pioneers is the more intense'.[7]

This sentiment is just as relevant today as it was then. It can be helpful to be a bit more sceptical of what seems like common sense and a lot more confident about what we suspect might be good sense – like that it is not a simple fact that schools are or must be like businesses, no matter how many times powerful people say this is true. We need public debate about school governance that does not just start from making schools our business, but that starts by making it our business to determine what kind of schools we really want and what kinds of values, decision-making principles and skills are most suitable for these ends. Alongside teachers, those involved in school governance can 'act collectively and organise accordingly' to ensure that opportunities to prevent the transformation of schools into businesses and business-like places are not lost.[8] Discussing the wider context and

politics of the ‘Make Schools Your Business Campaign’ in school governors’ meetings, and amongst wider school communities, might be an excellent way to start.

References

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1. To read about the ‘Make Schools Your Business’ that this pamphlet responds to, see https://www.sgoss.org.uk/makeschoolsyourbusiness.

2. Tom Woodin, *Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values: Contemporary Issues in Education* (London: Routledge, 2014).

3. Linda Shaw, ‘A quiet revolution: co-operative schools in the UK’, Co-op Stories, online at http://stories.coop/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Cooperative-schools-in-UK-case-study.pdf.

4. Woodin, *Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values*, 2014.

5. Keri Facer, ‘Why co-operative schools must work’, presentation given in 2010, online at https://d3hzmlhrf50pgz.cloudfront.net/uploads/2010/11/Keri-Facer-Co-op-Nov-2010.pdf.

6. Here ‘public’ does not refer to ‘public’ schools which are confusingly actually private ones, but to a system of state-funded education for all children and young people. It can also refer to a system of education which values learning for public participation in democratic social life.

7. This quotation is from Michael Fielding’s ‘Alex Bloom: Pioneer of radical state education’ in the journal *Forum*, Volume 74, No. 2/3, pp. 119–134. It can be found on p. 132.

8. Howard Stevenson and Alison Gilliand, ‘The teachers’ voice: teacher unions at the heart of a new democratic professionalism’, forthcoming.

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