



Changing the Climate (extract)

From closing chapter of CREATIVE SCHOOLS: Ken Robinson & Lou Aronica, Allen Lane 2015

What's the Problem?

There are many obstacles to the sorts of transformation we have been discussing. Some have to do with the inherent conservatism of institutions, including schools themselves, some with conflicting views about the sorts of changes that are needed, some with culture and ideology, and some with political self-interest.

RISK AVERSION

In *Weapons of Mass Instruction*, John Taylor Gatto speaks about a matrix of constraints on innovation in schools. A former New York City Teacher of the Year, he retired in disillusion with the impact of the factory-oriented, standards culture on teachers and students alike. After a lifetime in education, he said, he had come to think of schools "with their long-term, cell-block-style forced confinement of both students and teachers as virtual factories of childishness." He could not see why they had to be that way.

"My own experience revealed to me what many other teachers must learn along the way too, yet keep to themselves for fear of reprisal: if we wanted we could easily and inexpensively jettison the old, stupid structures and help kids take an education rather than merely receive schooling. We could encourage the best qualities of youthfulness - curiosity, adventure, resilience, the capacity for surprising insight - simply by being more flexible about time, texts, and tests, by introducing kids to truly competent adults, and by giving each student the autonomy he or she needs in order to take a risk every now and then. But we don't do that."¹ This resistance to change old habits can operate at all levels of the system, from classroom to state assemblies. There are other factors too.

CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

Education policy is inevitably enmeshed in other cultural interests, and local and national cultures deeply affect how education is conducted. In parts of Asia, for example, there is a strong culture in school of compliance and of deference to authority, which is rooted in more general traditions in Asian thought and culture. In the United States and the U.K., rightwing politicians in particular often favor the breakup and commercialization of public education. Their general commitment to market economies leads naturally to the view that education can be improved by applying that thinking to schools and parental choice. The political enthusiasm for these initiatives has as much to do with the general values of capitalism in these cultures as it has to any real understanding of their efficacy in education itself.

¹ John Taylor Gatto. *Weapons of Mass Instruction*. Gabriola Island, BC. New Society 2009

PROFITS AND INFLUENCE

There is a push by some politicians to open public education to market forces - through charter schools, preschools, and independent schools operated by for-profit corporations. None of these has been shown as a category to be better than well-supported public schools.²

POLITICS AND AMBITION

Not all policymakers in education actually care about education. Some are career politicians or administrators who are using education as a platform for professional advancement. Their own ambitions in education may be tied up with other political interests and motives. One of the reasons they put such a premium on test results is that they are preoccupied with short-term gains they can use in the next election cycle. In many democracies, these happen every four years or so. With the increasing clamour of the news cycle, campaigning starts eighteen months or more before. So politicians have a couple of years in office to get results they can use on the stump. They go for measurable results in politically sensitive areas like literacy, numeracy, and job readiness. The PISA rankings are tailor-made for political posturing.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Politicians are often drawn naturally to command-and-control approaches. For all the rhetoric of promoting individual fulfillment and the public good, there is a well-documented history in education of social control, conformity, and mass compliance. In some respects, mass education is, and always was, a process of social engineering. Sometimes the political intentions have been benign and sometimes not. I said at the beginning that education is an "essentially contested concept." It is, and sometimes we disagree not only about means but also about the ends of education. No amount of debate on strategy will result in consensus if the purposes we have in mind are opposed.

Organising Change

We noted the need for inspiring leadership to create a climate of innovation and possibility in education. I've been privileged to work with many inspiring leaders in education. One of the most inspiring is Tim Brighouse. A distinguished thought leader in the U.K., he has also been a transformative chief executive in two major school districts - Oxfordshire and Birmingham - and led important programs of strategic innovation in London and throughout the country. He knows from long experience that there is not a simple line from vision to change. It is a constant process of action, improvisation, evaluation, and reorientation in light of experience and circumstances. He sometimes uses this chart to summarize the essential elements: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan:³



Effecting change needs all of these elements. People need a vision of the future they are being asked to move toward. They need to feel that they are capable of change and have the skills that are needed for it. They need to believe that there are good reasons for changing and that the place they

² See, for example, Diane Ravitch. *Reign of Error: the hoax of the privatisation movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Vintage 2014

³ Adapted by T. Brighouse from T.Kostner(1991). Presentation at TASH Conference, Washington DC

aim to be will be better than where they are now, and that it will be worth the effort of making the transition. They need to have the personal and material resources to make the transition. And they need a convincing plan of action to get them there; or at the very least, one that will get them on their way, even if it changes as they go. One of the biggest obstacles to change is the lack of alignment between the various elements that are needed to bring it about. If one or more is missing, the process can stumble and usually does. It happens like this:



If all of these elements are in place, there's a reasonable chance of helping people move from where they are now to where they want to be. The role of leaders is to help ensure that they are moving in the right direction. And in the end, that too is the role of policy and of policymakers in education.

Your Move

Many of the principles and conditions we've discussed throughout this book are as old as education itself. They lie at the heart of well-rounded, successful schools everywhere, and they always have. My own work with schools and governments over the last forty years has always been based on these principles, and, in one way or another, the many examples of transformation that we've looked at in this book clearly illustrate them. The challenge now is to apply them everywhere. As we have emphasized repeatedly, there are many wonderful schools, with great and hopeful people working in them. But too many of them are labouring against the dominant culture of education rather than being helped by it.

Benjamin Franklin, the American statesman and polymath, knew that a balanced, liberal education for all was essential for the proper flourishing of the American dream. It is essential to the fulfillment of the dreams of people everywhere. As the world becomes more complicated and perilous, the need to transform education and create schools for people has never been more urgent.

Franklin once said that there are three sorts of people in the world: those who are immovable, those who are movable, and those who move. We know what he meant. Some people don't see the need for change and don't want to. They squat like boulders in a stream while the flow of events rushes around them. My advice is to leave them alone. Tide and time are on the side of transformation, and the currents of change may leave them behind. There are those who are movable. They see the need for change. They may not know what to do, but they're open to being convinced and to act if they are. Work with them and go where their energy is. Form partnerships and make dreams and plans.

And there are those who move: the change agents who can see the shape of a different future and are determined to bring it about through their own actions and by working with others. They know that they don't always need permission. As Gandhi said, if you want to change the world, you must be the change you want to see. Because when enough people move, that is a movement. And if the movement has enough energy, that is a revolution. And in education, that's exactly what we need.