



There is no such thing as neutrality

Sebastian Chapleau

In this article Seb Chapleau shares his thoughts on how non-partisan teaching should not deter us from political engagement. His account draws on his experience as a community organiser and head teacher to provide insights into how political literacy should be taught across the school and into the community.



One of my favourite philosophers – Jacques Derrida – famously wrote that ‘[t]here’s nothing outside the text’, by which he meant that everything we encounter (physically but also metaphorically) is tainted by subjectivity, making all we experience interminable series of political acts.

Likewise, Richard Shaull, in his preface to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wrote that ‘there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom – the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with the reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.’

Preamble

We are creatures of habit. Despite the fact that many of us claim that we like ‘taking risks’, we rarely do. We do what we always do. Rarely do we ever ‘rock the boat’.

We have become a society that doesn’t do politics. We talk about it – lots! However, people’s participation in democratic activities is on the decrease – not only voting, but also campaigning/fighting for what we believe is right. Similarly, and as argued by Robert

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Putnam, in his seminal *Bowling Alone*, people get less and less involved in community and associative events: membership to group activities (e.g. scouts, sports clubs, community associations, unions, etc.) has been on a steady decrease over the past few decades. The world we live in is a world where individualisation has been a key force of, strangely enough, globalisation: it is more common to watch Friends on one’s own, I’d often tell parents/carers in the school I set up in South East London, as a way to define what our core purpose as a school was, rather than have friends.

When you link this to the fact that the more and more young people face mental health issues which can be associated with loneliness (and this, again, in spite of the rising number of followers many young people have on their social media platforms), this should agitate us to rethink about the way our schools can explicitly focus on relationality and community. And, therefore, on politics too.

In what follows, I’ll focus on politics as a way to reweave the social fabric of our communities taking the word back to its original meaning: the wellbeing of our city.

Leadership as a political act

In our schools, things are very prescribed: there are frameworks (Ofsted, the National Curriculum, assessment frameworks and their connected progress measures, etc.), there are structures, and these are often resting on rules

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set by people whose self-interest is not to question the world as it is.

Recently, however, we've seen a resurgence in teachers organising themselves to create spaces within which issues of identity (e.g. race, gender, etc.) have been discussed. Practical solutions are being shaped, unearthing the many inequities too many classrooms are tarred with. As well as discussing what needs to change, many across our profession are now arming themselves with an arsenal of resources to better teach students about the world we live in.

As a teacher, turned Community Organiser, turned Headteacher, I've always been interested in how we develop our collective capacity to shape the world for the better. Many schools, in my experience, talk about the following postulate: it is our duty to equip our children to become leaders. What we teach in terms of knowledge and skills, consequently, should revolve around that. If not, we might as well stop saying we believe in leadership.

This is where leadership becomes a political act: it is politics which makes the world go round and it is people getting involved and taking ownership of what they want society to look like that makes their lives more meaningful. The choice to be a shaper of society – as opposed to a receiver – is exactly that: a choice. And making a choice is a political act.

Politics, as people mostly define it, is mostly partisan. And that's where we often get stuck. We have to take sides and that makes us biased, something many frown upon within schools. But politics doesn't have to be – and, in fact – shouldn't be partisan.

In addition, politics – as most people define it – puts people off. The concept of politics has become a dirty one. Research depressingly demonstrates that people's trust in political systems is at an all-time low. As demonstrated as part of the Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020 report, published in January 2020 by Cambridge University's Centre for the Future of Democracy, '[t]he rise in democratic dissatisfaction has been especially sharp since 2005. The year that marks the beginning of the so-called "global democratic

recession" is also the high point for global satisfaction with democracy, with just 38.7% of citizens dissatisfied in that year. Since then, the proportion of "dissatisfied" citizens has risen by almost one-fifth of the population (+18.8%).'

Less negatively, I simply see politics as meaning the 'wellbeing of our city' and not as a partisan construct established within Westminster. I see politics as the necessary tool which can free us from the chains of negativity and cynicism.

If we accept that politics is something we cannot avoid, if we believe in making choices, then let's draw a comparison with the way we teach children to read. Doing so will illustrate what schools could decide to focus on moving forward.



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One's not born a leader, one becomes a leader

Take reading as an analogy for what could happen in our society. The ability to read well rests on the successful learning of a complicated code which, in English, takes years to master. Successful readers are ones who have been taught the rules of the code, have been supported to apply their learning over long periods of time, and thus, eventually, achieved fluency/automaticity.

Once children can decode quickly/fluently, they can more easily access the worlds of meaning which texts offer. From letters, to sounds, to meanings. And once they can read fluently, children more easily access the world that surrounds them, not stumbling upon blocks which would otherwise restrict their understanding of their surroundings. The world we live in is a world of words and it is almost universally taken for granted, therefore, that the teaching of reading – through a systematic approach to phonics – is a necessity.

The teaching of politics ought to be considered equally. As we've said above, rare are the schools which don't see their role as 'enabling children to grow into successful leaders who can shape the world for the better.' However, unlike systematic approaches to the teaching of reading, schools rarely know where to start when it comes to teaching

children to become successful leaders who can have a direct influence on the world they live in. That's because most adults don't know where to start in terms of their own hopes for change. The system we're operating within, therefore, is one which reinforces an unequal status quo, whereby the political elites and the private sector will carry on dominating, whilst ordinary people will either remain silent or, when expressing an opinion, will simply moan.

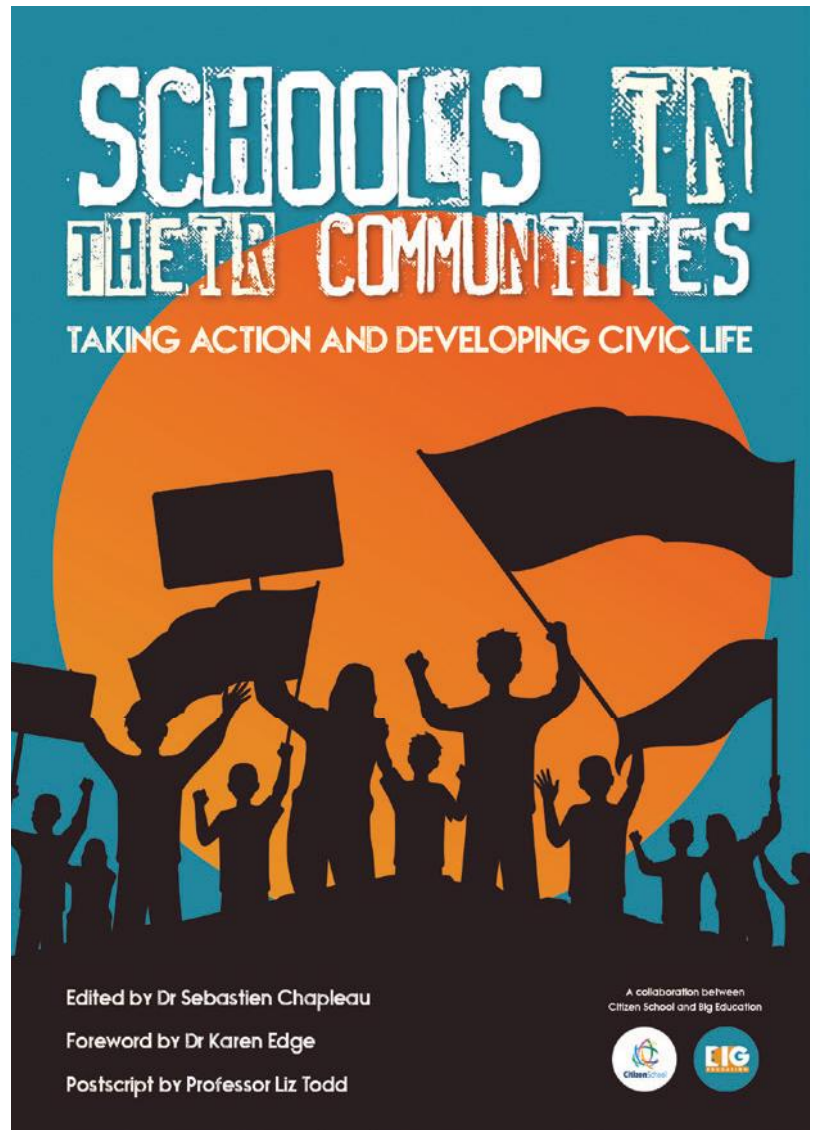
If schools believe in enabling students to become change makers who can seize control of their own futures, a few radical changes need to happen.

Teachers need to be taught again. They need to be taught about power and action, as well as what it takes to develop campaigns which will benefit the lives of their communities beyond our school gates.

Teachers need to teach children in ways which enable students to truly understand how the world works and how tactics (and what tactics) can/should be used to shape the world we live in for the better.

In reality, this is what happens. Take a scenario Emmanuel Gotora (Lead Organiser for the East London Chapter of Citizens UK) and I presented a group of teachers with:

It has recently come to the attention of the Head Teacher at School 21 that visitors to the school are finding it difficult to locate the school. This is having a knock-on effect in the school, and a delegation of educators from various parts of the UK recently could not find the school. Members of the local community, who use the school premises for community events, have also reported that they're finding it hard to find the school. This is leading to bookings being cancelled more and more regularly and community events underattended. Local residents are tired of cars reversing in the neighbourhood, seeming confused/lost. The Head Teacher has written to the Local Authority, requesting a street sign to solve the problem. The Local Authority have not responded to several letters from the school. Students have marched to the town hall demanding a meeting with the Cabinet Member for the Environment who is responsible for making such decisions.



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Following press coverage of the students' march to the Town Hall, the Cabinet Member has reluctantly agreed to a meeting with members of School 21 to discuss the issue. Your task is to negotiate with the Council for the street sign.

At a gathering of hundreds of educators interested in oracy (Great Oracy Exhibition, organised by Voice 21), we argued that enabling students to speak articulately and be heard is powerful. Pushing this further and enabling them to use their voice to win politically is/should be next on the agenda.

In our workshop, we had some great teachers

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with us in the room. But, after a 10-minute role-play, turning our scenario into what could be a real-life negotiation, it became clear that a sign hadn't been won and that it'd never be won.

Participants aiming to get Newham Council to install a sign spoke very eloquently but not much else could be said about the role-play, from their perspective.

On the other side of the argument – and as you may expect – the participants representing Newham Council were able to quickly hide behind simple masks: we've got no money, we have other priorities, it's not really an issue we've noticed, etc.

How do we teach ourselves – and then our students – to win, then?

As a starting point, we can focus on three key notions: power, research, and self-interest.

Power: Who do School 21 members need to have on their side so that Newham Council listens to them. Ignoring one school is easy; ignoring a group made up of members of local/neighbouring institutions working collectively is much harder. Neighbours include, in School 21's case, local Churches and Mosques, other local schools, groups of park users (Friends' Groups), members of Care Homes, etc. Building relationships with those groups is what good neighbourliness is about and it is one way to get more powerful. Most groups in neighbourhoods will overlap: a student at School 21 will worship at the Mosque, will have friends in another school, they'll use the park at weekends. Weaving links between local institutions can become a very natural process.

Research: what is it that we're asking for? How many people does it affect? How much would it cost? Who is the person within Newham Council who can make a decision?

Very often – and as was the case when we role-played this scenario – we are not prepared. We don't know what we're asking for, we've got no data to back our argument and, importantly, we don't know who we're asking!

A successful team is one that is prepared and one that knows what to ask, and who to ask. It is a team that has a script and that has planned what it will ask and how it will ask it. Making a

story personal ('My name is Ismael, and I go to School 21. I'm in Year 4, and the excessive car fumes due to drivers reversing in the streets near my school are making my asthma worse.') and direct ('Will you, Cllr Rachel Tripp (Portfolio Holder for the Environment, and whose powers include commissioning street signs), help ensure that my asthma doesn't get worse?') focuses the mind. It shows you are in control.

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Self-interest: people will do things when it helps them! Why should Cllr Tripp say yes? In the world we live in, people will rarely help because 'that's the right thing to do'.

Understanding what plays on your opponent's mind is key! Is it publicity they'll be interested in? Is it re-election? Is it that you could help them with something else they're working on?

An opponent's self-interest is key for you to understand, and it's important that you put yourself in their shoes as much as possible, clearly understanding what makes them tick. (I once supported a negotiating team with the current Deputy Mayor of London for Policing, and having students attending the school she used to attend worked beautifully. Wanting to make students from her previous school proud scored really highly on her list of self-interests).

In conclusion

Beyond the artificial nature of role-plays, the important point to focus on is that understanding what it takes to win (i.e. understanding that it takes a plan to move from the world as it is, to the world as it should be), schools need to be more honest when they define their aims to 'enable children to grow into successful leaders who can shape the world for the better.'

Aiming to make children successful readers works when schools have a plan. Likewise, and if interested in shaping the world for the better, we need to educate ourselves and be clearer about the way the world works.

Politics, like reading, and in order to be meaningful, needs to be taught well and practised – a lot! Politics, likewise, should be a habit and not only something we do whenever there's an election.