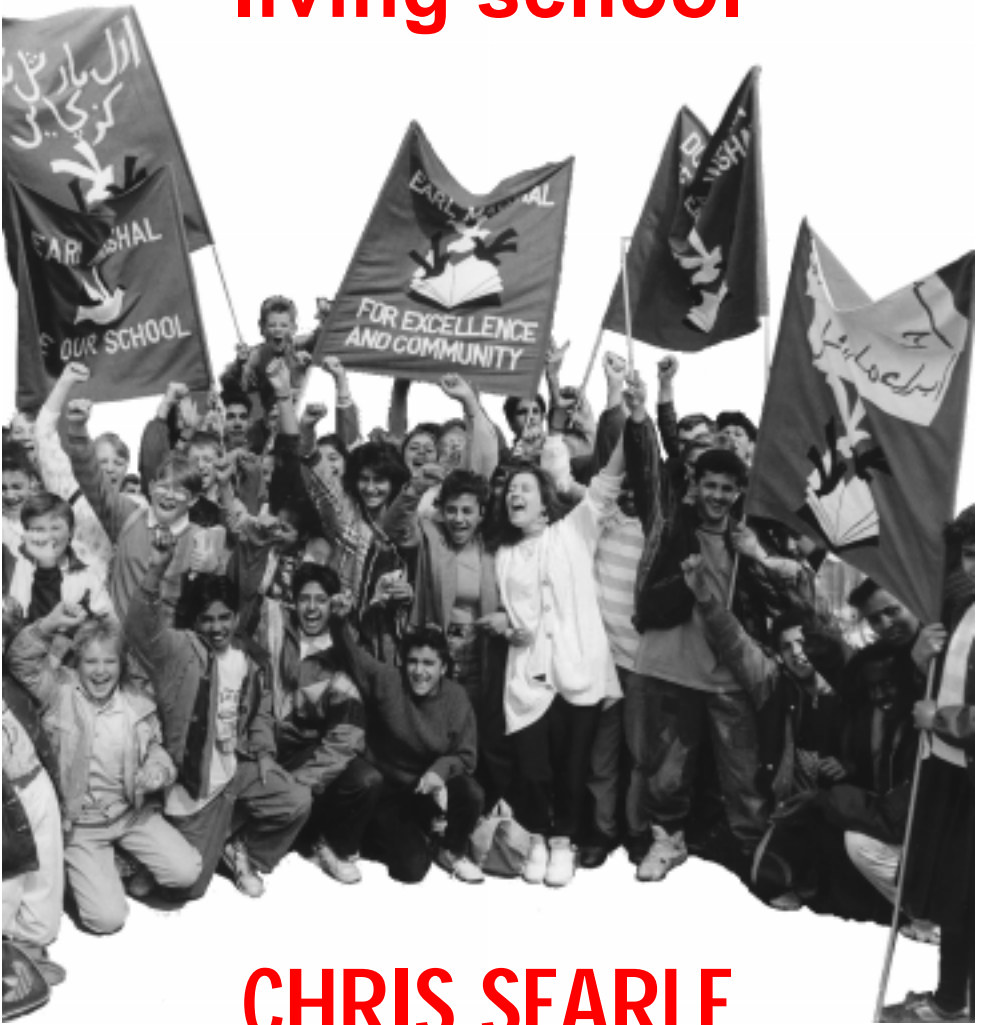


living community living school



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Contents

| | |
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| Acknowledgements | vi |
| Preface | vii |
| Introduction | ix |
| A different achievement: Excellence in the inner city | 1 |
| Living community, living school | 9 |
| Campaigning is education | 30 |
| Proud to speak: Languages, racism and unity | 43 |
| The gulf between: a school and a war | 55 |
| ‘Only a pencil’: The centrality of literacy | 68 |
| ‘Others in myself, myself in others’: the imagination and internationalism | 87 |
| ‘Familiar and heroic’: Herstory and the inner-city | 103 |
| Curriculum and Community | 130 |
| Outcast England: School exclusion, racism and the failure of the Education Reform Act | 135 |
| ‘OFSTEDed, Blunketted and Permanently Excluded’ | 145 |
| About the author | 164 |

A DIFFERENT ACHIEVEMENT: EXCELLENCE IN THE INNER CITY

(1996)

It happens during the last week of every August. As the national General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) sixteen-plus examination results are announced, the local city newspapers are full of the success stories and photographs of glowing school students with their stratospheric grades— mostly those who attend suburban secondary schools. Some have gained ten or eleven subjects at the highest points of ‘A’ grade and the reports reflect their own and their parents’ pride and praise. This is achievement, we are persuaded— its ultimate confirmation and popular expression, and as the government, step-by-step, re-shapes knowledge into the grim official plastic of its National Curriculum, continually tests young people on their inclination and ability to internalise and memorise, it then commissions OFSTED to police and enforce it, finally publishing its raw results in the form of school examination league tables— a new and deformed version of ‘state education’ begins to emerge.

This is not to decry or to devalue the huge effort and mental stamina that these young examinees have shown and proven, but it can only ever be just one part of the whole educational narrative. Maurice Bishop of Grenada, musing upon the frequent gulf between examination success and its usefulness in a speech on teacher education in the Caribbean, once observed that there were ‘many certificated fools in the world’.¹ Such success needs to be measured within a much broader and many-sided exercise of experience and understanding, which breaks through and goes far beyond the walls of state-licensed and market-oriented knowledge and curriculum in a narrowly ‘national’ context. As poet of Tobago Eric Roach declared of democracy, so his words also speak of schools and education ‘Be large, be critical!’²

But where are the inner city young people in all this rejoicing of examination success? Some are there too, and their achievement against all the social odds has been a truly formidable one. But the sky-high results are few and exceptional in the streets and estates on the other side of the city. This August, as with others, the celebrations are largely a middle class ritual.

What is achievement?

Yet here in our inner city school and in hundreds throughout Britain, every minute, every day there is an astonishing and continuous expression of achievement— a common achievement, a genius in the ordinary. Children of ten and younger have developed an ability to speak two languages fluently, moving in and out of each from one

minute to the next as if they were switching existences. Thousands of teenagers who have lived in, studied in and absorbed into their brainpower and consciousness, into their very beings, two cultures, two nations, two peoples, two lives and who manage every day to cohere and order them, yet still move in and out of them as two separate worlds. The result is a control over living and use of language that the suburban child, with all his or her effective routines of study and examination proficiency, will know nothing of and be unable to penetrate. It is the difference between the assimilation of narrow fact and official knowledge as education—and the living of life as education. Which is the greater achievement? Yet which counts for all in the presently organised state system of education, and which counts for virtually nothing? That is the reality of the class distinction, cultural insult and permanent racism that is at the centre of the way achievement is recognised: the denial of the creative language reality and syncretic genius of hundreds of thousands of inner city young people, a reality of mass exclusion and institutional ignorance.

A Pakistani child who accompanies her mother to the DSS and translates into Punjabi for her, unravelling the massive social inequality within the complex bureaucratic word-maze of her second language, and bringing it into meaning and sometimes additional benefits for her mother: what a testing! Yet what reward or recognition, beyond a service of love— while a middle class child of the suburbs gets an ‘A’ in a ‘modern language’ like French or German, which she learns dutifully through books and teachers but rarely speaks or uses in any organic, life-centred way. While a Yemeni teenager spends his Saturdays and Sundays every week teaching Arabic to younger members of his community in the supplementary school organised, administered and staffed by volunteers in his community— what acknowledgement is there for him in the qualification powerhouse of the system? What accreditation? How will his expert and committed work help his entry into university? Yet rote-learning and swotting in the suburbs, endless phrases learned by heart and put down again on an ‘A’ level examination paper—and university is yours! So what is achievement: is it the banking of passive fact by an individual learner, or the use and application of living experience in the service of others and the struggle to develop your own community?

Yet such living achievement has often reached a long way down a journey for the inner city student: the young man or woman who has arrived— sometimes having tramped across the scrubland of northern Somalia to cross a frontier and reach refuge from war—and those who have gone back in order to go further in their lives. Here a boy speaks of his coming, from a village in the mountains of southern Yemen:

Yesterday we had packed up everything. All our relatives were at our house, they were wishing us good luck. People like my Grandma and Auntie were crying because they couldn't bear to see us go. My Mum was really upset and worried at having to leave her family. Me and my brother enjoyed playing

with our friends in the sand, but they knew that we were leaving. I felt nervous and very excited about what to expect to find and do in England.

My Grandma would say to us, 'Where is this country, England?'

I told her, 'Oh, it is an island, very far away.' And my Grandmother said, 'what kind of country floats in water?'

I explained to my Grandma about it. She didn't understand, but I knew that she only asked these questions because she was deeply upset at having to say goodbye to us. I also knew that I would miss my Grandma and friends. I knew I would be quite lonely as there was only my Dad who I knew in England.

Then the arrival in England, a time for the fusion of reconciliation and strangeness:

Then for the first time in three years I saw my Dad. He was waiting for us and I ran towards him and hugged him. He kissed me and then kissed my brother Nageeb. He gave us sweets and fruits. The sweets I didn't even recognise and they were not like I had tasted before. And I ate an apple and a banana, then my Dad took us to the taxi.

The people in England seemed really strange and different. They talked in a language that made me feel lonely as I could not understand what they were saying. My Mum found it really good and easy to cook and get the food, but she was very lonely as my Dad was working in the factory. She had no one to talk to but us. Then after a few weeks another Arab family moved into the neighbourhood and my Mum became good friends with that woman, and that took her mind off her mother and family.³

There is a lifetime of childhood here: an exchange of nations and peoples and the grasp of a deep learning experience at such an early age. The same is true for the child who returns. She finds a life and a country she had not expected under the myths that her new consciousness itself uncovers. It is an education of the mind and heart— as George Lamming wrote, 'to make the mind feel ... and to make the feeling think.'⁴ That is the process that thousands of inner city young people explore on journeys to and sojourns within the lands of their parents. For it is an affirmation found in a country which is now theirs too:

When I finally arrived in Yemen I was surprised at what I saw because I had imagined it like a great dump with snakes and insects everywhere you looked. My first impressions were beautiful as I felt the hot air hit my face. In the beginning I felt uncomfortable because I felt that people were staring at me, but my parents told me not to worry because I was surrounded by family and friends.

When I got home to my part of the city, I felt at home. I heard the *ethane* (the man in the mosque) calling for the people to pray. When I first heard this my heart skipped a beat. The man's voice really touched me and the things he

was saying really made me feel at home. I *felt* like a proper muslim, even though I am one.

I felt free and happy all the time. The view from my bedroom window was enough to last me a lifetime. I could see the buildings. They were very different, high with lots of windows and I could see the blue sky and the green sea and the palm trees surrounding the mosque.

The first day we went out to the market and my father bought us some fruit. I was so surprised at the beauty of the fruit that it was enough to fill my eyes. The people surrounding me were very friendly and I felt equal because I was at home.

Yemen is not a very rich country but I was surprised at how it had built itself up over the previous years. Women in Aden were so free that they could do whatever they wished, but I had to wear a headscarf and an *abaya*, which is like a long cloak.

One day me and my sister went to a friend's house. Her name was Safa. She took us to the beach and we walked up and down the sand— it was beautiful. There were so many things to do in so little time.

Five weeks later my three sisters got married to my mum's brother's sons. It was a triple wedding and Arabic weddings last five days. On the first day you wear casual clothes and on the second you wear green. On the third day you wear any colour that you wish and on the fourth you may wear any colour again. Yet these four days were the worst that I had ever known, knowing that I had to go back to Britain without my sisters.

On the last day of the wedding, my sisters went home. It was the worst day of my life, it was as if someone had taken a piece of my heart.

Two weeks later we had to come back to Britain. We all said our goodbyes and since that day I arrived, I have never felt the same about that country again.

The achievement behind this story is not only to have travelled and been there, but it is also to have opened yourself to the other, to know another life and to allow it to change you and become a part of you. It is living as learning: learning as living. That is education, and that is the experience of many inner city young people that is largely unacknowledged in the formal state system. So much so, that such journeys and sojourns, when they take place in school time, which is usually inevitable, are deemed to be nothing more than 'interruptions' to the conventional school curriculum and judged negatively. They are, however, often the most vibrant and revealing learning experiences in a young person's life and need to be recognised, accredited and built upon not only within family and community, but with a strong sense of value in school too. For the 'community school' must never be a narrow or parochial concept, but a school of the world. It is a base for affirming and extending the internationalism of its very nature and commitment. Its curriculum, quite simply, is not of one 'nation' but of all nations;

not of a single British people but of all life and peoples— the unifying of cultures and nature as a power for development, justice and beauty.

Or there is the fourteen year old Pakistani girl who journeys to the centre of her family's faith and yearns to share the depth of her experience with all whom she knows—and the whole world, if possible. As she prepares to leave for Mecca with her uncle, her aunt and grandmother start to cry: 'Me and my uncle laughed at them and said, 'we're not going to World War Three, we're going to a fabulous place! Coming in to land over the city, she sees below 'the wonderful lights of Mecca' and is astonished by their beauty. Then when she visits the great Mosque she 'couldn't stop looking at it. I mean it was so beautifully clean and neat. It was shining from all over, and half of it was made of real gold.' The huge oneness of a whole community at prayer moves her deeply, but she suddenly comes back to a real world:

When we prayed, all the world in Saudi Arabia is at the Mosque. We prayed, and before you pray you clean yourself, you wash your arms, face and feet. Suddenly in the place where the women were cleaning themselves the lights went off, and when they came back on again after about five minutes I looked in the sink. There were grasshoppers and lizards. I screamed. It was a very big sink— the taps just went on and on to God knows where. At least a hundred people can wash themselves there.

She endures the burning heat: 'After we came back from the Mosque, we had a bath and got ready for the five very hard days in the tents. Believe me, it is so, so hot. It seems the sun's on the floor.' As she makes her last visit to the Mosque, the mundane and the mystical seem to jell:

We came back to make our last visit to the Mosque, to say hello to the black stone. We were very, very thirsty. We all started to cry: 'Our Prophet's in heaven and the devil's in hell!' It was all like a dream. It was absolutely amazing.

I'd love to go again, and I hope that every human being goes there.

Deficit and deprivation

How can this knowledge and experience be set down as 'deprivation' or 'disadvantage'? Yet the deficit approach to inner city education, the portrayal of students and parents in terms of problems after problems, only increases the burden on their breaking out from the caricatures heaped upon them. For their achievement is measured by the ever-narrowing official curriculum, becoming more and more impositional under the control of Conservative educators and ideologues such as Dr. Tate and his preoccupations with national identity and the vindication through history of truly 'British' heroes⁵— and overseen by the formulaic inspection criteria and processes of the OFSTED network. Authentic working class and internationalist inner city experience

is squeezed and excluded, with the imagination and energies fusing learning with life and human freedom being pressed tighter and tighter by every new proclaimed 'order' from SEAC and the new masters of officialised curriculum development. Thereby, living achievement becomes 'underachievement', bilingualism or a fluency in Arabic, Punjabi, Somali or Bengali becomes either irrelevant or an expression of linguistic poverty— and the immersion in cultures other than a white British norm or a European language becomes a degeneration into cultural 'disadvantage'. If we accept or work within the terminal dimensions of these definitions, the achievement of the majority of inner city children will never be equitably recognised or accredited. Instead, we should be raising the value-laden criteria of their own communities' aspirations in education, campaigning for the achievement of bilingualism in the inner city to be understood and accredited as the equivalent of one 'A' level for university entry, or for the consistent participation in the teaching and organisation of community supplementary or language schools and classes to be recognised formally as deserving another 'A' level in Community Development. Universities too, and those who frame their admission policies, need to be at the centre of this process, working closely alongside inner city schools and communities. Thus we would be promoting and campaigning around criteria that genuinely affirm and develop the cultural strength and achievements in the lives of many thousands of inner city young people, and struggling to open university doors to their commitment and talent.

The Damage of the Act

The force and alienation of government persuasion following the enactment of the 1988 Education Act has already wrought much damage and confusion to education and schools in the inner cities. While the well-resourced, prestigious suburban schools appear to offer their students a straight road to 'A' levels and university entry, the government uses them, through its 'open enrolment' policy, to entice inner city parents to abandon schools close to home. This was a move also symbolically undertaken by the leader of the 'Opposition' Labour Party, Tony Blair, who enrolled his own son in a grant-maintained school, well-traditioned and well streamed, at some distance from his Islington home.

The 1993 case of the inner city, mainly Bangladeshi, parents who went to court against Bradford City Council, accusing it of racism by allocating their children to local schools rather than allowing them free entry into, as the *Yorkshire Post*⁶ put it, the 'best upper schools located in the Aire Valley', shows how convincing has been the government attack on inner city schools. The *Times Educational Supplement* put the argument and the myth pithily: 'White middle class schools offer the best route out of the underclass for poor Asian kids and parents actually have a choice.' In fact, the reality of government strategy is to increasingly present no choice, as local schools are gradually bled dry and closed down— with suburban *schools* presented with the right

to choose rather than working class *parents*. Furthermore, the number of inner city children who are sentenced to long-distance education far from their friends and communities, who are disenchanted by and opting out of suburban schools and transferring back to schools in their local neighbourhoods— is also an observable phenomenon. As the Bradford Labour councillor, Malcolm Waters, concluded after the case of racism against the local council was turned down by the High Court in September 1993: ‘We have sympathy with every parent who may have believed that government policy guaranteed their right to the school of their choice, but it does not.’ This choice is a phantom one and a part of the duplicity of the 1988 Act. Yet while the Bradford Parents’ case of the blatant discrimination suffered by those communities living in geographically and economically-defined struggling areas of the inner city was undoubtedly true, nowhere in the establishment press could be found a defence or advocacy of inner city schools, or their potential in offering local communities a democratic and achievement-founded alternative to the estranged and faraway education of suburban schools.

Unlimited ambition

Far from the convenient myths hatched about inner city children being bereft of aspiration and desire to succeed in education, ask our students what their ambitions are— there is no limit to them. These have often come with their parents, travelling oceans and continents to strive to make them real. The school’s major daily task is to help to achieve and realise them, and passing examinations in conventional school terms and National Curriculum terms is of vital importance for inner city young people. Yet their teachers have so much more to do too, putting this official knowledge into a critical framework and offering alternative perspectives, broadening and internationalising curriculum and developing work against racism and sexism, creating new forums and activities within the community and democratic structures and practices within the school, stimulating learning and pride in black and working class history and culture, transforming individualised and capsulised notions of knowledge, value and experience so that our students can see in their future an ambition not only for themselves, but for their communities too.

A Pakistani boy says: ‘My ambition is to be a doctor, a casualty doctor because I want to save lives and help sick people. I’m not going to be a lazy one like some doctors that only do it for money. I’m going to do my best to help people.’ A girl classmate adds: ‘My ambition is to be a nursery teacher because I’d like to teach children all I can. I care about children’s education ... I would like to go to Pakistan and other countries and teach the children there about all kinds of subjects.’ Another girl writes: ‘I want to be a doctor because I want to save people to live and be proud of myself. I would like to help the Bosnian people because they are dying and I want them to live longer and enjoy their lives. I want to be part of a big group to help them because I

don't want them to be fighting all their lives.' Another knows the real situation in Pakistan, for he writes, 'you have to pay to go to the Doctor's there and it is a lot of money. I want to be a doctor to help those who can't afford to go.' Rizwana tells of her lifetime's hope: 'Ever since I was small my ambition was to be a teacher. I would like very much to be a nursery teacher because I like small children and I think that nursery education is important before you start school.'

Then there is Fatima, twelve years old and writing defiantly:

My ambition is to be a lawyer who takes cases and fights for justice in the court. I would like to be a lawyer because I want to fight for justice and the rights of people. Also I don't want guilty people freed and innocent people jailed. I would like to help people get their rights, not jailed for what they haven't done. I would like to give people the courage to speak in the court, and not be frightened.

These are not lives and futures seen from a deficit vision, rather from a clarity and determination to see success and fulfilment personally, and for others and whole communities too. Neither is there ambiguity about achievement and what it means. It is bonded with service, internationalism and love for ordinary people on two continents and across the world. It is upon this strength of *community* and aspiration that we, as teachers, need to build our work in the schools of the inner cities, within a culture which now goes beyond points 'national' and expresses the world. This culture needs also to be in the hearts of our schools and those who practice a critical pedagogy within a dialogue of the classroom, standing up against the passive notion that teachers are simply 'deliverers' of a formulaic and prefabricated curriculum handed down to them. Such an education can only be moribund and demotivating. Instead, teachers must live up to their true mission as active makers of curriculum in collaboration with their students, keeping knowledge and achievement alive and in perpetual process and creating schools which are true meeting places of curriculum and community.

References

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