

Flippin' eck! An urgent call for a democratic approach to education

Joel Petrie

Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber (ed.) (2016) *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up*. Routledge. 306 pages. £17.99

Teachers, especially in schools but increasingly in post-compulsory education, will be aware of the modish and sometimes zealous advocacy of 'flipped learning'. Critics might suggest that flipped learning is merely a revamp of blended or mixed-mode learning; but Yeeless, in a JISC piece on flipped learning and CPD, identified a study which split a class of students with half taught in person and the other half taught through flipped learning and supposedly found that [in] 'the control classroom, students gained an average score of 41%, but the flipped learners scored an average of 74%'. *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up* playfully riffs on the notion of the flipped classroom to articulate a radically utopian vision of education. In a recent *Forum* article, Professor Stephen Ball highlights a shift over the past generation in English education: 'one of the changes – slow, incremental but profound – has been the reallocation of authority in education. Some actors, like teachers and local authorities, have had their authority diminished, while others, like philanthropists, secretaries of state, head teachers, and the technocrats of school leadership, have had theirs expanded' (Ball, 2015: 8). *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up* very successfully responds to this argument as it applies to the global stage.

Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber, the book's editors, are secondary school teachers in the Netherlands, and *Flip the System* is the international follow-up to their Dutch book *Het Alternatief* (*The Alternative*). The editors draw on both chalk-face and

research active educationalists from around the world, such as Andy Hargreaves, Pasi Sahlberg, Ann Lieberman, Gert Biesta, Tom Bennett, Howard Stevenson and Stephen Ball himself. The book's central thesis is the urgent need to embrace a more humane and democratic approach to education, which places teachers firmly at the steering wheel of the educational system worldwide.

The book is presented in four sections with chapters often followed by vignettes which afford teachers from across the globe space to contribute to the overarching themes. *Flip the System* benefits from this approach and is very accessible in its style. The first section interrogates the pernicious impact of neoliberalism on education, and benefits from a particularly clear interview with Stephen Ball on the subject, which should be essential reading for any educator new to the concept and is worth the price of admission alone. Subsequent chapters explore the challenges of teaching in Cambodia and Georgia, and a final chapter by Thijs Jansen explores the compelling notion of voluntary professional slavery and proposes neorepublican alternatives to the neoliberal hegemony.

The second section shifts the focus to more theoretical concepts that might assist in flipping the educational system. For me one of the chapters from this section in particular resonates, and is here highlighted, as it is especially relevant to current post compulsory debates in the UK around teacher leadership, professionalism and trade unionism. The chapter, by Howard Stevenson and Alison Gilliland, is called 'The teacher's voice': teacher unions at the heart of a new democratic professionalism', and makes an impassioned case for teachers to reclaim their teaching autonomy via a new collective democratic professionalism. To an extent this is an

appeal that has rumbled on for years, and in a post-compulsory context the jockeying for position and ideological differences apparent between nascent professional organisations and networks including the ETF (Education and Training Foundation), the CoT (College of Teachers), and Tutor Voices illustrates their argument. Indeed several of the key theorists on democratic professionalism cited by Stevenson and Gilliland are very well known and long-standing advocates of the approach, including Sachs and Whitty. What sets their chapter apart in the professionalism debate is an outright rejection of the 'industrial versus professional' debate: teachers face pressures that entail professional, industrial and policy dynamics, and a useful example given is that a decision to increase class sizes would clearly have both a pedagogical, professional implication and workload, industrial consequences. Stevenson and Gilliland go on to argue compellingly that only teacher trade unions have the capacity to foster a new democratic professionalism: 'they are the only means by which collective agency can be asserted'.

The third section places the emphasis firmly on the necessity for collective rather than individual professional autonomy, and explores the practical democratic implications of such an approach. In the fourth section, which articulates strategies for teachers to increase their capacity to be change agents, there is another stand-out chapter: 'Teacher leadership – a reinvented teaching profession', jointly written by three American educators Barnett Berry, Noah Zeichner and Rachel Evans. The authors highlight how the concept of teacher leadership is ill-defined, arguing that effective school leadership is hampered by command and control management strategies, and needs to be replaced by a complex, collective leadership based on trust. This analysis will no doubt chime with educators in the UK working in post-compulsory provision. In *Post-16 Educator* 80 Rob Smith highlighted the beginnings of dissent emerging in FE, identifying Tutor Voices' publication of a Bill of Rights for FE as an example. He suggests we remember that 'dissent is about alternatives and the current situation requires us to engage in an imaginative and intellectual task', which could promote 'a system that is in harmony with teachers' values and properly enhances their function' (Smith, 2015: 4).

Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up is dissenting in this tradition: it is intellectual and scholarly whilst being eminently readable and accessible, and it is certainly imaginative in its scope and structure. What makes *Flip the System* especially impressive is that it goes beyond diagnosing the sickness at the heart of educational neoliberalism and begins, tentatively but

persuasively, to articulate a cure that must come from within teaching communities. In the words of Stevenson and Gilliland, educational professionals 'will not flip the system unless, and until, they organise collectively'.

References:

Ball, S. (2015) 'Back to Basics: repoliticising education', *Forum*, 57:1.

Smith, R. (2015) 'FE teachers, broken funding and dissent', *Post-16 Educator* 80.

Yeeles, N. ('Flipping continuing professional development' at <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/flipping-continuing-professional-development-20-aug-2015> (accessed 7th December 2015).

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