



The Watford Social Education Project

circa 1980s

My colleague Sharon had always fought the notion that we, the Watford Social Education Project (WSEP)*, were a dumping ground for kids the secondary schools couldn't handle.

To me this seemed counter-productive for WSEP as we struggled to keep business coming in. Based on our experiences, I knew that if we were less precious about this, we would find a lot more ready customers among the local secondaries. When she left and I became the lead worker, I began to re-think the whole WSEP programme.

Sharon had also felt that it was important to get the kids out of the school and into our own back room/mini-warehouse/work area as soon as possible, whereas I felt that we should be engaging on school premises within the context of school routines and strictures. I felt we had to win the early battles in gaining respect and support from the kids on the familiar turf of their own school settings, and that our premises should be used as an additional incentive for them as they tried to grasp what we were trying to impart. I also felt we needed full buy-in and on location support from the designated teachers who, hitherto, had been tempted to scarper after the kids were dumped at our premises.

In due course I and my new co-worker had developed and standardised a whole new approach.

Whereas before, the decision to work with us was previously taken by the Head and the teaching staff with the kids suddenly finding themselves transported off school premises to our draughty but egalitarian "board room", I wanted more initial buy-in from the kids. With this in mind, our negotiations with Heads and school staff meant that we were introduced directly into classrooms at the school. There the kids themselves would decide if they wanted to work with us and the classroom itself would become our base of operations.

On the first day I would be introduced to the class by the teacher and invited to make a presentation.

This I would do, listing the kinds of activities we'd engaged in previously and the resources (van, cameras, recording equipment, secretarial services, etc) we could bring in if they elected to work with us.

But, there were conditions.

First of all they had to decide, among themselves, after I was gone, if they wanted to work with us.

Secondly, they then had to agree to go through a series of sessions on formal collective decision making, culminating in the election of their own officers - Chair, Secretary, Treasurer.

And thirdly, once they'd achieved this, they could use our resources as they saw fit subject to the laws of the land, the school's rules, and their own collective decision making processes.

I don't think we were ever not invited back. It was a no-brainer really. They could see that, at the very least, here was a chance to get out of the tedious school cycle, get some fresh air, and maybe even find the latitude to sneak off for a fag break. Plus they would be able to play with cameras and videos and get driven around in a van!

So, having achieved their collective consent and, to some extent, their buy-in, we launched through a series of games and simulations to demonstrate both the mechanics and the advantages of collective decision making.

The first of these was something we called the "Moon Shot Shuffle". This consisted simply of prioritising a list of about 20 objects which one might wish to bring to the moon if one was planning to land there. These included things like matches, which would obviously have a low priority to most thinking people. This list would initially be given to each individual in the class and they would prioritise, on their own, without discussion with anybody else. These would then be handed in and the lists re-issued but to four or five small sub-groups where priorities were again addressed but in discussion within these groups. Again the lists would be handed in and then we would proceed to address the prioritisation as a single large group - with the discussion being chaired by myself and notes taken by the teacher. The teacher and I would grade all the results and - to everyone's astonishment - the sub-

group results were inevitably better than the individual results, but the full class result was always, for obvious reasons really, the best of the lot.

Another was a railway building simulation, with players working in sub-groups to collectively decide the direction of their own railway “companies” across a map of the USA. Sooner or later, as tracks converged on mountain passes or river crossings, they would also have to negotiate with other companies and, eventually have a meeting of all companies. However, the meetings between companies could only be attended by a single delegate from each company. These delegates were briefed by their colleagues who could then only watch in frustrated silence as their company interests were, for better or worse, represented. There were many delegate “recalls” as reps were taken to task by their peers for poor articulations of collective objectives.

Finally, having completed such exercises, the day would come when they would elect the officers of their class and begin, with their elected Chair overseeing meetings, to embark upon “projects”.

Any suggestions could to be developed and proposed by any sub-grouping, but had to be presented for decision-making to the whole class. The only stipulation was that each proposal had to have a proposer and a seconder, with the proposer outlining the project and answering questions and the seconder doing the final wind up before being put to the whole class for the vote. If more than one project was being proposed there would have to be further votes about the distribution and timetabling of the WSEP's resources. This frequently led to very spirited and sometimes very heated discussions, but we considered this tempering to be part of the experience we were trying to bestow.

As projects were developed and launched, we began to discover the true beauty of the system. For example, one of the first things groups of boys would think of would be a visit to or from the police. This was often a mischievous tester from the kids' perspective. “Let's push for a visit to the police station and see if they'll let us.” As the proposal was presented many of the kids would slyly watch the teacher and myself to assess our reaction to such a cheeky proposition. We might speak to one or two points, but only after putting our hands up and being recognised by the Chair. We might vote for or against, but if it was carried by a majority, it was carried - usually to the uninhibited elation of the proposers.

Of course, the next step was then to set everything up.

“How are you going to do that?” I would ask the elated proposers.

“Aren't you going to contact them?” they would ask.

“No”, I would say, “I'm not in your group.”

It became clear that it was all up to them. If they wanted to write letters, I would get them typed up on WSEP headed paper, but I wouldn't help them draft anything. If they wanted to phone, we would give them coins for a phone box but they would have to wing it themselves. This inevitably led to a lot of hard work on their parts as they strove to complete the tasks that would give them their ride in the van with all that technical equipment, but the day would eventually come. The better organised project groups would get out the classroom door first, to the envy of the less organised, but, sooner or later, everyone would get a crack of the whip.

One particular group followed up their heady guided tour of the police station (including the cells) by inviting a police speaker to come to their class to talk about careers in the force. Letters were duly drafted and sent and dates arranged. At the appointed time a police officer in full glittering uniform appeared at the classroom door. He'd been met by a nominated member of the project group who introduced him first to the Chair of the class who then introduced him to the teacher and myself. The glittering policeman was a little disconcerted by this, but not as much as when he was asked to sit at the head of the class next to the Chair whilst the teacher and I took our seats among the masses. The Chair did a god job of introducing their guest speaker but the policeman was clearly agitated by this reversal of roles and he eventually stood up and said, “Look, I can't do this.” and left. The kids were stunned.

This contrasted sharply with another event organised by another project group in the same class. The firemen were on strike at the time and all the kids were fully versed in the trash newspaper headlines of the day. “Firemen putting innocent women and babies at risk” etc. They wrote to the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and asked for a speaker, thinking they would demolish him with the power of their critique. The FBU guy showed up just as the policeman had, but he wasn't fazed at all by the set up. He immediately recognised the “branch meeting” format of the session and fit in perfectly naturally. The kids asked their cheeky questions and the FBU guy responded calmly and quietly whenever the Chair gave him the go-ahead, right up to the point that there were no more questions forthcoming. There was a pause as the kids digested the exchanges. Then one of them put his hand up and asked, “Could we come down and interview the men on the picket lines?” There was a hush as the

Chair turned to the FBU guy. The FBU guy said, "I don't see why not, but I would have to clear it with my Branch meeting first." This made good sense to everybody.

A week later the whole class was down there in front of the main fire station, taking pictures and video, recording interviews, taking notes, and occasionally throwing scrap wood into the steel 45 gallon drums the firemen used to keep warm on the line. "They're really nice blokes," they all said in the review session the following week. "Yeah, and they only want a fair wage and some health and safety. What's wrong with that?"

Another group hit upon the idea of going to visit the exotically mysterious "Hare Krishna house", a local mansion gifted to the sect by George Harrison. By this time everybody was familiar with the procedures and the plan evolved out of a genuine interest rather than a testing of the limits. Letters were exchanged and on the arranged date the group trooped off for an afternoon of Buddhism. They were greeted by a former Harrods (he referred to it as "Horrids") employee now named Boomadeva Das, a charming and undogmatic man who was clearly at peace with himself and proved a relaxed and genial guide. The kids had a tour, sat in on some group meditation, and even got fed and watered.

It wasn't all plain sailing. Issues of discipline arose but were largely handled by the kids' own democratic processes, but I occasionally lost my rag at some of the ingrained attitudes. One time I happened to be driving the van in the town centre when I heard one of the boys in the back shout out "Hey Paki". Blindly incensed, I hit the brakes so hard we all lurched forward and I turned back and hissed "Who said that?" A trembling hand went up and, without thinking, I said "Get out."

We were miles away from the school and I don't know how many from his home, but he stood there on the pavement among the very Asians he'd been abusing as we drove off. Today I would probably find myself sacked and charged and, even then, I was pretty sure I would be hearing from the school or the parents, but, to the boy's credit, he trudged it and nothing more was said.

Given the funding constraints, there was no way of empirically testing the work we were doing but, in the last days of WSEP as the funding dried up and moved on, I was attending a crowded meeting of one of the local community associations when I sensed some activity off to my right. I turned and leaned forward slightly. There, seated in one of the rows of folding metal chairs and waving discretely, were three or four of my former kids (including, as it happens, the one who shouted "Paki"). I smiled and waved back, but my heart nearly burst when one of them put up his hand to speak. Haven't a clue now what it was about, but he was recognised by the Chair of the association and stood up, perfectly at ease with the ritual, and spoke out in front of all those people. As I watched him, glowing with a virtual father's pride, I noticed his mates weren't watching him. They were watching me, and as I again caught their eyes, they nodded vigorously with an animated row of thumbs up.

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