

# **The 20% Project for Schools - A Modest Proposal**

**by Derry Hannam**

## **What young people need**

It seems to me that the crucial commodity that young people need in order to find and deepen their interests and identity, and to learn how to live with others is TIME. Time to think, time to wonder, time to question, time to create, time to hang out with their friends, time to find out who they are, time to relax and just be idle for a while – and a space to do it in.

Yet this is the one thing that prior to ‘the virus’ most state funded secondary or high schools, and increasingly, middle, primary or elementary schools as well, deprived them of. Lunch hours and playtimes/recess were shortened or cut. The encroachment into their free time was not just during the school day but also at home, in the evenings and at week-ends, with often relentless homework and test/examination revision.

## **Covid-19 virus opportunities**

Even in this time of Corona Virus and school closure/lock-down many schools are aiming to teach and task-set on-line on a full school day basis. The tasks set are basically conventional school-work with conventional teacher-talk, from the screen instead of from the front of the classroom followed by a conventional test.

Some parents are expecting and requiring this, but a growing number are not.

A Danish parent writes –

***“Since the exams and mandatory learning goals are abandoned for now, teachers report feeling more playful with students. They are working with co-creation and involving students in making decisions more than before.***

***There is more quality time spent between teachers and students, resulting in better relationships and increased student well-being.”***

Here the emphasis is switching from teaching to learning, from prescribed content to inquiry, and, freed from the pressure of examination preparation, a change in the quality of student-teacher relations to include more student participation and playful creativity. What an opportunity to do things in a better way when schools re-open for all students!

### **Some entire School Systems are already moving in this direction**

We know that it is perfectly possible to have a school system with high attainment that does not create pressure and anxiety.

Finland, for example, under the banner of “Less Is More” has a shorter school day than most with minimal homework - a legal maximum of 30 minutes per night in total and none at week-ends which are held to belong to the students – and no high-stakes national tests until the final year of high school.

Despite this apparently more relaxed approach to schooling academic performance is higher on average in Finland than most European and North American school systems

### **Two examples of a more motivating way of doing things**

When I was deputy head of an English comprehensive school in the 1980s the students proposed that we should have occasional ‘activities’ days when they and the teachers together could create a wide programme of activities which students of any age could choose from. Parents were supportive and some became involved.

The variety was amazing as was the enthusiasm! It was very successful and very popular, so we extended it to an 'activities week' in the summer term.

The process of programme negotiation and creation was in itself an education with staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders such as local sports groups learning to listen to, and learn from and about each other, often for the first time. Relationships were transformed with much use of first names.

At the point where I left the school to become an inspector the idea was being discussed of having an 'activities week' every term – which would have represented about 8% of annual curriculum time. No-one regarded this as time lost or wasted – far from it. Some students previously disengaged from school changed their attitudes entirely.

Parallel to this development and closely associated with it was the emergence of the school as a 'community school' with an elected community education council, commonly chaired by an older student. A 'community fair' took place at which the myriad community organisations in the rural town of five thousand opened themselves up to the school, and the school opened up its resources to the town's organisations.

Each benefitted enormously and a number of entirely new organisations emerged such as a community newspaper co-edited by adults and students, and a community orchestra with some 60 players aged 8 to 80. At the same time some normal school lessons became open to adult students of any age and part-time flexi-schooling was explored for the first time at the request of some home educating families.

Some years later, as an inspector, I visited another secondary school of 1300 students in a rural area where many students could not take part in extra-curricular activities because of long bus journeys home. The head teacher, staff, governors (English school board), parents and students' council formed an 'Electives Committee' which decided to move 'extra-curricular' into the regular schedule/timetable. They allocated half a day per week (10% of curriculum time) to a large and wide-ranging programme of 'electives.' These were negotiated between students and staff around the interests and enthusiasms of both. If students wanted

an activity that was beyond the expertise of any staff, though kitchen and janitorial staff also participated, then an appeal would be made to the parents.

The school was close to an internationally famous motor racing circuit and, as well as the more conventional musical and sporting electives, with the assistance of some parents, one mixed age group actually built a working racing car.

Because conventional teaching time was reduced it was possible for the electives programme to have a budget and if nobody else could be found an 'expert' would be hired.

As in my school these negotiations were themselves an education for democracy and through them relationships were transformed. Students of different ages could join any group they chose. Some were led by students themselves. The programme was very popular with all the groups involved. A parent told me that their children would 'get off their death beds to get to school on electives day!' In fact, part of my job as an inspector was to check the student attendance figures for each half-day of the week. The highest figure was consistently for 'electives' afternoon on Wednesdays.

I also checked the school's examination record. It was significantly better than might have been expected for a school in such a socio-economic environment!

### **The modest proposal**

So – my modest proposal. All state-funded schools, both primary and secondary, should be encouraged to allocate at least 10% of curriculum time to be negotiated around the interests of the students and staff. Time for individual or collaborative self-directed education with the teachers being available as facilitators or 'experts' if their services were requested by the students.

Sometimes the students themselves might be facilitators for other students – or even teachers. A teacher recently wrote in my union magazine about how much more her students knew about climate change issues than she did!

I predict that the negotiation process itself would be educational. The motivation and morale of all will rise. The new engagement which will result will more than compensate for any feared loss of learning from reduction in formal subject teaching time. In fact, standards will rise. Results will improve. Students will learn how to take responsibility for at least part of their learning and learn how to manage at least part of their own time – both crucial if they are to deal with the changes and uncertainties that the Fourth Industrial Revolution is already presenting us with.

### **It's already happening in the most innovative companies**

So – actually – why stop at 10%?

Companies such as the conglomerate SEMCO in Brazil or the Scot Bader Commonwealth paint company in the UK have for many years used company training programmes to encourage employees to widen and deepen their learning following their own personal passions and interests. More to the point, for more than 70 years, 3M's unique 15% Culture has encouraged employees to set aside a portion of their **work time** to proactively cultivate and pursue innovative ideas that excite them.

Drawing on the 3M philosophy Google has introduced its '20% Project' where employees are encouraged to follow their own ideas beyond their actual job descriptions for 20% of their paid work time. This has led to some of the most profitable of Google's innovations such as Gmail and AdSense. The US company Target Project has opened up a similar scheme to all its employees with its "Orange Friday" programme.

### **...and in a few schools**

The transfer of the 20% idea from the hi-tech business world to education is already happening in the United States.

The mother of the CEO of Youtube, Esther Wojcicki, has argued for and practised the idea for nearly 40 years in her highly successful Media Arts programme at Palo Alto High School. Students use 20% of their class time for totally self-directed projects where their natural learning instinct take flight either individually or more usually in collaboration with others.

She uses the mnemonic TRICK – Trust, Respect, Independence, Collaboration and Kindness.

Interesting that kindness is identified as a key, though underrated, evolutionary human quality by Dutch writer Rutger Bregman in his latest book “Human-kind” (highly recommended by psychologist Peter Gray of Boston College.) It is probably no coincidence that Esther Wojcicki’s daughter Susan was one of the founders of Google and went on to create AdSense in her 20% Google work time before moving to Youtube.

Wojcicki’s ideas run parallel to the emergence of the 20Time movement, nicely illustrated in a Vimeo film by Sean Ziebarth, and extensively described in Kevin Brookhouser’s book “The 20Time Project: How Educators Can Launch Google’s Formula for Future Ready Innovation.”

Every school should be free to organise the use of this time in its own way – it could be half a day per week plus 20% of some lessons, or two half-days, or one day per week, or 20% of all lessons. And, of course, if it was found that as students became more motivated the compulsory directed curriculum could be managed in a reducing amount of time then the 20% could grow.

### **The world is ready for the idea?**

When the Israeli educator Yaacov Hecht and I launched the 20% idea at a Council of Europe conference on Education and Democracy at Strasbourg in 2016 he asked for a vote on the issue when concluding his keynote speech. The 1000 or more administrators, policy makers and teachers voted overwhelmingly in favour. Afterwards I asked some who had voted against what they didn’t like about the idea.

“20% is not enough,” they said. “It should be more!”

I think I agree with them.

### **Young people are natural learners**

Could it be that at last the natural learning potential of young people will come into alignment with the future requirement for collaborative and creative innovators. Could schools become

places that nurture the social and economic entrepreneurs that the world needs, capable of facing up to the challenges confronting us, not least of those being the implications of climate change.

Let's hope so!

**Vote 20% - you know it makes sense!**

***Derry Hannam, (retired deputy head teacher of a Derbyshire community comprehensive school and school inspector, currently an international consultant in Education for Democracy and Human Rights)***

**Seaford, UK. May 28<sup>th</sup> 2020**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)