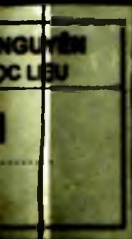




# ENGAGING TEACHERS

TOWARDS A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC AGENDA  
FOR SCHOOLING





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Towards a radical democratic  
agenda for schooling

**Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore**

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*Foreword by Simon Marginson*

*Acknowledgements*

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# Foreword

Since Rousseau there has been a long and rich tradition of arguments linking education with self-determination and collective empowerment. The most important contribution is probably that of Dewey, whose *Democracy in Education* ([1916] 1966) persuaded us to locate education in the social realm, as a primary instrument in building modern democracy. The tradition of education and democracy reached a peak in the late 1960s and 1970s which saw the flourishing of activist teaching in inner-city communities in Europe, Australia and the United States. Notions gained ground of the teacher as radical professional responsible for the empowerment of all, teacher-community alliances in building community, educational leadership as collective rather than bureaucratic. These practices were deeply threatening to many in government and conservative circles, and received a battering when the new right and policies of 'market at all costs' gained ascendancy from the mid-1980s. The primary contribution made by *Engaging Teachers* is that it recovers and reconnects with the education/democracy tradition.

In doing so this book demonstrates that understanding the social context, and being at home with political and economic argument, are vital tools for democratic education. Politics and economics have for too long been used to close down democracy in schools and separate them from their local communities (who become consumers-at-a-distance). Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore argue that an effective understanding of politics and economics can break down the ascendancy of conservative policies and enable schools and their communities to take their future into their own hands. *Engaging Teachers* sharply illuminates the flaws in the market model of teaching and learning. The market model rests on the breathtaking claim that market economic competition is 'natural' and serves the interests of all, free political decision-making is artificial and destructive, and teachers are just a special interest group that has captured schooling for its own selfish purposes. They explain that market choice is fine if you have the material means, the private wealth, to exercise the full range of choices. It's not so good if you do not. Markets by their natural operations foster inequalities. They divide school communities, where everyone should succeed, into winners and losers. They enrich some schools and impoverish others. And in systems



such as in New Zealand, the UK and parts of Australia that have reformed their government schools along market lines, markets have conspicuously failed to improve learning outcomes for students.

The key point in this argument is that capitalism and democracy are *not* natural or inevitable partners. Unfettered capitalism has no place for collective political empowerment, which forces the strong market players to become accountable to everyone, thus interfering with the 'natural mechanism of competition. Market economics *must* be modified if every person, rich or poor, is to exercise their democratic rights in society and through education. Markets have only a limited role in formal education which above all must place high quality schooling within reach of every citizen. That was the great gain made by the politics of public education in the twentieth century. It is a gain whose achievement is incomplete – especially but not only in the developing world! – and is constantly rendered fragile by inadequate resources from government and the resort to consumerist policy and competitive allocations. But high quality universal schooling for all *is* achievable and in some countries it is done.

*Engaging Teachers* is written in an accessible style and an optimistic spirit. Gale and Densmore believe that human beings are neither inherently self-interested nor inherently cooperative and generous to each other. We can be either, we are what we want ourselves to be, and democratic schooling can play a great role in fashioning us as collaborative social partners. Teachers are the key players here. For the authors, teaching is politically engaged, radical, critical, collaborative, context-aware and committed to empowering everyone. In this vision, the freedom of one is the freedom of all. If these are not to be empty slogans, as they often were in the 1970s, to be realized they require long-term and substantial work. It is no small task to regenerate poor urban school communities, in which aspirations are high but educational practices have little purchase, in the context of growing inequalities on both local and global levels. And the tasks are not limited to schooling. Democracy has been undermined not just because of the strength of the market model in education policy, and the funding cutbacks in the public educational sector, but by the power of corporations and the centralization of the media and information, which enables a small number of people to set the frame for public debate. Teachers, often fine community activists, have a vital role in regenerating democracy from the bottom up. Teachers have the critical skills to unlock the myths and mystifications of much of the information that blankets our public space. They have a crucial role in building the skills of organizing and empowerment upon which self-help depends. It is no wonder that such an effort has been made to narrow the horizons of teachers and block the exercise of their broader democratic role. *Engaging Teachers* helps teachers to find a way through.

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# Acknowledgements

Even before we finished writing *Just Schooling*, the precursor to this monograph, we began to plan for *Engaging Teachers*. In our minds, there was a degree of unfinished business, things we wanted to say about both the kind of disposition we imagined for teachers committed to a radical democratic agenda for schooling and the kind of socio-cultural and economic context in which they are located. We are, therefore, grateful to Open University Press, particularly to Shona Mullen, for giving us this opportunity and for once more supporting us through the publication process. Our thanks are extended also to Simon Marginson who graciously provided the Foreword to this volume during a time of extreme work pressures. But probably most important to us are Pam and David who continue to support us through the rigours and intensity of research and writing. We are acutely aware of their contributions to this book, though these might not be readily apparent to others. In particular, we are indebted to Pam for her editing skills that helped us deliver a relatively 'clean' text to the publishers. Finally, portions of this book have appeared elsewhere in different forms and have been reworked for inclusion here. We would like to thank the publishers of the following materials: parts of Chapter 3 originally appeared in *Discourse* and a version of Chapter 4 in the *International Journal of Leadership in Education*.