
Reclaiming Teachers' Voices

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ABSTRACT In advocating the importance of reclaiming teachers' voices Sheila Danton argues, not only that the DfES myth of 1970s 'uninformed professionalism' is historically inaccurate and embarrassingly oxymoronic, she also observes that "delivering' someone else's thoughts, ideas, strategies and lesson plans' hardly counts as 'informed professionalism'. Concluding a wide-ranging, passionately argued account of thirty-five years of teacher professionalism she suggests the current emphasis on performing and attaining, rather than learning and achieving, seems similarly puzzling as icons of professional aspiration. Sheila draws the final section of her paper to a close by suggesting three ways in which the teaching profession might collectively begin to reclaim its voice, its enthusiasm and its capacity to change what matters.

It is right to look to the future, wherever possible with courage and optimism. But what is it about the human condition that so easily allows many in the world of education to cultivate a sort of collective amnesia about the past? Why is it that large numbers of people can so easily be persuaded that change necessarily means progress, and that 'reform' – with all its trappings and hype – is always for the good? And what is that fuels our persistent, but too often unexamined, addiction to bright new (and not so new) ideas and theories?

Reflecting on the theme for this article, it has been all too easy to take a dewy-eyed wander down memory lane and dwell upon a golden age that never was. But there is surely something deeply and profoundly worrying about a profession that could well be in danger of forgetting its collective history and, perhaps worse still, of losing its collective voice – and the voices of individual teachers.

The Triumph of Expediency over Desirability

One of the features of the current public discourse on education is that so many assert the right to speak with the voice of authority about educational matters. Informed public dialogue and debate about education in general and about schooling in particular are essential features of a pluralistic, democratic society. But when the voices of politicians and those who advise them drown out any

sensible and informed debate about education, and when what is politically expedient takes precedence over what is educationally desirable, things start to go seriously wrong.

The spin, the gloss, the 'bites' and the power words, the vote-catching gimmicks and wearisome appeal to Middle England, have each in their own way contributed to the education cacophony, damaging and distorting policy and practice rather than illuminating and clarifying. How often do we need to continue saying this? And it is surely the near-total politicisation of education, and perhaps of the civil service too (for Tony Blair has told his civil servants to work with passion), and the futile quest for one-size-fits-all 'what works' solutions, that have played such a powerful role in marginalising rather than amplifying teachers' voices.

There are, of course, those involved in the policy-making business whose role it is to represent the voices of the teaching profession, and to mediate between teachers and their political mistresses and masters. It is important work, and many do it well. But for some, politics (and, of course, its more pernicious accomplice, power) is an irresistibly seductive, intriguing and dangerously all-consuming business: a business which, as Lesley Saunders has pointed out, is too often conflated with politicking:

the adrenalin-rich power games, the wheeling and dealing, ducking and diving, as addictive as caffeine or gossip.
(Saunders, 2004, p. 18)

The danger, of course, is that while the heady business of politics and politicking becomes an end in itself, the real work of teachers and schools becomes a side issue – something that can be 'fixed'.

Was There Ever a Golden Age?

The simple answer is 'of course there was not'. However, as the short-term quick fixes run out of steam ('catch-up' classes, 'booster' lessons and the like), and as some of the more top-down, heavy-handed, de-humanising measures (national strategies for everything that moves and a dizzying abundance of goals, targets and tests) fail to prove their worth, the time is surely right for a balanced analysis, informed by the voices of teacher practitioners, of what has been achieved and what has been lost – the sort of analysis that Rosemary Webb undertook when she looked at the effects of the national curriculum on Key Stage 2 (Webb, 1993) or that Lorna Earl and her colleagues carried out when they evaluated the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (Earl *et al*, 2003). If we are to learn from the past and move forward with integrity, we should challenge current mythologizing about the 'outstanding educational successes' of New Labour's administration, count the cost of large-scale reform and the frenzied attempts to raise what has euphemistically been called 'standards', agree upon what was good and worthwhile that has been lost in the process, and consider how it might be reclaimed.

Reductio ad absurdum?

One of the many things that large-scale reform brought with it was the need to abstract and simplify, to reduce ideas dreamed up in the frenetic atmosphere of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit or (perhaps less so) Sanctuary Buildings to a catchy slogan or two, a handful of bullet points or a compelling little diagram, stunning in its simplicity, but all too often vacuous in its content. And with the help of a technique called 'storyboarding', originally used in film-making to sketch out the basic idea of what is going to happen, these simplified 'messages', the neat little lists and diagrams, have been pointed with power in conferences and seminars across the country and beyond.

Thus in 2002 appeared the 'diamond of reform' (and note with caution the instant appeal of the diamond) of which former education minister David Miliband was so proud: a diamond shape with four interlinked themes said to underpin the Government's education reforms. Michael Barber, former head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, has been particularly keen on using a two-by-two matrix to get a variety of points across. Starting with a speech in Moscow (Barber, 2001) and on numerous occasions since, he presented the diagram below to describe four different historical periods since 1970:

1980s uninformed prescription	1970s uninformed professionalism
1990s informed prescription	2000s informed professionalism

Civil servants and DfES advisers have followed suite, and the matrix has appeared in standard packages of Departmental powerpoint presentations ever since.

What is perplexing, and extremely worrying, is that large numbers of people seem to accept without demur what Robin Alexander has described as:

... as distorted and politically partisan an account of recent educational history as one is likely to find. (Alexander, 2004, p. 13)

Take 'uninformed professionalism' for example. For a start, the term is surely oxymoronic. And for those of us who were teaching in the 1970s (and some well before that) the very idea that our individual and collective endeavours could be described as 'uninformed professionalism' is not only deeply hurtful but, much more important, historically inaccurate. Certainly, effective practices were spread somewhat unevenly across schools, LEAs and the country as a whole – as indeed they are now. There was much variation and perhaps a little too much permissive individualism. But, as Roger Crombie White reminds us in

his wonderfully evocative celebration of classroom practice (Crombie White, 1997), that is not to say that effective practices (and not just 'best practice') were non-existent, or indeed that they were uninformed.

My memories of professionalism in the 1970s and 1980s are somewhat different from those of Michael Barber and the civil servants and advisers who continue to promulgate his analysis. At a national level there was the TVEI, the superb work of the Schools Council and a number of highly creative initiatives being undertaken by the examination boards. There were national enquiries (Warnock, Bullock and Cockcroft spring to mind) and many excellent opportunities for teachers to be directly involved in APU test programmes (I was lucky enough to be one of them). At a local level, there was much innovative work happening in individual LEAs (too many to name, but Oxfordshire, Leicestershire and Coventry come to mind), HMI national and regional courses that teachers queued to get on – backed up by a whole series of HMI discussion papers, including *Ten Good Schools* (1977), *The School Curriculum* (1980) and the *Curriculum Matters* series (fondly nicknamed 'Raspberry Ripples' because of their pink and red covers) published since 1984.

In many LEAs, teachers' centres were buzzing with life, offering anyone and everyone who wanted it opportunities to learn and share. There were teacher-initiated curriculum working parties and discussion groups, research projects, and countless opportunities for teachers to contribute to their LEA's curriculum plans. There was a building of cultures, a bringing together of people, collaborative planning, action on equalities issues and much conversation about teaching and learning. Perhaps most important of all, in my experience (which, I acknowledge, may appear to some readers to be just a tad rosy-hued) there was an abundance of strong, positive energy, a wealth of creativity and a sense that, through our individual and collective endeavours, teachers had a voice and that we really could make a difference.

My experience, and that of many of the colleagues I worked with in the 70s and 80s, was that we were encouraged to draw upon the very best evidence available at the time to inform our classroom practice. (It is not as if research and evidence suddenly appeared under New Labour.) Of course there was always much to learn and we were far from perfect. But I would assert that we were, indeed, informed professionals. We had a strong sense of our professional identity, and perhaps more important, we had a voice. We enjoyed our work and we worked hard. Though endlessly challenging, work was not a 'load' imposed upon us by those above, and although there were of course some grumbles, we did not complain wearily and unremittingly about 'work-load'. Teaching was something we had chosen to do. We had been 'educated' (and not 'trained') to do it. We enjoyed it and, I firmly believe that both collectively and individually, and using the best knowledge and evidence available at the time, we had both the skills and the knowledge to make sound professional judgements about matters such as pedagogy and the curriculum.

The Contradictions of 'Delivery' and Professionalism

By way of contrast, can we really call 'delivering' someone else's thoughts, ideas, strategies and lesson plans 'informed professionalism'? Is the current emphasis on performing and attaining rather than on learning and achieving something that an 'informed professional' could willingly sign up to? I think not. And should it be any surprise that some of the teachers who are best able to use the new freedoms promised by the Primary Strategy *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003) are precisely the teachers who were thinking for themselves back in the 1970s and 1980s?

At the time, I do not think those of us who were teaching in the 1970s and 1980s believed that we were doing anything particularly radical or progressive. It was, quite simply, what teachers did. However, in the light of recent history, perhaps we were. In considering how we might reclaim the radical agenda, our thoughts should not turn only to the Chartists and the Owenites, to Pestalozzi, Froebel or Montessori, to those brave pioneers like J.H. Badley at Bedales, A.S. Neill at Summerhill, Kenneth Barnes at Wennington, Dora Russell at Telegraph Hill, Teddy O'Neill at Prestolee Elementary School or to some of the less well-chronicled figures whose contributions are too often neglected. Perhaps we should also bear in mind the many classroom teachers who were at the forefront of developing informed, innovative practices in the decades before the national curriculum and the national strategies were forced upon the school system.

So, Where Do We Go from Here?

If we have courage and commitment, if we continue to share a concern for the welfare of others and the common good, and if we have 'faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems' (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 7) there are many possible ways forward. Below are three tentative suggestions of ways in which, if taken seriously, the teaching profession might begin to reclaim its voice.

Constructing and Agreeing Teachers' Professional Identity

The Government's recent assumption that it has the authority to tell the teaching profession that the current reform of the workforce (note the language of 're-form' and of 'work-force' – a force of workers) will:

... usher in a new professionalism for teachers, in which career progression and financial rewards will go to those who are making the biggest contributions to pupil attainment.. (DfES Five Year Strategy, p. 66)

is breathtaking both in its naivety and in its arrogance. By their very nature, professions determine for themselves what it means to be a professional. There is surely something seriously amiss when New Labour (or any political party,

come to that) assumes the right to define a 'New Professionalism' for teachers. But there is a problem here. It could be argued that the teaching profession has not been as effective as it might in articulating what it means to be a professional. There are, of course, all sorts of reasons for this (in which I have played my part) including the existence of at least six teacher/headteacher organisations, all of whom are competing for members. It is therefore reassuring to see that, prompted by the Government's commitment to 'usher in' this new method of payment by results (without, it would seem, any formal consultation) one of the teacher associations has developed a comprehensive policy statement on teacher professionalism (ATL, 2005) which:

... rejects a concept of new professionalism which is limited to teachers being required to undertake development which relates to short-term aims as directed by the school or, less still, by the Government. (p. 4)

The time is surely right for all those organisations that represent teachers (including the subject associations, teachers' unions and, of course, the General Teaching Councils) to work together in shaping a statement on teacher professionalism to which all can sign up. It will not be easy, but it is not too late. Among other things, we need to look at what Judyth Sachs has identified as 'the two dominant and competing discourses that are shaping the professional identity of teachers' (Sachs, 1999, p. 2) – democratic professionalism and managerial professionalism – and decide whether we should aim for 'an activist teacher professional identity' in which, working collaboratively, critically and democratically, teachers find and use their own voices, or an 'entrepreneurial identity' in which:

the market and issues of accountability, economy, efficiency and effectiveness shape how teachers individually and collectively construct their professional identities. (p. 8)

Jointly constructing and agreeing upon a professional identity will be a challenge. But it *is* possible – and it will be essential if the profession is to find its collective voice. Perhaps this issue of *FORUM* might help the process forward.

Workforce Remodelling: hitting the target but missing the point

We should recognise that, while perhaps effective in addressing some short-term issues that deserve deeper analysis and understanding, the current focus on reducing teachers' workloads and on 'remodelling' the workforce is not a panacea. In fact, looking through some of the material currently being produced to support the remodelling agenda, at times it seems that we are dangerously near to hitting the workload target but missing entirely the educational point. Take this as an example (and there are countless others):

Cover supervision occurs when there is no active teaching taking place. Pupils would continue their learning by carrying out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision. (DfES/WAMG, 2005)

It is difficult to know quite where to start deconstructing this statement and the impoverished view of learning and teaching that has informed it. What precisely is 'active teaching'? Are we talking about a transmission model of learning here? And how can anyone begin to assume that pupils will learn by carrying out pre-prepared exercises under supervision? What sort of exercises are we talking about: copying out of books, filling in worksheets? And what sort of learning are we talking about: passive and compliant, solitary and individual, predictable and packaged, learning for pre-set goals – or active and creative, collaborative and mutual, uncertain and messy, and surpassing limits (ATL/NCB, 2004)? What does this model of 'cover supervision' look like in a class of four- and five-year olds with boundless energy who are endlessly, restlessly, eager to engage in active learning? Colouring by numbers perhaps, or sitting on the carpet with fingers on lips passively and compliantly listening to a tape-recorded story (or, at least, pretending to listen)? Yes, the young children being 'covered' (covered up ... smothered?) may learn to be quiet, to sit still and to do what they are told (though I very much doubt it) but will they learn anything that is worthwhile?

We need to start asking different questions. Why is work too much of a load? Could it perhaps be that, as has already been suggested, work becomes very much more of a 'load' when our creative, imaginative energies are sapped because we have little input or ownership, because we are 'delivering' someone else's 'product' and because we do not believe in what we are doing – our professional guts tell us that something is profoundly wrong. Surely between us we can find more creative ways of ensuring that, rather than being 'done to', right from the start teachers are very much more involved in generating and informing discussions about pedagogy, in designing the curriculum, and in exploring ways of assessing what children and young people have learnt, and what they might yet have to learn.

Taking Teacher Education Seriously

My final suggestion about ways in which teachers might reclaim their voices concerns the education of teachers as individuals and of the profession as a whole. By this I mean both the initial (or preparatory) education, and continuing professional education which, as Richard Bates has said is:

professional in the sense that it is informed and actively engaged, rather than passively 'professional' through a timid but prescriptive and coercive technology of teaching and training. (Bates, 2005, p. 2)

'TTT', 'competencies' and 'CPD' simply will not do any more as a shorthand way of describing the sort of professional preparation and continuing education

of a profession whose job it is to support children and young people learn and grow in the 21st century. We should surely be using a richer a more descriptive language than that of 'training' and 'competencies', particularly when, as we have seen earlier, the New Professionalism being proposed by New Labour will entail CPD being used to underpin a system of payment by results.

If the teaching profession is to hold its own amidst the growing decline in trust of professionals and of public institutions, then more so than ever before those who enter the profession should be supported in developing a deeper understanding of the historical, social and cultural contexts within which they are working, and an awareness that 'knowledge is culture in that various systems of knowledge help communities as well as individuals make sense of their world and act within it' and that, in the end, the role of the teachers is to encourage learning that allows people to 'travel with a different view' (Bates, 2005, p. 3).

Reflecting on the importance of teachers' voices with teachers of my own generation (my initial teacher education was as a relatively young 'mature' primary student at Sidney Webb College in the 1970s) a view which consistently comes across is that we were able to articulate what we were doing and why we were doing it because we had the time and the space during our three-year initial education to reflect upon what we were learning and engage in animated discussions about the history and sociology of education, about child development, about pedagogy and about the curriculum (which many of us had chosen to understand not as a list of subjects, but as everything that goes on in the school). And of course subsequently many of us were able to contribute to and enjoy the buzz of the local teachers' centre, which led on to local, regional and sometimes national courses and conferences.

But it was more than that. The reason we believed we had a voice was that we had something to say, that we had the energy and the confidence to say it, that someone would listen – and that we could make a difference. There are, of course, many thousands of teachers across the country who continue to teach beyond that which is prescribed and who have found often very strong and powerful ways of thinking and speaking for themselves. Most memorable for me are the nine extra-ordinary teachers in the *Learning without Limits* project (Hart et al, 2004). But there are countless others, as I was reminded when reading the acknowledgements to well over a hundred named teachers who, each in their own way, have contributed to a recent publication on classrooms as learning communities (Watkins, 2005).

So, let us be done with the language of deliverables and performance, let us honour the past and look forward to the future, and let us all commit to finding our own ways of making sure that teachers' voices are not drowned out by the clamour and clatter of powerful vested interests.

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