

On Not Being a Teacher: the professional and personal costs of Workforce Remodelling

PATRICK YARKER

ABSTRACT The introduction of Workforce Remodelling poses profound questions about 21st century teacher professionalism. Here Patrick Yarker explores, not only the dangers and duplicity of one particular 'reform'. These moving, insightful reflections of a gifted, courageous teacher expose the personal and professional dilemmas that will always face those who work for radical change within the state education system. In asking 'How far is it proper for a teacher to stay silent or be silenced and disregard their personal views in the implementation of education policy?' he raises questions we are often too busy or too apprehensive to consider. And yet, 'What we teach is ourselves'. It is our relational engagement with young people that is at the heart of education.

I am not a teacher any more. When did I stop being one? At the end of last August when my contract expired? At the moment I drove away from school in late July, Summer term over? The previous afternoon at the end of my final lesson, when the last member of my Year 8 class had gone and I stood by myself among the groups of desks looking at the blank of the whiteboard? Maybe I stopped being a teacher the very moment in Spring 2004 I made up my mind to leave the school... Does stopping teaching stop you being a teacher? Or little by little are you somehow stopped from being a teacher even as you do your work in school? Maybe I am again what I was more than twenty years ago, the teacher-in-waiting, kept beyond school until my first post was confirmed at the start of October and I could walk, a month late, into my first classroom. Fifth Years they were back then, and very tall.

My daughter, so the story goes, was taught to count backwards by a machine. She ran in at tea-time and said, 'Listen! Twenty, nineteen, eighteen, seventeen...' and so down to zero (or was it 'nought?') 'Wow!' said we, suitably impressed. 'Did you learn that in school?' 'No,' she said, 'I learned it from the microwave.'

The other day she brought home a letter. In it, the Acting Headteacher of her fine Primary School explains how the government's Workforce Reform

initiative will give teachers planning, preparation and assessment time during the school-day, argues that learning experiences will be widened and extended as a result (by the provision of such things as French lessons, football and cricket coaching and the involvement of local High School staff) and then claims: 'It is also an opportunity for our Higher Level Teaching Assistants to teach to their skills and experience, supported by their own designated teacher.'

I admired how the letter told it straight: 'to *teach* to their skills and experience'. But support-staff support: only teachers teach. I wrote back raising my concerns. I was replied to. An afternoon per week of planning, preparation and assessment time (PPA time) had enabled teachers to achieve real progress in dealing with their workload. Various options were being tested 'trying to ensure that the pupils continue to receive education from qualified teachers wherever possible... However, regardless of my own personal views, I have been charged as Acting Headteacher with ensuring that a system of PPA is implemented for September 2005, it being a legal requirement.' Reading this, I was struck less by the submission to the force of the law than by the self-censorship. At no point in her letter had the Acting Headteacher in fact divulged her personal views. I still do not know what she thinks about Workforce Remodelling. But I think her silence is telling.

How Far is it Proper for a Teacher to Stay Silent?

How far is it proper for a teacher to stay silent, or to be silenced and to disregard their personal views, in the implementation of education policy? And when one has set aside one's personal view that, say, teaching is not 'delivery', is it then easier to set aside one's view that, say, 'national' testing à la SATs is wrong? Is it then still easier to set aside one's view that distinguishing students by awarding them levels as a result of their performance in SATs is also wrong? And then is it easier to set aside one's view that organising students into sets on the basis of those levels is wrong? And then is it easier to set aside one's view that routinely framing lessons with starters and plenaries is wrong, or that being required to identify a small percentage of one's students as 'Gifted or Talented' so that they can access educational experiences denied to all students is wrong? And is it then easier to accept that it is no longer necessary to obtain Qualified Teacher Status to teach in the state system? Where does it take you when you have set aside what at first sight appear to be only 'personal' views? What is the human cost to the individual teacher required to be silent, to shift their ground, to act contrary to that which they find they indeed believe in? And if you cannot set some or all of this aside, silently or noisily, where does it take you?

The government claims that both 'standards' and the quality of students' educational experience will improve as a result of Remodelling. OFSTED will guarantee this. David Bell, the Chief Inspector, said: '...it is important that inspectors observe the quality of all teaching going on in schools-whether it is being done by qualified or non-qualified teachers. OFSTED inspects the teaching, not the teacher' (*Times Educational Supplement*, July 8, 2005, p. 1) So the

practice alone is what matters; the person is of no account except insofar as they are carrying out the practice to a greater or lesser degree satisfactorily as determined by OFSTED. And if, as a teacher, I acquiesce, setting aside my personal view that this is wrong, how long till I become a microwave?

What We Teach is Ourselves

Who the teacher is remains central to the activity of teaching because we are more than our practice. What we teach is ourselves. Consciously and unconsciously we teach our stance towards our students, our subject (and indeed the whole domain of knowledge and the activity of the world) and towards what it is to inhabit the role of being a teacher. Our practice as teachers always has this as its surplus. Students will determine whether or not they will learn from us not solely by what we do in the classroom, but also by the way we inhabit and reconstruct the role of teacher. At one root teaching is a moral activity, that is, an activity which cannot simply be presented as the following-through in the classroom of a series of predetermined steps laid down by absent others. The moment-by-moment interchange within a classroom between teacher and student, small group or whole class, combined with the creation and sustaining by the teacher of a classroom in which everyone feels safe and valued and able to contribute, along with the enabling of the spontaneous and the un-planned-for not only to occur but to be built upon, are activities at the heart of teaching. They are an expertise acquired in the act of making them happen. They are sustained in real time, over durations, so that their interruption is felt as a loss. They cannot be pre-planned, any more than they can be experienced 'remotely'. You have to be there.

The government asserts against reason that school-'teaching' can regularly take place while no teacher is present. It does so that it may sidestep discussion of the true costs involved in teaching and learning. New Labour is committed to holding down spending in the public sector; meantime the state of qualified teacher recruitment and retention continues precarious. The NRT website notes that almost half of those currently teaching are due to retire within the next fifteen years, and that one in five NQTs has left the profession inside four years. It acknowledges continuing staff-shortages in 'a number of key subject areas'. Rather than address the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers by improving pay and conditions, and by beginning a process of loosening the straitjacketed nature of the job, the Workforce Remodelling strategy attempts to re-configure schoolwork to accommodate to New Labour's spending-limits and to a dwindling number of people fully-qualified for teaching, dedicated to it and desirous of staying the course. The NRT website's vision is of schools where the essential work involves 'building a multi-skilled team to provide effective learning opportunities for pupils', that is to say inserting a cadre of unqualified staff to 'deliver' pre-packaged lesson-content. For the Remodellers, qualified teachers 'will take key decisions on what is taught and how', but decisively will not do all the teaching. Quite how it is possible for teachers to

take key decisions on what is taught and how *when they are not present where and while the learning and teaching is being done* goes unexplained.

Some headteachers have bought into the vision. The head of a London Primary school told *The Guardian* (7 April, 2005): 'People say remodelling is undermining our professionalism but, while we need teachers to identify what kids need, I don't believe we have to have the teachers delivering it.' The logic of such an outlook can only lead to capitulation before the dull economic compulsion which will follow. Teachers beware: what need so many expensive staff if the cheaper QTS-less variety can do as effective a job? One government advisor has already floated the idea that schools of the future might contain just the one qualified teacher.

Where is the Boundary?

If, as the National Agreement states, 'teachers and support-staff such as HLTAs are not interchangeable', just where is the boundary? What do you need to become an HLTA, and what will you be required to do to not be a teacher? For all the Agreement's apparent reassurance, the HLTA job-description increasingly overlaps with work currently done by qualified teachers. HLTAs will plan, prepare and deliver learning-activities for the whole class. They will prepare lesson-plans, monitor pupils and assess, record and report pupils' achievement, progress and development. They will lead meetings with parents and provide constructive feedback. They will (of course) deliver local and national strategies. In addition, they will train, appraise, mentor and manage lower-level teaching assistants and hold regular meetings with them. In order to become an HLTA you must first have NVQ level 2 qualifications (that is, GCSE grade C and above) in English and Maths, and training in relevant strategies such as the National Literacy Strategy. The dedicated website (hlta.gov.uk) acknowledges that 'There are no formal qualification requirements for support staff at they start of HLTA training.' However, 'The HLTA Standards have been set at a level which, when prior training and achievement are taken into account, requires a level of understanding equivalent to NVQ4' (which is to say a Foundation degree.) So you start out with GCSE grade C in Maths and English, and fifty days later are apparently qualified to undergraduate level. This impressive achievement won't, however, get you more than a letter from the TTA to prove you've met their 31 Standards. It won't even guarantee you are paid at the higher rate for Teaching Assistants, itself set at little more than half of average male earnings. Poverty-pay is established locally: there are (at the time of writing) no national pay structures. Some LEAs have therefore tried to claw back money, prompting strike-action by Teaching Assistants. For these workers, there are no guarantees of sickness-pay, holiday-pay or maternity/paternity benefits. Some schools are paying the HLTA '[an] improved rate—often just £3.50 an hour more than other assistants— only for time spent standing in front of classes.' (*Times Educational Supplement*, June 10, 2005) The drive to remodel is the drive to save money. When the government refused to guarantee funding

adequate to ensure classes would not have to be 'taught' by the unqualified, one signatory-union (the NAHT) withdrew from the Agreement. There is currently fierce debate within UNISON over whether the union should remain party to it. Many members working as support-staff in school have no wish to be used in place of qualified teachers, and have voted in some areas to reject the Agreement. In order to ensure their students are taught only by those qualified to do so, a small number of Primary Headteachers are preparing to defy the law.

What Will Teaching Be?

The author of the Government's own Numeracy Strategy has raised doubts about the value of employing thousands of Teaching Assistants. In research published in 2004 Professor David Reynolds co-authored a report saying the use of assistants had done nothing to improve standards: 'It would seem ill-advised to seek to solve teacher-shortages by replacing them with a whole army of learning assistants unless entry qualifications, training and rewards for the latter were substantially improved.' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 16 January, 2004) The re-jigged model of four levels of Teaching Assistant, with HLTA at the pinnacle, is not an adequate response to this advice. After all, Level 3 TAs are required to be *more* highly qualified than HLTAs.

Government pronouncements continue to insist that 'Teaching will remain a graduate profession' (Tony Blair interviewed on Teachernet, 15 July, 2004). But what will teaching be? The dedicated HLTA website says '*...most teaching requires the expertise and skills of a teacher...*' (my emphasis). An attempt is being made to institutionalise as a core-practice something which will further impoverish a child's educational experience in English state-schools. (The Welsh General Teaching Council has stated that only qualified teachers will teach in Welsh schools: as with adherence to SATs, England remains exceptional.) Using unqualified staff on a regular basis within classes while a teacher is available is not to be equated with handing over a class very infrequently to a visitor such as a writer or sportsperson who of course lacks QTS but who can bring something particular and enriching to the experience of the class. HLTAs will be used every day to do ordinary work with classes whose teachers are on-site and who would, until this September, have been teaching them. The Remodelling strategy is a watering-down of what was previously possible.

And what was possible could have been better then, and still can be. Figures from the National Office for Statistics show that the richest one percent of the population, some 600,000 people, own twenty-three percent of the wealth (almost £800Billion). These people doubled their wealth in the first six years of New Labour's government. The proportion they own of the social product is bigger now than at any time since the 1930s. Seen from the standpoint of what would benefit the great mass of the population, there is neither necessity nor justification for diluting teaching-provision in our schools. On the contrary, such provision should be further strengthened.

What Students Give their Teacher is Not to Be Given Away

Teaching costs. Partly the argument against the Remodelling strategy takes its force from a recognition that New Labour is trying to short-change those who use, and those who work in, the public sector in education. But the argument is also about teaching and what teaching is and who can and should do it. The Remodelling strategy is damaging because it does not acknowledge that teaching is centrally about the moment-by-moment lived actuality of classroom interchange and exchange, of the 'live' development and production of ideas, knowledge and experience in the classroom. Within this jointly- and severally-occurring endeavour the teacher plays a crucial real-time part in all the ways befitting what it means to inhabit the title of teacher. Fundamentally this is not a technical role. Its ground is deeper than competencies. For the business of negotiating with human minds, hearts and spirits, which is what teaching is, cannot be done on an instrumental basis. Attempting to do so fails, for hearts, minds and spirits are more than instruments and react accordingly. If there is no trustful compact between teacher and taught, which it is the teacher's role to instigate and nurture, what transpires will not be teaching and learning. Delivery begets response (even if negatively) but teaching is a giving and a taking, from all parties to all, and what students give their teacher is not to be given away. It is why teachers feel they should be with their classes. It is why teachers who are ill nevertheless come to work. It is the initial requirement from the days of the *paedagogos*, the slave who walked with the child to where the action was. It is the pledge given to Everyman: to go *with* him. In spite of New Labour's attempts to narrow course-content, QTS serves to indicate that its holder has an expanded (and therefore a more proper) apprehension of what it is to be a teacher and will act accordingly. QTS indicates a recognition, acceptance and commitment to the ethical claims of the role, to its moral and social dimensions, something that all the Remodelling Strategy documentation and associated public pronouncements resolutely avoid. The National Agreement can talk only of the 'extra range, experience and complexity of understanding' which goes with the qualification. As if this were the sum of it.

I am not a teacher any more. I have walked away from my classes and my place in the furthest 'mobile' (static for years, like all the others) next to the tennis-courts at the far edge of the main school site. Leaving my tutor-group a year before their GCSEs, leaving exam-classes mid-course, leaving younger students I'd begun to know, I felt guilty and low. A student again now, a learner, I am trying to explore from the outside teaching and compliance: the tensions generated in teachers by having to implement in the classroom that which they cannot agree with. That which the teacher-within, the teacher-in-waiting, un-remodellable, cries out against.

Correspondence

Patrick Yarker, Dols Hole Cottage, Hall Road, Beetley, Dereham NR20 4DE,
United Kingdom (patyarker@aol.com).