
Rescuing Teacher Professionalism

DEREK GILLARD

ABSTRACT If teachers are to reclaim any sort of agenda – let alone a radical one – they need to be taken seriously as professionals. Why aren't they? Derek Gillard surveys the history of teaching in England and argues that teacher professionalism was a short-lived phenomenon which has been in decline for thirty years. Far from rescuing it from the Tories, New Labour has extended the process of de-professionalisation. With a third of the teachers recently saying they are considering leaving the profession within the next five years because of workload, initiative overload and the target-driven culture the issues Derek Gillard identifies as key to the process of professional renewal take on a particular significance.

Traditionally, the term 'profession' was applied to divinity, law and medicine but not to teaching. Lester Smith argues that this was because during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries society differentiated between those who taught in the privately-owned 'public' and older grammar schools and those who taught in state-run elementary schools. The public and grammar schools 'assumed that teachers were born and not made' (Lester Smith, 1957) and shunned the very concept of 'pedagogy'. In contrast, elementary schools expected their teachers to be 'trained but not educated' – able to maintain good discipline and secure a limited proficiency in the 3Rs.

The 1902 Education Act sought to bridge this gulf. It brought grammar schools into the state system and abolished the pupil teacher system. It led to an increase in the number of training colleges, whose courses focused on subjects and methods. In the first half of the twentieth century growing awareness of the changing character of education led to demands for more advanced teacher training, and the concept of a public sector – including education – began to develop.

The Establishment of Teacher Professionalism

The 1944 Education Act and the McNair Committee's report together represented official acknowledgement of the professional status of teachers, so that by the 1950s they were regarded as 'the bedrock of the new welfare

society'. Crucially, as professionals they were 'partners in the deliberations of policy, able to influence the direction and control of the system.' All this 'gave meaning to teaching' (Lawn, 1999). If there ever was such a thing as a golden age of teacher professionalism, this was it. Indeed, Lawn argues that this period was so significant that its language 'is still used as the key way to explain the past and to analyse the present', despite the fact that its 'assumptions about education and public service, its administrative structures and its closed national boundaries' no longer exist (Lawn, 1999).

A number of developments raised the professional status of teachers still further during this period. Training was extended to three years in 1960, with four year BEd degree courses available from 1965. The longer courses included study of the history, philosophy and psychology of education, child development, behaviour management etc. The Schools' Council was established in 1964 to give schools 'responsibility for their own curriculum and teaching methods, which should be evolved by their own staff' (quoted in Watkins, 1993). From September 1970 all teachers in maintained schools had to attain 'Qualified Teacher Status' (QTS) and during the 1970s teacher training was integrated into higher education. But if teachers now felt that they were at last beginning to be treated as professionals, they were to be disappointed. The storm clouds were already gathering.

The Crises of the 1980s and 1990s

A world economic recession resulted in a 'general disenchantment with education' (Galton et al, 1980). Right-wing educationalists and politicians began a campaign to focus this disenchantment on the teachers themselves, notably in a series of 'Black Papers'. They were given ammunition by the 'William Tyndale Affair', which raised crucial questions about responsibility and accountability. These events led Prime Minister Jim Callaghan to call for a public debate about 'the purpose of education and the standards that we need'. Teachers saw this as blatant political interference but they couldn't hold back the storm clouds.

The 'Great Debate' which Callaghan had initiated was hijacked in 1979 by Margaret Thatcher's Tory government, which set about taking control of the school curriculum and giving more power to parents. The Schools' Council was abolished in 1984 and its work shared between the School Examinations Council (whose members were nominated by the Secretary of State) and the Schools Curriculum Development Committee (which was told not to 'concern itself with policy').

Teacher morale reached a new low in 1985 as negotiations over salaries and conditions of service broke down and industrial action followed. Politicians began arguing that the entire education service was in a state of collapse. It wasn't true, but it provided the context for the 1988 Education 'Reform' Act, which imposed the National Curriculum, tests and 'school league tables', made

budgets dependent on the number of pupils schools attracted, and prepared the ground for the establishment of OFSTED.

Thatcher bequeathed to her successor, John Major, a government which ruthlessly excluded questioning and dissent. The National Curriculum Council and the School Examinations and Assessment Council were used 'to endorse ... what the Secretary of State has already decided to do. If they decline to accept this role their advice is ignored, changed or rejected' (Watkins 1993). By now, politicians were interfering in the minutiae of education policy and practice, and the Secretary of State was deciding teachers' salaries and conditions of employment.

The Tories still hadn't finished putting teachers in their place. In 1991 they introduced the Parents' Charter and in 1993 set out provisions for dealing with 'failing' schools. A year later they established the Teacher Training Authority (TTA) 'against a background of hostility to the teaching profession' (Phil Revell, *The Guardian*, 7 September, 2004). The criticism of teachers continued throughout Major's period in office. This was the era of 'name and shame', characterised by OFSTED boss Chris Woodhead complaining about the existence of '15,000 incompetent teachers in our schools'.

New Labour: old continuities

Anyone who hoped that the election of a Labour government in 1997 would lead to the restoration of teacher professionalism was to be profoundly disillusioned. Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government did not just accept its legacy from the Tories, it built on it. Woodhead kept his job at OFSTED and within weeks Schools Minister Stephen Byers was 'naming and shaming' so-called 'failing' schools. Even the establishment of the General Teaching Council (GTC) in 1998 was a disappointment as it quickly became clear that it would have no say in curriculum matters.

In fact, politicians now sought to control pedagogy itself. With the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy and National Learning Targets, New Labour set about telling teachers not only what to teach but how to teach it. It didn't work. Improved scores in reading and writing tests only lasted a couple of years and – as the new Chief Inspector, David Bell, pointed out – came at the expense of listening and speaking skills and other areas of the curriculum. Unsurprisingly, Schools Minister David Miliband dismissed Bell's advice.

Government policy continued to undermine teacher morale and status. In 2002 Education Secretary Estelle Morris announced that extra cash for education would be conditional on teachers accepting a restructured profession. Most of the teacher unions accepted the 'workforce remodelling' deal. But the NUT refused to sign the agreement and their fears were realised as schools began to use students, newly qualified teachers and unqualified classroom assistants to cover for absent teachers. QTS itself came under attack in October 2004. Tory education spokesman Tim Collins described it as a 'silly rule' and

the GTC said it would introduce a 'fast-track' system to allow candidates to be approved for teaching.

With Labour re-elected, it looks certain that workforce remodelling will continue, there will be even more 'routes into teaching' and parents will be given even more power over the running of schools. Given this sorry history, what are the key issues which must be addressed if the professional status of teaching and teachers is to be rescued?

Key Issue 1: professional training

Most student teachers now have less than a year's training and are taught little or nothing about the history, philosophy or politics of education, child development, the relationship between intelligence and ability, the influences on educational achievement, theories about how the brain handles information or behaviour management techniques. Once qualified, teachers can be required to appraise their colleagues, run a department or coordinate school policies – often with no further training. Aspiring heads and curriculum leaders are reasonably well catered for through the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), but in comparison with other professions teachers are inadequately trained and lack a comparable professional career structure, disadvantages which are exploited by politicians who wish to set the education agenda.

Remedying this situation is not something teachers can undertake in isolation. But a start could be made if colleges promoted the benefits of longer, more professionally-orientated courses; if local authorities could be persuaded to run in-service courses on educational philosophy and psychology instead of courses on how to tick boxes; and if, wherever possible, schools recruited staff with more than just adequate training – an ideal whose achievement is not helped by the current shortage of teachers.

Key Issue 2: a united voice

For most of the past 150 years there has been no professional body to set standards or speak for the profession. Dr John Marenbon has described the years since 1988 as a period of 'shamefully docile behaviour of teachers in face of the attack on their professionalism mounted by successive governments'.

What is needed is a single teacher body able to speak with authority for the whole profession, a body which would focus primarily not on matters of pay or conditions of work but on educational issues including the curriculum and teaching styles. It would need to learn from big business and successful pressure groups how to develop a powerful political lobby whose aim would be to persuade politicians that they can't have imaginative and creative teachers if they treat them like robots. No one – and certainly no politician – is going to establish such a body for teachers. Teachers must do it for themselves.

Key Issue 3: public service

With the ever-increasing use of agencies and private companies, the public sector – which ‘gave teacher professionalism its use value’ – now directly employs far fewer people, while ‘marketisation’ has made it difficult to recognise a distinctive public sector ethos. ‘The practical disappearance of the discourse of professionalism, previously used by government and by teacher associations and by many other education participants, is significant; it is the end of an empowering language for teachers’ (Lawn 1999).

Lawn may be right to be so pessimistic. Certainly, the notion that teachers could single-handedly restore the lost public service ethos is clearly absurd. But they could play an important part in such a process by creating a single body which would act as the voice of the profession, by initiating a national debate, by seeking to persuade politicians and by joining forces with other professionals.

Key Issue 4: the nature of teaching itself

For politicians, teaching is now ‘a form of flexible and reskilled competence-based labour’ (Lawn, 1999). Teachers deliver an imposed curriculum, subject to an imposed assessment system, in an imposed school market. Politicians have been ruthless in their determination to control teachers, to alter their skills, to regulate their performance, and to deny them any say in the content of their work. Every aspect of the education enterprise is controlled through specification, target-setting, inspection and parental evaluation. The result is that English education, once characterised by ‘praise and a language of partnership’ is now defined by ‘threats and regulation’ (Lawn, 1999).

Teaching is no longer defined by a given level of qualification, and with the education service now fragmented and riddled with inequalities, a campaign to renegotiate the status of teaching will be difficult. But it is a campaign which must be fought and could be won. It is simply not good enough that the only issues on which teachers were prepared to take a stand in the past were the supervision of school lunches and the twenty quid subscription to the GTC. Is it any wonder they were not seen as professionals?

Does Any of This Matter?

Of course it does. A third of all teachers say they are considering leaving the profession within the next five years because of work load, initiative overload and the target-driven culture of education imposed by the government. It is not going to be an easy task for teachers to reassert their professionalism and thus be in a position to ‘reclaim the radical agenda’ because power is a narcotic and politicians have become addicted to it.

But the task must be undertaken, because the education system politicians have created in the past thirty years is sterile, utilitarian and boring. Children deserve a better deal and only well-trained, professional teachers have the

Derek Gillard

knowledge, understanding and expertise to provide it through innovation and imagination. It is time for teachers to demand their freedom. 'You cannot have it both ways – the right to interfere, and the right to expect initiative and imaginative leadership' (Lester Smith, 1957).

Correspondence

Derek Gillard, 60 Oxford Road, Marston, Oxford OX3 ORD, United Kingdom (dg@dial.pipex.com).

References

- Galton, M., B. Simon & P. Croll (1980) *Inside the Primary Classroom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lawn, M. (1999) Following the Third Way? Teachers and New Labour, in C. Chitty & J. Dunford (Eds) *State Schools: New Labour and the Conservative legacy*. London: Woburn Press.
- Lester Smith, W.O. (1957) *Education*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Watkins, P.R. (1993) The National Curriculum: an agenda for the nineties, in C. Chitty & B. Simon (Eds) *Education Answers Back: critical responses to government policy*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

A longer version of this article can be found in the *Education Archive* of Derek Gillard's website (www.dg.dial.pipex.com).