

EDITORIAL

Every Teacher Matters: a tribute to the teaching profession

‘Our teachers and school staff are a national asset of priceless value.’ So said the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Estelle Morris in a speech to the Social Market Foundation (DfES, 2001). During her time as a minister, Estelle Morris did her utmost to champion the teaching profession, even when she had difficult messages to convey. She continues to do so today. But surveying the educational landscape over the past decade or so, we could easily be forgiven for believing that not everyone shares Estelle Morris’ conviction about what she called the ‘talented and dedicated professionals’ who teach children and young people in schools – and their crucial role in improving the education system.

We hardly need reminding of the devastating damage inflicted on teachers and schools by heavy-handed, counter-productive policies such as ‘naming and shaming’, or the public humiliation of ‘failing’ an Ofsted inspection or being ‘bottom’ of the school league tables. The wounds run deep and take a long time to heal. While events like the annual teaching awards highlight the sort of things that many thousands of teachers are doing day in day out in their classrooms, they are hardly an antidote to the almost daily battering that teachers continue to get in one newspaper or another, or indeed the current enthusiasm on the part of the *Times Educational Supplement* to give weekly blow-by-blow accounts of the latest disciplinary cases brought before the General Teaching Council. As the teaching profession knows to its cost, good news rarely hits the headlines. It is much easier to turn a blind eye to the dedication and commitment of the teaching profession and to focus instead on blaming teachers for just about everything – including the ills of society.

This issue of *FORUM* provides a welcome opportunity to put to one side the negative headlines and the endless stream of politically inspired short-term policy initiatives – and the resentment and frustration they can all too easily generate. It also provides a timely opportunity to shift the focus away from the *Education and Inspections Bill* and the reductionist vision of schooling this new legislation enshrines. Instead, we start where, for teachers, it matters most: in the classroom with children and young people.

Contributors to this issue remind us of what it means to be a teacher, and to be a member of what Robin Richardson (1990) has called 'that most daring of professions'. We are also reminded of the powerful ways in which teachers, both individually and collectively, can contribute not only to the flourishing of children and young people but, importantly, to the well-being and growth of the profession as a whole. 'Every Child Matters' is one of the most widely-used and powerful slogans that has permeated the education agenda in recent years. Captured in those three little words is a universal belief to which we can all sign up. But there is another side to the coin. If every child really is to matter, then we must surely find better and more enduring ways of publicly demonstrating that every teacher matters too. The relationship between these two sides of the coin needs to be symbiotic if the teaching profession is to thrive – and if children and young people are to flourish in school.

Our first contribution from **Chris Watkins**, *When Teachers Reclaim Learning*, puts the classroom centre stage and reminds us what happens when teachers and pupils focus on learning. As Chris wryly points out, learning is a 'minority interest in current times' and an activity 'which is rarely talked about'. Highlighting the inherent dangers of the current emphasis on strategies, packages and performance that has grown apace over the past decade or so, the article explores why it is essential that we hold firm to the idea that it *is* possible, and indeed in the longer term essential, for teachers to reclaim their central role in learning. Based as it is on the 'lived experience' of someone who has worked with integrity as an educator for over 35 years, and rooted in a critical and informed analysis of the dynamics between teachers and their environment, the article describes and analyses the obstacles that need to be addressed if classrooms are genuinely to become communities of learners, and maps out routes that are possible if teachers are to reclaim learning, and their sense of agency.

Teachers' lived experience, and their vital role in constructing knowledge, are central to the next article. It explores a different but complementary way in which teachers and their students can be empowered, this time by their involvement both in and with research. In a reflective and elegantly-argued contribution that draws on poetry, stories and 'thinking aloud', and that incisively connects the rational with the imaginative, **Lesley Saunders** reminds us that 'teaching and research are mutually supportive in a profound way'. Exploring the relationship between research and teaching, and arguing that each is both 'a demanding science and an imaginative art', *Teachers' Engagement In and With Research: supporting integrity and creativity in teaching* suggests that if research is to be used effectively in schools and classrooms, it is essential that the teacher-researcher is a part of that process, not merely at the receiving end, applying 'outcomes' and 'evidence' to classroom practice. As Lesley reminds us: 'The connection between research and teaching is intimate and integral rather than incidental or instrumental ... what the relationship enables is the possibility of teaching-and-learning which is genuinely transformative.'

Teachers' voices, and their views on and experiences of New Labour's education policies, play a central role in a research project that is examining the impact of recent policy initiatives on primary teachers' work. In *The Impact of New Labour's Education Policy on Teachers and Teaching at Key Stage 2*, **Rosemary Webb & Graham Vulliamy** argue that 'there has been more change in KS2 teachers' classroom practice over the last five years than in the previous twenty.' The article examines ways in which targets and tests have impacted upon primary classrooms and the relationship between teachers and pupils, and confirms the 'irresolvable tension' identified by Robin Alexander (2004) between the Government's standards agenda and the desire for schools to foster creativity and enjoyment. Although morale has been damaged and teacher confidence 'almost totally undermined' by the Government's approach to change, Rosemary and Graham point to ways in which teachers are regaining their professional confidence, in spite of the continuing 'all-pervasive and stifling culture of performativity'. However, they conclude that: 'for creativity, experimentation and innovation by teachers to flourish, there will need to be a fundamental change in the educational climate.'

In a thoughtful and cogently-argued contribution about the role of teachers in Children's Centres, **Julian Grenier** looks back on his experience as a junior-trained teacher who has moved into the world of nursery education, and speaks with great depth and insight about some of the individuals who challenged his thinking and who helped shape his understanding and professional practice as a nursery teacher. In *Do We Need Teachers in Children's Centres?* he highlights the unresolved tensions between 'childcare' and nursery education, and tracks developments that have led to the current situation where there is a danger that 'Early Years Professionals' will replace nursery teachers and where the emphasis will shift towards childcare and away from teaching and learning. He also points out that as 'pre-schools', the early years phase of education exists only by virtue of the stage it comes before, not in its own right. Arguing that an important role of the nursery teacher is to protect young children from more formal approaches to teaching and to guard against the growing 'schoolification' of early years practice, Julian makes a powerful case for nursery schools and children's centres to remain part of the mainstream educational scene in England.

The changing role of teachers in Ugandan schools, and the courageous ways in which women teachers have acted as role models for children and young people, is at the heart of **David Rosenberg's** *Striding Forward: girls and women in Ugandan schools*. In a contribution that is a testimony to the outstanding commitment and far-sightedness of a practising primary teacher, David condemns the current discourse that 'has been emptied of pedagogy and filled with business-based models of time management'. Shifting the perspective, he reminds us that bigger questions loom when we 'step back and think globally' and remember the many millions of primary-age children around the world who do not have access to school. Drawing on his work in Ugandan schools as part of a Global Teacher programme, and on interviews he conducted with

children and teachers in 2001 and 2005, he offers a vivid and poignant account of how, in a relatively short period of time, the Ugandan Government's commitment to women's rights, coupled with the political will to implement Universal Primary Education, is having a visible impact on the women working within Uganda's education system and, importantly, on the aspirations of girls and young women.

In *Working with Children, Working for Children: a review of Networked Learning Communities*, **Non Worrall & Christopher Noden** provide a refreshing reminder that 'great things are possible' and that 'powerful learning' can happen when schools and teachers come together to innovate, experiment and collaborate. Building on the knowledge and expertise of individual teachers, the Networked Learning Communities programme was deliberately non-prescriptive, with groups of schools coming together voluntarily. Just as earlier in this volume, Rosemary Webb and Graham Vulliamy conclude that teachers are beginning to regain their professional confidence, so this article is an affirmation that in spite of the continuing emphasis on competition and league tables, and notwithstanding continuing concerns about increasing workloads, teachers and schools have found the time to develop creative and empowering ways of working together to the benefit of the children and young people they serve. And just as Chris Watkins explains what happens when teachers reclaim learning, so this contribution has much to say about what happens to pupils' learning when 'the collaborative impetus is built upon voluntarism and learning, and when enquiry, devised and directed by teachers, becomes the norm.'

The next article provides a salutary reminder of the damage, distortion and abuse that can happen when populist appeal to an assumed shared understanding of 'common sense' is picked up on and exploited by sections of the right-wing media. In *Playgrounds, the Press and Preventing Racism* **Robin Richardson** offers a compelling and critical account of the 'cruel simplicities' of the media fall-out that occurred when, earlier this year, Judge Jonathan Finstein dismissed as 'political correctness gone mad' a decision to bring criminal charges against a pupil for overtly racist behaviour. Recalling the history of the term 'political correctness', Robin goes on to describe the excellent work currently being undertaken by the DfES, in collaboration with teachers, to deal with racist bullying in schools. Those who have worked with and learned from Robin over the years will know of his unremitting commitment to support teachers, schools and the profession as a whole in the challenging but ultimately life-changing task of combating prejudice, discrimination and inequalities. It is reassuring to know that the DfES guidance has been informed by his knowledge, wisdom and insights.

The final three articles in this edition are written by people who, for many years, have worked with and for the teacher organisations. Meryl Thompson and John Bangs have, between them, worked for nearly forty years as senior officials in two of the major teacher unions, ATL and the NUT respectively. Rona Tutt was recently President of NAHT and continues to do much to support the organisation. Over the years, Meryl, John and Rona – all of whom

are former teachers – have worked with total commitment, integrity and dedication to serve the profession well. They write here with a deep and critical understanding of the political background that has been, and continues to be, so powerful in shaping the teaching profession, and the school ‘workforce’ as a whole.

In a trenchantly argued contribution that beautifully demonstrates the intellectual rigour and analytical skills **Meryl Thompson** brings to her work, we gain new insights into the background to the 2003 *National Agreement on Raising Standards and Tackling Workload*, an Agreement that has been so powerfully influential in attempts to re-construct the concept of teacher professionalism and to which five of the six main teacher unions initially signed up. Following on from Patrick Yarker’s deeply moving article about the personal and professional costs of workforce remodelling in an earlier edition of *FORUM*, *Re-Modelling and De-Professionalisation* takes a critical and detailed look at the ‘perplexities’ and ‘ambivalence’ of the Agreement itself, and at events that have stemmed from it, including a newly-constructed manifestation of the concept of ‘social partnership’. Demonstrating that safeguards are not securely present in the provisions of the Agreement to prevent a diminution in the overall quality of teaching or of the status of teachers, Meryl argues that: ‘So far, re-modelling offers no vision for a profession, except in relation to work/life balance and workload. As important as these may be ... they do very little to offer a respected and professional future for today’s teachers.’

Meryl Thompson’s warning about the price of social partnership is further explored by **John Bangs** in his contribution *Social Partnership: the wider context*. Readers of *FORUM* may know that the National Union of Teachers chose not to be a signatory to the 2003 National Agreement, which has now evolved into the Social Partnership Agreement (SPA). At the time, and subsequently, many commentators applauded the NUT’s decision to remain ‘outside the tent’ and thus retain a degree of independence and public criticality. Rather than dwell on the immediate issues that have impacted upon relationships between the teacher unions, and between the unions and the Westminster Government, John offers a highly objective, balanced and informative account of the ideologically contested concept of ‘social partnership’ as it has been constructed in the wider European context. He goes on to describe ways in which the SPA in England and Wales is unique in that, unlike social partnership as practised elsewhere in Europe, it has led to the exclusion from normal bi-lateral discussion of unions which have chosen not to be party to the SPA. The article concludes by calling for further analysis and debate about the relationships between trade unions, employers and governments.

We end this issue of *FORUM* on an optimistic note. In her inimitably positive and incisive way, and with a delightful touch of humour, **Rona Tutt** takes a critical and constructive look at the educational landscape. Noting the contradictions in New Labour’s policy agenda, she opens her article *Reconciling the Irreconcilable: coping with contradictory agendas* by suggesting that the Government’s ‘hyperactivity’ may be caused by ‘meeting some internal target to

produce a never-ending stream of ideas'. She goes on to point out that with all the grandiose talk about 'big pictures' and 'route maps', in reality, schools are being pulled in several directions at once, and that coherent and widely-supported aspects of current policy could be totally stymied by the 'whole panoply' of tests, targets and tables that determine so much of what goes on in schools. 'Is it *healthy*,' she asks 'to hothouse all pupils into passing tests and exams for which they may not be ready or cut out?' Ever the optimist, and with typical panache, Rona challenges the new Secretary of State to 'be his own person' by ending the 'overblown testing regime' and spending the money instead on personalised learning. 'What an opportunity for a new Secretary of State to make his mark!' she concludes.

Outcomes for Teachers?

Rona Tutt's contribution might just tempt us to reflect on the five outcomes, agreed upon by children and young people themselves, that are at the heart of the Every Child Matters agenda: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; economic well-being.

Imagine, if you will, that at some stage in the not too distant future teachers too are invited to agree upon five outcomes that are essential if the teaching profession is to grow and flourish, and to serve children and young people, their families and the community even better than it does today. And might these outcomes just perhaps include: being healthy; staying safe (but also taking informed risks); enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution ... They are certainly not the end of the story, but what better place to start.

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