

EDITORIAL

What it Means to Be a Teacher

MICHAEL FIELDING

In our opening contribution, *Care in the Community*, **Jonathan Paine**, a primary teacher from a coastal strip community in West Sussex, argues strongly for the desirability of teachers not only living in the communities they serve, but also rooting their approaches to teaching and learning in the felt experience of those communities. For him, an important part of what he has come to regard as central to the realities and possibilities of being a teacher is intimately connected both to the necessity of care and to its practical manifestation in communal life, in particular through the power and possibility of dialogue, to developing what he calls 'the art of the conversation'. In order for this to happen he argues strongly that 'Education ... needs to scale itself down. Schools must operate on a smaller scale within their own communities. We should try to turn our city schools into village schools, not the other way around.'

The notions of conversation and dialogue are woven into the fabric of **Gill Mullis's** narrative, *Learning to Teach: on being a teacher*. Gill, a secondary school English teacher from Bedfordshire currently leading a national student voice initiative, foregrounds the importance not just of dialogue, but of certain kinds of open, creative, mutually engaging relationships between teachers and their students that both enable and energise the learning conversations at the heart of radical educational practice. Thus, for her it was not just that she had to be attentive to the individuality of each of her students, but also that, 'More than this, I had to make time to listen – not just to the answers to literary questions, but to the narratives/lives of the students I taught.' Gill also reminds us of the necessity of rich conversation, not only with our colleagues but also with ourselves, all the way through our professional lives. It is through these conversations that we come to know and author a narrative of principled and passionate engagement that names and sustains the integrity of teaching as an emancipatory practice.

Much of this is also true for **Frances Holloway**. A highly skilled, immensely experienced secondary school teacher, like Gill, Frances puts dialogue and relationships with students at the centre of her work. Arguing for

the centrality of pedagogy, rather than subject specialism, in her *Enabling Something Amazing to Happen: a less proscriptive approach to teaching* she challenges conventional boundaries, and argues for the necessity of inclusion and against the atomisation and irrelevance of much that is required of both students and staff in most secondary schools in England: in insisting 'I teach people who are joyously and infinitely individual and who do not slot into a standardised mould', she speaks for more than herself and more than her students. In recalling the following incident, her humour and humility has a universal appeal: 'Two years ago a Year 9 student asked me, "What will these tests tell you about me that you don't already know?" A perfectly reasonable question to which I answered, "Nothing." If you can look pitying and resigned at the same time, she did, and walked off to take the test which neither of us could really justify.'

Reading these three inspiring accounts of what it is to be a teacher, one cannot help but be struck by the creativity, humility, bravery and tenaciously principled thoughtfulness of their work in national contexts that consistently seek to deny, suppress, or wilfully misrepresent them through the slick betrayal of populist reductionism, and the breathless hyperbole of what is 'new', what is 'now', and the old tyranny of numbers.

Many teachers are, for a whole range of reasons, unable to sustain the kind of professional and personal energy and hope that animated their entry into teaching. The dishonesty and deep destructiveness that blight contemporary contexts within which teachers work have an inevitable and distressing corrosiveness of much that is life-giving, inclusive and inspiring. Thus, in **Pat Yarker's** highly disturbing *A Kind of Twilight: how do teachers of English at Key Stage 3 respond to the requirement to prepare their students for SATs?* we encounter teachers suffering from 'frustration and self-defeat for they must work against their core beliefs as ... teachers'. As a consequence, not only are they deeply unhappy, they also 'find themselves manoeuvred into an inauthentic position vis-à-vis their students and themselves'. The voices of teachers that speak with such pain, with such troubled and hesitant eloquence, with such longing to live their professional lives as they would wish to and as others should also wish for them, move us in ways which make us clench our fists at the deep folly and destructive dishonesty of a system that has lost touch with its integrity and the corrosive realities of betrayal that undermine 'professional self-confidence and belief' of principled teachers in unprincipled times.

Ivor Goodson's *The Reformer Knows Best: destroying the teacher's vocation* makes equally distressing reading. Arising from a 1998-2002 Spencer Foundation study of the effects of teacher reforms in New York State, his paper focuses on Berry, whom he describes as 'a wonderful, humane, egalitarian teacher ... a creative, well-read, resourceful man concerned above all with social and racial justice ... a man who would be the bedrock of any initiative to make sure "no child left behind" would work'. And yet, as a consequence of the 'reforms' from which we are now still suffering in England, Berry, like his counterparts who speak through Pat Yarker's article, has been reduced from a

‘master craftsman’ to ‘a technician complying with the dictates of others and closely monitored as to his level of performance’. The results are catastrophic for Berry, for his students, and for ‘the social ecology of schools (that) is vital to our social fabric’.

Given the kinds of very serious issues arising from Pat Yarker’s and Ivor Goodson’s work and the more buoyant narratives articulated by Jonathan Paine, Gill Mullis and Frances Holloway, the very recent ground-breaking study commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on ‘Variation in Teachers’ Work, Lives and Effectiveness’ (VITAE) makes particularly interesting reading. In their *What Being a Teacher (Really) Means* **Chris Day & Lesley Saunders** set out some of the key issues emerging from the VITAE research. *FORUM* readers will, no doubt, be pleased to know that the starting points included a clear recognition that ‘teacher effectiveness is not some definitive characteristic that can be assessed (let alone measured)’. The research findings are hugely important for a range of reasons, not least because ‘they suggest that what it really means to be a teacher is not only more complex than some current wisdom suggests, but that schools need to devote far more attention to their policies and strategies for making best use of this precious human resource’.

The contested nature of what it is to be a teacher and the central notion of teacher identity are issues explored from two slightly different angles in our next two articles. The first, *In Praise of Diversity: why schools should seek gay and lesbian teachers, and why it’s still difficult* by **David Nixon**, approaches these matters from the standpoint of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) teachers and argues strongly not only that colleagues with these orientations bring particular strengths to schools, but also that the struggles they endure in the face of a largely hostile or condescending orthodoxy have much to tell all teachers who see social justice and human fulfilment as central to any educational undertaking. In urging us to take seriously the importance of ‘creatively and imaginatively reconstructing the world, our way of thinking it and creating it, differently and more equitably’, he is, in effect, urging us to embrace a richer and more inclusive humanity that gives greater strength and purpose to our daily work in our schools and communities.

Scherto Gill & John Pryor also argue in *The Person Who Teaches? Narrative Identity and Teachers’ Experience at an International Conference* for an approach to teaching and education that goes well beyond traditional boundaries so consistently and inspiringly transgressed by contributors to the Special Issue of *FORUM*. Reflecting on the bringing together of teachers from very different cultures and life experiences in an international conference and the professional and human learning that flowed from it, they underscore the importance of teacher identity and the absolutely central role of articulating a narrative that helps us to understand who we are and who we wish to become. It is partly about helping teachers to ‘make sense of their personal knowledge of life and work’ and partly about locating that meaning making process in a wider context of co-construction, a context in which listening to and learning

from others with similar values, but quite different cultural experiences, enables us to value each other and ourselves and our fundamental beliefs about the nature and purpose of education and schooling.

The narrow instrumentalism so destructive of many of even the most committed and most talented teachers and so opposed by contributors to this Special Issue is not, of course, inevitable and it is reassuring and refreshing, if a little galling, to learn from **Terry Wrigley** in his *'Training' is Just Not Good Enough* that initial teacher education in Scotland remains true to a more humane, more expansive notion of education than the dominant paradigms and practices south of the border. Again and again he contrasts the Scottish 'sense of openness as well as democracy and human rights' to the English approach which 'treats young people's development instrumentally – solely as a factor which may affect their attainment' and the consequences for initial teacher education that flow from these very different orientations. The difference is not just to do with a preference for 'the pedagogical' rather than the bureaucratic; it is also to do with an equivalent difference in tone. Few readers of this journal would argue with the closing insistence that 'training new teachers is just not good enough ... They also need to become *critically* reflective practitioners', yet this is, by implication what the English system denies.

What is clear, not just from Terry Wrigley's article, but also from almost every contribution to this Special Issue, is the enormous impact of national policy context on what is valorised and what is marginalised, what is allowed and what is not, not only in the day-to-day practice, but also in the underlying presumptions and intellectual frameworks that enable and constrain contemporary notions of what it is to be and become a teacher. **Sandra Leaton Gray's** *What Does It Mean to Be a Teacher? Three Tensions within Contemporary Teacher Professionalism Examined in Terms of Government Policy and the Knowledge Economy* offers a powerful interrogation of the English policy context which seems more suited to producing 'graduate technicians rather than autonomous professionals'. Whether or not we agree with her closing suggestion that ultimately 'we have to develop a shared set of beliefs for education that transcends politics', there will be little disagreement amongst *FORUM* readers with her analysis of a post-1988 process which has seen the increasing deprofessionalisation of teaching and the marginalisation of the few elements of vocation that subsequently remained.

The three articles that conclude our Special Issue each in different ways and from different standpoints help us, by virtue of their varying distance from the imperatives of English education policy, to reflect on 'What it is to be a teacher' in England half-way through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Two are written from within the contexts of other nation states – the USA and New Zealand – both of which have influenced and been influenced by our own traditions and recent histories. The third standpoint, that of Steiner education, also has an international tradition to sustain it and, like its companion articles, has much about it which resonates, if often by illuminative

contrast, with the dilemmas and delights that feature significantly in our current contexts.

In introducing us to recent research on Steiner education in England, **Philip & Glenys Woods** in their *In Harmony with the Child: the Steiner teacher as co-leader in a pedagogical community* remind us that the kind of narrow instrumentalism against which our contributors have spoken so persuasively also has opponents within the radical private sector of education that has in the past, through organisations like the New Education Fellowship and its journal *NEW ERA*, enabled a creative arena for dialogue with state sector teachers premised on quite different values and assumptions to contemporary orthodoxies. The centrality of relationships, the emphasis on the specifically pedagogic dimension of the teacher's role, and the insistence on the creativity and imagination of teacher judgement connect strongly with much that contributors to this Special Issue have argued for. Not only is a Steiner teacher 'not meant to be following slavishly a documented outline of educational practice or curricula laid down by others', there is substantial emphasis on teaching 'as a creative act ... an art, not a technical task' and a rejection of 'summative assessments and tests that rank children (like national tests in England)'. Furthermore, Steiner teachers' collegial commitment to running schools without headteachers has much about it that will excite the interests of *FORUM* readers.

Many of these concerns and issues are taken up by **Alison Cook-Sather** in her *Production, Cure or Translation? Rehumanizing Education and the Roles of Teacher and Student in U.S. Schools and Universities*. The current context of the USA echoes many of the worst features of our own contemporary malaise. Thus, 'recent federal legislation in the United States (No Child Left Behind 2001) has spawned various forms of scripted and prescribed curricula that are imposed on teachers, and students are under more pressure than ever to prove their fitness by performing well on standardized tests'. Against this depressingly familiar backdrop, Alison Cook-Sather argues for a reaffirmation of an approach to teaching animated by creative rather than controlling metaphors, respectful and attentive to teacher and student identities, insistent on the importance of narrative and the construction of selves at the heart of education. Hers is a plea for 'the rehumanization of education' and 'the demanding work of making intelligent meaning and taking responsible action even – and perhaps especially – within the confines of increasingly standardized and dehumanizing circumstances'.

Our final contribution, *Collective Memory Loss: secondary teachers and school qualifications in New Zealand* by **Judie Alison**, picks up on issues raised by Mary Jane Drummond in an earlier issue of *FORUM* (see Drummond [2005] Professional Amnesia: a suitable case for treatment, *FORUM* 47[2 & 3]). The 'collective memory loss' or professional amnesia prompted by 'extreme neo-liberal education policies of the 1990s' has serious consequences for the circumstances in which New Zealand teachers and their English counterparts currently find themselves. Not only is there the monologic government insistence that 'Education is to grow the economy by developing "human

capital”’, there is the same destabilisation and marginalisation of an older generation of teachers animated by a broader view of education addressing issues of social justice and a wider, more inclusive humanity. This is not, however, just a generational matter. For those not worn down by the ubiquitous narrowing of aspiration, there is evidence that others have too often been captured from the start by an unremitting process of deprofessionalisation. Thus many New Zealand teachers ‘demand pre-packaged assessment resources that they can download and use without change, rather than demanding professional space to prepare their own resources with their particular students’ needs in mind’. The answer is not, of course, to capitulate. If the reclamation of teacher radicalism ‘is worthy’, but ‘far away’ we have no alternative but to ‘make strenuous efforts to lift their heads above the immediate and to engage with fundamental questions of education’. In solidarity and with passion all contributors to this Special Issue would cheer her closing remarks: ‘We must not give up. The stakes are too high’.

Standing back and reflecting on the courage, creativity and commitment of the contributors to this Special Issue of *FORUM* on ‘What it means to be a teacher’, it seems to me that there are certain enduring elements of human learning, whether of adults or young people, in our culture that recur again and again with unflinching persistence. Together they provide the conditions of our personhood. In feeling my way towards them I offer two brief attempts to sketch out what these enduring elements might include.

The first comes from a recent (January 2005) research project I was involved in for the DfES on ‘Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice’. Having indicated firmly that the notion of ‘transfer’ was inappropriate for a whole range of reasons, most prominently to do with the pervasiveness and persistence of personal and professional mutuality, we suggested in its stead the notion of ‘joint practice development’. Unpicking the key elements that informed this alternative view of teacher learning, we identified four basic considerations which our data suggested underpinned successful teacher collaboration across, and indeed within, institutions. These were firstly, and most importantly, the necessity of establishing certain kinds of open and inclusive relationships between those involved; secondly, the necessity of attending to teacher identities, to the fundamental importance of personal and professional becoming that needed to be respected and nurtured in the processes and indeed the purposes of joint work; thirdly, the importance of joint learning being, if not learner-led, then informed by a rich and patient dialogic encounter between those who wished to enter into a learning partnership; and, lastly, the recognition that these processes of mutual encounter, of learning and frustration, of disappointment and delight, of uncertainty and elation, and the sheer hard work of experiencing all these things in the busyness and routine of daily work in often difficult circumstances take time – time to develop the courage to feel good about what we do; time to learn how to share that with others in ways which respects the norms of collegiality and enable others to learn with you and from you; time to sustain a relationship that will be patient,

supportive and available when things go wrong or our energy and our courage fail us in the development of new practices for new times.

What these four factors point to are a set of underpinning values and presumptions about human flourishing in a just and joyful society that *FORUM* has understood and explored for many years. They are those that have inspired and energised the radical state tradition of education which this journal has pursued since its inception, which it celebrated and re-affirmed in 2005 (see *FORUM* 47[2&3], 'Reclaiming the Radical Traditions of State Education'), and which our previous Special Issue in 2006 (*FORUM* 48[2]) extended and elaborated so convincingly and eloquently in its insistence that 'Every Teacher Matters'.

My second sketch is animated by the same values and assumptions and seeks to frame them in the form of ten questions we might usefully ask of our practices and intentions. My hope is that they are sufficiently clear to be helpful in guiding our work in directions and ways that are consistent with our deeply held aspirations. My hope is also that they are sufficiently uncompromising to unsettle the now ubiquitous attempts to betray what we value through the co-option of emancipatory discourse into the machinery of surveillance and increasingly subtle, often self-managed, forms of control.

Here, then, are my 10 questions: *Does this existing or proposed practice offer opportunities for us (students/staff/parents/the community) to ...*

1. Express our views openly and make some real choices about things that matter to us?
2. Enhance respect for each other and develop honest expressions of feelings and values?
3. Value difference and distinctiveness as of equal worth?
4. Further develop care for each other as members of our community?
5. Accept shared responsibility for our own and each others' learning?
6. Listen to and learn from each other in creative ways?
7. Make us look carefully at the connection between *what* we want to do and *how* we hope to do it? (i.e. Person-centred values must be expressed in person-centred practices and structures.)
8. Make connections between the particular (learning/practice) and the wider, more profound picture (what it means, who I am, who I wish to become) and so help us make meaning from what we do?
9. Develop the courage to cross traditional role boundaries, learn from and teach each other, and develop ways of working that extend our humanity and our creativity as persons?
10. Make sure we relate these questions to each other and so ensure our person-centred commitments remain inclusive and dynamic?

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time a Local Authority Senior Adviser before moving to the University of Cambridge Institute of Education in the early 1990s. At the University of Sussex since 1999, Michael's current research interests include the development of critical approaches to student voice, person-centred education, and reclaiming the radical traditions of state education in England. He moved to the University of London in January 2007. *Correspondence:* Professor Michael Fielding, School of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies, Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, United Kingdom (m.fielding@ioe.ac.uk).

The Annabelle Dixon Fund

We mark with sadness a year since the passing of a dear friend and colleague Annabelle Dixon. Annabelle was an inspired and inspiring teacher and educationalist – a researcher and writer: contributor, campaigner and co-editor of *FORUM* - the journal for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education. She joined Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, as the Times Educational Research Fellow in Educational Policy during a distinguished career in early years education. This spanned the domains of research, publication and the policy environment as well as the classroom she enjoyed so much. In the Lucy Cavendish newsletter of 2005, a piece on Annabelle concluded with the words ‘her work continues’ and this is demonstrably the case. In this time two books jointly authored by Annabelle have been chosen as the *Times Educational Supplement* Book of the Week. *Learning without Limits* was reviewed by Tim Brighouse, who declared that everyone in education should read it and consequently provided a copy for every school in the London Challenge.

Annabelle’s classroom was, in the words of a friend, ‘a place of genuine intellectual search.’ As a psychologist and teacher she was committed to offering inspiring but grounded experiences to children as the essential basis for such a search. The second book, *First Hand Experience: what matters to children* is dedicated to Annabelle, who died while the book was in press. Tim Smit stated ‘this book could save lives’ and hosted a two day conference around the publication at the Eden project he created in Cornwall. A bursary scheme for teachers to attend was set up by the authors in Annabelle’s memory.

A fund has now been set up at the College in Annabelle’s name, with initial donations from three former fellows of Lucy Cavendish. Collectively we sought some way to continue the spirit of generosity, collegiality and intellectual curiosity that she encompassed. We propose to use this gift to establish an endowment fund to enable the College to make modest grants to students. In consultation with friends, family and colleagues it was decided to make an annual award to a student who has made the most of her time at Lucy Cavendish during that year.

**If you would like to make a donation to the fund please contact
Head of Development at Lucy Cavendish,
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