

## The Reformer Knows Best: destroying the teacher's vocation

**IVOR GOODSON**

**ABSTRACT** Drawing on data from a major Spencer Foundation study, this article focuses on the effects of major restructuring initiatives in New York State on a gifted and utterly committed teacher. It challenges the now ubiquitous assumption that 'the reformer knows best' and reveals the gradual demise of an immensely gifted, dedicated teacher – a man whose mission to educate is compulsive, continuous and coherent – at the hands of 'reforms' which turn out to destroy the lives of students, teachers, and whole communities. Reforms which deny, ignore or otherwise disvalue the sense of mission of excellent teachers such as the person whose story is told in this article turn out to be counter-productive and exemplify the global warming of vocational purpose.

### **The Reformer Knows Best: ignoring the teacher's view**

In the years between 1996 and 2003 I was working for half the year in the USA and half the year in England. It was a time when the changes in schools in both countries were remarkably similar. Strangely many of the restructuring initiatives based on tests, tables and targets were advocated by powerful voices in American society. Interestingly one of the last places to actually try all these reforms was the centre of the American Empire – New York State.

By chance, I was working in New York State at the time of their introduction and from 1998 to 2002 was funded by the Spencer Foundation to study what was going on in the schools in the city in New York State. The project focused on collecting teachers' life histories, as well as on ethnographies of school life. Our findings have been recently reported in detail elsewhere (see Goodson, 2003); but for me the most compelling evidence on the effects of restructuring was how teachers with brilliant professional track records talked about their response to these initiatives.

In this article I concentrate on one such teacher, Berry, 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. His whole

professional life had been spent in downtown comprehensive secondary high school.

The 'reformer knows best' school reforms appear to be designed to work in spite of the teacher, not because of the teacher. Implicit in the reforms is a notion that many teachers are inadequate and need to be put to work in a more targeted and rigorous way. Whilst in some cases this may be true, little thought has been given to their effect on the significant number of high-functioning, creative teachers in the system. These teachers are the bedrock of the public school system and their understanding, consent and support would, I suspect, be imperative if new reforms are to work. Let us see what Berry's view of the new reforms was so we can judge if the 'reformer knows best'.

### **A Professional Life in Reforming Times**

I first met Berry in 1998 in an industrial city in New York State. The initial reason for our meeting was that our research project had begun in the local university and it was my role as research director to devise a research programme, and to look for key informants to further develop that process and provide data and insights. We were looking at the way that the educational system was undergoing reform and change towards more accountability and performativity criteria. Rather than writing a conventional report, we had begun to look at the process of organisational change from the viewpoint of those at the end of the change mandates: the teachers, students and parents. As a locally renowned teacher, Berry, with a stream of distinguished teaching awards and a significant local reputation, offered the chance to see how one of the most committed practitioners felt about the reform and changes sweeping through the district.

Berry's school, Sheldon, had gone through a trajectory recognisable in many downtown areas of New York State. From its origins as a high-status comprehensive with a broad social and racial mix and a fine academic reputation, it had faced decline and social turmoil. In the early 1970s, race riots led many of the white families to decide to leave for the suburbs. Sheldon School withstood these changes, but a new magnet initiative promoting school choice and competition began in 1984. This initiative drew many of the most gifted students away from Sheldon, once again reducing the school's academic reputation and also leading to more white students leaving the school. In the same period, the district closed a nearby high school with a high Afro-American clientele, and large numbers of these students and some of the associated staff were transferred to Sheldon. By 1989, half of Sheldon's students were estimated to be living in poverty, and by 2000 this had reached 70 per cent. The school was caught by magnet initiatives which draw academic students away, and by school transfers which brought less academic students into the school.

The period of the 1970s, and especially the 1980s, was one of precipitous decline in Sheldon School – a time of growing discipline problems and declining academic performance. Yet, during this period, Berry remained

committed to his work in the school and performed at a level that led to many teaching awards for excellence. This was not a teacher easily deflected by social turmoil, by racial dissent, by changing racial composition, or by changing academic priorities. In these years, he continued to stand his ground, to 'build his own classroom world' of excellence and commitment. Indeed, he judged he was at a professional peak in these years of school decline and deterioration.

I got my creative writing class in 1975 and then I got my first honors class in '79. From '75, until probably '85, was kind of a golden age where the kids I was getting and my own intellectual curiosity were at a peak, and I was living off energy that was coming from outside and inside. And I was constantly looking for new staff, finding new material, building up new staff, and testing things out. And it was a great time period. About 1985, 1986, I think, I entered a period of real competence where I felt like I was someone with tools that I could use well and at will. I was a ... I became a much more rigorous teacher.

These statements show Berry as a model professional, working in very difficult conditions in a school with some of the poorest and also most challenging students, but bringing a sense of commitment and mission to the task. He has achieved this by polishing up his own professional skills, by developing his relationships with his students and by constantly replenishing his intellectual and teaching 'resource-bank'. He has built a classroom world full of rich learning experiences and full of teaching passion and purpose – a site of commitment and craft. He is practising his commitment to public education, to teaching children of all classes and races, to teaching as a moral craft. For a society under pressure to improve, for the social fabric to be strengthened, for a sense of community to endure, such teachers must be nurtured, strengthened and supported. Such teachers attract and mentor new teachers.

Into Berry's world came new reforms and restructuring initiatives. In the 1980s, the USA experienced a rapid growth of standards-based reform movements. In this school district in the late 1980s, the State mandated competency tests in five subjects. In 1990, these tests were extended to six subjects and the required credits for graduates were expanded from 20.5 in 1986 to 23.5 for entering students a decade later. By this time, in the mid-1990s, a range of testing experiments had been narrowed down to a testing regime tied to the State's standards. Student graduation was dependent on passing standardised tests in five subjects.

Berry's sense of mission and commitment was to be itself tested by the new standards-based reform. But first, we have to establish where Berry's mission originated and how it came to have such a compelling role in his teaching excellence, and in the management of his life 'dream' or 'mission'. Berry graduated in English Literature with a minor in Archive Writing from the University of Louisville in 1968. He had a Creative Writing Scholarship and was editor of the literary magazine and arts editor of *The College* newspaper.

Upon graduation, not wanting to fight in Vietnam, he joined the Peace Corps and chose to serve in India.

His humanism is evident in that in his first teaching assignment at a school with a rising Afro-American population in a blue-collar area, he quickly felt at home. The school fitted with his liberal notions of treating all students equally in a democracy. This moral purpose and mission, of course, goes deep into American history – Horace Mann’s Common School epitomised this democratic ideal and was the precursor to the comprehensive high school he found himself in. The sixties generation was strongly imbued with such moral purpose and a desire for community and equality and, in that sense, Berry was like any number of men and women who chose teaching as a way of exploring their moral commitment to breathing life into the American democratic project. Of course, this infusion of new life coincided with the demographic bulge of the baby boomers who brought so much change and invention in their wake.

His commitment found an echo in the student community, whether Italian, Polish, White or Afro-American. He valued them all and this quickly created good learning environments in his classroom. He judged that ‘the Afro-American kids really liked me. And I think it was just because I was honest and real and so were they’. He also realised early on that there were certain things that he did pretty well. ‘I could build up a rapport with a class very quickly; I could get them interested in the literature very quickly.’ His belief in social inclusion and his definition of inclusive learning strategies plainly complemented each other and won him a broad student following.

However, as we talked, Berry said how much time and thought goes into his teaching. He is always collecting resources and ideas, ways of involving his students in relevant issues and strategies for motivating them to learn literature. His mission to educate is compulsive, continuous and coherent. So much so, that he always arrives at 5.30 a.m. and spends two hours preparing himself for his lessons. He is a dedicated professional then, dedicated to education and to spreading that learning as far across the social and racial mosaic of the school community as possible. The aim is to educate all future citizens of the republic: an honourable aim – part of his generation’s sense of mission and what it is that motivates him to give his best and to clearly achieve sustained excellence in his classroom.

Teachers with a strong commitment and sense of mission are incredibly valuable assets in any society. Hence, reforms should approach such professionals with some humility and sensitivity. In truth, ‘you don’t mend it if it ain’t broke’ and, if it already functions superbly as is the case with Berry, reform should be careful and caring.

Standards-based reform is, however, a blunt instrument, not least because it is standardised, not tailored to the personal and emotional side of teaching, not tuned to listen to the generational missions and commitments which motivate teachers through a lifetime.

Berry’s original commitment was to a comprehensive high school that educated all students and aspired to equality of opportunity. Over time,

structural changes began to erode such a vision – such erosions are perennial and persistent and inevitable as inequality widens. Magnet schools attracted pupils away, suburbs attracted the richer and primarily white parents away; school transfers increased the concentration of poverty and of minority students. As we saw, Berry's teaching adjusted to these setbacks in his classroom; his vision continued and his teaching remained excellent, bringing a stream of awards.

Into this trajectory of structural challenge, met and dealt with in his classroom, come the new reforms which do not stop at the classroom door. This time, Berry himself is to be treated as a standardised performer of tasks, increasingly defined by others. A master craftsman is treated as a technician complying with the dictates of others and closely monitored as to his level of performance.

His testimony as to the effects of the reforms is characteristically precise and honest:

This has been a particularly frustrating, demoralizing school year for me. Classes are so large, the expectations of the district and the school so specific, and the motivations and skills of the students so low that I find myself thinking in terms of period-to-period survival rather than in terms of grand educational success.

As a result of these frustrations, I have sunk into a period of depression ... Usually, all I need to keep me excited about teaching is a handful of interested students and the freedom to use their interest to engage the rest. This year, the nuts and bolts of curriculum, paper grading and monitoring of students has left me no time or energy for the more global kind of thinking that charges my battery.

### **Concluding Comments**

A common explanation purveyed by reformers is that teacher demotivation among established teachers is just a part of ageing. This does not equate with those teachers who have continued to perform stellar work throughout their careers, when they are valued and their purposes and missions accord with the overall societal vision of education. The destruction of Berry's commitment seems of a different order, for his sense of purpose and commitment are palpable, undimmed when you talk with him. This is a man of passion and purpose, but his purposes are at odds with the new vision. His memory of socially inclusive school communities and of egalitarian politics is deliberately contradicted by the new reforms which celebrate successful students in the suburbs and stigmatise the majority of students in the downtown. For the latter groups, standardisation systematises, organises and labels exclusion. These are Berry's students.

At the time, Berry's lifetime of creativity and resourcefulness, his memory of professional life, as based on his judgement and his skill, is undermined. We see a more prescriptive, micro-managed, professional practice replacing the

professional patterns in which he excelled and from which his students profited. No wonder his sense of professional disillusionment is so articulate.

When excellent teachers become disillusioned, this is a problem for standards-based reform. You do not deliver higher standards by disillusioning the excellent teacher: you end up inevitably lowering standards. Standards-based reforms have to develop an understanding of why excellent teachers pursue excellence. These are common threads.

Excellent teachers tend to have an overarching sense of mission and vocation. Many research studies tell us that most people develop a 'central dream' in their life – a commanding storyline that articulates their passion and purpose into a project or mission around which they organise their life. They judge the success and failures of their lives around the outcome of this central dream or mission.

Reforms which deny, ignore or otherwise devalue the sense of mission of excellent teachers are therefore counter-productive. It is not only that the excellent teacher is demotivated, but that good role models are demolished and good mentors diminished. The contagion of disillusionment spreads; the notion that teaching is a highly committed vocation on which professional men and women centre their lifeworlds is destroyed. When mission and meaning are lost, work becomes a more minimal commitment – people start to just turn up and go through the motions. As one new recruit said: 'It's just a job – I turn up, they tell me what to do. I do it and I go home at the earliest opportunity.' This is what you get when you ignore the 'hearts and minds' of excellent teachers and it leads not to rising standards, but overall to falling standards. Were this solely a matter of standards, it would be manageable, but it is behind this a collapse of social purpose and a destruction of more socially inclusive public practices.

In short, what you have when you follow the line of 'the reformer knows best' is akin to a global warming of vocational purpose. It is rather the same with the global warming of the environment, where we follow a line of the 'political leaders know best'. With schooling we see the steady destruction of the social ecology of the schools. The social ecology of schools is vital to our social fabric – when schools are allowed to embody moral purpose and to pursue social cohesion, notions of community and society are revived and enlivened. In the current historical moment we see a celebration of individual aggrandisement in our schools hiding behind the pseudonyms of 'choice'. We must hope this is a temporary cul-de-sac, for were it to become a permanent feature it would have catastrophic implications for our social reforms.

## References

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