Echoes of Plowden? Opportunities and Pressures Evident in Teachers' Experience of Autonomy and Accountability in One School Community

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ABSTRACT In the light of some of the aspirations for education expressed in the Plowden Report, this short piece considers the experiences of teachers in a 'progressive' English independent school. There is a particular focus on what might loosely be termed job satisfaction. It is suggested that, whilst these teachers enjoy their work, they have professional concerns about externally imposed notions of accountability, about professional autonomy and about the significance of the school community – issues that seem linked and that will have resonance for many in the teaching profession. For those interested, the full paper can be found in *Education 3-13*.

Introduction

The current educational and social context in which primary schools operate might be characterised as very different from the liberal context in which the Plowden Report appeared. Certainly the idea that primary teachers should have quite a high level of control over the curriculum to enable them to exploit children's natural curiosity and interest in learning (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) is at best an aspiration for many teachers working in schools today. For this reason our case study school was of interest. Though the pressures of accountability were no less evident here than elsewhere, it will become clear that the latitude and 'historical licence' for a different approach was greater in our case study school. In examining the teachers' testimony about their work, and the pervading culture that informs it, we felt that arguments about the relationship between autonomy, accountability and community that in many ways lie at the heart of the Plowden Report could be opened up to fresh scrutiny.

The School, the Teachers and the Study

The research investigated the experiences of teachers in a 'progressive' English independent school, with respect to what might loosely be termed job satisfaction. It is acknowledged that these are not necessarily 'typical' teachers and that they are certainly not working in a 'typical' school, but it is also evident that they had ideals and aspirations in common with many of their colleagues who teach in the state sector. The school's foundation was inspired by the Theosophic Educational Trust and it still has a self-consciously progressive ethos. Theosophists such as Annie Besant, a founder of the school, combined ideas and beliefs from different cultures and religions to create a coherent body of thought as a basis for action. Elements of both the Theosophist and the Quaker traditions still have a strong influence on the school, which now takes children from 5 to 18 years old.

The research process included interviews with four teachers, together with classroom observations and interviews with children. Two of the interviewees (David and Mary) were Key Stage 1 teachers (teaching ages 5-7 years), whilst the other two respondents (Sarah and Ian) were long-serving members of the school staff who had experience across the primary age range but who were both with Key Stage 2 classes (ages 7-11 years) at the time of interview.

Analysis of the teacher interview data aimed to draw out key elements shaping the teachers' readily expressed feelings of professional worth and commitment to the school. Their perception of the interdependence of the ideas of autonomy, accountability and community provides a conceptual framework for our account. To define terms a little, 'autonomy' is often qualified in general educational discourse as 'relative autonomy', that nevertheless provides scope for flexibility and exercise of creativity. 'Accountability' may be seen to limit this autonomy, comprising either bureaucratic and/or mechanistic procedures supervised by the state, or alternatively embodied in an active relationship between teachers, children and their parents. The consequent reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared ideals (that might nevertheless be open to debate between the parties) provide the foundations of a 'community'.

Job Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

David and Mary were both relatively new to the school and, indeed, to the profession. Both of their accounts made direct and up-to-date comparisons with the state school system that they had recently and deliberately rejected in favour of a 'progressive' alternative. As teachers, both Mary and David had soon determined to leave the state system in which they had found themselves after qualifying and now felt lucky and privileged to be working elsewhere. Amongst some strongly stated views from both about their reasons for doing so, Mary related how:

> I went to a ... school that had an excellent Ofsted inspection and it was horrible. They were horrible to children and it just didn't feed

> my soul. There was nothing there, they were just produced ... you went in and did what you were told and the children did it and they went home and there was nothing beautiful in what we were doing, nothing satisfying.

Viewing 'the inexorable shift of control from the teacher to the state' (Dadds, 1999, p. 41) as largely unhelpful in developing rounded individuals, these teachers pointed to the need for a level of teacher autonomy in curriculum decision making if children's learning is to be properly catered for and if teachers themselves are to feel valued. The necessity of relevance and meaning making for the children was strongly expressed in their statements, for which autonomy, and its associated flexibility, was seen as key (and as Johnson & Hallgarten [2002, p. 3] make clear, 'job satisfaction for teachers is intimately connected with rights of decision in specific spheres of activity ... centred on curriculum and pedagogy').

With the two longer serving teachers, the high level of initiative they were afforded was a significant factor in reconciling practice both with their core values as educators and with the ethos of the school. Ian explained that he felt 'very independent in terms of being able to select the type of work and the approach to work that we wish'. This was seen as vital, given an ethos that focuses on development of the 'whole child'. For these teachers, a key aim of teacher autonomy in curriculum planning is to achieve *child* autonomy in the classroom. Sarah linked social and intellectual development with the latitude a teacher has to give time to an individual – 'being valued for themselves as a person' necessitated giving 'time to talk and discuss'. Scope to adapt the curriculum to children's needs and interests seems, for these teachers, to be a necessary prerequisite for developing their pupils. It is interesting to note in this context that Johnson & Hallgarten (2002) have observed the inherent conflict in government policy between a focus on a narrow range of pupil outcomes in school and a recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and hence the inculcation at school of a commitment to learning.

Autonomy, Accountability and Community

Without the adjunct of accountability it would be tempting to categorise these teachers as liberal romantics, resembling the caricature historically attributed to the Plowden Report by the writers of the 'Black Papers' and others of teachers as advocates of 'do-as-you-like individualism' in the face of the relatively recent 'centralist do-as-you-are-told approach' (Dadds, 1999, p. 43). However, a highly developed sense of professional responsibility and accountability was also clear from both classroom observations and personal testimony. But for these teachers, a view of professional accountability does not rely on the imposition of structures 'from above'. It is clear from the teachers' statements that the requirement for some form of accountability has been internalised. This is understood first and foremost as accountability to children and then to their

parents, with some reference to forms of accountability between colleagues on the school staff.

A positive relationship between teacher autonomy, collaborative practice and professional trust, illustrated by the teacher testimony, has been shown to have a significant impact on the curriculum and teachers' culture (Littledyke, 1997). Accountability to the children, however, is paramount for these teachers, and not simply with respect to academic needs.

Evident throughout the teacher interviews – and the classroom observations – was the strong link between the teachers' intentions and the conditions of learning highlighted by Rudduck et al (1996). In analysing this testimony the interweaving and interdependence of notions of autonomy, accountability and community soon become clear, and the relationship between children and teachers is identified as central and critical. Positive relationships between staff and children are given pre-eminence, through the exercise of principles of respect, fairness, security and support. The aim is to provide children with challenge and a sense of themselves as learners, a high level of autonomy in their own learning, status in the school and, ultimately, control over their own lives.

With respect to the notion of community, Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) define community as comprising three elements – community of place, community of friendship and community of mind. Ample illustration of all three elements was evident in practice at the school or reflected in teachers' accounts. Observations also indicated that there was a palpable confidence in the ways in which the teachers engaged with other members of the school community in promoting, and in some cases defending, the values of the school. As parental priorities and expectations change, these teachers have the professional self-esteem (Hoyle, 2001) to challenge parental assumptions where they feel that this is necessary and 'ethos days' run for parents are a testament to this. This confidence in putting forward a professional perspective to all-comers is viewed as entirely healthy by the newer teachers – 'you do become much closer to both parents and the children I think' (Mary).

Messages from a Progressive Alternative?

School–community relations have to be open to constant scrutiny, nurture, refreshment and reinvigoration. But the working through of these imperatives as national policy in the state sector has left many teachers feeling that they have little control over the content of learning and that they are outside the spheres of influence that drive such policy forward (Reed & Hallgarten, 2002). In contrast, this alternative school community seems to realise the observations of Scheffler, as long ago as 1968:

> Teachers cannot restrict their attention to the classroom alone, leaving the larger setting and purposes of schooling to be determined by others. They must take active responsibility for the goals to which they are committed ... If they are not to be mere

> agents of others ... they need to determine their own agency through a critical and continual evaluation of the purposes, the consequences, and the social context of their calling. (p. 11)

The progressive alternative presented here serves to illustrate that essential and interrelated elements of this agency constitute some level of professional autonomy with respect to curriculum and pedagogy, an *internalised* sense of accountability, and a wholehearted involvement in the wider community of the school.

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