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## What Next in School Reform?

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**ABSTRACT** This article reviews the current state of education reform in the United Kingdom and uses the BBC film *The Choir* to explore alternative ways of improving the quality of learning and teaching in schools.

### **Introduction: the leader's dilemma**

As teachers and school leaders, we plan to capture hearts and minds, and very often succeed. Our values, methods and practices inspire young people to learn and love learning. Our schools seem to be better places. But we also fear that many of our efforts are in vain and that too often we do no more than reproduce what is already there. The disadvantaged seldom catch up, while bright-eyed and bushy-tailed young people earn predictable success. Family culture and influence seem so much more powerful than our efforts to implant burning curiosity and independent thinking. Most of our gains seem short-lived. We want to believe that teachers and schools make a difference and that education can transform life chances. Unfortunately, our ardour is dampened by our knowledge that successful learning is conditioned by deeply rooted social and cultural variables. Our attempts to fine-tune classrooms and teaching methods seem doomed to failure (Bernstein, 1970; Lowe, 1997).

The United Kingdom school effectiveness model, imposed through the test and audit system, has exacerbated these professional doubts. Since league tables were first published in 1993, school leaders and teachers have been judged by their ability to improve results. A strong emphasis on hyper-accountability has left no space for alternative, qualitative measures of social care and progress (Mansell, 2007). No school or teacher can rest content that students are growing up in reasonable health and happiness if the results trajectory is flat or downward. The relentless pursuit of results has overwhelmed other concerns and has undermined the confidence of many teachers, especially those working in cities.

There are signs of change, however. Policy-makers are worried as the evidence accumulates that student outcomes have not improved as much as they were expected to do (Barber, 2008). Parental choice and competition between schools seem to have produced a highly differentiated and increasingly polarised system (Levačić & Woods, 2002). Hopkins (2007) believes that command and control, top-down reform has stalled and that new methods, including teacher leadership, are needed if further progress is to be achieved.

The death of the Key Stage 3 tests marks, therefore, a turning point in the struggle to improve our schools. Policy-makers have begun to lose faith in their simple, instrumental solutions and are searching for better, smarter ways to enhance the quality of learning and skills in our schools. Unfortunately, professionals, battered by the annual cycle of tests, examinations and performance management, have become pessimistic and doubt their ability to 'make a difference' to the future of the disadvantaged and excluded. After the disappointments of large-scale reform, is there still mileage in the comprehensive principle that everyone can achieve, given appropriate support? What should school leaders and teachers do now to increase the chances of success for all? Is the time right for a new vision of how to make schools better?

### **Why Reform Isn't Working**

Stephen Ball (2008) argues that the positivist, scientific version of improvement that has dominated educational policy since the 1980s was bound to fail. He claims that the techniques supposed to increase performance and effectiveness produce instead 'a culture or system of terror'. School leaders become enforcers, assisting in the work of audit and inspection, while the teachers themselves teach to tests that have little connection with learning. The result is emotional pressure and stress; a relentless intensification of work that overflows into private life; increased competition within institutions; mutual surveillance; and bureaucratic paperwork that diverts everyone from the real business of working with children.

Hoyle & Wallace (2007) believe that the official model of top down reform also creates an implementation gap between the intentions of the policy-makers and their interpretation in schools and classrooms. A ceaseless flow of initiatives is implemented through Chinese whispers. Teachers do not own reform and wait to be told what to do, or engage in subversion or resistance. As a result, educational goals are not agreed or shared. Reform is subject, therefore, to an endemic and fatal irony.

Radford (2006) has identified a structural weakness in current models of effectiveness. The 'factors' that are supposed to lead to desirable goals are in fact generalisations – e.g. authoritative leadership, high expectations, purposeful teaching – that are impossible to convert into easily applied formulae, as you might, for example, with scientific theories. Teaching and learning are not one-dimensional activities, springs and clockwork in a watch mechanism or levers in a signal box, with predictable results flowing from particular actions or

combinations of actions. The impact of teacher behaviour is fluid and unpredictable because there may be slow, medium or long-term consequences and each student brings a unique mindset and potential to learning experiences. Classroom transactions are mediated by countless other variables and influences. Chaos theory illustrates the complex relationships and interactions that shape change over time. This is why Fullan (1982) believes it is easier to land a man on the moon than to raise average reading levels in the United States.

These flaws in the theoretical foundations of school reform are profoundly discouraging. School improvement seems to be much more difficult and much less susceptible to scientific reform than government advisers ever expected (Hopkins, 2007; Barber, 2008). After 20 years of large-scale reform, another wave of policy initiatives designed to energise school performance is unlikely to be successful. Systemic complexity will thwart our best efforts until we have a better approach (Barker, 2008).

### **Is There Another Way?**

The failing drive to improve basic skills and test scores betrays a desperate lack of imagination. Government agencies, obsessed with minor variations in statistical outcomes, have not the slightest idea how to enrich the quality of students' educational lives by drawing on the richest ingredients of our culture. As currently presented and interpreted, school improvement is a philistine enterprise that encourages teachers to neglect important areas of the curriculum. Singing, music, dance, drama, and poetry have become optional extras, marginalised by an all-consuming preoccupation with core subjects and measurable success.

The four part BBC television series, *The Choir* (2007), captures the essence of this improvement problem (how do we make a difference?) and powerfully challenges the self-limiting philistinism induced by government targets. Large numbers of students and their families, especially in our cities, are resistant to learning and fear learning. They lead lives that are arid in terms of the culture of their society and their own potential as human beings. They are drilled through a regime of tests and examinations that further discourages their participation and reduces their enjoyment of learning. Misconceived priorities exclude many of these young people from their cultural heritage.

Determined to prove that everyone can achieve, given the right support, the BBC chose a boys' school in an inner city area of a relatively deprived English midlands town. There has been no tradition of singing or choral work for 40 years. Teachers and children see singing as for girls and gays; but in reality even these unfortunates have no opportunity to sing. Amongst the school's students are choristers from the Cathedral Choir, who keep very quiet for fear of bullying; and multi-ethnic street rappers who entertain one another in the playground. The programme tells the human story of what happens when these children and their parents meet Gareth, a very young-looking but nationally distinguished choir master.

## Getting the Boys to Sing

Through a series of four programmes that reflect Gareth's nine months working at the school with the declared intention of producing a 100 strong choir to sing at the Albert Hall in London, the BBC portrays an astonishing process of school improvement that illuminates many of the difficulties described above and suggests an approach to *Getting The Boys To Sing* that has much wider implications.

The Lancaster School in Leicester is long-established and has a reputation for sporting excellence. Music is a low profile option after age 13 and there is no singing beyond music lessons. Gareth arrives and discovers strongly negative attitudes amongst the boys and many of their teachers – there is no way the students will sing in front of others, and they tell him he is wasting his time. His first efforts lead to frustration and anger as people play difficult, including the macho PE teacher who is head of year 10.

Over nine months, the choirmaster devotes his entire time to changing these attitudes and creating a choir of 100 boys. He walks the playground, scouting the terrain and understanding the boys' perspectives. He starts lunch and after school clubs, he finds the boys who have been keeping quiet about their music. He offers individual lessons to promising students, including one of the rappers, who is at first interested, then rejects Gareth in a cloud of anger. As the fledgling choir follows a patchwork path, Gareth takes them to another comprehensive, in a prosperous middle class area, where there is already a tradition of singing and wonderful music. He organizes a coach trip to King's College Chapel in Cambridge, where the choir members sing with the choristers. They are excited and awed by their expanding horizons.

Gareth organizes a rapper workshop with visiting musicians; and wins over the PE department by starting a staff choir that sings on sports day. All the time he struggles to find enough boys and to achieve consistent attendance and commitment. Participants and parents are amazed and as they grow in self-confidence and pride become advocates for Gareth's message that singing is life-enhancing and life-transforming. There is a school concert and parents are moved to tears by the first version of the choir. But it isn't big enough – how can Gareth achieve his target of one hundred boys? He takes his devotees to the local primary schools and engages boys who will transfer to Lancaster over the summer; these newcomers boost numbers in the autumn.

You see Gareth working with individual boys, investing hours in teaching them skills and giving them confidence in themselves – many are from ethnic minorities and this is the first time they have achieved public recognition and success – he struggles with the ensemble, by turns frustrated, depressed and inspiring. Always positive, he keeps the focus on the public performance at the Albert Hall, at first a distant goal but then a looming, terrifying prospect. Eventually he has his choir of 100 and they sing with England's best at the Royal Albert Hall, to the great pride and joy of their parents, teachers and peers. Sport is no longer the only tune at Lancaster.

Towards the end of his residence, Gareth and the choir intrigue their way to meetings with the head (who has seen the whole project as a tremendous boost for the school and students) and governors. How can they ensure that this new tradition does not disappear when the choirmaster leaves? It is the least convincing part of the film, despite the great goodwill of everyone at Lancaster.

### What Did Gareth Do?

Gareth's work at Lancaster exemplifies an approach to school improvement that contrasts with the 'scientific' methods endorsed by policy-makers and reformers. The choirmaster's apparently intuitive, craftsman-like methods suggest the principles that we should apply if we are to 'make a difference' in the sense of enriching the lives of our students. What did Gareth do?

- He adopted an incremental, pluralistic theory of change. He investigates, interrogates, challenges and demands – he never assumes. He does not believe there is one right answer, a formula for success – he is prepared to try anything and everything. Each student is different and demands time and energy as well as understanding.
- He recognises that you cannot work on one change dimension at a time. Families, students, teachers, school expectations, opportunities to succeed, the music curriculum, the elements of singing, motivation, attitudes, relationships – these have to be worked with all at once, in parallel and in series, never in isolation.
- He never loses faith and belief in himself, in the school, in the boys themselves – he constantly reminds people of their transcending, tangible goal, 100 boys singing at the Royal Albert Hall, and subsidiary objectives (improving skills and motivation, developing confidence and the desire for success) that are genuinely *transformational* and apparently impossible.
- He works with reality and adopts practical solutions – he is intensely hands-on, engaged and involved; if the project fails, he fails. He believes in singing so much that he is prepared to risk humiliation on public television – at times he nearly is humiliated, when a student walks out and when seats are empty at choir practice. There is only one test, not a battery (at the Albert Hall) – but everyone shares the experience and no one can fail on their own. This is a world away from a government singing initiative, with a coordinator appointed, a folder issued, a CD distributed and the inspection manual amended.

His choice of outcome (so different from the current obsession with numerical data) is qualitative – a unique, memorable experience that has the potential to change the boys' attitudes, skills, lives. This early, declared outcome shapes the project – this is not a game for elite, gifted individuals (though there are solos, often from unlikely boys) but a corporate endeavour for 100 students where everyone contributes to everyone else's success and no one is 'left behind'. Everyone is succeeding where they thought they could not.

## Conclusion

This model fails to provide a straightforward formula that can be generalised across the system and is therefore unlikely to appeal to politicians and policy-wonks or even to diminish their appetite for less troublesome solutions. Gareth's way is too slow, too individual, too particular and too hard to measure. The quick fix is the real substance of reform, and is perfectly adapted to politicians' constantly changing, short-term imperatives.

There are also questions about the sustainability of *The Choir* at Lancaster School and at other institutions fortunate enough to create new traditions, musical and otherwise, by these means:

To what extent is the whole improvement dependent on an exceptional individual who is not easily cloned?

To what extent is the cost of a dedicated choirmaster sustainable, either at the school or in schools generally?

Could this transformation have been induced without the BBC and the platform it offered Gareth and the school? Could Gareth have come to Lancaster by any ordinary employment process? Is the supply of able, trained and qualified music teachers (for the state sector) adequate for purpose?

Despite these reservations, Gareth's approach does illustrate how the best teachers have always worked. It also illustrates the sheer complexity of engineering lasting change in assumptions, practices and opportunity. There are no magic bullets, it seems, but many gifted teachers who can change lives by timely and appropriate intervention. The lesson of the choir is that the impossible can be achieved – but that our efforts to standardize complex processes and generate 'solutions' for every problem may prove counter-productive.

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