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## Book Review

### **The Professionals: better teachers, better schools**

PHIL REVELL, 2005

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I started my teacher training course in September 1963. After a few days of introductory lectures, we were flung out into schools for three weeks. I spent the first week mostly watching, the second helping with small groups and the third teaching the whole class.

The purpose of sending students into schools right at the start of their training was, presumably, partly to weed out anyone who was clearly going to be hopeless, and partly to give students the chance to say 'actually, this isn't for me' and push off, rather than waste three years of their – and their lecturers' – lives.

There were two more periods of 'school practice', one in the second year and a much longer one in the last. The rest of the time on the course was divided between the curriculum (what and how to teach the various subjects), and the theory (philosophy and psychology etc).

In the forty years since then, politicians have changed the training – and role – of teachers many times. BEd degree courses began in 1965. Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) became a requirement for state school teachers in 1970. Training was integrated into higher education during the 1970s. Conditions of employment were changed in 1991. The Teacher Training Authority (TTA) was established in 1994. The General Teaching Council (GTC) began work in 1998. 'Workforce remodelling', which many teachers saw as a diminution of their professional status, was introduced in 2003. And now failed bankers and other city types are to be allowed to become teachers after just six months' training.

Back in the sixties there were just two ways to become a teacher – the BEd or the PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education). Today there are more than a dozen different routes, including the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) and School-based Initial Teacher Training (SCITT).

Frankly, the whole business is now an extraordinary mess. What should be done to sort it out and establish a coherent scheme for training tomorrow's

teachers? That is the question which Phil Revell seeks to answer in *The Professionals*.

The book is in two parts. In the first, Revell follows more than seventy trainees as they work towards QTS, looking at the routes they pursue, the problems they encounter, which parts of their training they find helpful, and which are a hindrance.

In part two he considers the challenges the profession faces. 'I'm simply trying to answer a few questions,' he says. 'Who wants to be a teacher and why? Does teacher training actually prepare people for the rigours of the classroom? How do we persuade good teachers to stay on in the classroom? What kind of profession are today's wannabe teachers entering? Is it a profession at all?'

### **Part One: questions**

He begins by asking whether education is 'an academic discipline with theories and a knowledge base that all practitioners should be familiar with' or 'a craft, like carpentry, simply a matter of tricks and skills in the classroom allied to a mastery of subject knowledge'.

He reviews the bewildering variety of routes into teaching – PGCE, GTP, SCITT, BEd – and invites his student panel to complete an initial questionnaire. Given the utilitarianisation of education which has been ruthlessly pursued by both Tory and Labour governments over the past twenty years, some of their answers make surprisingly encouraging reading. For example, almost all of them reject the view that 'Teachers should focus on what they do best, imparting knowledge. Everything else is social work'; while a clear majority agree that 'Real learning begins when children learn to think. The teacher's job is to assist that process without getting in the way'.

Revell is concerned that the rush to get teachers into the classroom inevitably results in a lack of time for the theoretical aspects of education. 'Shouldn't teachers have more than a smattering of knowledge about child development, the relationship between intelligence and ability, the influences on educational achievement, and the theories of how the brain handles information?' he asks. 'What about the history and politics of education, a subject that could be usefully subtitled 'How did we get into this mess?' Or the ongoing professional debates about too much content, not enough content, uniform, testing, league tables, teaching reading, specialist schools?'

He reports the views of his panel of students during and at the end of their year's training. Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming majority felt that their training had been rushed and that some important topics were less than adequately covered, including the relationship between social class and achievement; child development; and theories of intelligence and ability.

Revell is clear that much of the theory is essential but he questions whether the initial teacher training (ITT) year is the best time to learn it. 'Wouldn't it be better for teachers to come to this knowledge with the benefit and perspective of some classroom experience?' he suggests.

## Part Two: answers

In part two of the book he begins to try to answer some of these questions. He compares the views of the two sides in the debate about teacher training. On the one hand, academics in university education departments argue strongly for a theoretical underpinning. On the other, pragmatists favour an apprenticeship model. The academics aren't helped by a 'fifth column' of theorists – typified by the right-wing think tank Politeia – who argue that education as a subject has little academic credibility and should therefore be scrapped. 'This may seem harsh and extreme', he says, 'but the voices behind these judgements have the ear of Downing Street, and government policy is moving irrevocably in their direction.'

In fact, most educators – and a large majority of Revell's trainee teachers – are more in tune with 'the Deweyian ideal' of an education which seeks to help people think about the world around them, rather than forcing them to accumulate facts. 'People are not born to be geographers or mathematicians or physicists,' he says. 'They are born to be people.'

Given this widely-held view of education, it is sad and puzzling that teachers have submissively accepted an avalanche of ill thought through government initiatives.

Of the National Curriculum, tests and league tables, for example, he says 'The children who started school that year [1989] were to be guinea pigs, subjects for an experiment that had no research foundation, no basis in educational theory. No longitudinal study was begun to gauge the results of the experiment. No research team was given the task of evaluating the proposed changes ... Tests were about league tables and teacher bashing, not about education.' He notes that by 1995 even the Conservatives had spotted that their curriculum 'reforms' had resulted in falling standards. Incredibly (or perhaps not), instead of turning to the teachers for help, they brought in Post Office Chairman Ron Dearing to sort out the mess.

The teaching profession was equally acquiescent over New Labour's specialist schools. 'A confident teaching profession would have asked far more questions', says Revell. 'Teachers should have demanded an independent assessment of the educational benefits ... Teachers know that the policy is based on a fantasy, but they have had their mouths sealed with twenty pound notes. How professional is that?'

On inclusion, he argues that 'teachers have swallowed the government's agenda, which was itself driven by pressure from disability groups whose view is political rather than educational.'

Why did so many teachers meekly accept the spewings out of this 'reform juggernaut'? Partly, Revell suggests, because most teachers were too busy to 'raise their eyes from their form filling for long enough', and partly because many teachers agreed that 'the system had somehow gone wrong'. The few people who did 'see the emperor's clothes for what they really were ... were isolated and ignored'.

Revell argues that what has been missing is 'a professional conversation between policy makers and teachers'. The result of relying on political advisers and business experts to create the National Curriculum, for example, was 'a series of solutions that owed more to politics and marketing than they did to educational theory'.

But teachers have been blameworthy, too. The unions have been less interested in engaging in debates about education than with screwing better pay deals out of the government.

The picture today is little better, says Revell, with the GTC failing to take a strong lead on educational issues such as the teaching of reading or the role of classroom assistants. He urges three priorities for a reform agenda: more innovative use of technology, a detailed consideration of the implications of workforce remodelling, and clearer policies on how schools interact with each other and with other children's services.

In his final chapter *Blueprint for Change* Revell notes the work already being done by 'Learning Institutes' – groups of schools taking collective responsibility for developing the next generation of teachers. He urges that these Learning Institutes should not only be centres for teacher training but should 'lead on professional development of all kinds'.

He argues that 'Initial teacher training should focus on the practical: on classroom management, lesson planning and organisation, marking and assessment. These are skills that teachers need as soon as they set foot in a classroom. Alongside these practical skills the teacher also needs a grounding in theoretical issues: education and the law, child development, the role of other childcare professionals. There is much else that teachers ought to know, but the ITT year isn't the right time. It's too pressured, too intense, there's too much else going on.'

He then offers some concrete proposals for the future of teacher training:

Teachers should be trained in appropriately funded schools.

Training should focus on effective classroom practice with a limited theoretical component. Only the best schools – 'judged on Ofsted reports and by value added performance indicators, not by league table positions' – would act as ITT providers. The ITT year would result in Qualified Teacher Status which would allow people to teach, but not to lead other teachers.

Teachers would then spend three years studying for a modular Masters degree, focusing on school based research and educational theory and leading to Professional Teacher Status (PQTS). Teachers with PQTS would be eligible for promoted posts, would be responsible for directing teaching and learning in their schools, and could prepare reports on the performance of other teachers. They would lose their PQTS status if they stopped working in schools. Advisers and inspectors would be expected to have PQTS and to teach for at least forty days a year. The General Teaching Council, not the Teacher Training Agency, would set standards for the PQTS.

‘The neo-cons won’t like this,’ says Revell, because it is not what they have in mind when they propose delegating the training of teachers to schools. They want to sound the death knell for educational theory. I want to enhance its status ... I believe that people with PQTS would be more likely to engage in debate about teaching and learning.

He concludes with some advice for the GTC. It should, he says, make some clear statements about teaching, defining the teacher’s role, setting out the core tasks that only teachers should carry out, offering clear guidance about working with other professionals, about what is and what is not appropriate for unqualified and part qualified people to do in a classroom.

The GTC also needs to include a statement of prime responsibility in its ethics policy. This would make clear where a teacher’s main loyalty lay – not to colleagues, or governors, or parents, but to the child.

This would be the basis of a new form of accountability, he says, in which judgements would be based on educational criteria. ‘A better educated and more confident profession would be in a position to demand that policy is based on educational objectives rather than political expediency. The profession wouldn’t always win that argument, but politicians would be forced to make their case in educational terms, which would be a huge improvement on what we see at the moment.’

It certainly would.

### **Practical**

Four factors make *The Professionals* a valuable book.

First, there is Revell’s own first-hand experience as a classroom teacher: he knows the territory and it shows. Second, there is his skill as a freelance journalist, which makes his text clear and extremely readable. Third, there is the year’s worth of in-depth research with students, which grounds the book in reality. And finally, there is Revell’s ability to bring all these strands together and construct not only an accurate analysis of the current situation but also an interesting set of practical proposals for the future.

*The Professionals* is a good read and a valuable contribution to the important debate about the training of the next generation of teachers.

Is it too much to hope that the policy-makers at Number 10 will read it and take on board some its messages? As Revell himself might say, I shouldn’t hold your breath ...

**Derek Gillard**  
*Oxford*



## Education Policy in Britain

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