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# Reasons to Be Cheerful? Why Teachers' Beliefs Could Yet Bring about Change in Schools

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ABSTRACT This article argues that despite a plethora of high-stakes testing, constant scrutiny and the drudgery of meaningless data collection, teachers preserve a notion of education and learning that goes beyond these meagre requirements. Drawing on data and information gathered from over 100 teachers, it maintains that the spirit of teachers is far from defeated, even if they often have to comply to survive. Possibilities for resistance are framed within a broader political perspective than that of teachers and teaching, looking to the formation of potential alliances with parents and other workers.

In case we have not been doing so, we need to pay attention. At the time of writing, junior doctors continue their dispute (just where, exactly, *did* they learn about picket lines and lobbying?) and the response of the Government has been to impose a non-negotiated contract. This same government's plans for housing could mean that some 60,000 households could be forced out of their homes because of the iniquitous 'pay to stay' scheme (Helm, 2016). In response to court victories by highly vulnerable people over the depredations forced on them by the bedroom tax – a levy on having a small 'spare' room in their residence – the reaction of the Government is a spiteful appeal to the Supreme Court (Butler, 2016). And all of this underwritten by a continuing discourse of dog-whistle racism about immigration and integration – the final irony here being Prime Minister Cameron's insistence on Muslim women learning English just months after presiding over 45 million pounds' worth of cuts to services for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) (Evans, 2015). The determination of the current government to pursue austerity as an ideological imperative becomes stronger by the day. All of which makes continuing resistance crucial: how might such resistance manifest itself for teachers in England?

The basic premise of what follows here is that there is a spirit of resistance among teachers that can yet challenge the hegemony of high-stakes testing, standardisation of curricula and misguided managerialism – a toxic cocktail neatly captured by Sahlberg's notion of the GERM – the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2012). However, in the spirit of knowing one's enemy and assessing the balance of forces in any dispute, it is worth surveying the current landscape in schools in England. On the face of it, reasons to be cheerful may seem limited.

The confidence, even arrogance, of the current government stems in part from the incremental construction of a cultural hegemony in schools over the past three decades. (Here, of course, we go beyond party politics. Labour in office did nothing to dismantle any of the destructive measure of the 1988 Education Reform Act and, lest we forget, introduced academies.) Gramsci talks of how dominant power 'not only justifies and maintains its domination but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 245) and Lyotard tells us how systems 'make individuals "want" what the system needs in order to perform well' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 62). There is much that happens in schools to bear out these observations about self-policing, as the following examples demonstrate.

The first of these is anecdotal. In recent years, I have noticed a conversational motif among my teaching friends and acquaintances. In response to a routine question about how things are going at work – and expecting the usual grumbles, shrugs or some entertaining yarn – I am often told within moments about GCSE pass rates and the outcomes of an Ofsted inspection. Where I might have once expected, at the very least, a cynical rejoinder about such 'success', this is no longer forthcoming. In another instance that reinforces this compliance with ideas of notions of success identified by higher authorities, I turn to events in a school with whom I work in partnership, where teachers undertake research into their own practice. In a progressive, open-minded enterprise, fully supported by the school's leaders, there is no escaping the fact that the overwhelming purpose of this research is to 'raise standards' – by which they mean 'improving examination results'. Although the term 'pedagogy' is often central to discussions and planning, what is plain is that it is results that are the principal driver and the justification for their actions. In this they are in tune with the spirit of the age – and this is not to denigrate the efforts of a group of professionals who are doing everything they can to improve the chances of their students. Neither is it to stupidly ignore the fact that the attainment of such results has an impact on their professional tenure and status and, as such, their ability to pay their bills. What it is an example of, however, is adherence to the 'what works' agenda which inevitably diverts consideration of pedagogy towards nothing more than the primacy of results (Alexander, 2004, 2010).

The second example of how schools consent to the terms of external systems exists in a ubiquitous regime of scrutiny. The overwhelming influence of Ofsted, which is equally threatening to teachers in its impending absence as it is in its presence and reality, is almost impossible to overestimate. In the testimony from teachers which informs the central argument of this article, reference to it is ever-present – and in almost all cases with no prompting from interviewer to respondent. Notwithstanding its looming impact, many teachers have now come to regard the inspection itself as something of an occupational hazard that can, after all, be catered for and for which some degree of rehearsal can be put in place. In some respects, even should one choose to turn a blind eye to the political provenance of an organisation that has never enjoyed the trust of teachers (Fielding, 2001), no occupation or profession is ever free from inspection. But if the Ofsted-event can be dealt with or managed, the persistent and insidious nature of in-house scrutiny is another matter. This self-policing currently takes two principal forms.

The first of these is the 'learning walk'. On rare occasions, such events may possibly have something to do with judging how well children are learning – although quite how a fleeting 10-minute visit may determine this is another matter. For most teachers, nothing could be further from their experience. These episodes, in which school managers of differing levels of seniority arrive unannounced in classrooms, often with a pre-determined list of criteria or, perhaps, 'this week's focus on learning', are seen as nothing more than a system of checking and control. Two comments from teachers from the study referred to later in this article describe the learning walk as 'a punitive exercise to harangue teachers' and part of the 'dark, unbelievably stupid side of teaching'. When placed alongside the regime of internal observation of lessons from senior staff – often accompanied by the grading of the teacher's performance (I choose the word carefully) on that day – what is clear is that schools appear to have chosen to police themselves. If we stir 'Mocksted' into the mix – one young teacher tells me that 'the school's management team went crazy, teachers became headless chickens' – this picture becomes even more compelling. It may be too fanciful to imagine mandarins at the Department for Education giggling into their tea.

The second means of internal control is the book-trawl. Here, on the pretext of ensuring high standards, pupils' books are inspected to make sure that work is being completed and properly marked. Once again, this is not how this is experienced by teachers. One teacher captures the feeling of many respondents when she tells me that 'it's not just the books being marked, it's you being marked'. Given that some schools now have systems in place where students are encouraged to respond to teachers' comments and then teachers are, in turn, required to reply again accordingly, the simple but necessary task of marking children's work takes on a life of its own and one that is used to gauge professional performance. A further dimension to this clumsy form of control and scrutiny is evinced through the number of teachers who tell me that it is a requirement in all lessons to 'have something written in books to show that we've done some work', as one of them plaintively tells me. Any pedagogical consideration is, by default in such circumstances, reduced to ensuring that there is some sort of measurable product which can eventually be tabulated and recorded as part of an individual teacher's profile.

As a final footnote to this discussion of self-imposed compliance, we turn to Ofsted or, more specifically, one of its publications. In an excerpt which should be inscribed on the wall of every teacher – and certainly on that of the head teacher – we are told the following:

> The quality of pupils' learning was hampered in weaker lessons by a number of myths about what makes a good lesson. The factors that most commonly limited learning included: an excessive pace; an overloading of activities; inflexible planning; and limited time for pupils to work independently. (Ofsted, 2012, p.5)

The same document goes on to warn about avoiding constant recapping of what has been covered and an obsessive need to refer everything to the learning objective. We will put to one side for the moment any unkind comments about rejoicing in the salvation of one lost soul, or even less gracious observations about who put such 'myths' there in the first place. What is central to the argument about schools' self-regulation is that it is these very requirements that still form the basis of most checklists on the learning walk and the criteria for lesson observations.

Towards the end of the last century, Dale (1989) identified a move from what he called licensed to regulated autonomy for teachers. In doing so, he alerted the profession to an impending regime of regulation and scrutiny which is now ubiquitous. Teachers in 2016 are scrutinised, controlled and inhibited in their professional actions in a way that is unprecedented. Underpinning this state of affairs is the ideological drive that has introduced performance-related pay as a firm reminder of the need to conform, along with an increasing insecurity of job tenure. All of this plays out against the background of austerity outlined in the first paragraph of this article. A reader could be excused for thinking that any nascent hope of resistance in such circumstances has little chance of seeing the light of day. Fortunately, this is not the case.

Despite continuing and proper concern about the 'soul of the teacher' (Ball, 1999, 2003) and correspondent concerns about authentic teaching in an age of performativity, I have argued for some time that teachers cling fiercely to a notion of having something better to offer than the meagre fare demanded by compliance to the 'standards' agenda' (Berry, 2012). The establishment of this position starts from findings from doctoral study research undertaken between 2010 and 2012 with some 30 teachers. In spring and summer of 2015 I put these findings to the test by approaching these original respondents along with a further, broader constituency. Drawing on professional connections and a process of snowballing, I spoke to, or received written correspondence from, a further 70 teachers in England about their view of having more to offer. What became apparent from an early stage was the eagerness with which teachers volunteered their contributions. Unsolicited emails arrived from the friends or colleagues of teachers already interviewed; long, written testimony was provided when conversations had been curtailed during the breaks at conferences and professional gatherings. Even given the nature of this purposive sample, the eagerness of teachers to talk about the best parts of their practice – and their enduring aspirations to 'be the sort of teacher I want to be' – was almost overwhelming. A newly qualified primary teacher writes with humour and pride about staying up most of the night to prepare for the trail of Anne Boleyn – with magical success in the ensuing lesson. A young secondary teacher tells me of how she takes a chance on getting her Year 7 to cup an idea in their hands at the end of the lesson and to bring it next time – and of how they proudly display their cupped hands as they see her in the corridor between lessons. An old hand tells of taking her English as an additional language (EAL) children out into the school garden and of how various misdemeanours with the hosepipe results in one of them writing his first English sentence: 'I wet in gdn'.

This complete commitment to providing a rounded education for the whole child is uplifting. It also gives the lie to the notion, sometimes mooted by more experienced teachers, that the profession as a whole, and new entrants in particular, have bought into GERM-led education. Ball's identification of survivalism (Ball, 2008) explains why, against their better judgement, teachers play along with the game. However, we would be wrong to think they have been completely fooled. Their testimony refers frequently to the mind-numbing and time-consuming collection of data and results, which they see as stupid and meaningless. One secondary teacher tells me that he understands that 'these features of our school are not necessarily because our leadership are malicious individuals' but that these leaders act because they are 'under pressure from our current twisted education system, itself gripped by a psychotic accountability agenda for teachers'. The same teacher bemoans a lack of solidarity from a head teacher who 'for all his flaws, was teacher once' and who is at pains to tell his staff that he is 'not a business manager'. Nonetheless, the same tedious demands for outcomes characterise the way in which the school is organised. When I ask a rather disconsolate secondary teacher whether she thinks that her school managers believe in what they do, she looks at me witheringly and tells me, 'of course not'. Sahlberg (2012) notes that one of the features of the GERM is the way in which schools adopt corporate management models. This clumsy mismatch between business and the education of young people may be a feature of how schools are led, but it does not presuppose unthinking acceptance by those who are affected by it.

The actions of school managers, and those who govern what they do, prompt disappointment and occasional ridicule from respondents. This begins with teachers' views of Ofsted. A secondary teacher tells me that 'I did feel a bit deflated (after an inspection) ... and a bit annoyed ... . I don't think it was until I came back after Christmas that I actually started enjoying teaching again'. A primary teacher is contemptuous in her comments when she speaks with the approval of her colleagues: 'we don't think they're useful ... they don't do anything meaningful'. It is not only Ofsted that elicits such response. The Government, a concept embodied for most in the figures of former Secretary of

State, Michael Gove and Chief Inspector of Schools, Michael Wishaw, is frequently berated for what is seen to be complete misunderstanding of what teachers do and the commitment they show in doing so. A primary teacher entertains his colleagues by quipping that 'they want us to differentiate in 70,000 different ways, taking into account each child's needs ... then they give them all the same test at the same time!' A primary head teacher takes issue with what he perceives to be a lack of respect for the profession in general:

> Those in charge of education don't get us. They assume we're teachers because we're work-shy. Why didn't we become merchant bankers? Because we're not good enough! But we don't need to be given deadlines, thresholds and targets because we're already working our bloody socks off.

It is characteristic of comments from teachers aimed at 'the Government' that they are not overtly party-political, but are aimed at an entity seen to be remote, aloof and poorly informed. Significantly, in terms of the possibilities for resistance to which we will turn later in this article, few teachers relate their concerns to what is happening in a wider political world.

The research reveals that the soul of the teacher has not been captured: despite all outward signs of embedded compliance, there remains an understanding that something better has to be on offer for children. Along with this goes an unrelenting willingness to work very hard for the benefit of children. In contrast to the bogeymen sloths of the six-hour day and 13-week holiday– a colourful idea which successive secretaries of sate have been reluctant to dispel – teachers work hard and relish accountability. A secondary teacher proudly tells me, 'I'm a public servant – it's what I signed up for'. A primary teacher says that she enjoys working hard for the benefit of her children; 'we don't try to wriggle out of things'. Such comments punctuate the testimony of teachers. It is on the back of such energy and commitment – a commitment often couched in the terms of public service – that the possibilities for resistance arise.

One of the ways in which this energy manifests itself is through social media. An element that emerged from conversations with teachers in 2015 was the lack of space, literal and metaphorical, to discuss ideas about teaching and pedagogy. Team meetings are dominated by data and operational matters; lunchtimes are spent, in the memorable words of one respondent, 'with a fork in one hand and a pen in another'; staff rooms are converted to workrooms and the chance for even the briefest of exchange – professional or personal – is closed down. This vacuum has been filled by the emergence of numerous digital platforms for discussion and exchange of ideas (Hardy, 2014). The brilliantly lively blogs of Jack Marwood, Jane Manzone and Debra Kidd, along with the *Guardian*'s *Secret Teacher* column, all demonstrate a willingness and degree of teacher agency as well as proof-positive of a spirit that is alive, well and determinedly non-compliant. This virtual community is instrumental in arranging real-life weekend conferences about teaching, the size and scope of which would be the envy of any activist or organiser (see northernrocks2014.wordpress.com and Hardy, 2014). Even allowing for possibilities of the emergence of new orthodoxies or potential homogeneity of thought from these unregulated fora, we must be encouraged by a profession – and it is largely younger teachers who participate – which is willing to interrogate, develop and challenge in this way.

Another possibility for resistance resides in the pursuit by some of an educational holy grail – albeit an obtainable one. In conversations with teachers in a whole range of circumstances, both as part of research projects and beyond, one question underlies a great deal of the discourse about results and standards: would it be possible to have the best of both worlds? Can we have creative, inventive teaching that allows us to follow our instincts, informed by professional judgement, and still obtain the results and outcomes required to keep the number-crunchers happy? For many teachers this is a consummation devoutly to be wished for, but for which there are disappointingly few examples or precedents in a world of schools locked into rehearsal, coaching and early entrance for public examinations. All, however, is not lost.

Although relatively difficult to locate, there are head teachers who are prepared to trust their judgement and pedagogical understanding of how children learn. There is, however, a note of caution here. In my conversations with many head teachers, it would have been excusable to conclude that commitment to teacher autonomy was widespread and that light-touch scrutiny was the order of the day. One head talked of the 'unnecessary angst' among his staff about the degree of regulation to which they were subject. It seems needless to point out that this was not a view shared by classroom teachers themselves. Nonetheless, there are honourable exceptions. Two primary heads whose staff I had already met – and who had talked of being in genuinely child-centred environments where their professional judgement was trusted – talk of a difficult, but achievable, balancing act of trusting teachers to take a chance and achieving the results necessary for survival. The former head of a secondary school, closing because of local reorganisation, talks about how impending closure liberated the school from 'the black cloud' of inspection and scrutiny, allowing teachers some genuine autonomy and resulting in the best set of GCSE grades achieved by the school. Beyond that, there is the widely acknowledged work of Alison Peacock and the approach of 'learning without limits' (Swann et al, 2012) and which, somewhat ironically, has earned her the approval of the very great and good whose policies have so inhibited the professional actions of thousands of schools and teachers. There is cause for guarded optimism; there remain in the system head teachers who believe that 'having both' is a possibility.

However, if there is to be resistance to the marketisation and commodification that has allowed the GERM to flourish and which represses these better instincts, then we must finish where we started – with the wider world. Notwithstanding episodes of teacher militancy over pay and pensions in the past five years, along with frequent localised campaigns over academisation, instances of industrial action by teachers, as in the wider union movement, has steadily declined. This article is not the place to investigate this decline in any great detail, but a continuing narrative around the need for austerity and the good fortune of being in paid employment have made traditional battlegrounds of pay and conditions a tricky terrain on which to engage with governments. The confidence to court parental support over curricular matters which characterised the successful SATs boycotts of the early 1990s (Coles, 1994; Jones, 1994) no longer exists. When we look, however, at the most far-reaching episode of teacher militancy in recent years, the Chicago teachers' strike of 2012, we can see that it is a willingness to bring together dissatisfaction with a reductive curriculum, industrial grievances and issues around social injustice – gathering parental support and that of other workers along the way – which can bring about change. Author Micah Uetricht captures the importance of campaigning beyond the school gates, explaining that 'neoliberal forces had long attempted to turn average people against public sector unions' struggles by framing any public workers' demands as coming at individual taxpayer's expense; in Chicago, that attempt failed' (Uetricht, 2014, p. 71). But even given that teachers here have not given up on a more visionary notion of what education could be, is this broad-based campaigning possible in England in 2016?

Writing about the Occupy movement, Chomsky makes the observation that addressing inequality on a global scale 'is now almost a standard framework of discussion ... [which] exposes the heartlessness and inhumanity of the system' (Chomsky, 2012, p. 13). Crowds gather in public squares across the globe to denounce that it is capitalism – and naming it as such – that is failing ordinary people as markets crash and the climate changes. Cataclysmic wars displace people on a scale previously unknown. Although beyond risibility 12 months ago, and still highly unlikely, there remains the possibility that Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders could become leaders of their respective nations. The 'necessity' for austerity to address failing economies in a world of plenty persists as the hegemonic ideology. All of which may seem far removed from a classroom teacher beleaguered by a 'middle manager' with a clipboard on the learning walk. However, by teachers seeing themselves as part of this wider economic and ideological assault and joining forces with others affected, their better version of what teaching and learning could be is a real possibility.

*Teachers Undefeated: how global education reform has failed to crush the spirit of educators* by Jon Berry and was published by Trentham/IoE in March 2016.

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