
For Michael

LESLEY KING

I met Michael for the first time at my interview for a junior role at the new Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire, after a fairly grim probationary year at a secondary modern in Southall where enthusiasm for teaching had been overtaken by exhaustion. I was nearly at the end of a belated PGCE at Leicester University where I had learned about plans for the innovative new school from Brian Simon, Maggie Gracie, Tim McMullen and from Michael himself. Back then, I was surprised at the way in which he treated me as an equal and articulated so clearly what a positive school experience should be like for all students, and for teachers too, of course.

From the beginning, our faculty at Countesthorpe operated as a collaborative team, with all views taken seriously and our total commitment taken for granted. Michael was a fine mentor and I learned without ever feeling I'd been managed or criticised. I learned to listen more carefully to what students told me and to respect their views more readily, even when they were very different to mine. They changed my mind, too, on many occasions. I also learned to expect a lot from all students, and inevitably they enjoyed the challenge of rigorous engagement with their learning. In this way the relationships developed among colleagues in the faculty were entirely congruent with those developed in our work with students.

These were exciting times and, often, joyful times, and the joy was a gift from Michael too. His capacity for excitement, his good humour and his sense of the ridiculous made him a pleasure to work with. On so many occasions I found myself in situations that made me roar with laughter. There was one occasion when we were late writing a CSE mode 3 Humanities paper, at a time when teachers developed their own curriculum and wrote and marked their own examination papers, with external moderation. We met full of determination to undertake the task but ended up watching John Wayne in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, blaming the Post Office for the late arrival of the exam paper. Michael convinced me that watching the film was an educational duty rather than a diversion from necessary but rather boring administrative work.

At first I wondered why Michael was held in such affection by all the adolescents he taught. On the surface he had little in common with them. He spoke differently, he came from a very different background from most and his interests were cerebral. What is more, he made little attempt to pretend

otherwise. However, he never failed to afford them dignity and love or take them seriously as learners; moreover, he shared important characteristics with them. He shared their zest for life, their sense of awe, and an innocence that is hard to explain but was catching. Hundreds of students will remember him with affection and with gratitude for the educational experiences they shared with him.

And I watched and learned. I learned to afford all students equal value, to have a determined optimism about the capacity for educational success for everyone and to work with students in a professional yet warm way. I also learned that all students have the capacity to surprise, that they are themselves artists, writers, actors, scientists, mathematicians and philosophers, and not merely in training to take on these roles.

I always wanted to be a teacher. Michael showed me what a teacher could be and I took the lessons learned into headship and later work in other schools across the country. Michael's work is still quoted in these schools. Only a few months ago an English adviser in a nearby shire county talked of him as a vital inspiration and was very impressed when I said I had worked with him.

Recently I came across a letter to me from Michael, dated December 1999, just after his retirement from Harwell School. He wrote:

I'm not sure about retirement, so called. I miss school a lot, especially now that I've been back twice for Christmas events. I miss being with children. I miss going in and saying hey I've had this great idea! I miss picking up their great ideas.

Michael's beliefs and practice do not chime well with the educational philosophy of this present government or indeed of any recent governments. As he said in the same letter:

I find the whole scenario more and more depressing. A sort of smug philistinism. As if they can't bear to think seriously. How they hate thought. Still we've got to struggle to win them over.

There will be what he called 'The Progressive Return'. And when it comes he will be vindicated.

In the meantime, I know I was fortunate to have met him at an early stage in my career and am proud to count him as a sensitive mentor, a supportive colleague and a loving friend.

LESLEY KING has worked in education for forty years, including twenty years as a secondary principal in two comprehensive schools in Leicestershire and Milton Keynes. She was fortunate to join the new Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire in 1970 at the same time as Michael. Her article, 'Schools within Schools: the Countesthorpe experience', co-written with Michael, appeared in *FORUM*, 18(2), 1976. *Correspondence:* lk@stonywelch.co.uk