
On the Promise and Poverty of Quality Teaching

MICHAEL FIELDING

ABSTRACT This is an edited version of a presentation Michael Fielding was invited to give in April 2006 at the Post Primary Teachers' Association Professional Conference. The conference, entitled *Quality Teaching – Leading the Way*, took place at the Wellington Convention Centre, Wellington, New Zealand. In his presentation, Michael contrasts two approaches to consideration of the idea of 'quality' in relation to teaching: performance quality and educational quality. The former is a disciplinary device designed to control at a distance. The latter requires rigorous reflexive thinking from which emerges judgement of values. The ways in which both approaches, and their implications, continue to resonate are examined.

I am honoured to be invited to address [1] this PPTA (Post Primary Teachers' Association) Professional Conference on such an important topic as teacher quality. Our understanding of what quality means, what drives the current insistence on its importance, and what kinds of practices it encourages and celebrates goes to the heart of many issues central to the systems of public education in Aotearoa New Zealand and in England at the present time. As the title of my presentation suggests, I have very mixed feelings about the helpfulness within the field of education of an emphasis on 'quality' which in its dominant contemporary sense owes more to the crisp imperatives and clear requirements of successful business practice than it does to its older lineage, where use of the term 'quality' is a shorthand attempt to briefly hint at something that is avowedly and unashamedly complex, properly profound, inevitably elusive, and often essentially and joyfully contested.

Target-setting as a 'Quality' Practice

In seeking to tease out some of the key issues, I begin by taking target-setting (Fielding, 2001) as a familiar example of a practice that is often thought to be

centrally important not only in helping us understand what quality is but, crucially, in providing us with a practical and reliable way of achieving it. Target-setting is, if you like, an important 'quality process' central to raising standards and thereby improving the quality of what we do and what we achieve. What emerge for me are two very different interpretations of target-setting; which interpretation one aligns oneself with depends on which understanding of quality one feels most at home with.

On the one hand, target-setting influenced by quality in this first sense – which, for the sake of convenience, I call *performance quality* – turns out to be diminishing and inhibiting much that seems to be central to education in its richest and most fulfilling sense. An insistent *concern for results* dominates proceedings. This form of target-setting is driven by league tables or their equivalent, questions are entirely instrumental, and individual attainment of students (and indeed staff) is important only insofar as it adds to the school's public exam profile. The overriding emphasis on outcomes privileges a narrow notion of attainment. Questions are often externally generated, generic and tangential to the real concerns and aspirations of the student and they are often asked in a way that is inattentive to or ignorant of personal detail. The freedom available to students is heavily managed by the teacher. Difficult issues are seen as the student's responsibility. The teacher's perception of what needs to be done defines the outcome, and the encounter is dominated by the teacher's agenda. Finally, the process is characterised by the presumption of one-way learning. Target-setting is primarily instructional: the student is presumed to learn from the teacher and monologue is much more apparent than dialogue.

For these reasons, this externally driven, frequently pressured exemplification of performance quality is an intrinsically dangerous practice and should be resisted, reconceived and refashioned in the spirit of its counterpart. The older notion of quality – which, again for the sake of convenience, I call *educational quality* – rejects the assumed authority of those who, external to the school and the teacher, impose a dissembling simplicity of standards that deny difference and mask purposes. In contrast to the controlling, cajoling preferences typical of performance quality, which are as oppressive for the teacher as they are for the student, target-setting as practised from the standpoint of educational quality takes a quite different form. Here a concern for results is replaced by a concern for persons. Conversations are driven by aspirations for individuals, questions have a wider reference point than standards, and individual attainment is ipsative (concerned with one's own best past performance) rather than comparative. The overriding emphasis on outcomes is replaced by an insistence on the integrity of means and ends. Achievement is widely conceived, questions are expressive of an integral concern for and detailed knowledge of the uniqueness of the individual student, and those questions are asked in a manner that is genuinely attentive, rather than a disguised form of teacherly assertion. Managed freedom is replaced by expressive freedom. Conversation is a genuinely joint endeavour, both teachers and students have the confidence to raise difficult issues, understanding emerges

from dialogue as often as it precedes it, and conversations are informed by the felt concerns of both parties. Finally, one-way learning is replaced by reciprocal learning. Here, target-setting is not only supportive of the student's learning but is reciprocal in nature. The teacher learns about the student, learns from the student, learns with the student, and learns about the process of learning and the teacher's role in it. The teacher's capacity to listen, to be receptive, is as important as the student's capacity to do these things.

Performance Quality and Educational Quality

Performance quality is, in my view, essentially a disciplinary device designed to control at a distance. It is corrosive not only of the practice of education, but also of our professionalism and of our wider responsibilities to nurture the dispositions and practices of a fully democratic society. It is anti-educational because it either circumvents fundamental questions about the nature of the good life and the place of both education and schooling in it or covertly answers those questions on our behalf by the pronouncements of a small group of experts. It is anti-professional because it systematically denies teachers a voice in making sophisticated judgements, preferring instead to bind us into the insistent processes of framework implementation and box-ticking. It is anti-democratic because it denies the educative potential of a wider engagement in these matters that any defensible notion of civic obligation demands in a participatory democracy. It further diminishes the very virtues it intends to nurture by a predilection for reducing complex issues to simple certainties; by making what are dissimilar compatible through their reduction to abstract qualities; by excising the moral and the aesthetic through the application of a purely technical process; and by articulating a generalisable standard that presumes the irrelevance of time, place and circumstance.

In its stead, educational quality argues for the need to start with the fundamentals of education and their contribution to the just society. It invites rigorous reflexive thinking from which emerge judgements of value, and in so doing it is supportive of teacher professionalism. Through respectful and sensitive dialogue with others it then seeks concrete ways forward. The conditions for such encounters are invariably informed by moral respect, egalitarian reciprocity, a sensitivity to different voices and standpoints and a capacity to reverse one's own perspectives (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 108). It thus exemplifies the values, processes and dispositions supportive of democracy as a way of life.

Teacher Quality, and Research on 'the Transfer of Good Practice'

My hope is that these reflections on target-setting provide some evidence of the kinds of distinction I am trying to make. In order to test them still further and in ways which I hope will be particularly pertinent to this conference, I now

look at two recent initiatives – *Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice* and *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* – presently preoccupying us in England, and that also have some resonance with current developments in New Zealand. What I shall argue is that the findings of both projects not only illustrate the distinctions I am exploring, they also support my contention that we should resist the pull of performance quality and set our sights firmly on the development of its educational counterpart.

The first project was commissioned by the Department for Education & Skills and published in January 2005. In its report *Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice* (Fielding et al, 2005), myself and my colleagues explored some of the key issues surrounding current knowledge of how teachers learn with and from each other across schools and colleges in a systemic sustainable way, a matter of considerable importance in a number of countries seeking new ways of encouraging professional creativity, its subsequent outcomes in higher educational performance and, it is hoped, greater subsequent economic competitiveness in the global marketplace. Among the key issues to emerge were four we felt were of particular importance.

The first concerned the centrality of relationships and trust in any kind of professional exchange and development that went beneath the surface and subsequently changed what teachers actually did in classrooms. Here, prior relationships recurred again and again in our data, leading us to suggest that, for a whole range of reasons, human encounter, getting to know and understand and trust each other, was a necessary, though not of course a sufficient, condition for good practice to ‘transfer’. It was thus in tension with the often-encountered presumption typical of a performance-quality standpoint that content-driven implementation of ‘good practice’ provides the way forward. This is not so. Practice, good or otherwise, resides in human action, and certain kinds of relationship between persons are necessary if genuine change is to take place.

The second key finding concerned the issue of individual and institutional identity. In other words, it mattered how you saw yourself in the nexus of collaboration; it mattered whether you or your institution were badged as successful or failing or somewhere in between. The performance-quality assumption that it was sufficient to put people together, give the successful school a significant sum of money and a lot of status, and tell them to get on with ‘collaboration’ is deeply mistaken. What teachers told us were more likely to succeed were arrangements that recognised the fundamental necessity of dignity; arrangements which understood and insisted that all participants had something to offer the other ‘partners’ in the development process.

The third key finding in many respects echoes the necessity of mutuality and dialogue that informed the second – namely, that if ‘good practice’ was to ‘transfer’, then it had to meet the felt needs of the recipient, and to do so, both parties have to agree and understand what those needs are. In other words, the process has to be, if not learner-led, then at least ‘learner-engaged’. The ‘transfer’ of good practice is not something that can be imposed or required in

any crude sense of unblinking implementation. Performance quality has to give way to educational quality in which a rich and reflexive negotiation is the necessary precursor to the possibility of real change.

The last of our four main findings is in some ways banal, but in its banality lies an insistent and simple truth – that the processes of learning and of sustainable change require not only the kinds of sensitivities and considerations outlined above, they also need time to enable us to make meaning out of what we intend and what we experience. Contrary to the tick-box proclivities and desire for closure of performance quality, educational quality requires time to enter into dialogue in an emergent, sometimes hesitant, way with one's own practices, with the work of one's students, with the work of others one comes to know over time, and with the new practices one may subsequently develop as a result of collaborative work. In sum, successful, lasting change resulting from collaborative work with teachers from other schools has much less to do with the bright clarity of standards devised by someone else, often ignorant of and inattentive to the realities with which one works, than it has to do with the making of meaning that lies at the heart of educational quality.

Because of the pervasive sense of mutual attentiveness and the degree of co-construction that appeared again and again in our data, we also suggested that the notion of 'transfer' was seriously misleading. Our suggestion was that the phrase 'joint practice development' would be more accurate and more helpful since it foregrounds the necessity of partnership and the emergence of something new which results from the diligence of joint work. For me, what lies at the heart of an educational notion of teacher quality is the opening up of spaces for professional dialogue within the practical contexts of joint professional learning.

Teacher Quality and the Rise of the 'Professional Learning Community'

The second and much larger project commissioned by the Department for Education & Skills was called *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* (Bolam et al, 2005). The project was concerned to see whether the powerful work developed in the mid-1990s in the USA on professional learning communities (PLCs) had any resonance with the quite different context of the English state school system. The answer, by and large, was 'yes' and the project made a number of key points about PLCs, eight of which I shall briefly mention here. The first concerns the importance of shared values and vision about pupil learning and leadership supported by a culture of improvement. The second concerns a collective responsibility for pupils' learning. The third underscores the importance of collaboration focused on learning, with emphasis on team work and collaboration across the whole school and across role boundaries. The fourth highlights a wide range of group as well as individual professional learning, and the fifth points to the prominence of reflective professional enquiry exemplified by such things as data analysis and action research. The

sixth characteristic of a PLC has to do with the necessity of looking outside the school to networks and partnerships, and the seventh reminds us of the importance of inclusive membership that goes beyond teachers to include support staff and governors. The last PLC characteristic echoes much of the 'Transfer of Good Practice' research and highlights the necessity of mutual trust, support and respect.

How do the findings of this research engage with matters of teaching quality and my twofold distinction between performance quality and educational quality? The answer lies not only in the very helpful identification of eight characteristics of a PLC that research suggests collectively contribute to improved pupil outcomes, but also in the differences between the English research and the literature review of largely US-based practice. In a nutshell, what strikes me, particularly about the substantial case-study elements of the English research data, is how much of it illustrates the constraining and distorting effects that the frameworks of performance quality have on what should be an exploratory and inspiring engagement. Thus, too often the richly suggestive notion of shared values amounts to little more than a highly instrumental, narrow concern for academic achievement. Collective responsibility for pupils' learning still betrays the dangers of balkanisation we have known for many years. Collaboration focused on learning often plays out as little more than a managerial interrogation of departmental performance and an unremarkable, if welcome, informal sharing of schemes of work within a department. Group as well as individual professional learning frequently gets little further than popping in and out of classrooms and the shared talk of department offices.

Perhaps most shocking of all, reflective professional enquiry turns out to be 'typically' about 'ways in which [teachers] were collecting and analysing achievement data to monitor pupil learning and set targets' (Bolam et al, 2005, p. 83).

What worries me in all this are two things for which I hold government departments largely responsible. First, for me, there is a sense of profound disappointment verging on anger. The pall of performance quality suffocates the imaginative range and educational integrity of committed and dedicated staff. Second, there is an equally strong sense of betrayal and, if not duplicity, then something that comes close to it in its frenetic abrogation of critical enquiry and trite dismissal of deeper traditions of educational thought. Government departments' inclination to inhabit a bubble shaped by the preoccupations of a continually changing present tends to disconnect them from deeper realities than their next target has the capacity or inclination to comprehend.

In Praise of Educational Quality

Performance quality is an attack on our professionalism because it marginalises the richness of educational judgement. It is a denial of education because it forbids us access to fundamental purposes. It is an affront to democracy because

it denies us the right and opportunity to exercise judgement together. It replaces our shared responsibility as citizens with a mechanistic accountability of experts. What, then, might we do? What opportunities exist within our current systems to nurture small spaces for educational engagement and create new ones for a brighter and more fulfilling future?

There are three suggestions I would make by way of conclusion, but before I do so, I want to draw attention to something which informs each of them to a significant degree. Echoing my earlier comments on joint practice development, it concerns the importance of creating spaces for dialogue and discussion in our daily work. Both are important, but in my view the former is more important than the latter because it is more exploratory and more creative, more inclined to grapple openly with the making of meaning than with the closure of argument. I would suggest *discussion* is animated by the need to reach a conclusion, even if only temporarily. In it you employ the powers of persuasion in order to prove a point to the other person and to confirm your existing understanding of the point you are trying to make. The presumption is often that you know the other person's position.

In contrast, *dialogue* is happy for the exchange to be open-ended. It is exploratory rather than persuasive, with an interest in deepening both your own and the other person's thinking and feeling. There is a willingness and a capacity to listen, often beneath the surface of what the other person is trying to say. It develops the skills of understanding, not just of argument, and genuinely welcomes surprise and the emergence of the unpredictable.

A Sense of Sustainable Self

While discussion has, of course, a place in each of my three suggestions, it is dialogue that is more important and more pervasive. My first suggestion has to do with understanding the importance of the deeper purposes that animate and sustain teachers over time, with what Richard Sennett calls 'a sense of sustainable self' (Sennett, 1998, p. 27). It has, in other words, to do with providing space where teachers can locate their own current professional preoccupations within their own sense of who they are as professionals and as persons. It is about encouraging and nurturing engagement at a fundamental level and exploring matters of importance in supportive communal contexts so that the learning that subsequently takes place has a personal and professional resonance.

The second has to do with what I have called 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999). Here, the suggestion is that a democratic twenty-first-century professionalism differs from its nineteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts partly through its commitment to a greater openness and reciprocity. Thus, new developments such as the 'students as researchers' movement and students as co-researchers and observers of teacher practice begin to reconfigure the roles and interrelationships between teachers and young people that have the capacity to be creative and energising for all parties involved.

The final suggestion is, again, inspired by a phrase from Richard Sennett's work. What Sennett argues is both lacking and important in lives lived under conditions of the new capitalism is a sense of narrative identity and life history. The world requires us to flex and change so fast and so often that it becomes increasingly disorienting and difficult, not just to survive, but to make sense of our lives. It seems to me that the educational purposes of schooling must now pay more attention to these matters and be sensitive to and nurturing of narratives spaces and practices that enable us to make meaning together. We should also seek to create new kinds of public space where young people and adults talk *with* rather than *at* each other, where they begin to engage as co-enquirers in and contributors to understanding how, as a community, the school helps its members to lead good lives together. Here we must look as much to the past as to the present for inspiration. Because so many aspects of our education systems are blighted by the betrayal of performance quality, it is now more important than ever to revisit and, if necessary, revive their radical traditions. These traditions name a quite different reality in a quite different language and hold the promise of a quite different future.

Beyond Quality

In its contemporary sense, quality, or, as I have called it, 'performance quality', is a profoundly mistaken mindset and, even on its own terms, it can never lead to the significant changes to which it aspires. This is so not only because it insistently diverts attention away from fundamental questions about education and the nature of the good life, but also because its preoccupation with audit and measurement tends to stifle creativity and exploration and is far more likely to lead to intensification than to transformation. As Stephen Ball reminds us, 'Teachers are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice, account of themselves in terms of a relationship to the meaningfulness of what they do, but are required to produce measurable and "improving" outputs and performances. What is important is *what works* ... Beliefs are no longer important – it is output that counts' (Ball, 2003, pp. 222, 223).

In the end, if there is a promise of quality teaching, it lies in our capacity to change the assumptions and the language on which current conceptions of quality are based. The processes of performance quality are essentially convergent, collectivist and invite dishonesty. The processes of educational quality are essentially expansive, communal and invite creativity. They owe allegiance to different traditions of democracy, the former representative and the latter participatory, and the degree to which you support one or the other depends on your own values and your views of how we best promote human flourishing. As a first step, I have advocated the notion of 'educational quality', but ultimately I feel the discourse of quality locks us into assumptions and processes that remain antagonistic to much that is worthwhile.

Apart from Dahlberg et al's 'making of meaning' (Dahlberg et al, 1999, pp. 87-120), it is not clear to me how best to name an alternative that carries

principled conviction and contemporary resonance. What is clear is that what matters to teacher professionalism is the opportunity to exercise educational judgement in dialogue with our colleagues, the students we teach, the parents and communities we serve, and all those who have an interest in and commitment to a more just society. Intentionally or otherwise, performance quality prevents us from doing these things and we should work hard to replace it with something better suited to our shared responsibility for democracy.

Note

- [1] I dedicate this address to Professor John Codd of Massey University. This New Zealand scholar's fine work has inspired myself and numerous others over many years.

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MICHAEL FIELDING is Emeritus Professor of Education at UCL Institute of Education. He taught for 19 years in some of the UK's pioneer radical secondary comprehensive schools, and for a similar period and with identical commitments at the universities of Cambridge, Sussex and London. A long-time supporter of *FORUM*, he has been a member of the editorial board for many years, most recently in the capacity of Chair. *Correspondence:* m.fielding@ucl.ac.uk

