FORUM
Volume 61, Number 1, 2019
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.1.83

Jolly Good Show, Sir

JOHN QUICKE

ABSTRACT In this poem the author explores a difficult mentoring session he had with a group of white male working-class pupils who were at risk of being permanently excluded from their secondary school. He describes and analyses the specific context which gave rise to the poem and explains why he found writing a poem a salutary experience.

Jolly Good Show, Sir
Mine for an hour, these cast-out characters,
to be re-worked, re-tuned in a mentoring space
where 'chat' in circles gives the liberal hope
of changing hearts and minds through conversation.

This curative oasis is delightfully upholstered
in clashing greens, with comfy chairs replacing
plastic seats and a tin of biscuits near a mini-
fridge providing tit-bits at adults' discretion.

I set the scene – arrange chairs, make sure
there's space enough between to minimise
he-kicked-me opportunities, locate
my own perch in a spot near the vittles.

A ribald entrance, a squeak of farts, body
armour rucksacks tossed off in all directions,
one looping a booby trap on the door handle,
threaten to leave me upstaged from the start.

Bizarrely I decide off the cuff to play
the role of a chat-show host, introducing

each to all as guests, asking them
to briefly introduce themselves to me.

But they want to be an audience to themselves.
Words they know will test and trouble teachers
are hooted in voices just on the break, and hoarse
from shouting football chants and teasers.

They talk of knobheads, wankers and their brethren,
a host of devils – dipsticks, lezzies, Pakis, queers,
poofs, scum-bags, stuck-up bitches, silly
twats, thickos, duggies, flids, mongs.

Their language flies so fast, I can't keep up—
the shoal swirls together, knows its strength's
in numbers, gives me a lesson in what it's like
to be excluded, to be blanked out and rendered impotent.

Provoked but still secure, with a tested ego
holding up, I call for them to give me
something positive to share with them,
a joke perhaps, a strength, an interest.

I suggest a topic – fishing – and they briefly
pause, still refuse eye contact but begin
to share experience, details of the bait,
intricacies of the tackle, best local haunts.

I persevere, ask questions, make a stab
at linking what I'd gleaned from other chats
to their rich and racy stories of expeditions
in the early hours and the mysteries of fish.

It goes quite well, they lose themselves in talk,
forget their efforts at a wind-up, settle
down to normal discourse, with me nudging
here and there, not imposing, just keeping

it going, checking the time, but this proves
fatal. The glance down at my watch is spotted,
the spell is broken, and anarchy returns
as if they remember reputations are at stake.

A further error – I try to sum things up,
to praise the contribution of each lad,

to let them know they have done well up to
that point, mention 'positive' and 'self',

and things deteriorate. I am stage-struck,
see myself as a silly man in a velvet coat
and half-moon specs, kick myself for forgetting
what they'd make of psycho-babble from a suit.

So artful and so social for boys deemed
anti-social, they pretend to be contrite,
use irony on me, mimic my accent – 'Jolly
good show, sir'– then loot the biscuits from

the tin with royal faces on the lid,
seize goodies from the fridge, bid me
farewell, and move as a vortex down the
corridor, sucking in others as they go.

I am left as a failure, a giver of support
now in need of support, holding on
to the idea their lifestyle did have 'best bits',
like collective endeavour and solidarity.

*****

I wrote this poem some time ago when employed as an educational psychologist by a northern local education authority.

One of the secondary schools on my patch was experiencing difficulties with a particularly challenging group of 'disadvantaged' youngsters, who were mostly boys and mostly white. I was reminded of the poem again recently when, while i was governor of a similar kind of school – predominantly working class, white and mono-cultural – we discussed the problem of boys' underachievement. There was a huge gap between boys and girls in attainment at all levels, with girls outperforming boys in progress measures and in GCSE grades, which mirrored the national picture.

In addition to my routine role in the assessment for inclusion of pupils with special educational needs, I used to get involved in some mentoring, mainly at the request of the school, although I never had time to do much of this, and indeed it wasn't really part of my role. I intended to have a series of meetings with these 'lads', but the poem refers to just one particularly difficult session where things got out of hand and I was left somewhat deflated and dispirited.

My intention was to ground the mentoring in a non-deficit model of these pupils (aged 13-14), who had been dismissed by many of the staff as 'silly', 'immature', 'uncooperative', 'aggressive', and were on the verge of being

excluded. Explanations varied but mostly referred to background factors such as 'disadvantaged' homes and 'bad parenting', and some of the pastoral staff talked about 'low self-esteem', 'lack of self-confidence' and 'negative self-image'.

I didn't dismiss any of this out of hand, but like all good mentors I wanted to start with identifying positives. My own orientation took account of broader social and cultural factors, perhaps more sociological than psychological. Strategies based on the idea of self-image and self-confidence were popular at the time, but it had always been evident to me that the picture was more complex than this. Many of these pupils did not seem to have a negative self-concept so much as a self-concept that was not in line with the school's version of an ideal self, and in fact was often diametrically opposed to it. The parents were not always as the school painted them. I have never liked the idea of attributing 'behaviour problems' in schools exclusively to an underlying psychological malaise, usually associated with dysfunctional family backgrounds. 'Normal' ongoing school life can have an emotional impact on pupils which totally undermines their sense of self.

Pupils react in various ways. They might conform or resist or do each of these at different times in different contexts, but their reactions are often more rational than schools give them credit for. My method was to establish an interactional framework which approximated the conversational ideal. A genuine conversation is inherently democratic. It allows space for the views of all pupils to be expressed and respects their capacity for dialogue.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, this group of white working-class 'lads' seized the opportunity to have a bit of a laugh at my expense.

After all, who was I? A stranger who didn't really know them and who (they seemed to know) couldn't himself, for various reasons, punish them. An authority in this moment without power. A softie. Not a policeman!

I wrote the poem as part of my reflection on 'what went wrong' in this session. What mistakes had I made? Was my orientation based on a romanticised view of these pupils, with expectations of their capabilities cognitively, socially and emotionally which were unrealistic? Certainly this would have been the school's view, or, more specifically, the view of some of the pastoral staff, who had recently called me in precisely because they had tried everything and got nowhere. It would have been tempting to agree with their typing of these boys as nothing other than anti-social, anti-school, anti-authority and maybe even psychologically disturbed.

The poem acknowledges the lads' subversiveness and how deflating that was for me, while at the same time identifying encouraging signs which kept faith with my basic orientation and values. I refer to my own errors (e.g. looking at my watch, using psychological jargon); to evidence of the lads' capacity for sensible and intelligent discussion about an interest; and to their solidarity and sociality in the face of authority, albeit a rather 'soft' authority. Their offensive sexist, racist and homophobic language is seen as a way of 'getting at' teachers. There was definitely a social-class element involved in the way they mimicked my 'posh' accent – 'Jolly good show, sir.'

Why write a poem? As indicated above, it was part of my reflection on what went wrong. It's not often that such material is included in writing about education. Descriptions of successful teaching strategies are more common, unsurprisingly because teachers want to read about 'what worked'. Mistakes and failures are acknowledged but not usually disasters of this kind, yet in my experience most teachers have had such painful encounters at some point in their careers.

Writing a poem had a salutary effect, and helped me come to terms with a potentially very demoralising experience. The form is similar to a ballad (i.e. a narrative poem in short stanzas), and trades on the themes and rhythms of this form. Descriptions of disasters, religious tales, tragic love stories, legends, histories are typical, but so too are comic, ironic and satirical uses of the form. Exploring my experience in this way helped with distancing myself for reflective purposes, and aided attempts to think more positively and constructively.

Is there a danger of trivialising the experience by writing this kind of poem? I would argue just the opposite. I think the moral and political points are more powerfully made in this way; the use of demotic language, repeated rhythms, quatrains, narrative form, irony – all capture something of the speed and flow of the action, and the topsy-turviness of the encounter.

Perhaps also writing something called a poem sets up certain expectations in the reader about how they are supposed to read it. Failure and sadness might have signalled an angst-ridden piece of melancholic self-reflection in lyrical mode, not this roller-coaster of a poem in a kind of mock-epic style. Yet at the same time it is personal for the author and does acknowledge his feelings and concerns.

JOHN QUICKE is the author of numerous articles and several books on education and psychology, including *The Cautious Expert* (Open University Press), *Disability in Modern Children's Fiction* (Croom Helm), *Challenging Prejudice through Education* (Falmer), *A Curriculum for Life* (Open University Press), *Inclusion and Psychological Intervention in Schools* (Springer) and a memoir, *Grammar School Boy* (Matador/Troubador). He was Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Sheffield, and a local authority educational psychologist. He is currently a school governor at a community secondary school. *Correspondence*: johnquicke@gmail.com