

## ***Professional Educators: searching for values and voices lost somewhere between compliance and autonomy***

### ***Preliminary questions and introduction***

- *How would you describe the power held by you and your colleagues?*
- *How far does it extend?*
- *How far would you like it to extend?*
- *Over whom or what is it exercised?*
- *Over whom or what would you like it to be exercised?*
- *What gives you the right to exercise power?*
- *Who exercises power over you?*
- *By what right do they exercise this power?*
- *To what extent do you see yourself and your colleagues as receivers and implementers of orthodoxies and policies devised by others?*
- *In what areas of professional life do you feel autonomous (either alone or as a member of a group)?*

People working in education have often worried about the term 'professional'. They have wanted to be referred to as professionals but feared that they compared badly with others such as lawyers and doctors who they saw as having control over admission to their own ranks and enjoying an autonomy lacking in education. Having taught and talked to lawyers and doctors about this and supervised their masters dissertations on the subject of their professional learning I am, however, sure that they have similar feelings of lacking power and being controlled by outside forces.

But for now I want to put to one side this feeling of relative powerlessness in order to address what I believe to be the more professionally defining business of voice and values. Power is secondary to the process of articulating and testing values; otherwise, how will you know what to do if you obtain power?

Having begun with ten preliminary questions I now want to ask and discuss ten major questions and some supplementary questions.

It might be useful to note that none of what follows is, in any way, intended to be the last word on the subject. The examples that I have provided could easily have been replaced by others; and the opinions that I express are certainly disputable, which is rather the point of the exercise.

## **Question 1**

### **What, if anything, do we profess?**

Being a professional is not only about having a degree of control over admission and the right and the power to take some autonomous action; it also means that you *'profess'* something; meaning that you advocate and try, usually on a collegial basis, to examine and give voice to beliefs or values that emerge from study and experience.

You can, of course, falsely claim or *'profess'* to be doing something that you are not, such as improving learning (the only real role for a professional educator) when all that you can probably show is that you are satisfying inspectors that your test or examination results have reached the target set for them.

Yes, I know they can sometimes be the same thing but any connection between better examination or test results and improved learning is complex, uncertain and challengeable; it is not straightforward and automatic; it has to be established; there are critical questions to be asked; comparisons to be made; and it cannot simply be asserted by pointing to favourable results. There is, however, a great temptation to leave out the critical questions, make the claim and hope that no-one challenges the assertion. The popular press will not seek to understand and explain the complexities behind results; and politicians seeking for the simplistic will not either: both of them will, instead, use results to reinforce whatever prejudice suits them at the moment such as the notion, seemingly widespread among politicians and journalists, that school teachers do not care about spelling, punctuation and grammar. It is a matter of where their own advantage lies when they decide how to distribute praise and blame to educators. For newspapers the sought after advantage is sales and for politicians it is votes.

Trying to satisfy the prejudices of such people by cutting out the critical questions can mean that professional educators suppress, neglect, distort or even lose their own voice and values.

Furthermore, educators sometimes 'profess' things that they have failed to subject to any serious critical thinking. It is professionally damaging when, imagining that the only problems are those of implementation, educators switch off their critical faculties and rush to do (and profess to believe in) what they are told they must do; Gifted and Talented (sometimes from the best of motives) and Specialist Schools in England come to mind. Incidentally, when it was suggested that England should have specialist primary schools I remember that the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust proposed that the particular specialism of primaries was, guess what, breadth!

The motives for this abandonment of critical thinking can be fear of transgressing newly imposed requirements which might result in failure on inspection and also recognition that the only way to obtain extra funding is to adopt a public policy initiative irrespective of its demerits. Why else have we got specialist secondary schools?

Failure to think critically stifles the emergent voice of educators; it leaves prejudice and poor policy to masquerade as values.

Policy initiatives may be subject to questioning but seldom from a socially critical stance. If they were we should hear far more about the negative social consequences of labelling 95% of children and young people as 'not gifted and talented'; we should have pointed out to us the contradictions in Gordon Brown's first major speech on education (note 3) in which, having advocated an approach to education based on a belief that every child has gifts and every child has talents, he went on to praise and reinforce the selective Gifted and Talented programme; and professional educators in England would be combining with parents to campaign against the sheer silliness of schools erecting signs at their gates advertising the narrowness of their specialism(s) while remaining legally required to provide a 'broad and balanced curriculum'.

### ***Supplementary questions***

- *How do you feel about selecting just a very few children as Gifted and Talented and what label do you recommend for unselected children?*
- *How should professional educators feel about accepting the extra money to be a specialist school when they are supposed to be providing a broad and balanced curriculum?*
- *How do you feel about selection in general?*

- *How do you feel when you neglect to examine potentially valuable evidence from your professional learning because you have already got what you want to meet your targets?*
- *And do you wish to have a reputation for always being compliant?*

## **Question 2**

### **Can pipers play their own tune?**

Because everything in education has a value being professional demands that we attempt some clarity and honesty about our beliefs. And in order to achieve clarity and honesty questions have to be asked. This is the case for techniques designed to manage and assess learning in a classroom such as setting, streaming, differentiation and the use of synthetic phonics; as well as for grand legislative designs that seek to re-structure the system such as specialist schools and academies. Being told what to do by the elected representatives of 'the people' is understandable and even reasonable: the piper is, after all, paid to play a tune. But the greater and more significant point for professionals in education who are learning *as and because they are* professionals (and how can you not?) is that the experience, expertise, concerns, anxieties and values of the piper are too often ignored when the piper asks why they have to go on playing the same tune or has the temerity to suggest playing a tune that is different from the one demanded by the paymaster.

### **Supplementary questions**

- *If you profess nothing are you entitled to be called a professional?*
- *Can you be a good professional if you do not allow what you profess to be submitted to critical examination?*

## **Question 3**

### **Who hears the voices of professional educators?**

The voices of professional educators are there but they are insufficiently collected, collated, disseminated and listened to. Every year in England alone almost 7% of school teachers (about 35,000) have a chance to participate in the TDA's postgraduate professional development (PPD) programme. That means more than 200 million words written each year in the form of critically examined, professionally relevant and professionally useful essays, reports, presentations,

critical learning journals, portfolios of impact evidence, action research, empirical research, case studies and dissertations, some of which are carried out in collaboration with colleagues and all of which engage with and make sense of the professional lives of teachers at masters level and above.

The PPD programme is evaluated annually for its impact upon practice but *not* in terms of what the collected critical voices of teachers can contribute to policy. Hardly anyone reads these words except for tutors, internal and external examiners (who only see a sample) and a few teacher colleagues. However, in terms of providing a hearing for the critically examined voice of educators I think that higher education is doing much better than government because this relationship with teachers and others involved in education generates both challenges to existing theory and the construction of new professionally valuable theory. Challenge to policy, on the other hand, is not encouraged by governments.

### **Supplementary questions**

- *To whom do you talk when you want to change something in your professional life?*
- *How can you ensure that there will be a fair hearing for what you wish to say?*

## **Question 4**

### **Who learns from professional learning?**

For the voices and values of professional educators to reach and impact upon policy makers I believe that they must also reach and impact upon each other. Unfortunately, dissemination beyond the immediate workplace is largely confined to:

1. individual universities taking the trouble to place work on websites or in journals;
2. newsletters such as CPD Update;
3. and the encouragement provided while it existed by the members of the Critical Advisory Support Partnership (CASP), especially the International Professional Development Association (IPDA) which works hard to create a supportive atmosphere for teachers to participate at their seminars and conferences.

Another member of CASP, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) has forged links and protocols between PPD and a number of national

initiatives such as NPQH. These protocols can multiply the critical effect of the initiatives by introducing criticality.

But I believe that we need more resource and energy if we are to learn from the learning of professional educators in a way sufficiently systematic that the critically constructed and examined voices of professional educators establish values that get through to policy makers. What those voices will say in the future I do not know but, having looked at a lot of work produced by school teachers when they make critical sense of their professional lives, I know that they have interesting, useful and significant things to say on everything from classroom practice to grand educational strategy. And if they do not say these things very well when they begin a programme of intensive professional learning participation in PPD usually improves the necessary knowledge and ability to enquire, critically reflect and report: essential elements in the development of voice.

I am beginning to wonder if anyone at policy-making level with resource and energy really wishes these voices to emerge. I think that what the policy makers wish to hear is that their policies are being implemented; not that they should be questioned critically or changed. This is why we hear so much of that dreadful phrase, 'best practice'. Government seems to think that continuing professional development is either about attending a briefing on an initiative or identifying someone who gets good results and faithfully copying what they do. Yet another dreadful phrase is often deployed in support of this notion: 'no need to re-invent the wheel'. In my view professionals and children and young people learn best when they are permitted to reveal and ask questions about their cock-ups: when the atmosphere set for their learning allows this to happen without blame or ridicule (though fun should definitely be allowed). And as for the wheel, by all means have a look at someone else's but in order to make it work for you it is important to contextualise or customise it. So, at least some partial re-invention has to take place. Professionals may internalise or digest or adapt ideas from other people: they seldom find simple copying to be satisfying.

### ***Supplementary questions***

- *What do you know about the experience, expertise, interests, concerns and values of your colleagues?*
- *What do they know about yours?*
- *How do you know what you know about them and how do they know what they know about you?*
- *Do you talk?*

## **Question 5**

### **Do we engage with theory and policy?**

The word 'engagement' is useful when thinking about the relationships between professional educators and theory and policy. I have used it for years imagining, possibly foolishly, that no-one could possibly object to it. But I now think that it needs some explanation. The relationship between a teacher and policy and the relationship between a teacher and theory should, in my view, involve critical examination of professional experience and expertise. It is that very critical examination which leads to professional values. Engagement implies that the professional is more than a cog in a machine: more than an instrument to be switched on and off either by policy-makers or by theorists. The concern I am raising is, however, that engagement often goes no further than trying to solve the problem of how to implement orthodox received wisdom. It is seldom permitted to go as far as helping to construct policy. As I have said, I think that theorists do better here because most academics (they are teachers too) working with school teachers are former school or college teachers and they recognise that while theory can shine a light upon practice it is when practice is well observed and rigorously examined that it can, in turn, challenge and help to construct new theory: the interdependence of the two is clear. Recognising this is to make a value judgment. Policy makers should take note.

### **Supplementary questions**

- *How would you describe the engagement of you and your colleagues with national educational policies?*
- *Do you adopt them, adapt them or do you think of something better?*
- *How would you describe the engagement of you and your colleagues with educational theories?*
- *Do you adopt them, adapt them or think of something better?*

## **Question 6**

### **What lies between the field marshals at headquarters making great strategic plans and the enemy?**

If policy makers were really interested in hearing and valuing the voices of professional educators they would ask what teachers are saying when, at a very high level of critical engagement, they begin to articulate their concerns, interests

and values. There is no mechanism for politicians to do this and, it seems, no desire. Until recently the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) involved itself directly in the professional learning of educators. But now it has devolved that job to the TDA to act as its agent. As a consequence another layer (possibly intended to be a barrier) has been placed between policy makers and the professionals. This idea gathered pace under Thatcher and is now largely how politicians perceive that government should be structured.

Another way of looking at this is to see the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA) as an expendable army sent to occupy the contested ground between the field marshals at headquarters (No.10, the DCSF and DIUS) and the enemy (teachers and schools). If government perceives them to have failed to conquer and convert the teachers and schools the TDA can be disowned, discarded and replaced.

In effect we have government hiring an agent to ensure that its will is carried out and constantly prodding (in government jargon this is called 'steering') the TDA to ensure that policies are being implemented. But the TDA is comparatively small and cannot fight alone so it tries to make allies of some unreliable and undisciplined auxiliary forces. These are the various representatives of professional educators such as the unions and the GTCE; as well as the NCSL and UCET. There is a huge host for the TDA to herd into some sort of battle order particularly if you add in a variety of semi-independent projects and initiatives such as the National Strategies. All of these auxiliary forces are trying to ensure that the TDA listens to them rather than to the field marshals and fights the battle their way; but they often disagree among themselves when their values and interests clash and sometimes they try to fix things in their favour by going straight to headquarters to try to persuade the field marshals. They may even go over to the other side and join the enemy. Who would envy the TDA?

Actually, it is even more complicated than this because there are various other mercenaries such as interest groups, consultants, private companies, war lords and carpet baggers also contesting the territory. I pity the TDA because they have to create some coherence out of this mess and from time to time they will commission the occasional carpet bagger to carry out a specific role.

But what of the other side? The 'enemy' are the teachers and schools: the professional educators. They have to be conquered, captured and converted; made to conform and comply; and dissidents must be rooted out, although sometimes they surrender without a fight. You might even say that since the 1980s some professional educators have forgotten how to fight or, worse, that there should even be a fight: a fight for what they value.

Meanwhile, watching the progress of the battle is the press who will report on it to the voters. If the representatives of the press become lazy and unwilling to ask

critical questions they will swallow without question the stories handed to them in official bulletins and present them to the electorate. Or, should it suit them, they will swallow and regurgitate the prejudices of the opposition parties.

### **Supplementary questions**

- *Why is it that politicians would rather listen to carpet baggers who are neither elected nor chosen by means of public advertisement and open application than to the voices and values of teachers that have been subjected to rigorous examination?*
- *Is this the second key to what defines a professional? As well as having values and being able to articulate a voice a professional must also be able to obtain a hearing. With all the noise being made by the policy makers and their mercenaries this is very difficult.*

### **Question 7**

#### **Can we make a value statement?**

What might it be that professionals working in education would wish to profess? Can there be a general value statement which most of us, most of the time and in a variety of circumstances, could profess to support? If there is I don't think it would ever be *unquestionable* because any grand and tightly unifying statement of values that purports to bring to an end the debate about what we are here for sounds a bit too religious to me. So any such statement has to permit questions. But please allow me to explore my own notion of professional values for a while because just maybe there is something upon which we can agree....to an extent....for a while. Or maybe we can begin to make sense of our disagreement.

My own value statement would be something like the old slogan used during the early days of GCSE and the National Curriculum. Both of these initiatives arrived into the world of education announcing very loudly that they were based on the belief that we should create the conditions in which all learners should be provided with opportunity to demonstrate what they knew, understood and could do.

When I first heard those words it seemed to me that accompanying that core belief had to be (there was no logical option) the desire to make all teaching, learning and assessment both accessible and fair. There could be no artificial obstacle courses such as examination systems designed with arbitrary normative hurdles so that previously decided upon percentages of candidates always failed to acquire the approved grades no matter how hard they and their teachers worked; there could be no cultural, religious, gender, racial, linguistic, financial or class barriers to learning; we would differentiate by outcome rather than by

means of levelled tasks for pre-levelled children; and there could be no policy to create and support especially desirable schools that were only available to the children of particular parents.

### **Supplementary questions**

- *Are the values of professional educators only to be discovered in discussion about pay, conditions and funding levels?*
- *Does the process of obtaining better pay, conditions and funding levels for schools and colleges lead professionals to offer to work to a government agenda and to put aside values that they have articulated and tested?*
- *To get the former do we sacrifice the latter?*

### **Question 8**

#### **Has professional voice been suppressed and have professional values been subverted?**

The fight began almost as soon as the National Curriculum and its means of assessment were announced. In the early 1980s (before the National Curriculum) much use had been made of the term 'Entitlement Curriculum'. Wigan Education Authority, for example, began a systematic review of the curriculum by simply asking its teachers to discuss two questions: 'To what are children entitled by the time that they leave school?'; and, having produced a working answer, 'How, then, are we going to make that happen?'.

Even after the imposition of the National Curriculum and its system of assessment the professional dialogues and voices generated in Wigan and some other LEAs continued to support a strong, confident and humanising approach to national policy that protected and promoted the values of the professionals. What I was not to realise until too late was that government intended to appropriate the term 'entitlement' to describe what it intended to force us to implement.

I want to give just a few examples of what happened as a result of the introduction of the National Curriculum.

We lost political education which was characterised by social interaction, the management of dispute and the critical examination of values. Instead we got back the old and discredited citizenship which can be summed up as learning how to be good: how to live a life acceptable to those with the power. By the way, no-one in the UK is really a citizen. We are all subjects.

The consultation document for science in the suite of NC subjects included an attainment target (AT19) that was all about the social implications of science. This would have meant teachers engaging with children in discussing the effects of, for example, government policies on nuclear power. It would, in other words, have problematised science education: made it socially significant: even interesting to some who might normally switch off from it. This attainment target was the first to go.

There was also some discussion of what was meant by 'history'. The then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Clarke, cut through that particular Gordian Knot (he was good at doing that) by arbitrarily deciding that history always ends 30 years ago. This neatly kept at bay consideration in the classroom of the actions of practising politicians: so much for schools hoping to become more socially critical (note<sup>15</sup> Stephen Kemmis).

### ***Supplementary questions***

- *What does 'voice' mean to you when applied to professional educators learning as professionals?*
- *What does it mean to your colleagues?*
- *Is it simply about complaining or can the voice of professional educators be more constructive?*
- *Does having a voice imply that you will obtain a hearing?*
- *Who might hear you?*
- *What do you want to say to them?*

### **Question 9**

#### **Should we maximise feedback and minimise labelling?**

I was hoping that in the process of trying to become accessible and fair education would follow a precept that I learned from Ray Derricott who was my tutor and also a predecessor of mine as director of CPD in education at the University of Liverpool. He used to say that when managing the learning of children we should endeavour to maximise feedback and minimise labelling. Labels display values. I do not think that I am alone in remembering the various labels that were placed on me while at school and the feelings that went with them which remain difficult to shake off. Some of them were very nice labels to wear but some were horrible and were often the result of what I felt to be very

unfair judgments by my teachers. What I did not realise in those days was that my teachers were also being labelled (note 16).

### **Supplementary questions**

- *Can you remember educational and social labels being applied to you as a child?*
- *If so, what was their impact upon you?*
- *Do you still wear them?*

## **Question 10**

### **Have policy makers avoided the implications of their policies?**

It is possible that the politicians (all members of a Thatcher cabinet) who marched for a while behind the 'know, understand and can do' entitlement banner had no idea at first of its implications, especially of its social implications, or that when they began to glimpse the significance they began very quickly to revert to type and set about shaping both the curriculum and the form of assessment so that they could more easily differentiate children and schools and parents. It is as though at the last minute they realised that their education policy was sailing too close to a fair and democratic shore and so, like the sailors of Odysseus, had their ears stuffed with wax lest they be seduced by arguments that would alter their World.

We no longer have a system that fits such a value statement. Possibly the liberal rhetoric was chosen by a Conservative government by mistake much in the way that Thatcher is supposed not to have realised what she was doing when she was in charge of education and closed down secondary moderns and grammar schools to create more comprehensives than all other secretaries of state put together. So-called 'choice' and competition now pervade the system making collaboration very difficult.

### **Supplementary questions**

- *Have the professionals joined the politicians in avoiding the implications of policies?*
- *We talk about teaching, learning and assessment. Should we be talking about society?*

## **Final statements**

**People engaged with the professional learning of professional educators should encourage intellectual curiosity and the discovery and use of different perspectives.**

**Critical examination of the experience, expertise, interests, concerns and values of professional educators will generate voices that bring a social benefit.**

## **Final warning**

Do you remember what the character played by Patrick McGoohan said at the start of each episode of 'The Prisoner'?

'I am not a number. I am a free man'.

He would not be labelled. He would not be commodified. He would not behave according to the plan. He would not accept 'their' values. He would maintain his own values. He would not allow his voice to be stifled.

He set out to find the person responsible for subjecting him and his fellow prisoners to a process of de-humanisation. Eventually, after much travail, he found out who it was:

himself!

We have to be careful not to collude in our own commodification or to become our own gaolers.

The critically examined voices and values of professional educators can help to build a better future for society. The really big question is do we wish it to happen? Or maybe the really, really big question is have we got the energy?