

“What do schools do when governments want the world?”

A talk at Arts and Media School, Islington: Tim Brighouse 13th January 2016

It is a privilege to be asked by the Arts & Media School, Islington to deliver this lecture. You have proved for more than fifteen years now just how successful a school on this site can be for so many children. You succeed in a way that predecessor-schools, two of which I knew earlier in my career, would never in their wildest dreams have considered possible. So I want to start by saluting the past and present staff who have made this possible. I know you have many successes among your alumni and I am sure their success will be an inspiration to those students fortunate to be here now that what they would love to reach in adulthood will be brought within their grasp.

So to my task...

In one sense a responsible democratic government has every right to ask its schools to deliver the world. And in an ideal world, schools would be only too happy to respond to their lead. Moreover successive governments have toured the world in response to declining scores in international tests such as PISA to find out what works. But as I shall argue that is part of the problem since in education contexts differ and what works in one place may not work in another. I shall also argue that there needs to be a UK – wide debate, leading to agreement about the purposes of education.

Even if allowance were made for context, modern governments have made another mistake so great that it is unlikely they would be successful even if they chanced on the right things to do. For, in their detailed prescription, they have so exceeded what it is reasonable for a central government to do that Alan Bennett was, as modern commentators would describe, as ‘on the money’, in criticising it as ‘close to a totalitarian attitude’. Moreover I shall argue that, in behaving as they have, they have ushered in an age of confusion. In seeking the world from our schools they have, unintentionally I am sure, impoverished them.

Given that what I shall say will fall at least for the moment on deaf government ears, I go on to describe how schools can even now create a curricular experience which is more likely to unlock the minds and open the shut chambers of the hearts of their pupils. But they can do so, despite rather than because of government policies and practices.

First a bit of history; consider.

After the Second World War an educational ambition for Britain was set in motion based on RA Butler's 1944 Education Act which settled the respective roles of central government, local government – through local education authorities -, the churches and schools. It was based on three assumptions.

The first assumption was that central government's role was to set the general policy guidelines only; the detail and most power -should be left to local government which was closer to the people and therefore better able to understand their needs. (After all, a war had been fought against Dictators in the Axis countries who had consolidated their power base in their respective countries by getting rid of local government. Moreover there was a long tradition in England that the state should intervene in education only as a provider of last resort.) So the secretary of state had just three powers – approving the removal of air-raid shelters; securing a sufficient supply of suitably qualified teachers; and approving the opening and closure of schools and the rationing of scarce capital resource for new schools. Power over the curriculum, staffing and resources was left mainly to local education authorities, who in their turn handed over curricular power to the schools.

The second assumption was to do with the purpose of education and schooling. In that, Butler was influenced heavily by the writings of a former Archbishop of Canterbury and particularly one passage:

Until Education has done more work than it has had an opportunity of doing, you cannot have a society organised on the basis of justice, for this reason.... that there will always be a strain between what is due to a man in view of his humanity with all his powers and capabilities and what is due to him at the moment of time as a member of society with all his faculties still undeveloped, with many of his tastes warped, with his powers largely crushed.

Are you going to treat a man as what he is or what he might be? Morality, I think, requires that you should treat him as what he might be, as what he might become...and business requires that you should treat him as he is.

You cannot get rid of that strain except by raising what he is to the level of what he might be. That is the whole work of education. Give him the full development of his powers and there will no longer be that conflict between the man as he is and the man as he might become .

And so you can have no justice as the basis of your social life until education has done its full work. And then again, you can have no real freedom, because until a man's whole personality has developed, he cannot be free in his own life.....And you cannot have political freedom any more than you can have moral freedom until people's powers are developed, for the simple reason that over and over again we find men with a cause which is just... are unable to state it in a way which might enable it to prevail....there exists a

form of mental slavery which is as real as any economic form....We are pledged to destroy it...it you want human liberty, you must have educated people.

In short political freedom, moral freedom, social justice resonated with politicians from all parties. Education was a 'good thing' and we needed more of it.

The third assumption was that it was not for governments to interfere in matters best left to professionals. In education 'matters best left to the professionals' meant ***what should be taught and how it should be taught***. Some politicians remembered from their youth, the end – forty years earlier -of the disastrous period of central national prescription, known as 'payment by results' (I suppose today we would call it Performance Related Pay through Performance Management)

The years since 1944 have witnessed what might be called by historians distinct 'Ages' with different characteristics. First an age of 'Optimism and Trust' lasting till 1968 – this was characterised by a general agreement that education was a good thing. Schools were built; Colleges of Further Education, Teacher Training Colleges, Colleges of Advanced Technology – later turned into Polytechnics (and ultimately Universities) - were created and run by LEAs. Local Authorities also created a Youth Service, Adult Education Centres, Teachers Centres and Outdoor Pursuit Centres for residential trips as they also founded a network of public libraries and youth employment services (later called the Careers Service). Towards the end of the period children who up to then (the early 1970s) were regarded as 'ineducable' were brought within the remit of LEAs as special schools were established and the world of Special Educational Needs expanded.

The second age was one of 'Doubt and Disillusion'. Starting in 1968 – the year of campus student unrest at all the universities, it encompasses the publication (1969) of the so called 'Black Papers' polemical leaflets written by gloomy reactionaries who claimed pupils weren't being taught properly or the right things, the collapse of a Primary School William Tyndale, pursuing so-called play methods, and the death of a comprehensive school, Risinghill, not so far from here , both school failures occasioning great and disapproving publicity. The disillusion culminated in Prime Minister James Callaghan's Ruskin speech of 1976 which epitomised the 'education isn't working' theme of the age of 'Doubt and Disillusion'. Central Government – at least in England if not in the other parts of the UK was determined to act.

Mrs Thatcher ushered in the third age of 'Markets and Managerialism' the tail-end of which we are living through even now. It started in 1980. It has been punctuated by White Papers – followed by Acts of Parliament- with mantra words such as 'choice'(for parents) 'diversity'(of provision and types of school) 'autonomy' (for schools)and 'accountability'. It stemmed from a belief in market forces and competition as a means of finding a solution to most problems. But the same white papers sometimes contained the words 'Equity' and 'Equality' and they demanded regulation by the state since market forces, though never publicly acknowledged, couldn't be relied upon to deliver those ideals. On the contrary

markets and competition tend to produce winners and losers – sometimes more of the latter than the former. So we have managerialism by the state. Over 40 Acts of Parliament and a Secretary of State not with the three powers very reasonably reserved to him, namely removing air-raid shelters, securing a sufficient supply of suitably qualified teachers and rationing scarce capital resources for new buildings – indeed two of these he has abandoned to the market with disastrous consequences as we run short of teachers and school buildings - but with over 2000 powers and very little accountability. No wonder Alan Bennett called it a ‘totalitarian tendency’. It extends to the Secretary of State defining in detail what shall be taught, how it should be taught and when it should be taught – something never attempted by Napoleon, Hitler and other continental dictators, and interestingly by no other western developed country – at least to the same extent as that enacted in England. Nor is this approach replicated in Wales Scotland or Northern Ireland.

But there have been some other unremarked outcomes.

And that brings me to the fourth age – the Age of Confusion in which we now live.

Let me explain.

I started by saying what the 1944 Act intended for Britain and it was true. But Acts of Parliament now are for the 47 million who live in England. Devolution to the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and Stormont mean that children and teachers in Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish schools march to a different tune. Not for them the detailed limited diet rigidly prescribed by Westminster. They do not know the Prevent programme nor are they familiar with Channel protocols. They do not teach ‘British values’.

Not for them an inspectorate which in reporting on schools so narrowly focuses on literacy, numeracy, attendance and progress at the primary level and the Ebac, progress and attendance between 11 and 16 at secondary. No, for the Scots there is a focus on many of those of course but within a more balanced and expansive curriculum – Curriculum for Excellence they call it (shortly to be heavily copied by the Welsh).

If you look through Michael Wilshaw’s annual report of last autumn, or a sample of OFSTED reports on individual schools, as I did of those published in the last week, you will find no mention of for example Music, Art, Drama, Dance or outdoor education or residentials. You will search in vain for references to the progress of children in their familiarity with and skill in the modern technologies. You will not find much mention of Science.

Instead you will find a relentless focus on the basics of literacy and English (though not as it is spoken) and on numeracy and mathematics backed by a concern with ‘progress’ on these measures.

Now let me be plain about it, I thoroughly agree that all these things are very important and that in the first age of Trust and Optimism between 1944 and the mid-70s we were guilty of neglecting them.

So I am agreeing that these are essential, but they are not sufficient. A focus on them alone will not unlock the minds and open the shut chambers of the hearts of many of our future citizens: indeed an exclusive focus on these alone is likely for some children to be counter-productive both in terms of the basic skills and in finding what the American Thoreau memorably describes, as the individual 'song' inside each pupil and that therefore, as he said, too many go to their graves with the song still inside them.

We cannot afford as a society for that to happen.

As I have implied earlier I can find no trace of any national agreement as to the broad purposes of schooling or education for the UK. I can find differing purposes in Wales Scotland Northern Ireland and England. Isn't it time again to affirm what is our common purpose?

What we need is an agreement in broad brush of what we would want for our future citizens. Of course we want them to be literate and numerate, to be aware of and inspired by the rich inheritance of our own and other people's cultures in the broadest definition of the word culture, and to feel a growing sense of capacity to contribute to that culture. We want them to be discriminating users of, rather than slaves to the new technologies. We also want them to grow up healthy – 'mens sana in corpore sano' as the Romans put it.

It has always struck me as one of our greatest Welfare State missed opportunities that the National Health Service and Education were created and have been administered as two entirely separate services.

We want them to think for themselves and act for others, as one school has for its motto. And of course we want them to have a respect for law, though not just 'English Law' as the rather self-contradictory statement by the Westminster government when it defined so-called British Values. And of course we would want them to understand that we now live in a society that respects pluralism, strives for equity and for equality. Of course our society did not always promote pluralism, tolerance and respect and our children need to know how they change even over a lifetime.

So there needs to be a UK-wide discussion and agreement about what are the broad purposes of schools in the four countries – in Cardiff, London, Belfast and Glasgow; in Aberystwyth, Blackpool, Portrush and Inverness.

If we do not take this step we must contemplate the break-up of the UK sooner rather than later.

Within England there will be enormous consequences of such a debate for system-wide practices.

We might for example decide that it would be desirable to have an accountability system where achievement as well as attainment is assessed, where there is an overt attempt to assess the progress of children in terms of their health and well-being, how they are able to be team players especially in solving inter-disciplinary problems which are the hallmark of the modern world, and how they are intelligent rather than how intelligent they are. In such a system, assessment and accountability would need to change and access to schools would need to be fair rather than the competitive scramble it is now.

So that is the background – a need to create a new age of Ambition and Partnership. The seeds of it are present already in the many school partnerships within England, in the Scottish and now the Welsh curriculum statements, in the way Northern Ireland trains and honours its teachers. So to legitimise it, require of the Westminster government a breadth of vision and a generosity of heart which would be the very hallmark of supposed British Values.

So what can schools do now until that happens and as they remain under the cosh for a narrow range of outcomes?

That is the second half of my talk.

There are five measures they can take.

First they must at all costs avoid isolation both for individual members of staff and for the schools as a whole. Isolation is the enemy of learning. So schools need to be in partnerships for the twin purposes of (a) Continuous Professional Development (CPD) or Professional Learning as some call it now and (b) School Improvement whereby in sharing data, professional practice and expertise they come closer to meeting more of the needs of all their students.

Secondly they will adopt a shared language of school improvement. For me, that shared language has involved over the last 40 years learning ever more about eight processes as follows.

1. Leadership...in the classroom, among pupils, in the department or phase, in the school as a whole, in contributing to the wider community;
2. Management...doing the right things in the right way, among staff, in the classroom and the wider school;
3. Review...of all aspects of school life and in a way which collects evidence, speculates about other practice elsewhere and is based on 'learning ever more on how to get even better at what we do';

4. Creating an environment fit for and conducive learning in every corner of school life behaviourally, visually and aurally - from the way children are greeted as they enter a classroom, through the way the walls educate the child, to the place of music and silence in learning;
5. Focusing on learning ever more about teaching, learning and assessing
6. Always promoting staff development and learning. Making sure that job descriptions highlight responsibilities for leadership, that staff work in an environment where they can take risks, confident that they can do so without blame and that they will have new experiences.
7. Involving students in every aspect of school life
8. Involving parents and the community.

Of these, the last two are the most neglected and underdeveloped. While all are important, I feel the most liable to receive insufficient emphasis at this time of financial cutbacks, is 'staff development'. For anybody who is interested I attach as an annex a 'Baker's Dozen' of low cost ideas to promote staff development.

The third way in which schools can make progress towards education for a broader purpose is to agree five or six 'experiences' which are guaranteed to all students. It is for then to decide what they are. Both in Birmingham (through what we called 'Guarantees' for the 'Early Years', for 'Primary' and for 'Secondary') and in London (through the Student Pledge) we had a very tentative attempt at that. Surely this is something which IAMS could persuade Islington to adopt form its own model. Involve the parents. It would be wrong of me to prescribe what they should be but I would be surprised if you didn't decide that taking part in a 'residential' should be one, especially after the Hamlyn report's research backed the efficacy of 'residentials'.

Fourth I believe that schools need an explicit 'second time-table.' At present all schools take students on day-trips, subscribe to the Forest-school movement, run residentials and many have the occasional days or weeks for intensive accelerated learning. It is time to leave this not to serendipity but be part of a thought-through rationale for the 'Second Timetable' justified not by chance but by deliberate thought.

Fifth and finally – a simple thing. Let every school have a wall devoted to pen-pictures of the achievements of past pupils as well as those here now. Let every school be proud of the achievements of those who have 'been this way before' and whose achievements may bring within the grasp of those present pupils, ideally all of them, who wish to reach for making a contribution in later life and be rewarded in so doing.

In these five ways schools now can anticipate what our politicians will eventually realise as important in schooling when we have teachers trusted, all schools aspiring to excellence with no artificial limits on how many that should be .

It will be an age of 'Ambition and Partnership'.

Annex

A Baker's dozen of practical CPD ideas

1. Making sure 'job descriptions' are written in terms of 'lead' and 'support' 'responsibilities'
2. Keep an updated school staff handbook (which is both loose-leaved - for each member of staff - and electronic) which contains a clear and concise guide to teaching, learning and assessing policy and practice with a basic list of 'singing from the same song sheet' practices 'we all do' but leaving sufficient room for individual creativity.
3. Establish a 'staff library' and use part of meeting time to report on articles/books read.
4. Use one of the five inset days to enable staff in pairs or threes to visit some other school

A Baler's dozen of practical CPD ideas

5. Let the SLT take over the teaching of someone for a day so they can have a focused observation of another's teaching.
6. Expect each member of staff to attend one 'Teachmeet' every other year. and make it form part of the annual performance management discussions.
7. Buy 'IRIS-connect' as a means of ensuring that all staff, starting with SLT and new-comers, get into the habit of observing *in private* their own practice.

A Baker's dozen of practical CPD ideas

8. Make sure each department has someone designated as the 'subject knowledge' coach who keeps abreast of developments in the subject.
9. Establish the role of 'pedagogical coach' –maybe more than one depending on size of school – to be available in response to IRIS-connect use.
10. Have a fund available for courses but only send pairs or threesomes and include in staff/faculty meetings time for report back. Conduct a 'six-months afterwards' review of what's lasted as a result of the course.
11. E-mail privately 'thanks' each week to members of staff who have walked the extra-mile and remember to acknowledge privately birthdays.

A Baker's dozen of practical CPD ideas

12. Establish a staff 'wellbeing' fund with theatre tickets, restaurant vouchers etc to be raffled at strategic points of the year.

13. Finally adopt the practice of the recently retired head of Morpeth School in Tower Hamlets who said his default position was 'yes' whenever he was asked by a member of staff if he/she could do something new or different. 'I needed a lot of persuading to say 'no'' he elaborated.