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at the time I
write this, in need of
a revolution in
education

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and I don't use it lightly

Teaching: notes from the front line

Dr Debra Kidd



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Introduction

For though I am not splenitive and rash,

Yet have I in me something dangerous,

Which let thy wisdom fear.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1

I used to quite enjoy physics in Year 9. We'd arrive at our lesson, collect a textbook from the teacher's desk and turn to whatever page he'd written on the blackboard. And then, while he sat on the steps of the fire escape with a newspaper, cigarette and a cup of coffee, we'd discuss the Burnley game from the night before. I didn't learn any physics, of course, but I learned a lot about football and found out that if you were a girl who knew about football you were quite interesting to boys. I don't think that is what our teacher had hoped for. But then I don't think he had hopes for us at all in that school, which was in its first year of comprehensive status, having been a secondary modern for years. I don't think he was used to giving children hope and joy. I think about those lessons a lot when people talk about how the quality of education has deteriorated over the past four or five decades. I wonder where they went to school because, among my peer group, my experience was not unusual.

When I left my secondary school at 16 clutching a handful of O levels, my dad sent me to a private school. It was his way of feeling that he was providing the 'best' for his daughter, having spent years painstakingly building up a business and carrying his family out of poverty into an affluence symbolised by bidets, Volvos and independent education.

With the exception of two teachers who seemed to think that discussing things was useful, our lessons largely consisted of taking notes from a teacher/reader sitting at a desk dictating from a book. It seemed that money bought compliant classmates but little in the way of teaching quality. No one took responsibility for our results. You listened, took notes, memorised and regurgitated. And if you did this successfully, and were able to respond succinctly to fairly predictable questions, you passed your A levels. It was as easy as that. Hardly anyone did A levels then, so there were plenty of university places to go around and you didn't have to stress about grades too much. One grade B and a couple of Cs would get you through the door of a Russell Group university. Simple. And if you failed? Well, that was your fault, nobody else's.

Was it really that bad in both settings? Of course not. In the first, there was the wonderful Dorothy Bowling who encouraged in me a lifelong love of music, and in the second, the witty Dave Hopkinson who made me see the importance of politics. Both brought interests into my life that enriched and influenced my future, as teachers have done for children throughout time. But back then there was a great deal of inconsistency, and this inconsistency was a national problem.

There is little doubt that when education began to rise in political prominence during the 1980s – a priority which rose as manufacturing industries declined – teaching practice was so patchy across the country that some structure was necessary. The quality of teaching and learning could not be left to chance. There was a need for national standards and forms of accountability – no one who remembers education in the 1970s and 1980s can argue with that. But, unfortunately, instead of exploring how the very best and

most successful practice could be shared, instead of looking at what we could learn about pedagogy, education became a vehicle for pushing forward political agendas in order to win votes. In his comprehensive book, *Thinking Allowed on Schooling*, Mick Waters takes us through an entertaining guide of how each education minister has, over the years, tried to become associated with one forgotten initiative after another in order to make their mark.¹ It would be funny if this had not come hand in hand with accusations that teachers, children and parents were consistently failing. As a result, we teachers have become accustomed to hearing and absorbing rhetoric about ‘falling standards’, ‘unacceptable failures’ and even ‘cheating’. We have been told so many times that we are not worthy of trust that we have begun to turn on each other. We have allowed ourselves to be beaten down into an acceptance of the belief that we cannot be trusted to form our own policies and practices and that we are in need not only of guidance but policing. We have begun to believe that if we do what we’re told, we will be rewarded and win acceptance. We beg to be ‘outstanding’; we crave affirmation.

These needs are managed and fed by people whose interests are served by developing tightly controlled monitoring and micro-management systems, individuals who can take the credit for any perceived success: politicians, consultants, advisers. It forms part of a myth of decline, which allows economic reform to dictate education policy without challenge from voting parents.² Who is going to argue with a politician who promises to make their child’s school ‘better’? As teachers, we take this relentless, critical interference

1 Mick Waters, *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* (Carmarthen, Independent Thinking Press, 2013), pp. 55–58.

2 Stephen Ball, *The Education Debate*, 2nd edn (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012), pp. 11–16.

from people who rarely understand the complexities of classroom interactions or the difficulties of balancing all the competing needs of children, paperwork and parental expectations. We have become de-professionalised, uncertain and afraid. We have begun to believe that we are not good enough, when, in fact, even Ofsted concedes that the teaching profession is the best it has ever been. It is time to take our vocation back, to learn to trust ourselves and each other and, crucially, to take control of the direction of education and policy.

This is a book about redirecting, rechanneling and reaffirming; about taking positive action. It challenges the overpowering but deadening desire for certainty that has formed the illusion that data is truth. And because I am a teacher, and because this book is about being a teacher and taking control, it is about activism both in and out of the classroom. It is activism informed by knowledge *and* practice, fuelled by networking, reading and collaborating. It is the activism of experience gained inside the classroom in the day-to-day interactions with children. It is pedagogical activism.

We are, at the time I write this, in need of a revolution in education. This is a strong statement and I don't use it lightly. And I am not alone in calling for it. At the Festival of Education in 2013, Charles Leadbeater used an example from aeronautical engineering to try to explain what was happening in education.³ He showed a picture of the Douglas DC-3 – the aircraft of choice in the 1950s. The problem with the DC-3 was that it flew at an altitude that meant it had to fly through cloud cover, leading to many cancelled flights and constant damage to the aircraft. While

3 Charles Leadbeater, *Technology in Education: The Past, Present and Future*. Speech delivered at the *Sunday Times* Festival of Education, Wellington College, Berkshire, 21–22 June 2013.

technology was beginning to be available to design planes which could fly at higher altitudes – above the clouds – most airlines preferred to continue tinkering with and improving the DC-3. Eventually, an airline invested in Boeing planes and the rest is history. Leadbeater described Michael Gove as a passionate engineer of the DC-3, desperately battling to keep his favourite craft in the air, while convincing passengers that the Boeing would fail. Leadbeater argued for ‘regime change’, urging parents and teachers to overcome the ‘cartel of fear’ that keeps the ‘DC-3’ in operation – the fear of the unknown and the worry that change will be bad. But doing nothing is worse.

Our current education system is overloaded with amendments, additions and adjustments which have been designed to keep an outdated model in the air. But it is crashing. And as it comes down, we see the battle of blame begin. It is presented to us as a battle between traditional and progressive methods when, in fact, the vast majority of teachers steer a pathway through the middle. It is presented as a battle for the future success of our nation, built on rhetoric from the past. It is a battle being fought at the extremes where both language and actions are dangerous. It is a battleground on which politicians think it is justifiable to change examination syllabi and criteria halfway through a course in order to appear ‘tough’. A place where teachers working to ensure the best possible chances of success for children are labelled as ‘cheats’. This is a moral no-man’s-land where immediate changes to education are announced on television and in newspapers rather than through the examination regulators and boards. We are in a *mêlée* where politicians behave like schoolboys; dumping their girlfriends by text message and spreading gossip about them to justify the rudeness. We are living through a time when expertise

is ignored, opposition is dismissed and ridiculed and where anyone with an alternative view is labelled an ‘enemy of promise’.⁴ These are dark times, indeed, but the darkness has been creeping up for many years and the night will be long, unless teachers take action.

When under pressure, it’s easy to look for those who are to blame. There is no doubt, as I will explore in this book, that politicians of all colours have a lot to answer for. But this would be an oversimplification of the situation. We need to look closer to home if we are to really change the way things are. How many of us have quietly complied to avoid unwanted attention? How many of us have sought to rank ourselves in comparison with our peers? How many have lost sight of a child in the pursuit of results? How many of us have changed our teaching to suit what we imagine an inspector is looking for? In all these ways, we collude in the system we say we deplore. This book argues for revolution, but this is not so simple an act as rising up and overthrowing an oppressor. We need to rise up against our own worst natures. We need to evolve in order to thrive, and so this form of evolution might be better conceptualised as (r)evolution. There will be uncomfortable home truths to be considered throughout, but in facing them we will put ourselves in a position worthy of trust and we will be ready to take control of our profession. There will be many who seek to stand in the way of genuine teacher autonomy so we may need to use weapons of mass construction. These weapons are rhizomatic – they connect at grassroots levels in creative

4 Michael Gove, I Refuse to Surrender to the Marxist Teachers Hell-Bent on Destroying Our Schools, *Daily Mail* (23 March 2013). Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>.

and unpredictable ways. They are weapons of hope. And they are in our hands, every day in the classroom.

This book aims to explore not only what these weapons are and how to use them but why they are needed. It examines what is happening in education across the world and how the hyperactive pace of change and narratives of failure are damaging children in order to protect the interests of a few individuals. It aims to expose what is, in my opinion, a system of child abuse so widespread and openly enacted that few can see it for what it is. What kind of future do we really want for our children and what kind of education would deliver it?

DEAD MAN'S CLOTHING

Bruno took off his overcoat and placed it as gently as possible on the ground. Then he took off his shirt and shivered for a moment in the cold air before putting on the pyjama top. As it slipped over his head he made the mistake of breathing through his nose; it did not smell very nice.

'When was this last washed?' he called out and Shmuel turned around.

'I don't know if it's ever been washed,' said Shmuel.

John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006)

In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, lonely Bruno, son of the Commandant, is desperate to join his new friend Shmuel on the other side of the fence. He thinks it will be fun. He has no idea that the other side is Auschwitz or that he is in danger. When Bruno dons his pyjamas and breathes in the odour of their previous occupant(s), he seals his fate. It is a moment of quite extraordinary complexity. It seems that in that whiff we get a compressed slice of time in which all possibilities are present and then closed down. The half-naked, shivering, innocent child stands there to be dressed in a future. Of all the clothes he could wear, he puts on the uniform of the concentration camp inmate. And there, in those clothes, are the past lives of the dead, the present life of Bruno and all his possible futures being narrowed into

one awful outcome. It is a small detail packed with power. And one that constantly reminds me of our education system. That is a pretty contentious statement, I know. Perhaps I ought to explain.

Our entire education system is predicated on the appearance of order and uniformity. Perhaps this is most obviously evident in the assumption that children perform in neat, straight lines of progress, roughly in line with their chronological age. This presupposed trajectory is deemed so reliable that every teacher in the country is judged against it. Nowhere on this line is there room for sickness, bereavement, neglect or abuse. Nor is there room for difference, diversity of talent or aptitude. Young people are judged by their ability to keep marching on a straight and narrow pathway, resisting the temptation to follow an interest or question the status quo.

Within this system, examinations have always acted as a sorting hat to send children into their futures – handing out garments labelled A, B, C and so on – and marking out potential. It has always been a blunt and unforgiving tool and none of the numerous attempts to democratise it have ever really worked. There have been changes along the way – from the divisive O level/CSE split to GCSEs, towards the open sharing of criteria, the right to a re-mark and to see the original paper with annotations and comments (one exam board once sent papers back to us on which an examiner had written his comments in Ancient Greek in an attempt to avoid being read), resits, coursework and then back again – each change designed to keep the ‘integrity’ of the system intact without actually questioning the system. Febreze.

It seems that we nearly all accept that examinations are necessary, so what we usually argue about is whether or not they should be washed. I would argue that we need new

clothes. This acceptance of examinations being the 'best' way to assess our children is as outdated as consulting the oracle, but we persist in the belief because to do anything different just feels too complicated. We ignore evidence that questions the wisdom of the system and blindly accept that which props it up. This is an irresponsible act of neglect. The disproportionately adverse effect of high stakes testing on children with special educational needs (SEN)¹ and those children from ethnic minorities² made a mockery of the notion of No Child Left Behind in the US and Every Child Matters in the UK. Although the slogans have disappeared, the idea of a one-size-fits-all approach to testing has been strengthened by successive governments and is rarely challenged. How often do we, as a profession, really consider the necessity of high stakes national examinations and the impact they have on our practice?

Consider:

- ◆ How much of your teaching time is dedicated to preparing for the demands of the exam?
- ◆ How much of your marking feedback focuses on the requirements of the exam?
- ◆ Have you ever said to an enthusiastic child, 'You don't need that for the exam'?
- ◆ Have you ever stopped teaching something you loved/valued because it was taken off the syllabus?
- ◆ Do you ever avoid teaching a significant news event because it won't be relevant to the exam?

1 Antonis Katsiyannis, Dalun Zhang, Joseph B. Ryan and Julie Jones, High-Stakes Testing and Students with Disabilities: Challenges and Promises, *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 18(3) (2007): 160–167.

2 Sandra J. Altshuler and Tresa Schmautz, No Hispanic Student Left Behind: The Consequence of 'High Stakes' Testing, *Children and Schools: A Journal of the National Association of Social Workers* 28(1) (2005): 5–14.

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