

Jackson, Alison (2007) The development of questioning as an enrichment to the professionalism of beginning teachers. In: British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, 5-8 September 2007, University of London. (Unpublished)

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The development of questioning as an enrichment to the professionalism of beginning teachers

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Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Institute of Education, University of London, 5-8 September 2007

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Advancing Learning and Teaching in Initial Teacher Education

It could be argued that the schoolteacher of the twenty-first century in England is largely formed by managerial government policy. Managerialism is concerned with market forces:

stressing productive efficiency, producing an elaboration of explicit standards and measures of performance in quantitative terms that set specific targets for personnel, an emphasis on economic rewards and sanctions, and a reconstruction of accountability relationships. (Fitzsimmons, 2005:1)

The resonance with teaching is clear; there are explicit standards for classroom teachers¹, frameworks for each part of the teacher's repertoire, judgment of performance through Ofsted² inspection, specific targets set through performance management, and accountability to school league tables.

¹ <http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/professionalstandards.aspx>

² The Office for Standards in Education – which is the main regulatory force of the teaching profession.

There seems no alternative but to accept managerialism as fundamental to the way things are done because managerialism sees itself as the antidote to chaos and irrationality, leaving no spaces in which autonomy can be contested legitimately. Managerialism has become a 'universalist' ideology in Western society in that it is applied to all organisations, not just businesses, and schools are by no means exempt. Presented as the singular discourse, managerialism renders contest irrelevant, resistance to the status quo illogical, and questioning unnecessary.

In this paper I want to argue that government education policies which have their roots in managerialist global trends may suggest to the beginning teacher a pre-determined, prescribed, unquestionable image of an ideal teacher who has no need to question his or her role. Superlative images of 'best practice' (the perceived optimal way to present material in lessons to pupils) and 'excellent teacher'³ reinforce this ideal of a kind of preformed professionalism which does not require the individual's own contribution or encourage any diversion from an established norm. Many commentators consider that teacher professionalism (Gewirtz, 1997; Ozga, 2000, Bottery and Wright, 2000, Mahoney and Hextall, 2000) has relinquished autonomous thought and autonomous action due to a surfeit of prescribed education policies and government 'guidance'. 'New' teacher professionalism may well embrace what Etzioni (1997:71-3) calls 'bounded' autonomy, 'a range of legitimate options within an affirmed normative framework'. The legitimate options for teachers are determined through the normative framework of

³ <http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/professionalstandards.aspx>

prescribed government education policies. Within this kind of prescribed autonomy, contest and dissent which exceed the bounds of the legitimate options may appear negative to the individual. However, I argue that autonomy is inextricably linked to resistance and that resistance, translated as positive questioning of the status quo has the power to enrich the professionalism of beginning teachers by encouraging reflection and debate and by encouraging the thinking professional.

As a basis for my argument I will refer to a piece of small scale research which I undertook with ten Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) over the first two years of their career in a large comprehensive school in England. As a practising teacher at the time of the research, my access to research sites was limited to my own workplace and I am aware of the limitations of the research in terms of generalisation. However I feel strongly that, by understanding the particular, we come to understand the universal (Simons, 1996:231), and offer the discussions of my participants with me as starting places for the reader's contemplation of the concept of resistance to the status quo as a positive tool for beginning teachers.

To consider the idea of the positive qualities of resistance and questioning, I investigated the work of Bourdieu and Foucault, both of whom give opportunities for reflection on the individual's claim to autonomy. Bourdieu is seen by some as a determinist because they feel that his theory of 'habitus' allows for no autonomous or chosen process, actors simply acting in certain ways. 'Habitus', habitual or typical conditions, the ways of doing and being

which social subjects acquire during their socialisation is acquired through practice and becomes deeply engrained habits of behaviour, feeling and thought (Lovell in Fowler, 2000:27). For beginning teachers this would translate as the experience of teacher training, induction and government targets, and would imply acceptance without the need for autonomous thought and no desire to question what it means to be a teacher and why teachers do what they do. Reflective practice in this extreme would have no place. But Bourdieu did want to admit autonomy within the structure of habitus. He rejected the view of habitus as deterministic and thought it possible to struggle against determined roles (Grenfell and Kelly, 1999:100). His agent speaks as the awakening of consciousness and socioanalysis controls the habitus; he allows for the individual to think. An individual who thinks might resist the habitus by questioning the status quo with the positive aim of seeking improvement. A truly autonomous agent may stand alone, but Bourdieu's autonomous agent dwells within society, is affected by it and is limited by it, but can at least aim to modify it. Thus the beginning teacher would not reject government policy but work with it. He/she would not attempt to overthrow managerialist trends but understand them. The aim would not be to promote revolution, but evolution as the possible stagnation engendered by definitive best practice and excellence would be broken down and enriched by constant questioning.

Foucault's view of the search for autonomy is oriented towards the inevitable; the inevitable result of domination which leads to a desire to exercise autonomy as a form of resistance (Moss, 1998:73). For Foucault, domination

was a negative force, but, on the other hand, he felt that power is imbued with positive qualities; 'power refers to relations which are flexible, mutable, fluid and even reversible' (Moss, 1998:101). This would imply that the beginning teacher does not need to accept policy as domination but as a power source which can be questioned and changed by the individual's own power. The beginning teacher can create a definition of autonomy for him or herself by questioning the power source. By positively resisting a preformed professionalism and building up as true a picture of self awareness and understanding of his or her circumstances as possible, the individual teacher will create their own more convinced professionalism. This professionalism will be more satisfying because it is formed not only within the bounds of external prescription, but also within the individual's continuing reflective interpretation of their role.

The first part of my research involved participant observation of the induction twilight sessions which were arranged for the NQTs. There was little evidence of encouragement to challenge the status quo or question 'the way things were'. Generally the sessions were monologues, a member of the school teaching staff 'telling' the NQTs 'how things were', the NQTs sitting passively listening and nodding acceptance. From the established members of the staff, there were very few hints that any resistance or questioning of policy was acceptable. One small exception came from a Deputy Head who suggested that teachers may be human, rather than 'excellent', 'best' or super beings, despite Ofsted's rigorous agenda:

'What is tenable and what isn't? You have to know where there are legitimate excuses and where not (for carrying out the professional duties of a teacher).'

This suggests that some autonomy of action, some questioning of the prescribed role may come with experience but is not very helpful for NQTs just starting out; they may 'have to know' but how does that skill arise? Have they explored this in their training? There was a sharp contrast between this supportive advice and a later talk given by an Assistant Headteacher who seemed to be intimidated by prior attainment data and suggested there was no hiding place and certainly no opportunity to question:

'Data should go in your register and haunt you for 2 years. What's frightening for schools is that their data is comprehensive – there are no excuses for schools.'

The participants had been offered the leeway to engage in questioning of their role and to pick and choose their own success criteria, and then had it snatched away in no uncertain terms by the almost tangible spectre of performance data. During the two years of the research, the school was expecting Ofsted 'at any moment' and the demand for a higher percentage of A*-C from GCSEs was the undisputed driving force of all activity; no argument held sway against this driving force.

In group sessions at the end of their induction year I suggested to my participants that in the twilight sessions there had been no debate; they had passively accepted everything they were told without question. They acknowledged that the main reason had been an understandable reluctance to stand out from the crowd in the early days of their career. However, they gave an interesting endorsement of prescribed policy in these group sessions which persuaded them against questioning, and that was the 'comfort of prescription'. This is a kind of comfort zone, a balm against the fear of failure because it is not possible to be active all the time and constant questioning for

questioning's sake can border on the absurd. As Bottery and Wright (2000:147) suggest, 'All societies require a degree of predictability and conformity in human behaviour if they are to exist'. The comfort of prescription is that balm which gives a background structure of conformity:

'You need to appear relaxed and in control in the classroom , so I mean, having a structure, knowing exactly what you are going to do is a great starting point.'

Participant 1

The comfort of prescription reduces stress in a stressful job, a safe structure in which to work. Yet my participants claimed autonomy within this safe structure with vehemence:

'I'd say (I have) quite a lot of freedom to initiate my own ideas. I do follow the scheme of work and follow what is meant to be covered but I don't do it in the same order.'

Participant 2

Their autonomy was secure and outside external prescription:

'Autonomy is just in the way you choose, it's not what you are actually teaching.'

Participant 9

All my participants rejected the notion of an ideal teacher, most equating the ideal teacher with a robotic being, incapable of thinking or questioning:

'I don't know if there's any mechanism for becoming this perfect teacher – we're not robots are we?' Participant 1

However, their claim to autonomy was always 'bounded' by the prescribed role from the government:

'The government is the organisation who, at the end of the day, will create the workforce of tomorrow, somebody's got to take the long term view for these kids to have a useful life.' Participant 3

Significantly, as the interviews and group sessions continued, contradictions arose as my participants struggled to maintain their definitions of their professional role, which emphasised caring for the child and their own perceived autonomous professional identity, alongside the drive in the school for the use of performance data, league tables and performance management. There was quite a lot of questioning going on in their minds in ways which were covert, even to the participants themselves and, because the questioning was covert it was reinforcing the negative aspects of resistance, not allowing any positive growth. They were all committed to their chosen career and to the well-being of their charges and had a tendency to distance themselves from government pressures in order to maintain their individual definition of the teacher's role. Therefore at the end of the induction year I asked about resistance to the status quo. However I avoided the term 'resistance' as being too emotive and imbued with negative connotations for the early days of the research, and simply asked if they felt they were listened to and able to challenge the status quo. They felt that their voice was not valued because they were NQTs, but things would change as they became more confident and left the NQT tag behind:

'We are still the same person. The person that leaves in July is still going to be the same person that arrives in September and it will be strange to think that your voice is more audible now. We can talk but we don't necessarily get listened to, that's what we've decided.' Participant 4

Participant 1 had earlier brought up the ludic element of education with the realisation that it all can just be interpreted as a game whose rules have to be followed. He now suggested a covert, but effective way to challenge the status quo, without overtly challenging it at all:

‘You can kick up a fuss and then be forced into doing it or if you kind of quietly nod and just go on and do whatever it is that you wanted, they’ll probably never know anyway.’

This seems to be an expedient kind of cynicism. In general, as in the induction meetings, when there had been no debate, there was a general impression here that their voices were very small and their status very low. The precariousness of their position in the induction year accounted for a lot of the silence. They had lived with the possibility of failure for twelve months and had only just begun to be told that they had passed and achieved QTS, but still were not one hundred per cent sure of their future. As Participant 6, whose future was still fluid, put it:

‘I could go and voice my complaints to senior management...but very gently...I haven’t got my contract for next year yet.’

Thus at the end of their first year they felt too insecure to think that resistance or questioning was anything but a futile waste of time.

When I met my participants again to hold individual semi-structured interviews, it was the autumn term of their second year in the profession. They continued adamantly to profess themselves to be autonomous, suggesting that they would think carefully about anything they were asked to do and maintain their right to refuse. They were sure that they had minds of their own. I therefore asked them if they would question prescribed policy, this time by using the emotive word ‘resistance’; ‘would you resist?’ To consider resistance was a very novel idea for them; they showed considerable discomfort and pondered long and hard about their answers. It was necessary to continue to probe this question, not to force them to organise a revolution but to encourage them to

really think deeply about whether they accepted everything totally without question and whether resistance had to be negative.

Resistance was negative for them for many reasons. Participant 8 had tried to question and become dispirited when she felt her enthusiasm went nowhere:

‘It’s very difficult, you can’t change anything, it’s very frustrating, I want to be active but when I’m tired – what did getting stressed and running around actually achieve – did it change anything?’

Participant 10 had also become dispirited as her attempts to question constructively backfired and seemed to set her apart as some kind of troublemaker:

‘If I don’t like something I’ll actively try and change it. I will not sit and do it though that doesn’t make you popular.’

There was quite a lot of feeling that resistance is negative because it is a waste of energy and that it is preferable to comply to make one’s life easier:

‘No (I don’t resist), I might question sometimes but generally I just get on and do things for an easy life.’ Participant 4

One could interpret this compliance for an easy life as far more negative than resistance because acquiescence for no positive reason is an unproductive form of passivity. Resistance was negative because of the fear of repercussions:

‘I’m not a confrontational person.....if you get caught, something might happen to you.’ Participant 5

This begs the question of ‘professional’ trust; Participant 5 did not seem to feel trusted or confident enough in the value of her own opinions. There was a feeling of being a very small cog in a very large wheel from these participants.

Resistance was negative as it could be personally hurtful and damaging and therefore to be suppressed as Participant 6 explained:

'I have my little 'bolshy' moments but I go with the flow.'

'Does it not bother you...'

'That I'm sucking up to them? Yes, but if that's what the system wants, then I might tweak it here and there but ... '

Resistance was negative and harmful to the children if a teacher changed what the child 'should' be taught:

'I see the kids in my class as more important than whether a certain teacher thinks we shouldn't be doing that, we should be doing this.' Participant 5

There is a feeling here that going against prescribed practice is self-centred and somewhat egotistical, thinking oneself 'better' than the experts and in danger of letting down the school.

Resistance was negative as it wasted precious time. Participant 1 admitted that he would choose the easiest way through to save time and was unhappy when I suggested this may be compliance:

'Urrrrr, it's a kind of defiant compliance. There's no point in fighting battles that you can't win and there's no point getting wound up about things that you can't do anything about.'

There did not seem to be a lot of defiance in this compliance, but this was his way of dealing with his discomfort and it afforded him some confidence. He went on to bolster his idea that it was best to comply on the surface and then do what you really wanted clandestinely:

'If you ask a question and then receive an answer then you have to act on the information you are given but if you don't ask a question, knowing full well that you are not going to like the answer, then you have more freedom to do other things.'

This form of resistance is not positive because ignoring things changes nothing and does not suggest alternatives in an open forum.

Two participants sought ways of resisting that would satisfy them but found it very difficult to avoid contradiction. Firstly, Participant 7 rejected the negativity in the word 'resistance':

'If I felt that I was presented with some ridiculous targets for a class I'd challenge that – challenge being the operative word.'

The use of the word challenge was important for her as it bestowed a positive light on 'not agreeing', but I wanted to know how far this challenge would go. I asked her how she would challenge the targets and reminded her that she had said earlier that the use of prior attainment data was not the best thing. There was a long pause as contradictions arose because deep convictions were struggling with prescribed duties. When I asked again if she would challenge, she capitulated and said:

'No – because they're part of the job, another thing coming up, I don't particularly agree, but I don't fully disagree with them - I know I have to do them (set targets against predicted grades).'

So her positive idea of challenge was overwhelmed by the inevitability of prescription.

The second participant to admit to resistance was Participant 3:

'No, I don't (resist)... .. Yes I do! Because even after all I've said – the way education policy is going is that we're setting far too many targets and no one's monitoring them.'

I reminded him that he had said earlier that there was a 'good' reason behind all we were asked to do and he struggled to avoid the word 'professional' to bail him out:

'I think there should still be some individual errrrrrrm a professional I can't think what the word is I don't think we are getting enough freedom from the government to do what we want, as long as we are hitting our targets. I don't think the Ofsted system should be happening except in extreme circumstances.'

There seemed to be a fair bit of resistance going on in the mind but would anything concrete be done? He, in agreement with his colleagues, felt that he would stand up and speak in the 'right' forum but doubted he would be listened to and could not specify what that forum would be. He genuinely thought that the way his subject was presented under the structures was good and therefore had considered carefully and come to his own conclusions to follow the lesson plans. Any resistance would be clandestine; he described an idyll of taking the kids out 'to see what lives in a field' which he would do, but he wouldn't take an Ofsted inspector with him because:

'That would be assessed as a bad lesson and would impact on the whole school.'

Thus the recurring theme of letting down one's colleagues is a brake to resistance.

The final group interviews which I held with my participants were at the end of two years in the profession. They showed themselves to be not overly concerned with the need to resist; they did not feel dominated by oppressors. Although they mostly accepted that power was coming from government policy, they felt that it was either too remote to concern them, or bound to be

positive power because of the vast expertise which feeds it, or quite easy to ignore completely by just doing what obviously has to be done and getting on with one's own business despite it:

'I suppose on paper I am doing things, I'm filling things in, I'm complying, I'm doing what I'm supposed to but personally I know it's just another thing – pen-pushing.'

Participant 7

The 'hierarchy' of the school were seen as the ones affected by the government policy, not them. Where they did see negativity was in the discussions on resistance and even an allusion to 'challenge' was quickly quelled because it really was not worth standing against something as meaningless as 'just another thing coming along'. They felt that they would be disloyal, letting down the school and their colleagues if they spoke out against policies, so they compromised their ideals, they contradicted themselves. Clarke and Newman (1997:54) suggest that 'dissent from the discourse is difficult to articulate – in the sense of having few pertinent vocabularies through which it can be spoken'; in fact, any dissent by these NQTs was inarticulate, held 'underground', what Clarke and Newman call 'passive dissent', which seemed to undermine the fieriness of their claimed autonomy. Resistance was negative, something not quite nice, akin to opposition, obstinacy, aggressive refusal and thus alien to their ideal of the caring, positive purpose of education. They had constructed an arsenal against resistance; they had never thought of it, it was not in their nature; an 'easy life' was preferable; there was a lack of time for indulging in such things; they were too low in the hierarchy for it to have any effect, but...if you join the hierarchy you have to comply and cannot hide any more; it was common sense not to resist – there's no point because it's good stuff anyway;

resistance just makes your life harder and it's hard enough; it would harm the pupils; it was selfish; it was disloyal; they were trained not to resist and to do what they were supposed to; cynicism was counter-productive; you might get 'punished'. When acceptance collided with autonomy they sought ways around the problem; compromise, do what is expected but hold a little back for oneself; resist in the mind and comply in actions; reject total capitulation, retain some aspect of individual approach; embrace one's own form of manipulation of prescribed tasks; comply under one's own terms; resist covertly, when no one is looking.

Any resistance that the participants engaged with was subdued, it dwelt beneath the surface. This raises questions of authenticity because if no one knows you are resisting, is the resistance valid? There are scant glimmers of hope here for the positive resistance discussed by Bourdieu and Foucault; that is to say that one can struggle against habitus and power relations are mutable. But three important outcomes of this debate had arisen; firstly, the participants had confronted the concept of resistance and realised that it was not irrelevant to them and that there could be ways in which it might be effective for them; secondly, the participants had considered what Usher and Edwards (1994:27) describe as 'the need for teachers to question any discursive practice, no matter how benevolent'; and thirdly I had asked 'why?' and 'what if?' and prompted the beginning teacher to consider resistance as a positive force.

.In individual terms, there is a survival instinct that minimises resistance, for resistance is not comfortable. Perhaps all are guilty of self-delusion, 'going along' with the dominant discourse in order to lead a quiet life. My questions to my participants were formed to reveal this but also, hopefully, to sow the seeds of realisation that resistance does not have to be negative or destructive and the individual is not necessarily swamped by the state or organisation; it is possible to problematise the dominant discourse and suggest that there are other ways of seeing things. Rather than revolution, the accumulated effect of persistent questions and suggestions of difference can be significant; what Postman and Weingartner (1971) call a 'soft revolution'. This brings about the realisation that inevitability is not really inevitable, that social conventions are temporary and arbitrary, that power relations are not immutable and that prescription in teaching can be questioned.

Starting with Initial Teacher Training and progressing into the whole of the teacher's career, the new standards for classroom teachers⁴ encourage positive questioning to enrich the professional skills of the teacher. Those recommended for the award of QTS (Qualified Teacher Status) should 'reflect on and improve their practice and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their developing professional needs' (Q7). True reflection engenders questions and possible resistance to what is current practice. The professional skills also suggest that those recommended for the award of QTS should 'have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and

⁴ <http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/professionalstandards.aspx>

improvement are identified' (Q8). This requirement spans across Induction, Post Threshold teachers, Excellent Teachers and Advanced Skill Teachers. Being 'creative', 'critical', 'innovative' and 'adaptable' again require questioning, disagreeing from a stance of positive, 'constructive' motivation which seeks improvement. Training courses are looking to implement Masters level into their programmes; this will encourage the development of conceptual understanding that enables the students to evaluate critically current research and evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them. I would argue that my research with the ten NQTs has shown how vital it is to encourage this development; it will not necessarily happen on its own. Whatever word one uses – questioning, challenge, dissent, resistance – it is essential to present and channel this as a positive and beneficial force for the individual teacher and hence for the child and for society. I will leave the final word to one of my participants who defended managerial government education policy:

'We are told what to do by the government because they believe that is the best for education in this country. I think the market should rule.' Participant 3

He defended every policy objectively despite his inner convictions which were at odds with the very policies he was defending. The government knew best and therefore their policies were right. I summed up his arguments at the end of the interview by saying that questioning government policy was therefore irrelevant and unnecessary and his inner convictions, his professional beliefs, rose to the surface to contradict all he had just said:

'I think that questioning of it (prescribed government education policy) is always healthy because questioning will lead to a better understanding of it, so I think we will always question why we are doing this.' Participant 3

and being enriched by that questioning.

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