

The near future for the professional learning of educators

Who will capture it?

First of all, have you seen the manifestos of the three traditional parties?

The **Labour Party** manifesto wins the prize for being the most visually startling: a picture on the cover of good old reliable mum and dad with older child on the shoulders of father and baby in the arms of mother; all of them, including the baby, gazing across green fields towards a wonderful rainbow out of which emerge, in red, the words *A future fair for all*. For my generation it conjures up a vision from the end of World War Two: we have endured strife, sacrifice and tribulation but now we can look forward with confidence to a future full of hope. Any minute now Gracie Fields will come marching over those hills leading an army of good, solid working class people created by J.B. Priestley letting rip with 'Sing as we go', like they did in the 1930s when they conquered the economic depression and went back to work at t'mill. It makes you want to shake the hand of that nice Mr. Atlee.

Then there is the Manifesto of the **Liberal Democrats**. They are offering *change that works for you* and are *BUILDING A FAIRER BRITAIN*: the 'F' word is getting a lot of use in this election. In terms of the visual impact of its cover its major problem is that the chosen party colour is yellow. As one of the weaker colours in the paint box it can only reach the retina by being set against even less stimulating faded colours. An interesting feature of the manifesto is that it takes a more thematic approach than the other two so that you cannot simply find a heading such as 'education' and must make a guess if the subject might come under something else such as 'Family' or 'Community'. It actually comes under 'Your Life'.

But taking the biscuit has to be the manifesto of the Conservatives; entitled, with no apparently conscious sense of irony, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*. In all my far too many years of looking at and, sadly, buying manifestos I cannot remember a single political party ever going so far as to produce a manifesto in hardback (coloured blue) with glossy paper. It recalls for me a scene in 'Yes Prime Minister' in which Jim Hacker is advised to ensure that the presentation of policies must counterbalance their substance or lack of same. In other words, the lighter and thinner the detail the more imposing must be the presentation. It looks so serious.

And who provided the money so that the Conservative hardback could be sold at the same price as the paperbacks of the other parties? Might it be Lord Non-Dom of Belize?

After looking at those three and seeking for more perspective, I then consulted *The political manifesto of THE OFFICIAL MONSTER RAVING LOONY PARTY*. I could only find one written in 1996 but it carried a warning: *VOTING CAN SERIOUSLY DAMAGE YOUR SANITY*. It seems like good advice.

You might, by the way, like to be reminded that the MRLP was for many years the only political party advocating votes at eighteen and that they also achieved the feat of beating the Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidate into last place in a by-election in Bootle, thereby finishing off both them and their leader David Owen as a political force. Worth at least a celebratory swift half I should think.

Anyway, enough of this, I want to proceed to address the question of who will capture the professional learning of educators.

1. Might it be the political parties?

For the Tories this would mean that anything remaining of what we used to call public service would definitely have no frills. You want frills then you pay extra. Get used to travelling with only hand luggage if you wish to work in a 'bog standard' state school. And don't expect support for your professional learning from your Local Education Authority (LEA). In England they no longer exist and what has replaced them will have little independent power and fewer resources. The slogan 'Big Society' really means SMALL government. It almost certainly also means more openings for commercial educational warlords.

For more on what professional learning would be like under the Tories see also **4** and **6** below.

We can, however, be sure that a lot of use will be made of the word 'good' as in 'good degree' (in an approved subject) from a 'good university' working in a 'good school' getting 'good results'. As soon as the 'G' word comes into play it brings measurement and comparative value with it. This, you might think, is totally fine. Well, so it might be if we could trust a party political definition of the 'G' word.

For a discursion on the inadequacies of our traditional ways of measuring performance and ascribing educational value [click here](#) to see ***Faultlines, flaws and a poverty of purpose*** in ***The Values of New Labour: a discursion on its approaches to schooling in England and to government and politics in general***.

In my view use of the 'G' word is necessary for labelling purposes and easily capable of generating prejudice. You know you are 'good' because you can point at someone who is 'less good' and at others who are really 'bad'.

One tiny potential positive lurks within the manifesto of the Conservative Party. They intend to do some thinking about what might be reasonable levels of performance by children. For those that remember that it was the Conservative government that destroyed any chance we had of doing that when they introduced the National Curriculum and the Assessment Orders that went with it, accompanied by untested and unresearched notions of levels, this idea will produce hysterics; and, in any case, they intend to maintain league tables which will continue to condemn schools, teachers and children to a competitive climb up a greasy pole in order to get into the 'above average' category.

For (New) Labour this would mean more academies and more parental power to decide which approved provider runs a school. They have diversified schools to such an extent that the process appears unstoppable. Maybe the influence of the Liberal Democrats in a hung parliament might slow the acceleration of the choice and diversity approach to schools but the number of politicians prepared to go to the barricades for good local secular mixed schools is probably now as small as the number that believes in mixed ability teaching.

For the Liberal Democrats this would mean a slight, though hesitant, return to what the old Labour Party used to stand for. Smaller class sizes and a partial end of university tuition fees would, we are told, be accompanied by a freeing up of the curriculum.

If so then much of professional learning would be devoted to pedagogy. In other words, teacher would talk to teacher about what should be taught and how and what should be assessed and how: real professional learning; also a totally proper professional thing to do. This would reverse the trend begun in earnest by the Tories under Thatcher and taken further by New Labour under Blair and Brown of devising an official educational orthodoxy and ensuring that professional learning is devoted to its implementation.

Two strange points here: totally against the grain of free-market philosophy the Tories nationalised the curriculum and the system of assessment; and, despite its espousal of a similar philosophy, New Labour continued the policy.

Try [clicking here](#) for ***A borrowed educational vision, A story about a gerbil and a dextrous and verbally agile secretary of state and The model*** in the same document referred to above.

You can, however, tell that, like all the parties, the Liberal Democrats have yet to confront the inadequacies of our approach to judging performance and ascribing value.

2. Might it be the Select Committee of the House of Commons?

This would mean very little because despite their report on the training of teachers the political parties are under no obligation to take any notice of it. They will simply take from it what they feel supports the policies they have adopted and ignore the bits that don't. At least the Select Committee showed respect for the professional learning of teachers; and I did love that they chose to quote the words of a teacher commenting on the government's notion of a masters in teaching and learning (MTL): 'A Mickey Mouse' masters.

By the way, we have to remember that irrespective of the outcome of the general election the composition of the Select Committee will change.

Have a look at www.parliament.uk/csf/ and start your search there for information about the work of the committee. Reports must, I am afraid be bought. The reference for The Report on the Training of Teachers is ISBN 978 0 215 54388 2.

3. Might it be faith groups?

This would mean more social divisiveness. It was all very well Tony Blair going on about the need for different faith groups running schools to make children aware of other religions but that does not compensate either for the impact of separating children according to the religion, or pretended religion, of their parents nor for the effect upon young minds of being told from a very early age that human behaviour has to be judged according a set of rules validated by belief in a supernatural being.

Professional learning loses criticality and validity when practised within a framework that insists upon acceptance of a faith.

4. Might it be big corporations?

This would mean balance sheet values and graphs. There would be lots of gloss and lots of spin. Think how companies present themselves to shareholders by choosing whatever news and statistics will show them in the best light. Maybe, however, schools are already pretty good at that. What will be different is that there will be a definite pressure to achieve a profit. Of course the 'P' word does not have to be used and they may copy our so-called 'public schools' and become so-called charities; but big corporations do not aim to work at a loss or even to break even: by one means or another they will run schools to *extract* value even if the preferred phrase will be 'to *add* value'. So results will be everything. That also means targets. Forget off-the-wall professional learning; forget doing anything that will take a few years before it pays off; and, while you are about it, do nothing to rock the boat. Professional learning will be carefully costed and must, therefore, be timed, tidy and targeted. Do not expect it to be untimed, untidy and untargeted. The accidental discovery of professional penicillin will be unlikely and any thought that schools and teachers can

contribute their experience, expertise and values to the formation of society will be dismissed.

[Click here](#) for **Commodification, the packaging, shelf-stacking and labelling of learning for sale and exchange** in **Critical Professional Voices in Education: a series of essays for critical conversations**.

My guess is that there will be much use of firms of consultants to 'do' or 'provide' or 'deliver' professional learning and also that universities will try to get more into this business: they need the money. The public service vacuum created by the Conservatives, if elected, has to be filled somehow and entrepreneurship seems to be the likely response to the opened up market.

I also think it likely that output will be presented as outcomes. This is often the way of organisations seeking to headline good news to make themselves look better. A percentage of examination scores is not outcome; it is only output. Output becomes outcome only when it has been critically examined to establish its significance. Why would anyone bother to engage in critical examination if doing so is likely to reduce the significance of the raw score: to reveal that a school or college is less effective than it wishes people to think? We will have to watch out to see if the critical examination stage is perverted by doctors of spin who are only going through this process in order to make a sow's ear resemble a silk purse. I believe that professional learning without critical examination and the use of more than one perspective struggles to be called professional at all.

But do not despair; imagine professional life in a school run by some of our banks and big corporations: if you fail spectacularly you will get a bonus!

5. Might it be universities?

This would mean...well, I like to imagine that it would mean that learning became more important than results; that liberal educational values returned; that there would be more coursework to encourage longer term enquiry; that collaborative professional learning would challenge both theory and policy and create new professional knowledge; that there would be consideration of previously unasked questions; that unexpected evidence would be examined for unintended outcomes; and that orthodoxies would be challenged. I am afraid, however, that, even should a fraction of that happen, it will all be linked to results.

The International Professional Development Association could help here. To show you what I mean I include below an amended extract from my forthcoming column for Breaktime Magazine.

One organisation that brings together school, college and higher education teachers to develop, discuss and disseminate professional voice is the International Professional Development Association (www.ipda.org.uk). Based in

*Britain a feature of its conference has for years been presentation and discussion led by teachers about what they have learned while working with colleagues from higher education. I remember, in particular, hearing about cross-border professional learning taking place in Ireland and wondering if the policy makers would ever wish to know about it; and in Wales ipda Cymru has made a practice of bringing together teachers and tutors to exchange and discuss what they have been learning. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to persuade ministers that they should do more than just parachute in to such events in order to deliver slick speeches exhorting us all to improve; take a few questions; and then, with apologies for having to do something **really** important, leave expeditiously. They might benefit from staying to learn what teachers have to say; even while they are queuing for coffee. Well, why not? And why should we be so grateful for their condescension? Who was that masked minister? He left me a silver bullet!*

I like the ipda approach because it helps people develop their professional voice. Conferences confined to academics can all too easily become a succession of papers being read so that someone can chalk up enough ticks on their curriculum vitae. Yes, I am afraid that HE also suffers from a target setting culture that does little to encourage good quality professional learning. And conferences confined to school teachers are far too often all about being told what to do next. What is far more valuable is having the opportunity to talk to people about, say, a professional learning project that you have just begun or are halfway through. It also helps to have the chance to talk to colleagues in an atmosphere that allows you to reveal some professional mistakes, even disasters, and yet to show what and how you learned from them. I think that is real collegiality.

It is not only universities that retain sufficient power to make such things happen. Despite all that has taken place, particularly in England, to diminish the capacity of local authorities and schools to take initiatives it continues to be possible for teaching councils, local authorities, schools, colleges and others to work with universities to sponsor the kind of professional learning I talk about above.

6. Might it be parents?

This would mean a constant turnover of shareholders rather like parent governors. This idea from the Conservative Party can only be taken seriously in terms of the social damage it can cause. What parents have the spare time to do this? One very large group with spare time is the unemployed living on benefit. Do you think they will get together to form many schools? If any parents do form schools it will be those that have resources and connections. Wider social gaps will appear as a result.

Parents running schools will have an overriding desire to serve the interests of their own children. That does not mean to say that they will be uncaring about others but the most powerful perspective has to be personal. This is quite

understandable, even possibly commendable. But it does make a difference and I believe that educational coherence for parent run schools will only be achieved if it is accompanied by social coherence: from parents of like mind, like values and like interests working to a like purpose. This will mark them out from other groups.

[Click here](#) for **Stratification: 'society, society, society'** in the document referred to above.

Professional learning will, quite simply, be dedicated to serving the values and interests of whatever social group has established the school.

Also [click here](#) to go to **Collaboration and Partnership: coping with choice and competition** in the same document.

7. Might it be management buy-outs?

This would mean something like the senior management of a school or group of schools forming a company to apply for taxpayers' money to run a school virtually independently. It is unlikely that one school would be big enough to obtain economies of scale. We are hearing about John Lewis or Co-operative Society type approaches to the delivery of local services but I am not at all sure that I know what is actually being sold and exchanged here. Perhaps management buy-outs would see the re-emergence of educational values untainted by the need and desire to climb league tables but I doubt it.

My guess is that senior school managers would catch the capitalist disease very quickly. A re-reading of Animal farm is called for; remember the final scene?

8. Might it be local government?

This would mean....nothing. It simply won't happen. For people working in England the old Local Education Authorities (LEAs) have gone. The positive spin on this is that education has been replaced by the child; which is why old directors of education are now directors of children's services. It is a more coherent approach. The negative is that we have lost the capacity of local authorities to take initiatives; to provide the range of professional learning opportunities that once they could; to cluster schools; and, importantly, link education to democracy.

9. What group have I left out?

Ah I remember, I have left out teachers! I wonder why it did not leap to my mind that teachers might capture their own professional learning.

But the **common problem** with all of them is their urge to measure success simplistically and a belief that everyone can be top of a league table at the same time.