Critical Professional Voices in Education

Six Essays for Critical Conversations

Preface

I wanted to write these essays because I believe that I have spent much of my professional and personal life responding to poorly constructed and socially damaging educational policies that have been put together by unthinking or narrow-minded politicians. Sometimes these people have been passionate about their policies; sometimes they could not have cared less; and sometimes education has been nothing more than a stepping stone for them towards bigger and better political rewards. Seldom have their policies been worth our efforts to make them work, especially since the best of them are usually dropped in favour of something worse. I think we should talk about this.

Professional educators, perhaps particularly those working in England, have been and are subject to interference that ranges from grand strategy (though not so grand that it does not keep changing) to minute advice on how to teach and how to assess; all of which is accompanied by blame dished out to the qualified by the unqualified.

I mostly draw upon the English experience dominated as it has been by testing, inspection, damage to democratic accountability and a foolish political belief that education policy should mean seeking out and punishing the below average. But I am aware that many countries are catching the league table disease. They all want to be at the top which means measuring what is easy to measure and the use of some very blunt instruments to deal with so-called failure. In my view human beings should not be treated like this and society suffers when they are so I hope that at least some of what I have written might be more widely useful or, at least, interesting.

I am not advocating the return of the free-wheeling teacher: a type common when I began teaching in the sixties and even more so when I began formal education in the forties; although the profession has always had its constraining nostrums some of which, such as assumptions about intelligence quotients (IQ), have caused a great deal of social damage. But for the last twenty or more years I believe that we have had far too much prescription; far too much blame; far too much labelling of children and teachers; far too much dampening of professional voice and values; and far too little social benefit. What I want to see is greater opportunity for professional educators to subject policy, theory, experience and

values to critical examination; and greater encouragement for them to articulate their voice and obtain a hearing.

Despite sometimes being easy subjects for negative stereotyping educational theorists do listen to school teachers and change their views and their minds as a result but politicians mostly limit their listening to how their policies can be implemented. There is a considerable amount of professional knowledge that simply never comes into the political decision-making forum. And it won't unless we have the confidence to hold some critical professional learning conversations; unless we change the discourse from its focus upon implementation; and unless we begin to establish the importance of learning from the learning of educators.

I want to emphasise that acceptance of the notion of critical professional learning remains, I believe, weak. If professionalism is to mean anything at all in the field of education it must help us to rise above passive responses to poorly thought through policy and to policy consciously intended to preserve privilege. To do this we must acquire and apply some criticality.

The forces opposing critical professional learning are, however, extremely powerful with huge resources at their disposal including the power to define in their own interests the meaning of words such as 'success', 'failure', 'effectiveness' and 'improvement'; all the more reason, then, to stiffen up our sinews and obtain a hearing for the critically examined voices and values of professional educators.

I wish that what I offer here as stimuli for critical conversations were better written; more to the point; more academically sound; and more professionally engaging. I freely admit to allowing anger to dominate the tone of my writing from time to time but I do not wish to hide my feeling that society has suffered far too much at the hands of politicians when they make educational policy.

Nothing that I have written in these essays is intended to be exhaustive: the subject matter is huge and beyond my range; and I hope that it does not look as though I am trying to prescribe solutions for professional educators because I believe that part of the problem is that there is far too much received orthodoxy. Nevertheless, if this is not too contradictory, I have not held back from making clear what I think should happen. My disingenuous excuse for the shortcomings of my writing is that I ask rather a lot of questions that, I hope, provide the opportunity to criticise the text and so move discussion forward.

You may remember the response of Captain Mainwaring in Dad's Army when his errors were pointed out: 'Ah', he would say, 'I wondered which one of you would be the first to notice my deliberate mistake'.

So, following the example of the Captain, it is in the spirit of do-it-yourself professionalism that I present six essays to stimulate collegial dispute, critical professional learning and the emergence of examined professional voices.

Introduction

The themes of these six essays were chosen after looking back at the editorials and articles that I wrote for CPD Update (note) and various papers I had written over a period of approximately thirty years. Many of them were position papers that have never been published so it is unlikely that, should they wish to, readers will be able to consult all of them. I cannot claim that the themes are based upon a careful examination of the concerns of other people; they are certainly not based upon anything approaching a thorough examination of the vast literature; but they are based upon issues and events that have concerned me for a long time.

The essays are not academic essays such as might be submitted for formal examination or peer review. I have tried instead to adopt a more traditional style of discursive writing. They might be described as polemical in places; they certainly include more opinion and assertion than carefully supported argument; but you will see that from time to time I cannot resist the position paper approach outlining, for example, principles and frameworks. Maybe I worked like that for too many years to shed this kind of writing completely. I do not follow a consistent format but I do ask rather a lot of questions hoping that by taking a scatter-gun approach at least some critical conversation will ensue.

Audience

If there is an enduring criticism of what used to be called *In-service training* (INSET), was then called *Continuing Professional Development* (CPD), is in danger of being called *Professional Development* (PD) but, in my view, should be referred to as *Professional Learning* it is that it often asks no more of participants than to learn to describe, accept, possibly adapt and apply the thoughts of other people. Another criticism has been that inside a school or college the perception of professional learning is often confined to a series of events that need to be co-ordinated so that everyone gets roughly the same entitlement.

The increase in the number of teachers participating in postgraduate programmes and recent government plans in England to move to an all masters-level profession ought to mean the development of a more penetrating form of professional discourse. I am trying to make a contribution to this development by stimulating discussion requiring criticality. I also wish to encourage educators to engage critically with the ordinary happenings of professional life; not to think that they only learn during a timetabled course.

The audience for these essays is, therefore, any group of professional educators who wish to talk to each other about what I consider to be some relevant issues.

The **first essay** tackles the theme of professionalism so, to a degree, it is the core essay which contains elements that are dealt with individually in the other essays. There is, I think, some overlap across all of the essays but I have not deliberately set out to ensure that issues addressed in more than one essay are treated consistently. My purpose is to stimulate discussion and maybe a little inconsistency can help to achieve that, especially if it is noticed.

The major points that I am trying to make in the first essay are that professionals have to *profess* something; that what they value will be all the better for being critically examined; that the voices that emerge from critical examination will have something significant to say; and that it is important that these voices obtain a hearing. If professional educators are to break away from a culture of compliance and blame and obtain more autonomy professional values must be articulated, examined and heard.

The theme of the **second essay** is commodification. This is a word that I keep hearing used to describe what has been going on recently in education but usually without any reference to Karl Marx who first articulated the concept for us. Maybe he has been out of fashion for too long and these days our understanding of commodification comes instead from the business community. It is almost as though a word once used to describe a process of de-humanisation has been cleaned up a bit so that it can be used more positively. Or maybe our threshold of professional repulsion now allows us to envisage doing things to children, young people and ourselves that at one time we would not have considered.

In order for commodification to work we must have packaging, shelf-stacking, labelling, weights and measures, advertising, standards, sell-by dates and all the laws and regulations needed for sale, exchange and distribution. In education that is exactly what we now have. So, I ask, is that what we are here to do? Are we engaged in a process of de-humanisation?

The **third essay** is about stratification. I admit to being deeply disappointed that a deluded Labour Party deceived itself into believing that policies derived from its opponents could deliver a more egalitarian society. Maybe it no longer believes in fairness. The values that place so-called 'public schools' at the pinnacle of our education system are now, it seems, the values to which we must all subscribe.

The idea put about by Blair and his allies and successors amounts to:

- telling us what an educational designer label looks like;
- the devising of test and inspection regimes that must be passed in order to acquire the designer label;

- the maintenance of wealth as a factor in obtaining certain types of highly valued education; and
- the punishment and negative labelling of those that fail to meet the requirements for being given an educational designer label.

A league table system that distributes rewards to the 'successful' cannot operate unless it also identifies and shames the 'failing'. We must condemn the failing in order to pin gold medals on the successful. Any idea that a social good is achieved in this way is, as I say, delusional.

In the **fourth essay** I tackle some of the misconceptions of postgraduate professional learning for educators. The title of the essay is The Socially Critical Teacher which is an adaptation of the title of a book by Stephen Kemmis called *The Socially Critical School*. It seems to me that too many people in positions of power and influence have failed to question their perceptions of what happens when school and college teachers embark on postgraduate programmes of professional learning. They seem to have a picture of Higher Education derived from Dickens or Evelyn Waugh and their reaction is to go to the other extreme and want to impose an official masters degree that is an instrument of policy devoid of theory and criticality.

What I cannot understand is why anybody should be frightened of educators critically examining:

- their own experience and expertise;
- the experience and expertise of colleagues;
- the work of theorists; and
- the policies of politicians.

Is there something wrong in bringing teachers to a position where they become used to critically reflecting on what they do and upon its social impact? And, to continue a theme, is there something wrong in developing, articulating and expressing a critically examined professional voice?

The **fifth essay** is on the subject of collaboration and partnership which is made complicated because we are also required to compete in order to provide choice. It is fault-lines like this that make implementation of educational policy a dizzying and disrupting activity. Parental choice for those without unfair advantages is becoming school choice.

I do like critical professional learning communities. I think that they can be mini-universities generating enormous knowledge of great social value. Without them the struggle of the socially critical teacher will be much greater and we shall be less likely to hear the examined professional voice. In this essay, therefore, I offer some thoughts on what these communities should look like. They exist, however, in a dangerous World. They are under pressure to confine their

energies to implementation of policy and to employ some very simple assessment measures in order to label children and, thereby, themselves. If they fail to think beyond this their professionalism will be diminished and there will be a social cost.

The **final essay** on evaluation begins by asserting that this process should not be left to the end. Maybe when I decided where to place this essay I felt a touch of irony might help make the point. There really is nothing more important than to think about how we set about making sense of and ascribing value to our lives as professional educators. Perversion of this process is just about the worst thing that can happen.

Once again I have tried to offer my views on the principles involved and the systems that will, I suggest, help to bring into the light significant professional learning.

The questions that I raise in each of the essays are there to stimulate conversation leading to the expression of professional voices. They are not there as a test: there are no correct answers. I provide no tariff for 'excellent', 'good', 'fair' and 'poor' responses. My purpose is not only to get things off my chest but also to take forward or begin the kind of conversations that will help professional educators articulate, examine and obtain a hearing for what they believe is worth saying. My assumption is that society needs critical professional voices in education. This is what I assert and I do so from the sense that I have made of my own experience and observation. You may think that I could have drawn a different conclusion and you may have drawn different conclusions from your own experience and observation but it is the one that I offer.

In addition to the questions or conversation starters in each of the essays I have included below some generic questions that can be applied to all of the texts. Please adapt them, skip over them or add to them as you think fit.

Examining the texts

Each essay highlights a number of concepts and critical questions intended to generate discussion. Sometimes I have added prompts and sometimes propositions; and sometimes I have interwoven questions into the text.

In addition you may find it useful to have a set of generic questions or activities which I set out below that can be used to examine each of the essays.

When constructing questions and activities I often find that they can be either too bland, in which case they become all-encompassing, or too detailed, in which case I end up with too many. I have tried to avoid both types but you are invited to adapt and add to anything that follows if it helps you to contextualise and relate what I have written to yet further changes in educational policy. So think of the following as a series of headings with some prompts to help you examine all of the texts; and, in particular, to examine them with colleagues. After all, it is conversation that I am trying to encourage.

If my tone is too reminiscent of an examiner setting questions for a public examination it may be because I spent far too many years doing just that.

By the way, I have used a version of what follows as an activity called '*Critiquing Official Documents'.* You can also find a further version of this activity in the final section of ***The Values of New Labour***.

1. Assertion

Try to pick out instances (**three might be a good number**) where the text depends upon assertion alone and where no or inadequate evidence is provided in support. Be prepared to explain your selections to others. You might, for example, feel that a point being made can only be justified as opinion which you can take or leave; you might feel that the opinion is accompanied by a qualification which makes it more worthy of consideration; you might feel that the point being made can stand as a fact if it can be verified; you might feel that the point is not worth making and should have been left out; and you might feel that the point claims more than can be justified on the basis of the evidence presented to you.

You do not have to agree or disagree with the assertions. You might even strongly agree with them but still feel that evidence is lacking.

2. Agree/Disagree

Pick out (**three perhaps**) points in the text with which you most **strongly agree** and (**three?**) with which you most **strongly disagree**. When doing this try to put aside consideration of the nature, strength and significance of any evidence provided in the text because this is not a direct question about that evidence: it is about relating what you have chosen to your own experience, knowledge and values: what is it that makes you agree or disagree? Be prepared to explain your choices. That is where evidence will come in; evidence from your own professional life.

3. Balance and Fairness

Would you say that the text is balanced and fair? You may wish to narrow this down to where you think it is and where you think it is not and simply point out some examples. I am not suggesting that you write an essay about an essay and, in any case, who says that everything has to be balanced and fair? Again, be prepared to explain what you have decided but remember that revealing to others decisions about what you consider to be balanced and fair may bring your own values not only to the surface but also into question.

4. Style

Style does matter because it is part of how we say what we want to say. It can both please and irritate. It can both reveal and hide. It can both explain and deceive. But possibly the worst thing that a style of writing can do is to confuse. So can you find places where the style of these essays did not help you? I guess that metaphors, analogies, examples, illustrations, punctuation and juxtapositions may provide the greatest sources of confusion and irritation. Can you identify a few places where a different form of expression might have helped? Can you provide better ones? Would the meaning change if the style of language changed?

You might also like to identify places where you feel that the style helped.

5. Histories, classifications, formulations and testing of theories

It can be very interesting to trace the history of theories and to place them in appropriate groupings. Doing this can help the sense-making process.

A way of thinking about theory and groups of theories is that they are relatively settled sets or expressions of understanding that can be tested. They can be based upon really thorough enquiry. They can also be based upon very poor enquiry. Remember that Sherlock Holmes was always reluctant to formulate a

theory too early in his enquiries but when he was ready to do so the next thing he did was to test it.

Sometimes we forget that besides the field of education there are other areas of study that have used similar theories, often much earlier. Systems theory is just one example. Theories do not necessarily only grow in one field.

Sometimes we refer to theory and theorists so frequently that we get involved in a spot-the-theory game, lose perspective and become unable to take a step forward. The phrase 'cannot see the wood for the trees' comes to mind.

Sometimes we use theory without realising it. The dodgy research basis for the 11-Plus examination is seldom referred to these days but the assumptions that accompanied it remain to haunt us.

Can you identify and classify theories used in these essays? Can you identify areas in the texts where you think that *theorising* is taking place before sufficient enquiry has been carried out? And can you identify areas where you think it would be appropriate to construct and carry out a test of something said in the text?

Because theories are not always made explicit in the essays and because I do not often refer to a body of literature these might not be easy tasks. I advise managing your time carefully here. Try to remember that digging into a text to discover a hidden theory is not the desired end: the initial and main purpose of this exercise is to take part in critical conversations. Discovering, articulating, contextualising and challenging theories is part of that.

But this is not a solitary activity: your conversation will allow others to express their knowledge and you may have the chance to engage in some systematic, collaborative enquiry about theory. If in doubt you can always ask a question.

6. Political stance

Can you identify and classify political positions in the texts? It may help to distinguish between *political* and *party political.* I take the word 'politics' to stand for the process by which groups come together in order to make decisions about values. Political parties have already established general sets of values from which policies emerge; although sometimes the line from value to policy may be tortuous and even broken. The general value positions of parties may also be seen as perspectives from which they examine the World.

So, can you see general value positions in the texts and can you see value positions that you regard as those of particular political parties?

Explaining what you believe that you have discovered is, yet again, essential.

7. Orthodoxies and assumptions

I would like to think that the essays encourage challenge to orthodoxies and assumptions whether they come from politicians or theorists or have emerged from years of practice. An example of what I mean is that it has become so normal to differentiate by task that some teachers do not even know about differentiation by outcome any more. On a larger scale you might think that society has come to accept the partial privatisation of education and so it is seldom challenged. Can you identify any such orthodoxies and assumptions called into question in the texts?

On the other hand, the essays may also make assumptions and follow or propound orthodoxies; maybe without realising it.

8. Inconsistencies and contradictions

I have already said that there will be inconsistencies between essays but can you identify inconsistencies within them? In particular you may find that a point being strongly asserted in one part of the text is contradicted in another part. Sometimes authors do this deliberately in order to arrive at a synthesised or reconciled final position. But sometimes they do it because their minds are wandering. There may advantages in following a wandering author exploring un-charted territory: it can stimulate thinking; and there may be disadvantages to reading a text that is exceedingly well designed and assembled: it can resemble a set text that has to be learned unquestioningly.

I am not asking you to judge and grade these texts. I merely suggest that you use any inconsistencies and contradictions that you identify in order to further your critical conversations.

9. Developed Further

Is there anything in the text that you would like to have been developed further? You might also feel that you would like to research or enquire further into issues raised or points of interest in the essays. Again and always, be ready to explain.