

# The Cultured Teacher: Priorities in Training

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The views expressed in this paper reflect a professional lifetime spent in education, as a teacher and teacher trainer in Liverpool for twenty years, as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in Wales for eighteen years, and now, at what may be my final remove, as head of Education and Humanities in the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, Wrexham.

They are views which are based on my personal educational beliefs, and on my experience as a teacher and as a trainer and observer of teachers. They are very much the views of someone at the end rather than the beginning of a process. If I had my own college, generous funding and sympathetic schools, the course described is the kind of course which I would try to run. I realise that in the present world, particularly with the increasing pressures on schools, and now colleges, to teach to a demanding National Curriculum, it would be idealistic to try to base education and training firmly on concepts of culture; however, it seems to me quite reasonable that many of the ideas which I outline should be integral to all elements of education - teaching, training, inspecting, administering. Unless we have a central belief and a cultural identity, how can we respond to the many pressures which society lays upon schools and to the range of official opinions as to what schools should be doing? In the United Kingdom, for example, an industrial terminology has become very current in education and there is a tendency to talk of schools 'delivering' a curriculum, seeing learning as a tangible entity, very much like a speech or a sack of coal (which are also 'delivered').

So, I present these views as an interesting speculation, wishing that they may provoke some debate. I hope that I will have the opportunity to embody some of my own principles in the work which I do here in Wrexham over the next two years.

## THE TEACHER AS A PERSON OF CULTURE

The concept of the teacher as a person of culture is not a new one. In many ways it derives from Socratic models of how the process of education works from generation to generation.

At its centre is the idea of the teacher as a passer on of wisdom, with a firm identity and a wide range of references, whose task is to awaken the interest and curiosity of the young, so that they too may work towards wisdom. This is not to ignore the very pragmatic role which education has to play in the shaping of society, but puts the emphasis on the education of the teacher as a whole personality before calling on him to deal with the fragmentation of knowledge as represented by our predominant pattern of curriculum. Preparation based on the concept of the cultured teacher presupposes radical changes in the present curriculum, methodology and role of the 'training' institution.

It may be useful to begin with some of the characteristics of many young teachers in the primary classroom. In themselves, they are adequate practitioners, in that they can handle the pupils, prepare purposeful activities and have the general interests of the children at heart; they are not, however, good teachers, and not likely, in the present climate, to become so.

They do not understand their own culture, or, when they do recognise it, undervalue it;

they have no clear sense of their own identity or of the purpose of education in helping the young to achieve their identities;

they have a limited knowledge of wider cultures and are frequently unable to extend children's thinking or to make connections between areas of knowledge;

they have little experience of philosophic thought or how to conduct planned arguments;

they do not have the confidence or the realisation to bring their own experiences into the classroom.

In other words, they have not yet realised that teaching is a sustained meeting between mature and less mature people, in which the subject (or the subjects) is only a convenient middle ground on which the generations can engage in discourse and speculation.

All of this argues for a mode of education and training which is more likely to produce what I will call the aware and cultured teacher who knows what vital role education has to play in society, and who has sufficient understanding, confidence and skill to respond to whatever practical challenges teaching presents. At the present moment, one of the greatest challenges is to teach successfully the National Curriculum (in Britain, at least). It should not be forgotten that the National Curriculum is based on accepted and proven models of approach and in itself is a reflection of clear strands of culture. To teach the National Curriculum well requires more than just a surface knowledge of content and attainment targets, but an insight into its cultural rationales.

In order to attempt to produce such a teacher for the primary classroom, we need to re-think our present concepts of teacher education and teacher training. The two words, 'education' and 'training' are often the focus for controversy about the nature of the process by which teachers are prepared. My argument is that each is a vital element and that the terms are not mutually exclusive. To produce the 'cultured' teacher outlined above, the education would be undertaken by the institute and the training by the schools. The elements would be brought together in the realisation and increasing practical experience of the student.

It would be interesting to speculate how such a division might work over a three year professional degree course for intending primary teachers. The process involves some radical re-thinking about content and method. The aim would be to produce a rounded and culturally aware teacher. Over the three years, the course would hope to develop the following cultural qualities:

the ability to conceptualise and to argue rationally;

the possession of a wide range of personal and cultural references;

the ability of making connections between and within areas of learning;

the ability to be articulate, to speak and write fluently, and to have experience of performing and creating;

the ability to calculate with accuracy; a wide knowledge of cultural areas and a deeper knowledge of one;

an understanding of the importance of gaining a clear knowledge of the background and culture of the children being taught;

the possession of cultural ambitions for the children which relate to their own development of self-awareness and of their understanding of social behaviour;

the ability to recognise points of common experience between themselves and the children and to capitalise on these in their teaching;

And, perhaps most importantly;

a confident self-identity;

a central set of beliefs;

a personally derived understanding of what the purpose of education is, in the context of their own presence in the classroom; the realization that wisdom is central to knowledge and learning.

In other words, we try to develop the whole person, before we fragment into the elements of the curriculum.

There is no opportunity here to go through in detail each component of course over the three years, but it is possible to map out the main areas to be covered and to indicate broadly the way in which a cultural education could be developed. Such a task would be the prime, but not the sole function of the institute.

### **YEAR 1: Cultural Education (institute-based - taking two thirds of the course)**

The initial year would have four main components. The first would be based on the student's own background and sense of identity. It would help him/her to explore his geographical and historical roots and the nature of the society/societies from which he/she derived. In particular, this first course component would help each student to identify and assess the strength and value of a whole series of cultural references; these would include language, art, music, mathematics, class, education.

The second component, coming later in the year, would enable the student to undertake the same exploration and analysis for another geographical region, related closely to where he/she was having the first experiences of like in schools.

The third component would be a course in argument, philosophy and current affairs. It would be practical and particularly concerned with helping students to think and argue at the level of some of the larger moral questions (what are the natures of good and evil, for instance).

The final component would, on a weekly basis, help the students to extend their knowledge of popular and formal cultures. More importantly, however, it would seek to develop their own experience and expertise as speakers, writers and performers; all students, for instance, should have substantial experience of making music together to a suitably high standard, either as members of a choir, or of an instrumental ensemble of some kind. All students would learn the craft of imaginative and factual writing.

### **Training (school-based)**

The work in schools would be wholly observational. It would have at its centre regular discussions with teachers about what is happening and why. It would allow students to work with teachers, in particular in planning. It would require the student to look in detail at the school context, to talk regularly to parents, shopkeepers, people living nearby, and to become involved with organisations in the area. On the basis of this experience of the school and the community environment, and in the context of the cultural explorations which they are undertaking, students would be required to formulate questions about the process of education in the school and to move towards judgements.

### **YEAR 2: Cultural Education (institute-based)**

The components dealing with the cultural investigation of the societies containing the training schools, and argument, philosophy and current affairs will continue. They will take about a third of the overall time available.

A major component will be introduced covering areas of knowledge; this will include languages, mathematics, science, art and music. The disciplines of history, geography and technology will be introduced as methodologies in helping students to reach understanding in the five main areas.

Students will continue with the component related to performance and creativity; there will obviously be very strong links between the second and third education components in this second year.

#### Training (school-based)

The emphasis will be on teaching elements of the National Curriculum. Students begin by working with small groups of pupils for limited amounts of time. They are beginning to work in the context of specific cultural and educational aims. They progress to planning sequences of lessons, perhaps going over a week. They begin to teach within a subject system and, most importantly, are beginning to make informed judgements about what they are doing and the nature of the children's responses. This school-based component takes about one third of the total time.

#### YEAR 3: Cultural Education (institute-based - half the time available)

The components on cultural identity/ self-knowledge, and on argument/philosophy/ current affairs, continue. Within a study of areas of knowledge, students choose a specialism from the main five and continue with the component in speaking, writing and performing.

#### Training (school-based)

Students would work initially with small groups, then with whole classes, and for extending periods of time. In this final year, the school-based training would represent approximately half of the time available overall.

There are two obvious points of potential weakness in the scheme as outlined above. One is the heavy training load which is placed on the schools and the other is the apparent gap between the work of the education and training sides, which could lead to incoherence and possibly very confused students. To help overcome these, I would see an extension of the present move in Britain to involve schools even more in the training of new teachers. School-based training is no new thing. It could well be based on good training materials which would be common to all schools, and a training curriculum which ran throughout the three years and identified appropriate times and strategies for particular emphasis. Such material could be devised by a central agency, such as the Teachers Training Agency, or be developed from some of the excellent writing which is already available for such courses as the Open University PGCE. The teachers would be trained in the use of such materials by the institutions, in much the same way as they now produce mentors; in other words, the institutions would know exactly what training was being offered in schools, would be involved in preparing teachers for it and could well be involved in some of the implementation.

At the end of the three year course, students would be granted qualified teacher status, but they would still be required, either before or during their first year of teaching, to attend a number of centrally-devised courses (but locally run) pertinent to their particular needs. Such courses would include specialisation in early years/KS 1/KS2 and special needs. They would be intense, probably last for one week, and be intended to bring together specific elements covered during the degree course so that the students are sure of the focus when they first work independently as qualified teachers. There would be an expectation that students would maintain the cultural enquiry and expansion central to their teacher education and be offered over the years regular opportunities to look at the nature of their teaching in the context, not only of changing demand, but of more universal truths.

**POSTSCRIPT**

Our courses of educating and training teachers at the moment are too crowded, too rushed and too fragmented. By working on the development of the teacher, we stand a greater chance of bringing coherence to the process and acknowledging that it is the schools who have the most clear insight into and experience of, how to teach young children. At least, by concentrating on the development of a wise, mature and cultured person, we have more chance of providing society with someone who can contribute valuably across a wide range of areas and who is more likely, under pressure of outside demands, to be able to step back and make sure that the vital educational processes are not affected.

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