The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: Stories of Change and Professional Development in England

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*It is the best of times, it is the worst of times, it is the age of wisdom, it is the age of foolishness, it is the epoch of belief, it is the epoch of incredulity, it is the season of Light, it is the season of Darkness, it is the spring of hope, it is the winter of despair, we have everything before us, we have nothing before us, we are all going direct to Heaven, we are all going direct the other way...*

This quotation from the opening of ‘A Tale of Two Cities’, written by Charles Dickens, almost 150 years ago, with only the verb tenses changed, characterises the world in which many teachers in schools, colleges and universities now inhabit in England and elsewhere. It is a world which for some is bewildering in its complexity, for others challenging in the paradoxes which it seems to offer, and for others depressing in its effects upon schools, teachers and teaching, and learners and learning. Since 1976 when the then Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, speaking at Ruskin College, Oxford, linked the state of the economy with standards in schools, the walls of the so-called ‘secret garden’ of teaching, like those of the city of Jericho so long ago, have come tumbling down. In the years since then, there is little in education that has remained untouched by government in its attempts to raise the quality of educational achievement in order to boost its position in the world competitiveness league.

It is not the purpose of this paper to revisit or analyse the reasons for the various initiatives that have caused the work of teachers in England and Wales to become increasingly intensified and stressful, or to catalogue the changes in their working conditions, the negative media coverage, increased competition between schools as a result of increased parental choice, increased visibility and contractual and professional accountability through the local financial management of schools, national assessment tests for pupils at key stages of 7, 11, 14 and 16 years of age in core subjects, published league tables, mandatory teacher appraisal, and a privatised external school inspection system, annual school development plans, a National Curriculum (for teacher training and schools), contracted 1265 hours per year and a developing divisive system of educational provision which looks to the past for its models rather than to the future for its inspiration. All these changes have been well documented. However, it is necessary through this, simply to remind ourselves that teachers, like those in other more commercial occupations, now live in uncertain worlds where systemic change is outside their control and where traditions of respect (that teachers have the best interests of students at heart), trust (that teachers have the knowledge and skills to do a good job), autonomy (in which teachers alone are responsible and accountable for educational decision-making at classroom and school level) and guaranteed employment for life are no longer uncontested.

Theoretical Discussion

In attempts to reflect the sense of uncertainty teachers experience in their daily lives this paper works with post-structuralist critiques which emphasise the personal and the
contingency of the local whilst retaining a neo-Marxist emphasis on structures (Goodson 1995, Gerwitz 1996, Haywood and Mac an Ghail 1996). The paper works ‘simultaneously’ with both the macro structural and micro personal paradigms recognising the often complex and contradictory relationships between these perspectives (Apple 1996). Teachers’ ‘genealogies of context’ are created by the articulation between national structural changes, such as the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and the way teachers’ cultures interpret and make sense of those changes within their local and personal work and careers (Goodson 1995).

Post-structuralist theories allow one to explain how teachers’ professional subjectivities and identities are placed within powerful restraining and controlling discourses (Foucault 1974, in Ball 1990). Recent discourses in the UK concerning teachers’ professional work have been created by a Government hostile to public education (Ball 1994, Apple 1996). These antagonistic discourses have constituted teachers’ professional work as problematic and, therefore, in need of discipline. The effects of ERA 1988 have included a series of constraining rules, regulations and procedures which have disciplined teachers and their work (Ball 1994). Although discourses such as ERA 1988 powerfully ‘hail’ teachers’ subjectivities into a restrictive order, this does not mean that teachers are mere docile victims without active agency (Hall 1996). Rather, teachers’ stories speak of the creative, intelligent and diverse ways in which teachers find discursive ‘spaces’ within which to position themselves (Ball 1990, Woods 1994). Teachers’ subjectivities are constructed at the site of multiple, overlapping and sometimes contradictory discourses (Ball 1996). Thus a teacher may find him/herself working with constraining and restrictive school discourses of accountability and managerialism, such as OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and emancipatory discourses which encourage teacher professional autonomy (Ball 1994, McCulloch 1997).

A teacher’s professional ‘sense of self’ is an important aspect of a teacher’s identity (Nias 1989, 1991). Post-structuralism allows for freer and looser definitions of a teacher’s professional ‘sense of self’ and identity than those suggested by a fixed, unchanging and stable teacher’s ‘substantive self’ (Nias 1989). Through the use of post-structuralist theory one can better appreciate that there is no clear divide between a ‘substantive self’ and a ‘situational self’. Post-structuralist theories contest the notion of a professional unified identity suggesting instead that there are multiple, non-unitary professional identities which are relational and contingent (Nias 1989, Walkerdine 1990, Hall 1996). A teacher’s interpretation of a professional identity is dependent upon whom he/she is interacting and in what context. A teacher working with an OFSTED inspection or a National Curriculum Test may occupy a radically different professional identity to the professional identity presented to contemporary work colleagues in the staff room. Thus post-structuralist theories of a fluid, contingent and shifting teacher’s professional ‘sense of self’ identity allow for teachers to work with contradictory discourses. Working with notions of multiple professional identities need not be constraining but rather emancipatory since it allows a teacher, working in different contexts with different people, to take on board dramatic redefinitions of their profession (Bloom & Munro 1995).

Methods

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to knowledge of teacher professionalism through stories in which fourteen teachers attending a part-time Masters degree wrote about how their lives and professional development had been affected by the 1988 Educational Reform Act and subsequent policy initiatives. There is no suggestion that these are ‘typical’ since
this was an ‘opportunity’ sample. Indeed, given the small proportion of the total population of teachers attending postgraduate degree awarding programmes in universities in England, these teachers may not represent the range of perspectives in the profession as a whole (assuming that a range exists).

There are, however, few stories of teachers from different phases of education, and with different lengths of service, which have yet been documented. And yet, as recipients of imposed change, their voices need to be heard. The intention is primarily to investigate their perceptions of the contexts in which they live their own development lives, and the interaction between these. In asking them to write, no ‘lead’ was provided, other than for them to tell their story. The writing was not assessed and was shared between members of the group as a professional development exercise negotiated within agreed ethical framework of confidentiality. All names in this paper are, therefore, fictitious. Our own interest in undertaking this work stems from an ongoing, career-long concern with teachers’ professional development and, within this, a particular interest in bridging perceived theory–practice tensions through the development and dissemination of grounded data often referred to as ‘teachers’ ‘voice’. In this paper we are representing the teachers’ voices and relating what they have to say to the macro debate which focuses on whether educational reforms in England and elsewhere are resulting in the depprofessionalisation or ‘technicisation’ of teachers’ work or whether they result in reprofessionalisation’ (Hargreaves & Goodson 1996). Selections from the data themselves will be used as the key texts from which discussion then develops. We have quoted extensively, partly in an attempt to balance ‘the voices read and heard’ in this paper, and partly because the richness of the teachers’ own texts illustrate their individual and collective stories far more effectively than abstract academic comment.

Stories of Change

The teachers were from six primary and eight secondary schools. They were of different age and experience (24 years–50+ years). All occupied positions of responsibility in their organisations, ranging from primary school Subject Coordinator, Head of Year, Head of Department, Deputy Headteacher and Headteacher, and represented a range of subject interests and specialisms (for example, music, science, PSE, humanities, PE, SEN). Of the fourteen, six were male and eight female.

FIGURE 1. Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>6</td>
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The stories were subject to a content analysis during which two broad common categories were identified. Firstly, ‘contextual’ issues which related to the positive and negative environments in which they worked, and secondly, personal issues in which teachers wrote about their own development. Whilst the two categories interacted, in the light of some of the critical (and depressing) discourse on the technicisation of teaching, it was interesting to note that most of these teachers appeared to be confident in their abilities to engage in development and exercise forms of autonomy within or despite what for some seemed to be
difficult cultural and reform contexts. They had found ‘room to manoeuvre’, though for some this had been gained at great personal cost. The data will be presented along these two axes as a means of enabling the reader to get a feel of the critical perceptions of the teachers. Those who do not wish to be enlightened by the direct quotes may wish to move to the final discussion of them.

A. The working context: Living with change

All the teachers highlighted in their stories various aspects of the government initiated changes and their responses to them: the National Curriculum, OFSTED (external, privatised inspection), local management of schools, the introduction of ‘grant-maintained’ schools which allowed governors and parents to choose to have their school funded directly by central government and thus be freed from control by the Local Education Authority (LEA), increase in parental choice so that parents can now choose not to allow their children to attend the school in their own local area.

1. The National Curriculum: The effect of personal and institutional cultures

No teacher criticised the national curriculum *per se*, but it was clear that the kinds of personal and institutional culture into which it was implanted significantly affected the effectiveness of its impact upon teachers and teaching.

i) Country of the young

John, a primary school Deputy Headteacher who had begun his teaching career aged 25 in 1988, the year of its introduction, felt that now the changes had become almost completely absorbed into the culture...and it has been important to individuals to be part of that culture...had ‘taken it in his stride’, but watched his older, more experienced colleagues, trying to unlearn all those years of accumulated wisdom:

I found the National Curriculum no great hardship when set against my other problems (what did it matter what maths you were teaching them when they wouldn’t listen anyway?). I took it in my stride and watched my older, more experienced colleagues, trying to unlearn all those years of accumulated wisdom.

ii) Mismanagement of change: Teachers were livid

Tom, the Head of a science department, was still deeply resentful of the unnecessary work to which he and other colleagues had been subjected as a result of Version 1 of the National Curriculum, only to have it undone by Version 2:

When the new Orders were published, the department was faced with the huge task of analysing and rewriting schemes of work to fit in. There were 17 so-called attainment targets (ATs). Each one was decreed by the government as ‘being a topic’. Part of the task was to build in an assessment system...In seemingly no time at all the government had taken advice that the format was unworkable. The 17 ATs were reduced to 4. Teachers were livid. They felt that all our work (in preparing for the 17 ATs) had been to no avail...
(iii) **School leadership: Getting it right or losing commitment**

Both Alison (a primary school home–liaison teacher) and Jenny (a primary school deputy Headteacher), both teachers with 20+ years experience, wrote of the responses of the schools in which they worked, and how these were determined by the leadership qualities of the Headteachers:

The National Curriculum was well received and staff flowered in subject specialisms, went on outside courses and were pleased with the non-contact days...Pressure on teachers from outside influences may have been an infringement on their professionalism...

Each (of two schools in which she was home–school liaison teacher) reacted very differently...Staff from one school attended courses, fed back information, developed a rolling programme of topics to ensure coverage of the National Curriculum. The other school did nothing...

However, Dave a secondary teacher with similar years of experience wrote of the way in which a particular approach to the implementation of the National Curriculum in which discussions had centred upon considerations of extra workload rather than the effects of the new policy upon the value of education received by the children, and the inadequate attention paid to teachers’ views had led to feelings of disaffection:

The reforms which affected us (abroad) were mainly the introduction of a National Curriculum and its associated evaluation of teachers’ and children’s performances. On their own these changes would have been easily digested, but two other factors combined with them to produce a situation which seriously upset the smooth equilibrium of the school. They were firstly an innovation in management techniques adopted by the Headteacher of trying to engage in a more democratic approach to decision-making, and secondly the appointment of a Deputy who turned out to be inept at forming any working relationships with the teachers...Most discussions (of issues related to the National Curriculum) were based on considerations of the extra workload...rather than on whether the new policies would affect the value of education received by the children. The reaction of the senior managers was to allow the discussion to continue along these self destructive lines, allowing everyone to have their say and to air their pet grievance and then bring the meeting to a close. Then after a few days the teachers would be informed of changes of policy which bore no relation to the direction of the discussions in the meetings. The net result was that teachers felt that the meetings were a waste of time, since their ideas were not acted upon...National Curriculum changes were adopted, but within a disgruntled, disaffected group of teachers...Management must take account not only of the substance of innovations but also the feelings or ‘culture’ involved in the change...

Samantha, a primary school teacher wrote of the difficulties faced by her Head who was not able to make the teachers do as he wanted as they were very stubborn:
The Head was a very nice man who wanted to please everyone and offend no-one. He allowed his Deputy to do as she wished and let her get away with not doing her fair share of the work...

Perhaps the most telling comments, though, which reveal the power of those with control of knowledge to exercise it (for good or bad) over others, was from John:

As Deputy I became familiar with how to set up, monitor and amend a school budget. I was involved in all the staffing and resourcing decisions. The Head would pop down to my classroom and ask if she could increase SEN hours, or buy a new filter for the fish tank...As a new Deputy, it was a source of status and power, and one that I feel sure would not have been available if I had been older or more experienced, plainly an absurd state of affairs...

Matthew, a Coordinator of Personal and Social Education had been fundamentally affected by decisions which had been taken as a consequence of the National Curriculum. Management had cut down the time available, presenting the decision as *a fait accompli*. The effects of this, and other changes since 1988 had been to greatly diminish his enthusiasm and motivation:

I took the loss of time for PSE personally as I had been...notably zealous in trying to maintain its prestige and influence. I became very disappointed and disillusioned and withdrew from the committees—curriculum, equal opportunities, personnel and staff development—on which I served...GM and local management of schools has changed my perception of management in education and correspondingly altered my career path...I had hoped to become a Deputy Head but the role in the 1990s seems to be less based on education and leadership than on finance, management and marketing. I am ill at ease with the language of efficiency, accountability and value for money...In all, the effects of educational change over the last eight years have been greatly to diminish my enthusiasm and motivation...teachers’ loss of autonomy through curriculum prescription and the teacher’s contract have led in my view to a numbing and unrewarding daily experience where broader educational issues are submerged under a morass of administrivia, pointless meetings and safe, mundane and routine teaching...

iv) *Balancing demands with entitlements: Serious dilemmas*

Mary, a secondary school Head of Special Needs, wrote of the serious dilemmas which had been posed, particularly for teachers of pupils with special educational needs:

The onset of the National Curriculum faced some staff with serious dilemmas about balancing the demands of the curriculum and the issue of entitlement. This was particularly difficult in the case of pupils with special needs...Many staff have felt forced to move away from mixed ability teaching and into a more rigidly set system...The advent of league tables also worked against the notion of inclusive education. The latest policy changes including the Code of Practice certainly specify clearly what our responsibilities are towards all
pupils with special educational need. Unfortunately they stop a long way short
of providing real answers as to how some of pupils diverse needs can be
actually met in practice...

2. **Financial delegation**

Three teachers wrote critically of the move to local financial management in schools. In
Sue’s primary school, Valerie’s, Christine’s and Matthew’s secondary schools, teachers
had been made redundant as resources declined.

i) **External threat, ebbing enthusiasm**

Christine, in her sixth year of teaching, wrote:

> My experiences at the school have not always been happy ones. There was
> one occasion when I felt a significant lack of self-confidence and motivation.
> In my second year of teaching it was announced that due to (financial)
cutbacks there would have to be redundancies. One area (of the curriculum)
nominated to lose staff was mine. It was a period of great worry and
unpleasantness as unions were involved and interviews took place. My
enthusiasm for the job was very low at this stage, but the Head and other staff
were very supportive... It took a while to regain my interest for school and
teaching after that experience.

ii) **The perils of isolation**

Matthew wrote of the unexpected consequences for his school which had ‘opted out’
of the financial control of the local education authority on the expectation of
increased finances:

> In 1992 our school went grant-maintained...The expected financial bonanza
failed to materialise and colleagues felt the perils of isolation as redundancies
were announced without the benefit of LEA safety net in terms of enhanced
early retirements or the possibility of redeployment. The handling of the
redundancies had a profound effect on me...The outcome for me and many
others was a bitterness and complete mistrust of the managers involved as they
failed to appreciate long-serving colleagues as anything other than numbers on
the payroll...

3. **Parental choice: Voting with your feet**

The legislation which allows parents to choose which school to send their children to is
founded upon the notion that choice will itself be available and a determinant of quality. In
the end, good schools will grow and poor schools close down. It is, in other words,
underpinned by a market-led, customer-as-purchaser-of-service ideology. Valerie, in the
third year of her teaching career, provided one perspective on this:

> The present time is a very critical moment in the academic calendar and in the
history of the school in general...Parents of year six pupils are in the process of
choosing whether the schools allocated to their children are desirable. A lot of parents vote with their feet and, due to a negative image of the area and school, are reluctant to send their children to us. It is unfortunate, also, that a lot of Asian parents in Leicester do not send their children to us and appeal to change the allocation because they see the school to be in white territory. This is further compounded by the negative publicity the area receives from the local press, which lowers the self-esteem of our students, many of whom are from poor socio-economic backgrounds...

4. The new teaching contract: A loss of good will

The curriculum reforms of 1988 were accompanied by reforms to teachers’ conditions of service, possibly occasioned by a previous decade of industrial strife. Mary, a secondary school teacher of fifteen years experience wrote of a loss of good will:

> With the advent of the 1265 working hours and industrial action, the good will of many previously highly committed teachers was severely damaged and in some cases lost completely. In a school with a previously excellent record of extra curricular activities much good practice was lost and has never really been recovered. This was compounded by the loss of five days holiday for INSET. However valuable and relevant the activities which were planned for these days, many staff came reluctantly to them...In fact there seemed to be little long-term planning evident and very little account taken of individual staff development needs.

5. OFSTED: Cynicism remains

This perceived demonstration by government of a loss of trust in teachers was compounded by the introduction of a privatised external national school inspection system which issues public judgments upon the equality of schools and provides a graded assessment of teaching for each teacher observed. Several teachers wrote of the consequences, none positively:

i) A state of stress

The whole OFSTED inspection experience...left the staff in a state of ‘post-inspection stress’ and prompted many to question their futures. A number of staff left at the end of the year for a variety of reasons... (Val).

ii) ‘Getting it right’: An unconscious neglect

All the teachers agreed that prior to the inspection (one or two weeks before) they had unconsciously neglected their class lessons in preparation for OFSTED. This was so that they would get it perfectly right for the inspection week. (Samantha, a primary teacher of four years experience).

iii) Nothing we didn’t already know

The inspection report said nothing we didn’t already know. We knew that the
school had come a long way, but still had far to go...The school seemed to be lagging behind many other schools and was playing ‘catch up’ at a rapid pace. (Samantha).

iv) Professional judgment undermined

Julia, an infant school teacher of almost eight years experience wrote of the way in which the actions of a Head-teacher, determined to ‘get it right’ had undermined and undervalued the teachers’ confidence in their abilities:

All aspects of our job came under even closer scrutiny from the Head. Her close perusal of OFSTED documents, the Inspectors’ criteria and OFSTED school reports is constantly brought to our attention—usually in a negative light. The Head has high expectations and clearly wants the school to do well. By interpreting and then implementing certain criteria to the extreme she undermines the professional judgment of teachers. An environment has been created where staff follow certain policies and strategies, not because they believe they are the best policy, but because the Head says so...

Julia’s professional development had always been in the shadow of the reforms. She attributed the successful adaptation of the large infant (5–7 year olds) school in which she worked to the arrival of a new Headteacher who was new also to headship and so knew life in school before ERA, but did not know life as a Head before ERA. However, she pointed to a perceived continuation of restrictions upon the capacity of teachers to take on the spot decisions based upon their view of the best learning interests of their pupils:

The introduction of the National Curriculum has meant that all planning had to be related to (national) Attainment Target...Teachers became very conscious about what they were allowed to teach...they also found that they had to relate their planning to the school policies and schemes...teachers now had to plan together. Collaborative planning and teaching was to become the norm. As a result, there has been a greater sharing of expertise and knowledge. Teachers have encouraged each other in their reflective evaluation of teaching skills and strategies. This has ultimately enhanced the quality of teaching and children’s learning...A negative effect...is that much of the spontaneity that has always been a characteristic of infant teaching has disappeared. The sound judgment and common sense has had to give way to paper bureaucracy. The teacher who realises that an impromptu lesson is necessary to reinforce a specific concept no longer has the freedom to insert something into their weekly plan. This is an example of how accountability has not improved the quality of education, but has actually marginalised and restricted it...

B. The personal context: Learning from change

Although the changes in their working contexts at national and local levels were the subject of considerable criticism by these teachers, the almost universally positive responses provide for optimism and constitute an interesting commentary on their success in maintaining, asserting or extending their ability to take decisions, albeit within parameters
which were determined more by external forces than previously had been the case. Their successes were achieved, however, in different ways:

1. The supportive culture of a learning organisation

Christine had spent the eight years of her teaching career in the same school and attributed her happiness and progress to this:

My school has a culture which is supportive and encourages staff at all levels of their career to develop professionally. Everyone is given the opportunity to initiate new ideas, courses and activities. It has a dedicated staff and an ambitious and forward thinking Head and governing body who manage change calmly without flustering staff into panic. Motivation and enthusiasm are high, a fact which has been commented upon by parents, visitors, governors and inspectors. There are high expectations of everyone connected with the school from pupils to ancillary staff, to teachers, to management. Due to the support and the open culture of the school. I feel I have gained in confidence personally and professionally...

2. Lifelong learners

Jenny’s teaching had become more reflective, although her motivation and enthusiasm may have dipped for a short period of time! Samantha confessed to liking and enjoying change, despite the seemingly adverse conditions:

Class sizes are rising, resources are low and morale is also very low. Many teachers have lost or are steadily losing their motivation to teach...As I was still very new to the job, I had loads of energy and was very willing to get involved in things. I wanted the others to be as energetic as I was and pull together...I became one of the founder members of the Parent Staff Association. I began to channel my time and energy into getting parents involved in their children’s education and so built up a good rapport with them. I also came into close contact with the local business community and instigated sponsorship to get new book bags for the school...I was willing to try new things and experience as much as possible...There was a lot of inflexibility at the school. Teachers were not willing to teach other year groups...I wanted change. I like and enjoy change. Virtually my whole life has been a very steep learning curve...

3. Change of role

Alison (primary), Valerie (secondary) and John (primary) had all been promoted and, despite the difficulties and frustrations, had gained positively.

Alison had been promoted to Acting Deputy Head of a school for one term and one of her major roles was to monitor the progress of a probationary teacher who had been through a legal dispute (industrial tribunal) with the Headteacher:

On reflection, I learnt more about the management of people in that one term than in the whole of my career. It was a difficult, challenging and often stressful time. As a result I feel that no situation I may encounter in the future could ever
prove to be quite so negative...This chain of events underlined for me the importance of the leadership role within a school and, indeed, that of the Deputy Head...

Valerie had been promoted to Head of Year and had found it hard to maintain her commitment to teaching in a situation where she was also developing a staff leadership role:

I have less teaching time than before in order to incorporate the changes in the nature of my work...Becoming Head of Year was a critical moment in my career at my present school...I was at a stage in my career where I was ready for professional advancement and also, there was a feeling of commitment on my part to the school and a desire to be involved in the progress of its Action Plan.

When I first embarked upon the job, I was very motivated and enthusiastic. I had an opportunity to try out new ideas and methods for carrying out my duties. I was able to give advice with some semblance of authority. I was put in a position of organising myself and other people. I found the new job rewarding and highly enjoyable.

I found that I had lots of energy at first to try out my ideas. However, as the term progressed my energy levels decreased. Certain parts of the job were not as satisfying as others...

4. Change of location: Lateral transfer

Ben, Dave and Tom had all changed secondary schools during the period, and Dave, a primary teacher had taken 'time out' of teaching:

i) Making a difference

I found my new school to have an entirely different culture. A new Headteacher had been in post for less than two years...The school was truly fragmented. The department was fragmented. There was no development plan, no school aims were apparent, or shared with me, and I received no induction or support...There was no consistent teaching, record keeping, assessment practices or sharing...No one in the department had been on a course for years...departmental meetings, of which no minutes were kept, focused on resources and examinations...

At the time I was determined to make a difference. I organised departmental meetings to discuss teaching styles; redistribution and control of resources; a reorganised scheme of work reflecting the National Curriculum; consistent assessment...I was used to working in departments where everyone played their part. Here everything proposed was met with no comment. This soon undermined my confidence and caused self-doubt...I persevered...It was as if I represented the threat of change that had been ignored...with the arrival of [other] Heads of Department, the school culture began to alter. There was no direction, however, no leadership or whole school plan or philosophy. There was no cross-fertilisation between departments...Sadly, during this time my teaching suffered at the expense of development. (Ben).
ii) Learning to negotiate the swamp

Dave wrote of himself as a ‘beachcomber’ who, when he took a lateral move as Head of Science to a school in a different part of the community, found himself in bad weather surrounded by alligators:

I found myself under intense scrutiny from colleagues, senior managers and educationally-aware parents. It was raining on my beach. The National Curriculum swept over my beach as a tornado of uncertainty, unwieldy bureaucracy and sophisticated management demands. My canoe sank and I was suddenly surrounded by snapping alligators more ferocious than I could have imagined...I had and was given a bad time...I felt inadequate in the face of demands from colleagues for solutions to the problems presented by the demands of the National Curriculum, and distressed that an education system I had loyaly served could have spawned such a patently unworkable monster. In short, I lost confidence in those responsible for the system...

Dave’s response to the alienation caused by imposed, unworkable curriculum was to learn:

I learnt things about my own leadership, the political agenda and about the qualities of those around me—their huge capacity for loyalty and disloyalty, their own insecurities and tremendous strengths. The most important thing I learnt was the fundamental imperative for integrity to underpin my work. I also learnt that alligators need treating with respect. I have become a strong advocate of teamwork and I have developed an interest in process improvement. This is a significant shift from my old canoe paddling days... My National Curriculum experiences forced me to evaluate and change my working experiences for the better.

iii) Early vision

Tom had learned how not to manage a department by observing the failure of a colleague who had tried to get his way by a mixture of arrogance and sensitivity. In September 1994, he had taken a lateral move to a job in a different part of the country for personal reasons:

The department needed a complete organisation...I was able to reflect on what was right in [the previous job] and take a fast track approach...the old was unceremoniously discarded and the new (already proven) was installed...We work as a team and while I had the early vision, the rest of the department contributes to the...fine-tuning necessary to keep ahead of the game...

iv) A change is as good as a rest

After nine years teaching in primary schools in England, Dave had decided to go abroad, looking for a ‘challenge’, returning twelve years later after teaching in Greece and Dubai. He said of himself:
Throughout I have always felt a huge commitment to education, which includes the enormous outputs of energy, enthusiasm and skill which is demanded from the job. Yet the greatest turning point in my career was a rest from this hard, but satisfying work...

He described the way in which the ‘congenial atmosphere’ in a school in which he was teaching abroad had deteriorated as a result of the poor management of an externally imposed innovation. This, and a ‘mid-life transition’ desire to return to his roots had caused him to take a complete break from teaching:

I felt I needed a complete change from what I was doing because I had been teaching for 20 years...perhaps everybody needs a short break to renew their batteries and give them the impetus to carry on with renewed vigour...for me and my teaching career it was the rest that was the best ‘change’ I had ever had...I felt completely re-vitalised and ready to face any new teaching challenge which could be thrown at me...

5. Joining collaborative inquiry networks

i) Opening windows

Mary and Trish worked in a school which had become part of a series of university inspired school improvement networks. For both, this had been the most significant learning experiences in their careers:

The effects of being involved with this (IQEA) project have been far-reaching. On a personal level it has given me much greater confidence to tackle working with colleagues since, although there is a high personal commitment and ownership, no one works without support. It is group decisions which are carried through. It has regenerated my feelings about school since it has opened up many opportunities to try different roles. Despite the amount of hard work and persistence which has been required, it has released previously untapped energy levels since the process provides ongoing input... The effect...on my teaching is to have heightened my awareness of what I had previously treated as a fairly automatic process. I have had to question why I have done things in a particular way and have been given ideas and strategies to try alternatives. It has created a climate of inquiry and a feeling that solutions can be found through collaboration. The overall effect on my professional life has been to open some windows. I have been prepared to take on greater challenges within school with increased confidence. (Mary).

ii) Time to reflect

In IQEA I was able to form relationships with a group of people which were very different from those in working situations. The network gave us time to reflect upon the issues pertinent to our school. We meet with other schools also as part of this higher education supported project. It keeps people on track, provides time for analysis...has been highly influential in bringing about
change in our school—a bit like stopping an oil tanker in full flow!! Therefore I have seen a totally new way of working towards shared goals. The short-term expense has enabled long-term economy and success. (Trish)

6. Every cloud has a silver lining: Personal choice, professional gain

Only one of the fourteen teachers seemed to have become permanently disenchanted with the effects of the educational reforms and their management. Yet even here, there had been a positive outcome. Matthew’s withdrawal from involvement in a number of school activities had been followed by a change in his personal circumstances and had, paradoxically, freed time and energy which he had used to register for postgraduate study, which he described as an opportunity to stand back and look critically:

The birth of a first child caused a profound change and established an enjoyable fixed reality which compensated for the fragmented chaos of school. This, together with the loss of my managerial role and withdrawal from committee involvement enabled me to undertake a postgraduate course which I am enjoying immensely as an opportunity to stand back and look critically, if not at times a little smugly, at the day to day dislocation that school seems to have become...The virtual loss of PSE in the school has, I think, affected my self-confidence but I feel that I still have something to offer education and have not yet reached the stage of complete cynicism and burnout. My energy levels remain high...and I still have confidence in the future...(Matthew).

Conclusion: Finding room to manoeuvre

The data has demonstrated that notwithstanding considerations of the changing balance of power, conditions of service and ideologically-driven economic market imperatives in the education system, these teachers themselves continue to play an active role in defining what it means to be a professional. Despite the increased prescription of curricula and concurrent systemic reforms which have provided choice for parents, invested in potentially punitive monitoring, public evaluation and assessment of schools and teachers at regular intervals, and increased the complexity of teachers’ working lives, teachers have retained control over their professional lives which has contributed to the maintenance of commitment and enthusiasm. A number of personal and situational factors (for example, the quality of school leadership and school culture, their disposition to change) have contributed to this. There was no suggestion from all but one of the fourteen teachers that teaching had become ‘just a job’, though the temptations to move towards that position had been legion.

For these fourteen teachers it is clear that the years since 1988 have been turbulent, stressful, challenging and persistently intensive. For those who began their careers post-1988, the New Curriculum itself is relatively unproblematic, though in common with the others they write of the ‘business and stress’ of their work, the importance to its success of maintaining their own energy levels and commitment and having sustained support in this through the quality of leadership in school and the broader educational community. Many of the teachers have been involved in significant changes themselves during the period, and though it was outside the scope of this inquiry to probe the reasons for this, it is often the case that change of role or location—allows for reflection on purposes and practices, enables a broadening of experience and, from the evidence of these teachers, educational perspectives. More than this, it creates an imperative for those who are to survive
successfully to engage in an increased rate of personal adaptation and professional development—the steep learning curve or accelerated uncomfortable learning often associated with change. In almost every case, mention was made of the importance in successful change of leadership which promoted and supported collaboration with colleagues in school, and in two cases, with other schools in partnership with universities.

For those involved in promoting change, then, the lessons are clear:

- Respect those who are implementing it by listening to them, demonstrating an understanding that extra time and energy are needed;
- Ensure that those who are implementing change are well led;
- Recognise that change is complex and involves the head and the heart, the personal and the professional;
- Provide sustained critical support for teachers’ autonomy through an external inspection system which is collaborative rather than confrontational.

For those who write about the political, economic and social policy conditions of schooling, the lessons are:

- Beware of making judgments about teacher technicisation which do not take account of local, institutional and personal professional contexts. The teachers in this study had clearly adapted and, during the transition from initiation to internalisation of change, had re-asserted autonomy;
- Undertake more studies which integrate the theoretical debate with practitioner perspectives.

What seemed to have happened during the eight year period of change which had been the focus of these teachers’ stories was that control over various aspects of their working lives (for example, conditions of service, accountability, curriculum content, assessment) had been ruthlessly re-located through legislation, but that almost all had found room to manoeuvre and thus to re-assert autonomy, albeit within newly defined parameters. They had been proactive in skilfully locating their multiple and shifting professional identities so as to live and work with the contradictions that they daily faced as a teacher. Far from being ‘technicised’ these teachers’ resolve had, if anything, been strengthened by the negative experiences of externally imposed change. Initial compliance to external control had been a temporary, if painful, phenomenon for most. Self-motivated ambition to do the best for the school, pupils and their own development had prevailed. What had been initially ‘readerly’ texts of change in which they had perceived minimal scope for creativity had become ‘writerly’ texts in which they had taken a creatively interpretive role.

Others have noted the apparently contradictory consequences of imposed change upon teachers (Ball 1994, 1996). In work with primary schools, Peter Woods (1994) and Troman (1996) found that, within certain contexts, teachers have regained control of decisions regarding their teaching by first complying and then strategically redefining the work so that it remained underpinned by their own values and identity as professionals with moral purposes. Helsby, too, found that secondary school teachers have been able to find spaces in which to manipulate the requirements in accordance with their own professional judgments (Helsby 1996).

The teachers’ stories in this paper demonstrate the diverse ways in which teachers work with the contradictory effects of disciplinary Government discourses as manifested by ERA 1988 and other recent Government legislation. The teachers are both energised and
empowered by new stipulations, and wearied and disempowered by the extra work (Ball 1996). The teachers make adaptations in both their work and their personal lives to accommodate the conflicting discourses within which they find themselves. The teachers use a range of diverse actions attempting to manipulate problematic changes to their own advantage. These strategies are not always successful. It is within this ‘chaos’ and dissonance that teachers make sense of their working lives (Ball 1996). Nias states that:

To be a teacher is to be relaxed and in control, yet tired and under stress, to feel whole while being pulled apart, to be in love with one’s work but daily to talk of leaving it. (Nias 1989, p.191).

A teacher’s life is inexorably contradictory and one of the ‘tricks’ is learning to live with such contradictions. The teachers’ stories in this paper demonstrate that many teachers have learnt the ‘trick’.

These findings do not suggest a denial of the great personal and professional costs to teachers of the manner with which reforms have been implemented. Nor do they support the worthwhileness of the reforms themselves. That their management has been poor is manifested by the many ‘older’ professionals who have been alienated or unable to cope. In England, for example, there has been a three fold rise in non age related early retirements of teachers and headteachers over the last five years (Day et al. 1996). Together, however, they do challenge those who argue that teachers’ work is becoming ‘proletarianised’ and that teachers have ‘mis-recognised’ the increasing intensification of teaching as a sign of increased professionalism (Apple 1989). Whilst ‘technicisation’ may be an intention, the teachers in this study recognised precisely what was happening and were able to find ways of reasserting their professionalism after a temporary period of shock, innovation, fatigue and, in some cases, disillusionment. The evidence of this study, therefore, is that the either/or notions of ‘professionalisation’ and ‘proletarianisation’ as consequences of reform are too simplistic. Whilst they may occur simultaneously (Hargreaves & Goodson 1996) it seems likely that they represent options rather than imperatives, and that they may be represented better as forces. The continuing dynamic tension between them is part of establishing, maintaining and developing a teacher’s multiple identities in the purposes and acts of teaching. Much more empirical work needs to be carried out on what it means to be a professional over a career span. This small scale inquiry reveals the need for analyses of change to take into account complex strands of history, situation, personhood, professionality and disposition to change which contribute to defining what being a professional in different contexts means. It shows, also, the key active roles which teachers continue to take not only in responding to but also in formulating agendas for teaching and learning in school. Autonomy with accountability are much more than ever before the twin pillars of professionalism. The successful professional has, it seems, recognised that change can be both the worst of times and the best of times.

REFERENCES


