

Wait until Wednesday

30 Oct 2014 | by Giles Barrow

Giles Barrow, in the first of two articles, highlights his concerns with the present educational system



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right thing*

Giles Barrow highlights concerns with the education system. | Photo: Scott Akerman / flickr CC.

In November last year, I gave ministry at my Local Meeting and talked of how I had, at the time, been overwhelmed in my work. I work in schools and local education services, providing coaching and training to teachers, school leaders and support staff. My background is as a teacher – initially in the secondary sector – but I spent most of my professional career in specialist provision and services, particularly regarding students excluded from school or at risk of custody. For the past decade or so I have been working independently on themes such as the relational aspects of teaching and learning, values-based leadership and developing school culture.

Speaking truth

In the lead up to that winter's Meeting I had been with a head teacher who was in tears because she knew that the school data-set condemned her at the next inspection. She anticipated being asked to leave her post. There was another who was wracked with guilt at having excluded a highly vulnerable student despite his personal commitment to social justice. The head knew it was an act of expediency and his guts went to water at the prospect of returning to school after the weekend. Then I supported a fantastic and experienced teacher who had been assaulted by a Year 11 student. There was the governor who was deeply troubled to learn that the school's head teacher was bullying staff, but feared the consequences of addressing the situation. And then there was the ongoing situation with a primary school leadership team, who were resisting being 'encouraged' by the sponsoring trust to help the attainment figures by 'helping the children along a bit in the tests'.

I have been around schools for almost thirty years and am well used to their creaks and moans and the professional challenges and dilemmas, but I had not really appreciated just how things had been changing over the past few years. On that Sunday morning in Meeting I felt compelled to stand and speak my truth. The result was that I felt really upheld by Friends. It was clear that I had been heard and that what I had encountered in schools was significant.

Reconnecting

For my part, I set about making a meal each half term and invited the head teachers I worked with to come and spend time with one another. Not much happens other than that, and each one tells me they appreciate the chance to step out of the role for a brief time, reconnect with what is most important for them and enjoy sharing what's gone well. They get mutual reassurance that they are not alone and that if it's difficult, this too will pass. It contributes to sustaining a sense of humanity when it seems most difficult to do so.

Essentially, it has become harder for good people in education to do the right thing. I have seen many individuals suffer for holding onto their principles and more who have attempted to 'play the system'. A handful of brave souls have become Ofsted inspectors with a view to 'fighting from within', but soon got their wings burnt flying too close to the flame and either fell away dejectedly or became assimilated.

Having described a series of miserable situations, it is important to acknowledge that there are schools, head teachers and teachers who are achieving many great things. I work with several. My observation is that this success tends to be in spite of the system and is highly dependent on a fairly exceptional constellation of individuals and circumstances, as opposed to an inspiring and effective system of support, accountability and central organisation of schools.

Lunchtime on Wednesday

I chose the title for this article for a couple of reasons. First, it tends to sort out those who are closest to the life of schools from those who may have been out of the system for a while, and who will recognize immediately the significance of Wednesday, and specifically Wednesday lunchtime. This is the last point at which Ofsted rings a school to notify them of an inspection before the end of the week.

The consequence for head teachers particularly, and school staff generally, is that from Sunday evening anxiety builds until mid-week. In the meantime few senior staff stray far from the school: there are no distant meetings, training or other commitments that could reduce the preparation time for the inspection. This may sound excessive to some, and yet one head teacher commented: 'Giles, it's the situation all over the place. We all worry until Wednesday. If you find a head teacher who says they don't, they are either lying, have just been inspected or are a fool.'

The second reason I used the title was to explain how the emphasis on accountability immobilises and limits the scope of education in schools. In most

respects the tail is now wagging the dog. It is a recurrent sadness for me when new teachers and aspiring head teachers declare that their objective is to be an ‘outstanding’ teacher, or school. How dismal that personal vocation is defined by utilitarian, functional, bureaucratic terminology.

Playing exam games

I also write as a parent of four children of secondary school age. A principle of our parenting is that we send our children to the local school, regardless.

Unfortunately, our local school is ‘outstanding’. Now I know this might appear a peculiar comment but, parents, be careful what you wish for. Nowadays, to be ‘outstanding’ a school needs to be truly ingenious at playing the exams game. To comprehend the machinations of this core function is like understanding alchemy. Juggling the competing and aligning variables involved in conjuring up exam results is a new professional art. Ultimately, it gets hold of a school like a drug habit and the bigger hit you get, the more you need.

For parents with children at such schools, many will be familiar with just how much time is spent on the exam process: revision, exam skills training, exam practice, mock exams, pre-exam testing, level projecting, grading and resits. With four children in the system mealtime reviews of the day invariably included at least one child being tested. Now, readers might argue that having four children in the system might give a distorted view. This is a fair point. However, it gives an insight into what life is like for a teacher in that kind of system, working with two to three hundred students. My kids really know loads about exams and they are pretty good at them.

I am left wondering about the experience of those children who fare less well in exams. What’s it like if you spend most of your day in an ‘exam factory’? For more able children I notice that a cynicism creeps in, as one of mine commented: ‘I know what they [the school] want and I can get it for them. Not much else matters.’ It’s not just teachers learning how to play the game.

Next week Giles considers particular Quaker concerns about the current English education system.

The Friend welcomes contributions on this subject, particularly on the relationship between education and inequality.