Workers, Leaders and Prophets

An address to headteachers, Tower Hamlets, 2008

Introduction

'You are very young, Mr Percival,' said one of the governors. 'And not yet married, Mr Percival,' said another. John Perceval, aged 27, was being interviewed for the headship of a new school. Told by the governors he was too young and too unmarried, he replied: 'I shall have overcome the first obstacle within a few years, and the second within a few weeks.'

The governors presumably approved of these two answers, for they appointed him.

The governors also presumably liked the vision, the dream, for education that Percival outlined. The year was 1862. The school was Clifton College, in Bristol. The appointment was surprising not only because Percival was young but also because he was what in those days was called a liberal. He believed passionately, for example, in the provision of higher education for women and was one of the prime movers and shakers in the creation of Somerville College, Oxford. Equally heretically, by the standards of his time and his social class, he believed there should be many more universities in England in addition to Oxford and Cambridge, and was instrumental in the creation of, amongst others, the University of Bristol. Some decades later he became widely unpopular in certain quarters as a result of his fierce criticisms of the concentration camps that the British Empire set up during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. In 1903 he chaired the inaugural meeting of the Workers Educational Association.

Percival's dream for the school which he was to lead through the 1860s and 1870s was that it would produce young people who would help change British society. A similar dream inspires the headteachers of this borough some 150 years later, and is at the heart of this conference entitled Equal, Included and Challenged.

In addition to these introductory notes recalling the dream of a nineteenth century headteacher, this lecture at the conference has three parts, concerned respectively with stories and images about self and other; the gifts and strength and moral

purpose of headteachers; and the next stage in our country's evolutionary progress. Some of these phrases, as shortly will become clear, are from a speech by John Percival.

Percival was a liberal, but most of the people he interacted with were conservative. 'I often think it comical,' wrote his exact contemporary, W.S.Gilbert:

> I often think it comical
> How nature always does contrive
> That every boy and every gal
> That's born into the world alive
> Is either a little Liberal
> Or else a little Conservative.[1]

Fifty years and a few months after the day Perceval was interviewed in 1862, he returned to Bristol to give a speech commemorating the school's foundation. Aged now 77 but still active in national affairs (he was by now a bishop in the Church of England), he in effect rebuked the school for its failure to realise the dream with which it had begun. It had become conservative, in his view, in the worst senses of that word – it complacently reflected and reinforced patterns of gross inequality in Britain in the late nineteenth century and the Edwardian age now in its heyday, and between imperial, colonising Britain and what came to be called the global third estate, the *tiers monde*, the third world, the global south.

A marquee had been erected on the school cricket field, known as the Close – as in 'There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night/Ten to make and the match to win/ A bumping pitch and a blinding light/An hour to play and the last man in … Play up, play up and play the game.' The author of that poem, by the way, was one of Percival's pupils in the 1870s, Henry – later, Sir Henry – Newbolt. There was a deathly hush in the marquee that night, it can readily be imagined, as the old silver-haired man, looking back with sadness on the last 50 years of national and imperial history, closed his speech with these words in his commanding, uncompromising, Cumbrian voice:

> I still dream of the time when from some school, under some influence which as yet we know not, there shall go forth a new generation of men, who shall be characterised not merely by some social, athletic or literary accomplishment, some conventional varnish or culture, but by a combination of gifts and strength and moral purpose, which shall stamp them as prominent workers, if not as leaders and prophets, in the next stage of our country's evolutionary progress.

The review of the primary curriculum, currently taking place in England, refers to 'attitudes and attributes' rather than to 'gifts and strength and moral purpose' and to 'securing civic participation' rather than preparing children to be 'workers, leaders and prophets in the next stage of our country's evolutionary progress'.

Some of us here today perhaps prefer, and not without good reason, the educational prose of our own times to the passion of an elderly bishop in 1912. Others here may prefer the language of dreams. Perhaps all of us can agree to pay heed to that injunction from Edwardian England that we should 'only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted'.[2] Be that as it may, let's move now to this lecture's first main part. The title is 'Stories and images of self and other'. In the jargon of a conventional lecture at a conventional conference, it could be 'Attitudes and attributes'.

Stories and images of self and other

> "How would you react, Henderson, if I said … if I said that the one word I associate with you is 'hostel'?"

This is a question in a conversation in William Boyd's novel *Stars and Bars*, set in the United States in the 1980s. The speaker is American and the person being addressed, Henderson, is English.

> " 'Hostel?' " Henderson's mind raced. "As in 'Youth Hostel'?"
>
> "No, for God's sake. As in hostel aircraft, hostel country, as in 'The Soviets are hostel to American policy'. "
>
> "Oh. Got you. We say 'style.' 'Hostyle'."
>
> "Why do you hate me, Henderson? Why do I sense this incredible aggression coming from you?"

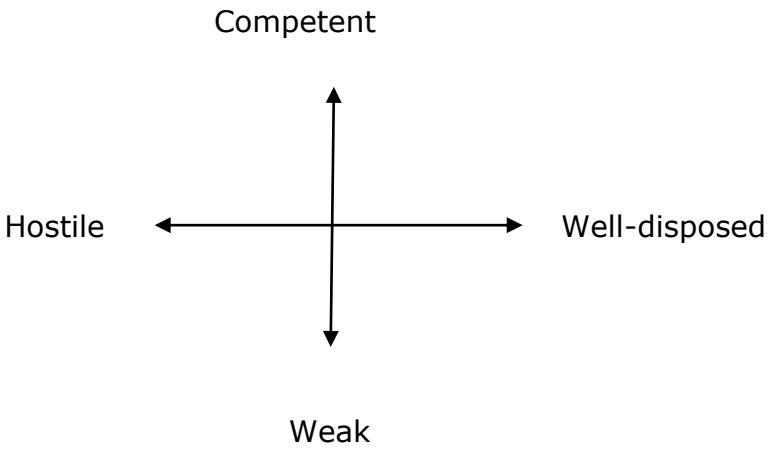
Boyd's snatch of conversation is a glimpse of what another novelist famously called *la comédie humaine*, the human comedy, the funny ways – some of them peculiar, some of them ha-ha, many of them both – in which we humans interact. It's basically our manners that are funny - the courtesies, codes and customs we devise in our various local situations to enable us to rub along reasonably smoothly with each other, with at least the appearance of cohesion and mutual liking.

More importantly, Boyd's vignette is a beautiful reminder that the first thing we humans are programmed and wired to do, the first thing our DNA makes us do, when we encounter otherness, is assess whether the person we're encountering is (as it were) hostel, or whether on the contrary they are 'nice'. The nasty/nice dimension is known also as cold/warm, menacing/supportive, aggressive/cooperative. This primary continuum of expectations and assumptions is recognised not only by ordinary common sense but also by academic social psychologists. They have in addition shown that the second thing our DNA makes us do, sometimes in exactly the same split second as the first thing, is assess how capable, how resource-ful, the other person is.

We who work in education are all too familiar with this concept. The question is, what resources does the other have, what do they bring to the party? What goods do they have that we'd like them to share with us? What bads do they have that we would not like them to inflict on us? ('How many battalions has the Pope?') In short, are they power-ful or power-less?

We humans use these two primary continua – hostel/well-disposed and resource-ful/weak – as the hemispheres in the mental maps which pre-exist our actual encounters with each other. We pre-judge that people will be situated somewhere in each of these two dimensions. A sketch of the mental map is shown below.

Figure 1: the mental sketch map with which humans respond to diversity and otherness



The map can be readily converted into a 2 x 2 matrix with four ideal types – so to speak! – in the stories we tell about ourselves and others, and the pictures of ourselves and others we entertain in our imaginations and minds' eyes. Going round anti-clockwise from the top left, there are a) people perceived to be both hostile and competent b) people perceived to be both hostile and weak c) people perceived to be both well-disposed and weak and d) people perceived to be both well-disposed and competent. The latter group is sometimes known as PLU – People Like Us!

An immediate advantage of the visualisation is that it stresses there are three types of people who are different from us, three types of PLT, as the term might be, People Like Them. There's not a single type of Other. It's crucial to bear this in mind in the field of education, as in other fields.

A famous story tells of a pre-test, post-test experiment in relation to teaching about cultural diversity. The pre-test showed that the dominant view amongst the pupils was that foreigners are, as one child put it, stupid bastards. This was

an expression of the bottom left hand quadrant of the mental map sketched above, weak ('stupid') and hostile ('bastards'). There followed some intensive teaching about high achievements in cultures different from the pupils' own. The post-test showed a marked shift had taken place in pupils' attitudes. This was expressed by one child with the statement that foreigners are cunning bastards. In terms of the map above, the shift was from the bottom left to top left.

From the ethical point of view underlying today's conference, it was not a huge advance.

There are several further points arising from the map. First, the map is relevant to all the strands in the equalities agenda – age, disability, ethnicity, gender, 'race', religion and sexual orientation and so on – not to ethnicity only. People campaigning against age discrimination, for example, refer to the bottom right hand quadrant as the 'dear and doddery' quadrant – old people are seen as well-disposed ('dear') but without power or competence ('doddery'). The definition of 'old' here, incidentally, is 15 years older than oneself.[2]

In the field of disability equality there is a similar concern to shift attitudes and perceptions from the bottom right quadrant to the top right. In relation to misogyny and gender equality the map reminds us of three ways in which men have historically viewed, and are still capable of viewing, women: dumb blondes (bottom right); the Eve who weakly allows Satan into paradise and uses then her wiles to seduce Adam (bottom left); and the evil stepmother or witch (top left) who is equally satanic, but exercises power through casting spells, reducing men to frogs, bulls or beasts, or petrifying or castrating them to bloodless and impotent stone.

At its most extreme, sexism does not envisage that the top right quadrant exists or can exist. 'Why,' laments that character in *My Fair Lady*, 'can't a woman be more like a man?' The impossibility of women and men seeing each other as People Like Us can be held by women ('internalised sexism') as well as by men. A leaflet currently being placed in the hands of people who look like your lecturer here this morning, as they walk minding their own business along a London street, begins as follows:

> Our programs are designed for single men looking for a true life partner who is beautiful (10 to 20 years younger), intelligent and educated, is unspoiled by feminism, and whose culture is one of support and respect for their husband.

I didn't know whether to be flattered to have this thrust into my hands by a total stranger, or pissed off.

In the field of race relations, the bottom left quadrant represents the stories and images underpinning classical racism. White people saw others as, in Kipling's

infamous phrase, half-devil (hostile) and half-child (weak). The onus on white people, their burden in Kipling's term, was to civilise others, namely to make them, if possible, PLU. Or if that was not possible (and basically racism envisaged that it was profoundly impossible), then the task was to get them into the bottom right quadrant, the place where, in a phrase from the times of European imperialism, the natives are friendly, even though subjugated.

People perceived to be PLU are people whom it is possible to love and to respect. It is possible to engage in dialogue and enriching encounter with them, and to learn from them, and to be changed by them, for the better. Further, and even more importantly, it is possible to work with them on the solution or management of shared problems in a shared space. This does not entail a denial of difference. On the contrary, it involves recognition of relevant difference as well as of shared humanity. Love between two individuals recognises the individuality of each, the infinite variety of each. At the same time, it is entirely possible for recognition of individuality to co-exist with seeing the other as a fellow human being. The paradigm example is the relationship between a parent and their child. The parent sees the child as sharing the same humanness, and can and does dialogue with him or her. Attend to the child, said Froebel, the child will tell you what to do. Such listening and telling start on day one, indeed hour one, and minute one.

Btw, do you know that poem by Sean Taylor, who works often with schools here in east London, which he first read out in the delivery ward of a local hospital a few moments after his son Joey first saw the light of day? –

> Welcome to the world, to the air and the stones.
> Welcome to the colours of the birds.
> Welcome to dogs and distances and storms.
> Welcome to the rooms full of words.
>
> Welcome to trees and choices and love.
> Welcome to friends and the sun.
> Welcome to wheels and worn down shoes.
> Welcome to your dad and your mum.
>
> Welcome to windows, doors and shelves.
> Welcome to adverts and sirens.
> Welcome to the world with its big, wild cats,
> its laughter, its songs and its silence.

The doctors and nurses in the maternity ward, Sean mentions on his website, greeted the poem with a spontaneous round of applause. Joey himself, Sean says, gave a yawn. Yeah, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings …

In most local education authorities, by the way, the mental map clarifies certain relationships. The top left quadrant contains, as seen by LA officers and inspectors, the secondary headteachers. The bottom right quadrant contains the primary heads.

'Slavery,' it has been famously said, 'was not born of racism. Rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.' [3] Kipling's half-devil, half-child imagery was in important respects generated by, not just the motivating force behind, imperialism. It was a kind of *post hoc* justification. Similarly in the other strands and dimensions of the equalities agenda: attitudes, cognition, discourse, narratives, stereotypes and mental maps derive from the desire not only to drive and motivate unequal power relations and discriminatory practices but also to justify and perpetuate them.

Prejudiced attitudes are not the cause of inequalities, they are their consequence. Reducing and removing inequalities involves challenging attitudes, yes most certainly.

But there's more, much more, to the equalities agenda than that. For example, if we wish to challenge the stereotype of Other as weak and resourceless, the need is not primarily to educate ourselves about the Other but actually to share resources with the Other, empower the Other, and (it follows) disempower ourselves.

More about the equalities agenda in due course. First, a few notes on – to recall the grand words used by Bishop John Percival in 1912 – the 'combination of gifts and strength and moral purpose' required nowadays by headteachers. The following brief piece of material was written in prose for a report published a few years ago by the National College for School Leadership. It is presented here as a *poème trouvé*.

She is constantly
managing tensions
and problems
directly related
to the
particular circumstances
and context

of the school.

Her main leadership task
is one of coping
with
unpredictability,
conflict

and
dissent

on a daily basis.

She is able
to combine
a moral purpose
with a willingness
to be collaborative
and to promote
collaboration

amongst colleagues,

whether through teamwork,
or extending

the boundaries
of participation
in leadership
and
decision-making.

She is, above all, people-centred,
placing human needs
before organisational
needs.

She is constantly on call.[4]

Some of the same points are made in another poem by Sean Taylor, providing the key word in the last line of the original text is changed. The poem is entitled Five Miles Up.

Five miles above the cold sea,
I am asleep in the sky.

Then there's an urgent whisper.
An air-hostess swishes by.

"Is there a doctor on board?"
she asks across the seats.

Heads shift on small pillows,
"A doctor? A doctor?" she repeats.

I wish that I could nod,
then stand up looking doctorly and assured.

And I wonder if one day I'll hear,
"Is there a headteacher on board?"

The world needs not only doctors and poets (the key word in Sean's original last line is 'poet') but also headteachers – people who are doctorly and assured, like doctors, and people who are also imaginative, zestful, searching and caring, like poets.

And, yeah, like headteachers at their best.

The next stage in our country's evolutionary progress

A basic set of responsibilities, for workers, leaders and prophets in the next stage of our country's evolutionary progress is evoked with the term 'equalities agenda'. Since 2001 schools have had a legal duty to actively and proactively create greater ethnicity equality; since 2005, to actively and proactively create disability equality; and since 2007 to actively and proactively promote gender equality. A parliamentary bill to be published very shortly is likely to require schools to promote age equality (though only in employment matters), faith equality and sexuality equality as well. Further, there is a requirement to promote community cohesion. It is also relevant to mention and stress the ethical duties to promote class equality; to promote human rights; and to defend the interests of future generations.

Only connect the prose and the passion … I still dream … workers, leaders and prophets in the next stage of our world's evolutionary progress …

… Is there a headteacher on board?

References

[1] *Iolanthe*. Gilbert's dates were 1836-1911, and Percival's 1834–1918.

[2] A*geism: a benchmark of public attitudes by* Sujata Ray, Ellen Sharp and Dominic Abrams, compiled for the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent for Age Concern England, 2006.

[3] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published 1944.

[4] Adapted slightly from *Effective Leadership in Schools in Challenging Circumstances* by Alma Harris and Christopher Chapman, National College for School Leadership, 2002.