

**EMBARGOED TO 0001 hrs FRIDAY 7 MARCH 2008**

*President's Address to Annual Conference, March 2008*

## **Leading professionals – from contradiction to coherence**

Here are three cameos.

On a cold night in Germany we are at the end of an exchange visit party and are listening in awe to a fantastic live band. The performers are a group of 15 year olds from both countries who, in a ten day acquaintance, have discovered their shared interest, confidently communicated using both languages and put together a polished performance.

The second is a conference of around 100 university admissions tutors about the Welsh Baccalaureate which we have successfully piloted at St Cyres. The next speakers are four of our students. As I am introducing them the technology fails through no fault of theirs. Does it flummox them? Of course not. They improvise, crack a few jokes and then seamlessly move into their presentation. They speak with confidence, humour and clarity. As I listen I wonder why on earth I had been asked to speak first. Their input says everything and their actions say more about the efficacy of the Bac than anything I could have done. My pride in these students is complete.

The third is a GCSE results day one August. Amidst the jubilation stands a student with her parents. All three are beaming and they are surrounded by her many friends congratulating her. The student has achieved a D grade GCSE in ICT and a series of entry level qualifications. This mammoth achievement for the girl who has Down's Syndrome overshadows those of many of her admiring friends who have many A\*-C grades to celebrate.

Moments like these remind us why it is such a privilege to be a school or college leader and what we believe an education service is for.

It is in this context that I have chosen the theme of this conference and my presidential year - *Leading Professionals*.

And I have had ample opportunity to reflect on it so far this year. I have gained an insight into the education systems of the UK, Europe and beyond. I have visited schools, glitzy government launches, all kinds of conferences and seminars and countless meetings within the education system and outside.

This fascinating experience leaves me as convinced as ever about the excellence of the work taking place in our schools and colleges. Many of those who deserve the credit for this are unassuming about it, quietly getting on, and so we often take for granted good practice, and the high standards we expect and therefore achieve.

But it also tells me in this year of what seems like unprecedented and relentless change that many aspects of education policy and practice are fraught with contradictions and tensions which have the potential, if unchecked, to undermine the coherence of our vision for a world class education service.

Today I am going to examine that vision in a little more detail, consider some of those contradictions and consider how we might overcome them.

## **A shared vision?**

As a head teacher I believe that the most important part of my job is to establish and articulate the values and vision which underpin the education we provide. Of course this cannot be my personal view alone but must be one that is developed collaboratively first by our leadership team who genuinely share responsibility and accountability for all aspects of the operation of the school. Alongside the privilege of being leading professionals comes the responsibility to lead all of the other professionals on whom our success depends. Our ethos has to be shared across the entire school community – staff, governors, students, parents and all of the other partners. Communication is everything –our vision and values have to remain under constant discussion and review and I and all of our staff have to embody them in everything we do.

Here is a question for you: When you appoint staff into leadership roles do you make them do the ‘we’ test? No - nothing to do with the well-being agenda or their ability to sit through a two hour meeting but something you can listen out for in an interview or run a highlighter over in their letters. Count up the number of times they use the first person plural rather than the first person singular when describing what they do. Do they share a vision or do they operate in splendid isolation convinced that only they know best?

During the last 6 months it has been extremely refreshing to have seen a strong recognition of the need for this kind of team effort by the government. The Prime Minister himself has expressed the vision for our education service publicly on several occasions. In his University of Greenwich speech in October he spoke of the way in which schools use their mottos to express their vision and he set out his own government’s values and aspirations. In the same way as our leadership team promotes the school’s vision it is evident that his ministerial team is trying to operate in the same way. Actually I wondered whether they had been eavesdropping on our morning assemblies where day in day out we spell out the values that symbolise our vision!

*... a promise and a summons; they embody ideals and aspiration; they speak to a guiding belief that every child has talent, every child can learn, and so we must nurture and fulfil the potential of all.*

*Gordon Brown, 31 October, University of Greenwich*

In an inspiring publication ‘Policy First - Lesson’s from the front’ which I commented on in the January edition of Leader magazine a group of young graduates on the ‘Teach First’ scheme described this shared mission as behavioural leadership. In their publication they said this:

*Schools should empower staff and pupils with the sense of ownership and mission that should be at the heart of education... If teachers in all of our schools are re-connected with this broader mission and encouraged to act, they will perceive themselves and their colleagues as they are: leaders in their schools and society.*

It gave me cause for great optimism to see some of the most recent entrants to our profession recognising the importance of this so early on in their careers. Their understanding that leadership is a ‘pervasive culture and attitude’ is deeply heartening. They rightly recognise that all professionals are leaders and therefore all colleagues are leading professionals regardless of length of service. That same collaborative ethos built on genuine distributed leadership should underpin the continuum of CPD we need to provide, the consultation processes we establish and the way we prepare the emerging leaders on our staff for further development.

So there is a high level of coherence between what we and the government believe about how we should lead our system. It is when we get into the detail of the vision and discuss priorities that contradictions begin to appear. By way of illustration of this point look at the way this American town implements its fitness policy!

## **A radical new approach to learning?**

There is a growing consensus amongst many different practitioners, supported by research that we have entered a world in which new styles of learning are of key importance.

This is a world in which new technologies are integral to the education we provide. ICT an exciting challenge - a field in which we have just cause to be proud. The progress we have made is the envy of many colleagues in other countries. There is still much to do though, for example in meeting the ambitious and worthy challenge of introducing real time reporting within the next three years. We have been discussing areas of concern with BECTA including suitability of existing systems and access to high quality ICT advice and support – essentials if we are to meet the implementation date of 2010.

In this new world our students demand much more of us. The fact that 21<sup>st</sup> century children are not obedient, compliant, empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge in preparation for a single, lifelong career is an opportunity as much as it is a challenge.

21<sup>st</sup> century education has to be a constantly evolving process tailored for the individual, drawing on formative assessment - genuine assessment for learning which motivates and supports learners, challenges them to aim higher and shows them how to do this.

It has to prepare them for life by taking them outside the limits of an old fashioned, outdated curriculum and into one which instead is planned holistically. The Learning to Lead project we have developed with World Challenge is an example of an approach which supports this.

21<sup>st</sup> century education has to produce learners who are self aware, confident, excellent communicators. These learners need to have the ability to think so creatively and innovatively that they can even solve those problems of which we have no conception at present and certainly cannot foresee.

And 21<sup>st</sup> century education should operate in a state of the art environment, designed to incorporate the worthy values expressed in the Children's Plan. This is an environment where new technologies are harnessed and all of the children's agencies work together under the same (watertight) roof – a school genuinely built for the future, not just a new building.

It is an environment in which schools, colleges and other learning providers work collaboratively to meet the needs of all students adding immense value to the educational experience. And in doing this they share the accountability in ways that go far beyond the narrow range of measures currently assessed by our inspection system.

The work in progress all over the country to develop personalised learning is bringing about a true revolution in practice and a genuinely deep understanding of the process of learning which has already taken our professional expertise into new realms.

In the series of Leading Learning conferences jointly organised by ASCL and SSAT leading professionals from all over the country have shared excellent practice. ASCL members are enthusiastically leading developments in the content of the curriculum, the organisation of their institutions and many other aspects of the learning process. And they are doing this in ways which lead and develop fellow professionals and students and are having a real impact on the quality of learning. This is the true realm of leading professionals.

And it is our job - our privilege - to lead the way in this learning and CPD process for our staff as well as our students. That is what we, as leading professionals, should be doing.

### **Or a return to a mythical lost golden age?**

However, there is another contradictory view:

A view that actually all of these new ideas are in some way the problem rather than the solution.

That new approaches to teaching and learning mean discarding all of the existing ones.

That we need to turn the clock back to a lost era where old fashioned didactic teaching was directed at carefully streamed classes of children.

That these children could be so accurately assessed by annual written examinations in the school hall that they were all able to learn at the same pace and be filled with content which could be tested in the next examination. I am reminded of the opening lines of *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens.

*'Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are what is wanted in life. Plant nothing else and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: ...Stick to Facts, Sir!'*

*Charles Dickens Hard Times.*

That we as professionals do not want to prepare our learners for the world of work.

That all children should progress two levels in the National Curriculum in each key stage as assessed in written tests regardless of where they have started from, the length of the key stage or indeed what they understand.

That improving success rates somehow equate with falling standards.

That the effectiveness of schools can be measured by observing these compliant and perfectly behaved children standing to attention displaying their perfectly groomed school uniforms when a visiting MP enters the room.

That children would meet the needs of employers if we taught them 'skills' as if these are something separate that we had never thought of.

And a part of this view is that the 'education establishment' whoever they might be (but I have a sneaking suspicion that quite a few members of it are in this room) is somehow using all of these new fangled ideas to undermine learning and the very fabric of our education service.

And all of this leads to a devastating culture of denigration, intervention and micromanagement.

Colleagues, did you notice that even Hogwarts Academy got taken over by the Ministry in the latest Harry Potter film where a 'high inquisitor' is appointed to address falling standards in the school?

### **The health of our education service**

Here are some headlines about our education service that we have had to endure in recent months.

It never ceases to amaze me how willing people in this country are to denigrate our education service and ignore any research which contradicts this view. The old adage '*I went to school so I know best*' has never been more pertinent.

And so in January when the annual circus of league table publication took place, one of the headlines asserted '*At least half a million pupils are attending failing schools*' and listed the ten 'best' schools in each LA area. This steadfastly ignored factors related to location, intake, policy on selection, SEN etc. etc that would have enabled an informed evaluation.

In February a response to a parliamentary question asked by the opposition showed that 30000 students left our schools without qualifications. Now this statistic begs many further questions. How does that 4.6% of our school population compare with other countries? Did all of those students leave education completely? How many of

them had learning difficulties? And so on. As a modern languages teacher I did some quick research into the situation in Germany by way of comparison. Their government statistics told me firstly that their comparable figure is 7.8% and secondly that nearly twice as many students are in special schools than here. The answers to these questions are complex and certainly merit informed debate, not knee jerk reactions.

This negative culture is highly pervasive. It is fuelled by similar statements from politicians with the continual use of emotive vocabulary undermining confidence in the work we do.

Recent coverage of possible changes to modern languages orals exemplifies this culture. An uninitiated reader might believe that the current oral exams in which children regurgitate carefully prepared answers to set questions are rigorous. We know that challenging tasks requiring genuine, unscripted communication in the classroom, assessed by expertly trained teachers, are more rigorous and cover a wider range of skills and knowledge.

In January I gave evidence on behalf of ASCL to the Children Schools and Families Select Committee which was investigating the serious confusion of purpose surrounding assessment policy and the perverse effects of our league table culture. The level of agreement across the range of witnesses present about the confusion of purpose and the negative effects of league tables was complete. Everyone was clear about the problems –except the government. As evidence in support of the English league table and assessment arrangements, one MP, who knew I was a head in Wales cited the disappointing results of the PISA assessments taken for the first time by students in Wales last year

But as the highly respected Professor Richard Daugherty who led the review of National Curriculum assessment in Wales pointed out the following fact had been forgotten:

*'The 15 year-old pupils in Wales who took the PISA tests in 2006 had experienced a regime of national tests at the ages of 7, 11 and 14. It was the market-driven, test-ridden system of schooling that brought us those comparatively poor PISA results.'*

The Government of Wales took part in the PISA assessment precisely because it is ambitious. It recognised that the journey to excellence takes time, heart searching and effort in collaboration with the profession.

As leading professionals we know that the way to take forward our education service is to conduct rigorous self evaluation and draw on robust evidence in order to build on strengths and address relative weaknesses. We now know our schools and colleges better than we ever have before.

At St Cyres like most other schools self evaluation is embedded in our day to day work. As a team of professionals we critically analyse a mass of data and test out hypotheses by gathering first hand evidence. A commitment shared by all leading professionals to continually improve the standard of the service we offer requires us to be fiercely self critical and face any uncomfortable evidence we uncover head on. That ethos cannot develop within a culture of blame in which an overinflated accountability regime constantly forces us to look over our shoulders.

To quote Richard Daugherty again:

*'Yesterday's solutions should have no place as we look to respond to tomorrow's challenges'*

Of course the UK government is not immune from the effects of the culture it has created. Although it could be congratulated for meeting 65% of its 346 performance targets a recent headline berated it for missing 122 of them. We know how they feel! A bit like the guy in the picture.

For leading professionals there is no time for a 'cup half empty' mentality or for the abuse of evidence to political ends. This damaging attitude of mind fundamentally contradicts the 'can do' mentality and vision that underpins my absolute conviction that leadership is about seeking solutions rather than problems.

And it can lead to a low trust approach which de-skills leading professionals rather than taking forward the very welcome overarching framework set out in the Children's Plan.

And of course it becomes the justification for politicians to constantly make new policy. This explains but does not excuse initiatives.

There is of course a more balanced view; for example within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Alliance -a group led by Mike Tomlinson and Tim Brighouse with an impressive membership *including the National College for School Leadership, QCA, SSAT, TDA, Partnerships for Schools and I am particularly delighted to note Ofsted – not to mention employers and school and college leaders.* And day by day the voice of reason seems to be getting louder and louder.

In the document I have just quoted, the authors refer to the old joke in which a lost traveller stops and asks the way from a farmer. "If I were you," answers the farmer "I wouldn't start from here." Setting out our vision from where we are now is not easy and certainly not possible in a cup half empty culture. The Children's Plan has the potential to be a big step forward in this respect.

But whilst policy makers busily ask the questions: 'Do we have a healthy education service or an ailing one? Are school and college leaders part of the problem or the solution?' and some use it to try to make political capital the urgent task of meeting the complex needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century young people is delayed and frustrated.

The confidence and motivation of our service is undermined by a culture of blame which stifles creative, bold and optimistic leadership.

### **The health and well-being of our society and our young people**

Another cameo from St Cyres: We come out of a late meeting at 6.30 and a little boy has just come back into the school foyer. He doesn't want to go home and felt he had nowhere else to go. Nobody is home and when someone does arrive there will be no food, no love, no attention. In spite of our ongoing efforts to attract urgent help for this child he is left at risk for several more weeks. We feel helpless and desperately concerned.

The changes in our society during recent years are a major challenge to leading professionals and policy makers. We highlighted the following in ASCL's contribution to the Children's Plan consultation. The list is certainly not complete.

- *marriage breakdown*
- *less deference*
- *a greater sense of alienation*
- *a lack of a sense of place felt by many*
- *more open sexuality*
- *commercialism*
- *long working hours for one or both parents*
- *living in poverty*
- *children in care*
- *lesser value placed on extended families, with young and inexperienced parents having fewer support mechanisms*

- *less emphasis on duty and more on rights.*

There is enormous and well documented concern about the well-being and happiness of our young people.

And we know that some of the greatest challenges we face are presented by those children:

- who seem never to have the opportunity to have a conversation outside school with an adult
- who rarely sit down for a family meal
- who are left in their free time to go where they like with no adult control
- who arrive in our schools crying for attention, all too often in ways which disrupt the learning of others. This places us in the professional quandary of balancing their need for support with the needs of the rest of the school community to be able to learn without disruption.

So when the DCSF issued a press release in November of 2007 rejecting the notion of 'Toxic Childhood' I would not have gone that far – on either side of the debate.

Nevertheless, we warmly welcome:

- the review of CAMHS provision
- the emphasis in the Children's Plan on tackling the injustices many young people have to live with, and
- the bringing together of our children's services, that are still in many areas not operating in a sufficiently strategic manner.

But we must also not fall into the trap of thinking that all children lead the miserable lives I have just described:

or that all children are deprived

or that the real problem of NEETs is so large that our entire education system should be built around this.

or that all young people are knife carrying demons looking for trouble.

As someone who over the years has visited many different schools as a colleague, subject inspector (sorry but I do think it is better for practitioners to be doing this!), trainer, consultant and parent I see anything but a society in which it is bad news to be a child. And so yet again another contradiction comes to the fore:

What I do see however is a complex picture in which we as leading professionals need to ask searching questions in partnership with other agencies and policy makers about how we can address the challenge of growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And many of those questions relate to two matters which are fundamental to the work of leading professionals: behaviour and attendance. Unless these are addressed learning cannot take place.

One of the keys to motivation is parental involvement. Many of you have successfully introduced student review days to replace parent consultation evenings where (literally in one school I worked in!) a bell rang every four (not five!) minutes and parents rushed to the next teacher to receive the briefest of progress reports on their children. The children of course normally had no place at these events.

And just as some of you thought you were making progress and had begun to reap the benefits of a process which involved learners in a longer, private and professional three way discussion with teachers away from the cattle market the DCSF published this guidance:

***DCSF guidance: Keeping Pupil Registers:***

*Academic Review Days are also known as Target Review Days or Pupil Planning Days. The Department understands ...that some schools have been closing for one such day in a year. This has enabled the form tutor or other staff to meet all parents with their children for a short time (usually no more than 15 minutes) to assess curricular progress and to set personalised targets instead of meeting parents with children in the evening. ...we would wish schools to discontinue any such days as described above. We would prefer schools to consider alternative methods.*

Where does this fit in to a partnership model where we as leading professionals have the autonomy to make decisions which are in the interests of learners?

And where does the extraordinarily unnecessary recent instruction from the DCSF to schools that we should monitor and report the reasons for absence from KS3 tests fit in? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to address the shortcomings of the tests?

And unfortunately there are too many other examples of this kind of micromanagement:

- The proposal for a new additional set of complaints procedures to deal with specific complaints about bullying
- Counting every single lunch and producing a 'healthy lunch box policy' (which we will not do)
- The guidance for schools causing concern and special measures for those that 'fail' without a coherent approach to the provision of support for those that are battling in the most challenging circumstances. The General Secretary will say more about this on Sunday.
- The numerous LAs which still see themselves as providers rather than as commissioners of services and support

Why does the government feel it needs to impose this level of micromanagement rather than setting out the priorities in an enabling policy framework and leaving leading professionals to decide how best to implement them? It contradicts the fundamental principles of trust and professionalism which should be the basis of the important New Relationship we have forged with government. It converts a valid shared vision into bad practice implemented by a deskilled profession.

Similar contradictions arise in policies relating to behaviour. Ensuring good behaviour is the bottom line for Leading Professionals. Without the correct climate in our schools we might as well pack our bags. The superb work of ASCL member Sir Alan Steer rightly places great emphasis on the relationship between effective teaching and learning and good behaviour and the approaches which we know are successful.

But we all know that disruption by even a small number of children undermines the learning of many more. In such cases exclusion supported by properly funded and well led alternative provision has to be an option. This is an aspect of the Children's Plan on which we must work particularly hard to eliminate the inherent tension between inclusion and exclusion policy.

Today ASCL is publishing the results of a survey about the effects of the new rule on exclusions of more than 6 days. These confirm our fears that earnest efforts to address the immense challenge of providing for the education of our most vulnerable young people are being undermined by the difficulty of accessing appropriate support services.

This has begun to force schools to resort to permanent exclusions instead of longer term fixed term exclusions which might have enabled them to put in place strategies to help these students.

Five days is not long enough to put in place appropriate strategies to deal with students' issues, such as referrals to CAMHS or restorative justice sessions.

We are well aware of the detrimental effects of permanent exclusion and are trying hard to implement approaches which avoid the need to exclude. However we feel that this policy is backfiring and the pressure of stretched resources is getting worse as the year progresses.

This contradiction makes it more difficult to meet the needs of these children.

**From contradiction to coherence:**

All of these contradictions distract us from the golden opportunity to build on the vision and values on which there is so much agreement and move to a new coherence. Indeed this is a necessity if the rightly ambitious agenda of the 169 page Children's Plan is to become a reality and not just a very expensive doorstep.

<i>Contradictions</i>	
<i>A radical new approach to learning</i>	<i>A return to a mythical lost golden age</i>
<i>Learning at the centre</i>	<i>Teaching at the centre</i>
<i>Assessment an integral part of the learning process = after second 'assessment'</i>	<i>Assessment = testing/ external accountability</i>
<i>Improving pass rates = success</i>	<i>Failure in exams= rigour</i>
<i>Improvement is supported by robust self evaluation</i>	<i>Discovering areas for development=failure</i>
<i>Intelligent accountability</i>	<i>Over-accountability</i>
<i>High trust</i>	<i>Low trust</i>
<i>A healthy education service</i>	<i>An ailing education service</i>
<i>Childhood today –a deep malaise</i>	<i>Childhood today - A time of great opportunity</i>
<i>Happy Childhood</i>	<i>Toxic Childhood</i>
<i>Professional autonomy</i>	<i>Centralised control</i>
<i>Devolved management</i>	<i>Micro-management</i>
<i>Inclusion policy</i>	<i>Exclusion policy</i>

And that coherent approach would look something like this:

<i>A new coherence</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ A shared vision of the new approaches to learning</li> <li>➤ Learning at the centre</li> <li>➤ Assessment an integral part of the learning process</li> <li>➤ Improving pass rates seen as success</li> <li>➤ Improvement supported by robust, self critical self evaluation leading to informed, constructive debate</li> <li>➤ A cup half full mentality</li> <li>➤ A high trust approach recognising the need for professional autonomy within an enabling policy framework</li> <li>➤ Acceptance that our education service is healthy and improving</li> <li>➤ Childhood today made into a time of great opportunity for all young people</li> <li>➤ An inclusion policy in which all leading professionals work together to face some of the most complex challenges of all.</li> </ul>

Leading a large school or college is like turning round a supertanker. I have been head of St Cyres for 8 years and only recently can I honestly say that the major changes we have implemented have become embedded. ASCL's research into sustainable leadership proved this conclusively and we as leading professionals have done much to adapt our roles in the context of distributed leadership.

Transforming our education service is an even bigger juggernaut. It will not happen within one term of government let alone the term of office of one Secretary of State the average length of which since 1997 is 1.8 years and since 2001 1.3 years. Patience and confidence in the decisions we make and the leaps of faith we undertake, confidence in our system and the leading professionals who work within it are the key to success.

The rewards for meeting the challenge of that journey are immense and far outweigh the setbacks and disappointments that we will inevitably encounter. When they do occur our passion and focus as leading professionals are more important than ever.

This conference, with our visits and seminar programme which focus strongly on learning from each other will help us to remain in the driving seat as we shape 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

At the NASSP convention in San Antonio last month at which some 3000 principals from all of the USA were present one of the speakers Aaron Davis said 'If you know **why** you do what you do, the **what** will come'.

The people I mentioned this afternoon - the rock group, the student speakers, the girl with her exam results, the little boy in the foyer are the reason. We all have similar stories and experiences which go to the core of what we do as leading professionals. They are our reason why we do what we do and they are the key to the coherence we strive for.