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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF QUALITY IN TEACHING

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Abstract By means of short case studies of four different periods in education policy in teacher education, the idea of teacher quality is shown to be a context-based idea. It is never self-evident but always contested. The essay concentrates on the way policy makers or managers have defined teacher quality in their policy changes or management action. The concept of teacher quality, through the idea of the context-bound 'good teacher', is seen to be a way in which changes in the recruitment, training and work of teachers are managed.

What is expected of schools alters over time with changes in society and in national circumstances. In consequence, successive generations may differ in how they define standards at school, and how they measure changes in such standards . . .

(Better Schools, 1985)

The above quotation is drawn from the introduction to a major policy reform of the Eighties which focused on teaching quality (DES, 1985). In the context of the policy document it was quickly made and then passed over in the rush to policy details. Yet in the quotation there are a number of possibilities raised about how expectations of schools (and so, of teachers) have altered and as a consequence of this, the idea of the teacher has altered. Indeed for the purposes of this essay it introduces the notion of changed expectations about and successive definitions of teaching quality very well.¹ There cannot be a useful definition of teacher quality which transcends its context. Strong definitions about teacher quality are most prone to ahistoricism and arguments that use them tend to assertion not argument. Most policy documents which are relevant to this area tend not to argue for their view of teacher quality so much as they content themselves with a self-evident description.

Although the *Better Schools* quotation has its value, as it introduces the time/context specificity of the definition of the teacher, it does not help much with an exploration of how these changes occur, nor which agency or department implements them, nor how cohesive the idea of a 'generation' is? There is little sense of the reality of the different definitions or the tensions or contradictions which exist within that reality or generation at one time. These questions are all the more interesting as *Better Schools* was itself the harbinger of massive, structural changes in schooling, the economy of education and teachers' work which have not yet finished. However, this quotation allows us to recognise that teacher

quality (like schooling) cannot be effectively discussed if it is defined reductively, ahistorically or in an essentialist manner. Policy makers or policy influencers may feel able to describe the times, the teacher and the task in these ways but this essay will attempt to ground the idea of teacher quality into different specific contexts and show how the idea itself has altered dramatically. Teacher quality has been a contested concept, it is certainly not neutral or self-evident. Definitions have not just emerged or been accepted. Particular social and political circumstances and dominant employer or employee versions have shaped the idea. In the particular case of the *Better Schools* proposals for teacher reform, it would be shortsighted to take a statement on societal changes and the description of necessary policy changes at face value, as the quotation suggests we should. The years of conflict with teachers which preceded the policy paper, the dispute with local education authorities and the radical governmental agenda at the time gave birth to that paper and it was produced by only one party to the dispute, the government. The Department of Education's version of national circumstance and school change became the dominant one. There was nothing self-evident about it. The attempt to reduce debates about school values and purposes by the imposition of lists of technical, curriculum and managerial duties and skills and to define a new generational standard need to be judged in the context in which they were created. Defining and managing teacher quality, by the standard of *Better Schools* alone, should be treated as a contested and contradictory act.

In this essay I will make reference to four different periods when clear definitions of teacher quality can be seen. These periods are arbitrary, showing, as they do, different perspectives on quality which have operated this century in the state elementary (later the primary and secondary) sector. These periods are viewed in terms of the image of the teacher which policy makers, acting as employers or management advisers, have created, or which managers and management policies have operated. These periods are not produced chronologically to develop an argument on how the image of the 'good' teacher changed but patterns emerged in which the necessity to develop new images of the 'good' teacher resulted from teacher shortages and a redefinition of the purpose of state education and that there were competing definitions of the new teacher. Teaching quality is seen here as a social construction, an attempt to make visible and explicit the practical and ideological management imperatives in any given period. However, the social construction of teacher quality is a contested process; initiatives are taken in response to shortages or emerge out of particular political and social conjunctions which are then responded to by teachers. Generations of teachers are themselves divided, containing as they do, competing practices, favoured 'good teacher' models and biographically-ordered work experience around which teachers organise or group.

The periods I have looked at are drawn from research projects I have undertaken in the history and sociology of teachers' work: they are the First World War and the Twenties; the Second World War and the Forties; the early Sixties and the Eighties.² These projects were not intended to develop into a twentieth century history of State/teacher relations and are used here only to make the argument for the social construction of the notion of teacher quality.

The Right Sort of Quality

Looking backwards from the nineties our perspective on teacher quality might emphasise the reductive and taxonomic aspects of teacher skills which have come to dominate references to quality in Britain, and have been shaped by its current high policy profile. Yet in the early decades of this century, there was less emphasis on technical skills in teaching and more emphasis on the social and political character of the teacher (Lawn, 1987). Teacher quality appears to have been defined in practice in relation to the 'social order', and it was the employers, the government and the local squirearchy which decided what that natural 'social order' was and how teachers either fitted into it or disrupted it and where they should be recruited from to service it. Arguments about the quality of the teaching force at this time were arguments about politics, gender and class.

Managers expected to manage and from schools to local boards or education committees the first two decades are full of reference to the requirements they had for 'their' teachers. They expected to control recruitment policies, employment tenure, job responsibilities and aspects of teachers' social existence. Their expectation was one of absolute control over their employees. This might vary from in rural areas, teachers' politics, churchgoing and social life, to in urban areas, their right to manage and the power of teachers to combine. At local level, school managers, representing local ratepayers (business class, farmers, etc.), constantly examined their teachers—on their drinking, their chapel-going, their politics and their associations, and so forth. They judged the quality of their teachers against their definition of the natural 'social order' and their place as managers in operating on behalf of that order.

Neither they nor the central government expected teachers to cavil at the creation of new routes into teaching or the creation of new classes of skilled and unskilled teachers or their recruitment of, in times of shortage or because of economies or strikes, any person they saw fit to be a teacher. As far as they were concerned quality was signified less by particular skills than by social and political representations, that is, what did the teacher appear to be? which class were they recruited from? did they accept the conditions of their work? were they the right sort of people? This attitude can be viewed from the correspondence in local newspapers and recorded accounts or council and committee meetings during strikes, disruption or policy changes; it can also be read in examples culled by writers who began to treat this subject as one of civil liberties or of class oppression. Another source is the number of commentaries, from the turn of the century onwards, which make reference to the worrying rise in this large group of secular, influential and educated workers and the power they might wield in their communities.

Teachers were recruited mainly from the working class. In reviewing the pupil-teacher system, in 1902, the Board of Education referred to the origins of this system (Board of Education, 1907). It was intended to be a cheap system of recruitment to elementary schools, drawn from the children of the manual labour class, and until the Revised Code came, it worked (at that time managers appointed 'anybody' to get the State grant). By 1898, it was stated that this method of recruitment was becoming 'economically wasteful and educationally unsatisfactory and even dangerous . . .' The newly created importance of the education system and a 'well-equipped body of teachers' meant that direct recruitment from the labouring classes was now inappropriate. It was suggested that they be encouraged

to enter secondary education, gaining a liberal education which might overcome their 'narrowness of intellectual and professional outlook'. Social class and economic efficiency ran together. These teachers had sufficient quality at the right cost to the taxpayer when the demands on state elementary education were minimal. As this system began to be seen as economically useful to the industrial society and not just a drain on it, then quality was redefined. It would be the same class but with a longer education. The difference between the Revised Code period, when untrained teachers were recruited from the manual classes, and later, was a reflection on the changing economic purpose of state education but the tension continued between teacher quality defined by cheapness and by economic purpose. This continued and explains the proliferation of routes into teaching and the rise of a teacher association, fuelled by social grievances and contradictory training policies. Quality was a relative term, suited to employer purpose, and contested by organised teachers who took a consistent line on craft skill and training (expressed as professionalism, Lawn, 1987).

The recruitment of women teachers in increasing numbers in the later 19th century and early 20th century is a reflection of this need to reduce costs and to increase efficiency, a conundrum produced by their need to train the labouring class more to teach in elementary schools. One way was to recruit women teachers—the London School Board, opposing the recruitment of untrained teachers, argued

(that) it has been made a matter of regret that the teachers of elementary children have to be drawn from a class of society which, to say the least, are in early life not surrounded by refining influences. The better prospects offered to teachers by the extension of school boards are far more likely to attract a higher class of women than a higher class of men. It is well known that there is a considerable number of women, socially raised above the labouring class, who suffer much privation through the scarcity of remunerative labour suited to their capacities . . .

(Copelman, 1985: 94)

Class is interlinked with gender in defining teacher quality. As men were seen as being able to operate in a wider labour market and to have higher economic value, teaching quality was soon defined as being related to women. Women would be more inclined to teach, they would have the right qualities and they would also be available at the right price. They would also be judged on their ability to teach a newly gender differentiated curriculum, in particular the domestic economy element, including needlework. Although the argument for the recruitment of women into teaching was to develop nationally, a permanent

it was viewed with concern even amid the general social unrest. Teachers were seen as significant in the reproduction of the social order. While they were also not part of it (by membership) they were seen as acting on behalf of those who were. The notion of teacher discontent was not so easily coped with as it was in earlier days when the state education system was not so important economically. The result of the strikes and political action by many teachers was the creation of a new policy on teacher quality by the government and H.A.L. Fisher at the board of education. Fisher heightened and changed the idea of the 'good teacher'; he argued for 'an efficient and devoted corps of teachers' who would produce good citizens, be patriotic and apolitical, and realise the benefits to society of the projected investment in education (Lawn, 1987: 66). Fisher described a system of self-government for teachers based on professionalism, responsibility and collegiality. Most of all, he talked of a time when there would be higher standards of education and training for teachers. Fisher was battling against the ideas of various socialist writers, Labour party and union leaders and workers who were offering teachers a different vision of their role and work in the future. In this sense he was developing a new version of teacher quality, an ideology to produce a policy. The ideas of teacher quality he provided, distinctive as they were and contrastive with the past, were made to recruit and retain teachers, literally and figuratively, to a new state policy. Teachers were redefined; they would have self-government and not petty restrictions, they would be educated not just semi-trained, they would be professionals not just hired hands. Teaching quality was redefined because the importance of the education industry had been raised and because their value as state professionals had been recognised.

The concept of the social order, expressed as a cultural and social hierarchy and as an economic project, was important to teaching. Teachers were measured against that idea and were seen as a social danger if they did not match up to it because of their actions or sometimes because of who they were. On the other hand, the 'good teacher' was probably not in a national association of teachers (or not active within the association), not antagonistic to managers and their control over conditions of work, not politically or socially radical and accepting of the class/gender basis on which they were employed. In this period, teaching quality appears to have been mainly defined by reductive class, gender or political attributes in relation to state or local labour markets and 'social order'; teaching skills were not so much technical as social. Not until the mid-twenties did a major teacher training route emerge which represented features of Fisher's ideological policy.

The New Look in the Forties

The Second World War was followed by a period in which an argument about new kinds of teacher can be seen clearly against the backdrop of older elementary school realities. This post-war period, often described as one of consensus or central/local partnership, or even 'indirect rule' (Lawn & Ozga, 1986) followed a wartime emergency in schools, and contained a radical reconstruction in the aftermath of the 1944 Education Act. The shift in the argument about teacher quality took place against the problem of recruitment in teaching, the creation of emergency training routes and a commission which tried to establish a new teacher education structure, linking colleges and universities together. This time though there was an emphasis on the 'good teacher' experimenting and the mythology of

a distinctive English tradition of teacher autonomy and professionalism appears to be rooted in the forties.

Teachers' work had changed in wartime. Women teachers had again shouldered the work of the education industry (Lawn, 1987b). Teachers' workload had grown enormously due to the use of schools as places of emergency social care in the war; schools had been used as salvage centres, emergency centres for feeding and housing blitzed families, rest centres and distributors of clothing coupons. Their working hours and conditions had changed and because of war disruption, their work had become harder; it was harder to get the same results from children. Teachers had become quasi-civil servants and schools had become part of a wartime, and later post-war, social welfare administration. The Welfare State was built in education out of wartime needs and priorities. Schools were used for medical inspection and care and provided a milk and meals service. Kenneth Richmond described this change in the nature and importance of schooling to the State, and the consequent changes in the definition of teaching so,

(the elementary teacher) gained some insight in to the meaning of social service; he was becoming a welfare officer in the best sense of the word. True he detested this metamorphosis; protested that 'he didn't know what things were coming to'; felt that his status was being degraded to that of an odd-job man, forever at the beck and call of pestering officials; but there was no gainsaying his broadened outlook.

(Richmond, 1945: 134)

H.C. Dent, the editor of *The Times Educational Supplement* at the time, asked the same question:

(All these developments) have combined with other wartime developments in the educational situation to present the teachers with a pretty—and embarrassing—problem: what is the teacher's job? Is it to teach or to do a multitude of other jobs as well?

(Dent, 1944: 161)

Teacher quality had become more broadly defined. The primary pastoral role was becoming established and the teacher worked in a site which was extending its functions and required new skills. New wartime responsibility led to increased levels of innovation in the curriculum and a recognition that this was now the area of teacher competence and responsibility. These gains came with some losses. The time for this changed work, in curriculum and in pastoral care, came out of the teacher's life, the working day was extended in practice. The function of the job incorporated school supervisory tasks, including meal supervision. Men and women reacted in different ways to these events and in some school sectors what was rejected by some was an opportunity for others. A new definition of the teacher was created in which teaching time was described and controlled by the employer yet the teacher was valued and had a responsibility, built upon the major role schools now had in a society reconstructing.

The creation of a special training route into teaching in the mid-forties altered the idea of teaching quality once again. The shortage of teachers had led to the creation of a scheme to recruit demobilised soldiers. The Ministry of Education was faced with a shortfall in the number of teachers due to the raising of the school-leaving age and the other developments associated with the 1944 Education Act. Although training colleges operated a two-year certificate course for post-

school entrants, which was about to be raised to three years, the emergency scheme proposed was based on an intensive one year course (followed by a two-year study/probation period). The Ministry of Education leased or requisitioned suitable sites across the country and began to train teachers itself.

Acceptance into emergency teacher training was based upon age (between 21–35), war service, a school certificate (or a subject essay) and a judgement as to suitability for teaching according to ‘temperament, personality and intellectual capacity’ (Ministry of Education, 1950: 23). The judgement of the interview boards was used to develop the common idea of the standard required of a ‘qualified teacher’. As Dent pointed out (Dent, 1962: 20), in a brief summary of this scheme, the main reason for its success was the ‘maturity, enthusiasm and hard work of the students’. This is the image of teacher quality prevailing in this period. It was a question of experience, no longer one of class, gender or qualification. The image is both apt and spurious. It was a recognition of the influence of the Army education programme which produced motivated people with an interest in education (Lawn, 1989) and it was a *post-hoc* rationalisation of the need to create an emergency non-standard entry.

In an official description and evaluation of the scheme, the new Ministry of Education described the quality of the students as being the significant feature of the scheme. This quality was specified as ‘keenness and singleness of purpose’, ‘a wide range of talents and accomplishments’ and ‘powers of initiative and organisation’. Through the section dealing with students, emphasis is placed on their maturity, responsibility and experience. Maturity was defined as a personal quality and previous experience, related together. Competence in teaching depended upon the following personal attributes it was stated—vitality, genuine interest in one’s fellows, conviction of the social importance of schools, willingness (and ability) to consider the problems of teaching from the child’s point of view and readiness to reflect on and profit by one’s own experience. Problems in training could be ascribed to the following personal qualities—a colourless personality, aloofness, complacency and a cynical attitude to teaching (Ministry of Education, 1950: 36–46).

In this way teacher quality was shaped by the idea of maturity, meaning the relationship between experience and personality. This was a key image but it fitted the newly developing idea of teaching as a pastoral or social welfare role, a consequence of wartime and post-war reconstruction. As the Ministry argued, the values of teaching have more meaning for the mature student; if the profession of teaching was of a ‘highly social character’ then the training of teachers could benefit from mature entrants and would be constituted differently for and by them. It was the quality of their ‘personal relationships’ with children and colleagues which counted, their eagerness and enthusiasm and their willingness to take on out-of-school activities. This image of teacher quality was both a reflection of a policy response to teacher shortage and of a change in the nature of teaching.

Better Schools—from Newsom to Joseph

The different requirements and interests of the late fifties and sixties can be seen within the work of the Central Advisory Council for Education in England, and one of its major publications, the Newsom Report (Half our Future, see CACE, 1963). The focus of the report was the education of the average adolescent

pupil in preparation for the raising of the school leaving age. In retrospect, through the composition of the Committee and in its arguments, it can be seen as a link between the emphasis in the forties on the welfare and social aspects of education and the later emphasis in the eighties and nineties on specialism and teamwork.

The root question which the Report asked and answered was 'what kind of teachers, with what professional and personal resources, do the schools require to do the job?' (CACE, 1963: 98). It was not just a severe shortage of teachers with which they were faced, they felt that 'good teachers' needed to be retained in 'slum, heavy industrial and other ill favoured areas' and that teachers' work should be made or shown to be 'personally and professionally satisfying in its demands'. In its effort to restructure the work of the secondary school teacher to meet the needs of the children, it suggested a new emphasis in these secondary schools on pastoral care, on cross-curricula competency, on extra-school work, on teamwork, on vocationalism and on school support services. As it pointed out, it was trying to produce a new and 'sufficiently attractive professional image' for teachers (CACE, 1963: 99). The consequences for teacher education and for the image of teachers, that is the idea of the 'good teacher', were great. There was to be a move away from the mature, experienced generalist form teacher in the secondary schools; it wasn't the image that was wrong, indeed the report talks about the valuable contribution the mature entrant would make to the 'personal education' of adolescents but the fact that teachers shortages were more likely to be filled from young entrants who would need particular skills. A new emphasis on skills resulted, concentrating on mastery of two or more subjects, on pedagogical studies (teaching methods and techniques) and on educational studies (sociological and psychological study). The knowledge about these areas would now define teacher quality. The shortage of teachers, and the felt necessity to provide a good education for all British citizens, had led to the creation of a new image of the teacher, built on new craft skills and longer professional training. That image was also a youthful one, it was to be associated with the expansion of higher education in the sixties and the establishment of more comprehensive schools. For a while teacher quality was, in one of its contemporary images, associated with a young comprehensive school teacher, using subject and pedagogical skills. The Newsom idea of professional purpose, associated with the inner-city and industrial areas, was soon developed into a compensatory education approach and positive discrimination in schooling by teachers. In urban areas, as Gerald Grace has shown, this new purpose of teaching, in primary and secondary schools, soon became fractured and different versions of it, liberal and radical, became embedded in the relations between groups of teachers (Grace, 1978).

In the eighties a new image of teacher quality was developed by the state from the management of policy changes in primary schools. The new generation primary teacher was to be significantly different to her predecessors. They had worked in (what has been described as) a period of educational consensus in which the primary headteacher had a significant practical role in defining the teacher's work which, generally speaking, was classroom based and generalist. They weren't specialists in a subject area, they worked under the head's direction (tightly or loosely operated) and they were responsible for the children in their classroom/age-group.

By the late eighties it was possible to see clearly the new idea of primary teaching, expressed in government publications, and the new qualities associated

with it (HMI, 1985; DES, 1985). The duties, responsibilities and performance of the teacher have become more closely defined. The craft skills of teaching have been codified, subject specialism is a requirement, curriculum content and its assessment have been tightly specified. Teaching has been redefined as a supervisory task, operating within a team of teachers and (probably) with an allowance for leading and managing them, work is related to the overall development plan or whole school management policy. It is argued that

Professionalism in the primary school has moved on from being classroom-based, usually in isolation from other teachers, fairly well defined by the head but in a context of responsibility and autonomy, to a collective schoolwide job, based on narrowly defined though complex tasks within a context of shared management functions and tight areas of responsibility, clearly defined and appraised.

(Lawn, 1988)

The kinds of personal qualities, once referred to in discussions of mature entrants or within pastoral/welfare aspects of schooling, have moved, in this discourse, from being ideal characteristics to part of a job description in which specified qualities are to become necessary skill requirements.

Quality?

Obviously teaching has altered this century but the focus of this essay has been on the dominant views about teachers and how these views have turned into significant policies. However the emphasis has been less on if or how the policies worked and more on the distinctiveness of the different images of the 'good teacher' produced at different periods. The metaphor of image is not literal; there are dominant views but there are contested views. The sharper the image the less likely it is to be an accurate representation—for my purposes. In this essay the image will have to be in semi-focus.

Why should teaching be redefined and what purpose does talk of quality or the 'good teacher' serve in redefining the teacher's work? It isn't just 'changes' or 'national circumstance' or 'generations', it is the way in which these terms are used to legitimate a shift in the production of teachers and their system of working.

Teacher shortage appears to be linked with either a redefinition of or a restated emphasis on teacher quality. This may be to forestall criticism that shortages allow the State to recruit teachers by any route, and by what standard, it so wishes. The personal qualities and experiences of a teacher may be emphasised

it appears to be that quality is redefined according to state purposes; as new sectors of schooling are developed then, as with shortages, the job is redefined to suit groups of probable recruits. At several points, it appears that these recruits are drawn from a pool of untapped labour and the job is redefined to suit their qualities. There is no other teacher quality but their 'personal' qualities and these are almost stereotypically defined.

The idea of skill is not consistently emphasised in defined teacher quality, although when it is it alters considerably between cases. It may be loosely referred to or specified in detail, related to classroom control or to pedagogy and curriculum, assumed to be clearly definable or to be discretionary and 'professional'.

Although the state has appeared to be more closely defining teacher quality as the century progresses, there are discrepancies or omissions between definitions. It is sometimes not clear why one view is taken, rather than another, and the definitions sometimes appear expedient. There are also tensions between the ideological view of the teacher and the practice, and between the dominant definition of the 'good teacher' and the teacher's definition.

At the present time, teacher shortage and a major critique of teacher education in policy circles are again creating new images of teacher quality. They appear to range widely at the moment; the National Curriculum Council is suggesting that a school-based initial teacher training should be comprised of subject studies, the National Curriculum and classroom management only and the Centre of Policy Studies and the Hillgate group (on the Right) take a similar view, reducing training to subjects and substituting school teaching apprenticeship for pedagogical and educational studies. The Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education still seem to prefer a training institution-based teacher education but with more school-based work, a general move to competency-based training, better coordination of the curriculum and monitoring of quality. There is, within the training institutions and in some local education authorities and schools which work with them, a view of the modern teacher, called the reflective practitioner, which describes a thorough training in a highly-skilled enquiry-based class teaching mode (Pollard & Tann, 1987). The related idea of the effective teacher, promoted by the National Primary Centre, which, using ideas from primary practice and the HMI, see the teacher as constantly reviewing practice and working in teams (NPC, 1989). There are competing images of the teacher in these approaches, mirroring societal changes and ideological perspectives on the role of the teacher. They have been produced within a social and educational context which is deeply divided. Which of these views of teacher quality will prevail, at what level of the system and by what political and policy process? How will the contested notion of teacher quality be temporarily resolved?

Notes

1. This paper is based on a set of short case studies which reveal patterns in the formal or official expectations of teacher quality in the 20th century. There is little emphasis in this paper on the teachers' own definitions of quality nor on their struggle to defend these definitions, instead the focus is on the way in which governments altered and shaped the idea of the 'good teacher' to suit their policy purposes. In this paper a full picture is not developed nor is there a causal analysis. It is a first attempt to reveal aspects of the social construction of teacher quality.
2. This paper uses case studies drawn from different historical projects on teachers and teaching which I have undertaken or that I am currently working on. The references to these projects are made in the references at the end of the paper. Their focus is always on teachers' work but there have been different emphases. My early work was on teachers' economic conditions, organisations

and political alliances but my emphasis today is on the relations between pedagogy, teachers' lives and their labour process. There has been a consequent shift into oral history and ethnographic research in my recent work.

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