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What's politics got to do with it?

~ Michael Rosen
Writer and broadcaster
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I'm thinking of putting myself up for the leadership of one of the three main political parties. I'm not sure which one at the moment, but then I'm not sure that it matters very much. I've figured out that one thing I've really got to get right is what I'm going to say about education. Well, actually, one thing I will be getting right is the fact that it's education that I'll be mentioning. After all, how absurd it would be for me to be putting myself up for this job, and not mention education?

OK, let's take a step back here. What do I mean by the phrase “mention education”? Do I mean some kind of general stuff about how important it is for us to “enlarge the skills base”? Or that it's necessary to give our youngsters the best possible start in life? Or perhaps talk about how it's only when schools start teaching the difference between right and wrong again that we'll be able to sleep soundly in our beds? Should I be a little more specific and talk about how it's only by returning schools to local control that we will lever up standards? Or should I be even more specific? Highly particular, in fact, and start talking about how the chanting method is the best way in which children should be taught their times tables , or that downwards rather than horizontally is the best way of learning the periodic table?

Judging by the records of people wanting to be party leaders, or indeed have become one, all these ways of “mentioning education” seem to be fairly well road-tested. Now, why should this be? What is it about education that makes it such a must-pack in the present-day party leader's suitcase?

Look at how David Cameron addressed the Conservative Party conference on October 4 2005. In a speech that covered the European Union, world poverty:

> “we don't just stand up for Gibraltar and Zimbabwe, but for the people of Darfur and sub-Saharan Africa who are living on less than a dollar a day and getting poorer while we are getting richer.”

and inner-city poverty:

> “I want to be able to say to the people living in our inner cities of all races and religions, grappling with the problems caused by family breakdown, poor housing, and low aspirations: ‘we know we have a shared responsibility, that we're all in this together, that there is such a thing as society; it's just not the same thing as the state.’"

…it was, let's say, curious that in this speech, David Cameron's very first concrete policy initiative - I think that's what they're called - should have been synthetic phonics, which he got to via patriotism, freedom and aspiration:

> “Aspiration is enabled by education; how cruelly it is disabled by Labour today, when one fifth of children leave primary school unable to write properly, when 1 million schoolchildren play truant each year and when the very essence of aspiration - social mobility - is going backward in this country.

> “There are far fewer children from state schools going to our best universities. And it's getting worse.
> “What have Labour done? Created an exam system where 16% means a pass, where parents of children in failing schools have no redress and no way out.
> “And we're now a country where failure is called "deferred success". The government introduced the national literacy strategy. It's a good idea. In fact, it was Gillian Shephard's idea.
> “But why can't children be taught to read with synthetic phonics, a method that works?
> “Treating every child as if they are the same fails the child who is struggling and the child who is not. So why can't we have streaming and setting, to help all children reach their potential?”

Yes, he hit synthetic phonics just 360 words in to the speech; his second policy initiative being to bring in streaming and setting, and his third, you may remember, was to save special schools. Even more curious is that these were the only three policy initiatives in the whole speech. Presumably world poverty, inner city poverty and Europe will come later.

Now for all I know, this will prove to have been an incredibly successful strategy. As David Cameron walks into number 10, Andrew Marr and Nick Robinson and the rest will remind us of this speech and how it marked a turning point in (let's say they'll say) the history of the twenty-first century, or something as equally non-hyperbolic.

But let's look back at what Cameron was actually saying. The Labour party are responsible for one fifth of primary school children not being able to write properly. It's significant, isn't it, that no matter whether we agree with this statement or not, the proposition itself is not impossible. And that's only because we've reached a point where it's governments who sort out primary school writing. Let's just hold that in our heads. This means that when I'm in a classroom working with some children on a poem, wondering if we're going to talk about getting lost in the supermarket, I'm part of government policy. This is the status quo, the state we're in.

Moving on, Cameron then says that there's a problem with social mobility in this country and links this directly to the matter of state school children not going to what he calls the “best universities”. Presumably one is the consequence and not the cause of the other. That's to say, the lack of social mobility, in Cameron's book, is preventing state school students from going to, let's say, Oxbridge, though saying 'best' is full of resonant vagueness. As it happens, the lack of social mobility has many consequences, but you know, I wouldn't have thought that the low number of people going to Balliol from the comps in Hackney was suitable meat and potatoes for a major political speech. But it is. I would have been wrong.

Next stop is the “16% is a pass” statistic. I'm not sure where this comes from. One of my kids is 19, so he's just gone through the whole system and I seem to remem-

ber that all the pass levels he came home with were the usual hoverings between 40 and 50. I've just marked some MA essays for one of the universities that is never called “our best”, and the pass was 50. Well, let's say Cameron is right - he wouldn't be fibbing - the implication of what he's saying is that we desperately need more kids to fail exams. Only then will schools succeed. Perhaps someone will tell me that I've misunderstood something here.

And then, under the stewardship of David Cameron, with failure rates running at acceptably high levels, with schools that used to fail now succeeding (presumably with the consequence that we're back to that silly old Labour thing of too many kids passing too many exams), we're going to have synthetic phonics. Well, as we now know, we *are* going to have synthetic phonics. This is because of the Blunkett principle. Hold on, you're thinking: Blunkett's gone to his lair to lick his wounds; it wasn't him who introduced synthetic phonics. It was Ruth Kelly. Who's also gone somewhere to lick her wounds. So it'll be Alan Johnson. Unless he's going to be the next John Prescott. In which case it'll be someone else. No, the Blunkett principle is the one by which a Labour think-tank scans Tory Party think-tank statements and *Daily Mail* editorials and adopts these as Labour policy.

So let's pause awhile and contemplate what's happened here. The two major political parties are unanimous in implementing a policy that directs year 1 and 2 teachers in what they do and how they do it every working day of their lives. I know analogies are dangerous, but let's see if we can find one. Doctors do medicine. As we know, the structure of their existence is directed from government, as are their budgets. But take, say, the case of MMR. You'll remember that Cameron and Kelly and the rest say that synthetic phonics works (we'll come back to that in a moment), which of course is what the NHS says about MMR. But whereas synthetic phonics will be compulsorily delivered to every five year old - yes, that's all forty-four phonemes, not ten, not twenty, not thirty five, but forty-four - MMR is only delivered to the willing. So what is it about education that makes it so suitable for this kind of diktat while the nation's health is less so?

I'll leave that hanging in the air for the moment and come back to phonics. It's notoriously hard to get a grip on literacy levels. Every year, national newspapers make hay with attainment levels, thereby proving in an annual flash of statistical brilliance that some people are below average and some people are above it. A visit to the national literacy trust's website will show you a wildly fluctuating needle on the literacy dial, where experts struggle to tie down concepts like “functionally illiterate”, “inadequate literacy” and the like. One test showed with a stunning lack of cultural bias that 10% of people couldn't understand the instructions on a packet of seeds, while in 2003 16% failed their GCSE English. (Ah! Perhaps that's where David Cameron got his 16% from?) Meanwhile, 12% say they have problems with reading, writing and spelling, but it's less than 1% who, it's claimed, I quote, “can be described as illiterate”.

Well, we all know how to juggle with these figures in ways that might show on the one hand that the UK is now jam-packed full of people who can't read and write, and on the other that we're not doing too badly. But let's get this clear: a system that manages to teach most people how to read is going to be changed because of the failure of the minority. So, if policy A mostly works but not entirely so, you replace it with policy B. But what if policy B succeeds with those who fail under A but creates another set of problems? Well, that wouldn't matter, you might say, if policy B is shown to cut the number of problems and failures.

And so we come to how governments use educational research.

Sue Ellis, a lecturer at the University of Strathclyde made the following observation on her study of the so called Clackmannan research project:

> "The Clackmannan phonics research reported by Watson and Johnston (2004, 2005) was an experimental trial to compare different methods of teaching phonics. It wasn't designed (despite media reports) to investigate whether phonics instruction provides a more effective 'gateway' to reading than a mixed-methods approach. The researchers did not collect the range of data nor conduct the sorts of fidelity checks that would be required to address such a question."

The Wider Context for Synthetic Phonics in Clackmannanshire: Evidence to the Rose Committee of Inquiry into Methods of Teaching Reading
- Susan Ellis, University of Strathclyde
September 2005

Let's think about that. So, what went on in this research project wasn't a test to find out whether synthetic phonics is the method that works better than methods currently in place. Well, well, well. So, we are about to switch a whole education policy affecting every single child in state education on the basis of research that cannot prove that this is desirable, necessary or, indeed, will succeed. This is extraordinary, isn't it?

But there's more. When we look at what actually happened when the synthetic phonics programme was introduced in Clackmannan schools, we discover that there was in fact a whole range of interventions going on. This was a local authority initiative (oh, not one of those beastly LEAs; we're going to abolish them, aren't we?) and involved, of course, a whole set of new resources and teacher training. But there was also staff development on general lesson planning, interactive teaching, the importance of building on success, teaching of reading-writing links, developing literacy through play, and extra help with language enrichment activities. Home school link teachers were appointed to work with parents on literacy issues in four of the six pilot schools:

> "These staff carried out home visits, ran story clubs and after-school homework

clubs, worked with parent groups, set up library visits and borrowing schemes as well as working in classrooms."

Sue Ellis was:

"...told that parents particularly welcomed the emphasis on encouraging early writing and developmental spelling in the home.
"Schools were involved in a separate and concurrent initiative, the New Community Schools Initiative, introduced personal learning planning. This included some, but not all, of the early intervention schools."

It won't surprise anyone here that the project also received some extra funding from the Scottish education office, and of course it's not clear if this kind of extra funding would be available to everyone when universal synthetic phonics drops from on high.

Meanwhile, yet more things were going on in the Clackmannan schools:

"[The] supported voluntary introduction of:

- A thinking skills programme for older children, developed from Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children programme. This was introduced (and explained to the schools) as a specific initiative to bolster reading comprehension. In this programme, philosophical discussions arise from joint reading of a common text. Children are invited to suggest and then discuss questions or things that puzzle them about the story events, themes or characters.

- At some point, additional staff development on teaching comprehension and developing reasoning in P2 and up was introduced, and additional reading comprehension lessons for children in P2 and P3 were inserted into the programme. This seems to have been in response to teacher feedback.

- A spelling scheme was introduced."

Now all this is extraordinary. We have absolute agreement within the country's political establishment that there will be a major policy shift and that this policy shift is based on solid research, and yet when one researcher takes a closer look at what actually happened, she finds that the conclusions drawn by the politicians are not ones that can be drawn from that particular project. And where are the eagle-eyed journalists rushing off to Clackmannan to unearth this? And how interesting that though synthetic phonics was introduced as the core method of teaching to read, the children were involved in a whole other set of procedures to do with learning how to read. How would we know if some of these didn't perhaps contribute something terribly important to the children's success in reading?

I can just see it now. The next election will see Tory and Labour saying that they will implement synthetic phonics and what's more they'll appoint home school link teachers for every school and these staff will carry out home visits, run story clubs

and after school homework clubs, work with parent groups and set up library visits and borrowing schemes. Perhaps not.

But there's an obvious truth underlying all this, and it's one that suits our politicians to ignore: learning how to read is a complex and varied process, and not all children do it in the same way. It's a basic truth that David Cameron has grasped. Look again at what he said:

> “But why can't children be taught to read with synthetic phonics, a method that works?
> “Treating every child as if they are the same fails the child who is struggling and the child who is not.”

Have I got something wrong here? He says that every child will be treated as if they are the same when it comes to teaching them how to read, but then treating every child as if they are the same fails the child who is struggling and the child who is not. Actually, it's me who's struggling here. But then, you'll remember, it's because in the next sentence he says:

> “So why can't we have streaming and setting, to help all children reach their potential?”

This sort of thing gets the blood coursing and the feet stamping, but of course secondary education is already jam-packed full of thousands of systems of selection, grading, streaming and setting. Cunningly, Cameron didn't indicate whether he thought that now is the time to stream and set primary schools. Actually, I was streamed and set in primary school. I remember it well. At the end of what is now called year 5, our teacher told us that we were all very able and clever children but next year we wouldn't be in the same classes. There was going to be one class for people who were good with their heads and one class that was good for people who were good with their hands. Miss Williams would teach the first class and Mr Baggs would teach the second. I was in Miss Williams’ class, the one for people with heads. It soon became clear what the difference between the two classes was: we spent every morning doing maths. Half of this was mental arithmetic, where Miss Williams would bark out sums at individual kids and you had to bark the answers back at us. She had a way of moving round the class to catch anyone who was glancing out of the window or down at his shoelace. “Twenty four divided by three!” I think she was inspired by this:

> “Besides being possessed by my sister's idea that a mortifying and penitential character ought to be imparted to my diet - besides giving me as much crumb as possible in combination with as little butter, and putting such a quantity of warm water into my milk that it would have been more candid to have left the milk out altogether - my uncle Pumblechook's conversation consisted of nothing but arithmetic. On my politely bidding him Good morning, he said, pompously, "Seven times nine, boy?" And how should I be able to answer, dodged in that way, in a strange place,

on an empty stomach! I was hungry, but before I had swallowed a morsel, he began a running sum that lasted all through the breakfast. "Seven?" "And four?" "And eight?" "And six?" "And two?" "And ten?" And so on. And after each figure was disposed of, it was as much as I could do to get a bite or a sup, before the next came; while he sat at his ease guessing nothing, and eating bacon and hot roll, in (if I may be allowed the expression) a gorging and gormandising manner.

"For such reasons I was very glad when ten o'clock came and we started for Miss Havisham's; though I was not at all at my ease regarding the manner in which I should acquit myself under that lady's roof. Within a quarter of an hour we came to Miss Havisham's house, which was of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower were rustily barred. There was a court-yard in front, and that was barred; so, we had to wait, after ringing the bell, until some one should come to open it. While we waited at the gate, I peeped in (even then Mr. Pumblechook said, "And fourteen?" but I pretended not to hear him)…"

from Chapter 8, *Great Expectations*
- Charles Dickens

When we had finished with mental arithmetic, we did 'practical arithmetic' and then we had tests. Every day we had tests and at the end of the week the test scores were averaged out and we were given positions or placings in the class and we all changed round. This way we could see which kids were brilliant, which kids were average and which kids were rubbish, in our class that was already selected. So there was a special built-in class streaming going on, because you only ever worked with someone who was about the same placing as you in the week's tests. Then we all sat down and did the eleven plus exam, which about half of us passed. This left the other half in our class and all the rest of the other class who were failures. Whenever I meet any of this majority, they can always tell me that they always knew that they were failures. And then an exam came along that told them they were failures. And then they went to a school for failures. It's an alluring prospect. Tell me I'm wrong, but I have a general feeling that it's something like this that's on its way back. Oh yes, it'll be called all sorts of different things, the way the particular segregation, selection, streaming and setting will take place will all have user-friendly well-spun names, but in essence, the system will be the same.

But I've strayed somewhat from David Cameron's little masterpiece. I had a few more thoughts about phonics. The original Clackmannan research by Watson and Johnston concluded this:

"**Is synthetic phonics teaching the way forward?**
Synthetic phonics is not an exclusive approach - teachers may include synthetic phonics alongside their own programmes to boost the teaching of reading. Our purpose in carrying out these studies was to discover which aspects of phonics teaching are the most effective to ensure that as many children as possible become competent readers, but we recognise that this is only one aspect of effective teaching."

Accelerating Reading Attainment: The Effectiveness of Synthetic Phonics
Joyce E.Watson and Rhona S.Johnston
School of Psychology, University of St Andrews
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library/documents7/interchg.pdf

Which is what you might expect from a cautious researcher. After all, there are limits with all phonic methods of teaching reading. Just to be technical for a moment, a phoneme is the unit of sound that some linguists think our language can be broken down into, and a grapheme is the letter or group of letters plus twiddles (accents and the like) that we use to represent a phoneme. English is often thought to have forty four main phonemes. However, some of these phonemes can be represented in two, three, four or even more ways. Consider 'ow'. There's o,w in 'cow', there's o,u in 'sound' and there's o,u,g,h in 'bough'. No worries, says synthetic phonics, these are our building blocks. Bung the building blocks together, (and already the wagons of educational suppliers are circling the schools offering jolly little phonic blocks to buy), and you make words.

The snag with this is that we don't have exact grapheme-phoneme correspondence. That o,w of 'cow' can also give us the o,w of 'row' or even the o,w of the poet Cowper. The o,u, of 'sound' can also give us the o,u of 'you', and o,u,g,h can be found in tough, cough, through and thorough. Whatever glories and successes synthetic phonics will bring us, it will never bring us total reading. As Watson and Johnston make clear, other methods will be needed. But the complexity involved in saying all this won't fit a party leader's speech, a policy overhaul or a manifesto statement. In other words, education takes the back seat while politics takes over.

So how come we've got to a point in history where the day-by-day, minute-by-minute concerns of a year one or year two teacher are the building blocks (!) of a major political speech? I'm not sure there can have been many other times in the past when this has been the case. If we were living in 1902, then we would perhaps be having a heated conversation today about what Bonar Law had to say about elected school boards versus local education authorities. In 1918, we might be arguing about why Lloyd George had not made the raising of the school leaving age to 14 compulsory. However, between 1921, when it did become compulsory, and 1944 (educational historians please correct me if I'm wrong), I don't think you'll find many party leaders talking big about education in schools - a bit about training and apprenticeships, as far as I can make out, but no headline-grabbing stuff about reading schemes or the need for rigour in nursery schools. Then, the whole debate surrounding comprehensive education reached party HQs in the sixties and seventies, but at party leadership level; this was about structure and the consequence of this or that kind of structure on the social fabric. For decades, what was taught and how it was taught was given a steer by groups of people who were chaired by the people whose names adorn the famous 'reports' - Plowden of 1967, Bullock of 1975, and before that people like Hadow and his reports of 1926 and 1931. That was how political all this stuff got.

So what was wrong with that? How did we get from Plowden, Bullock and Hadow to David Cameron? And why?

It's not a mystery, but we got there via the phenomenon we call Thatcherism. The group of people who brought about that political upheaval and transformation was, and still is, absolutely certain that education has a political outcome in two senses: one, in that there is a social and economic outcome to whatever structures and processes education policy puts in place; and two, if you make certain political noises in public about education, there will be a favourable election outcome.

Some people will remember Margaret Thatcher saying in her address to the Conservative Party Conference in October 1987:

> "Children who need to be able to count and multiply are learning anti-racist mathematics, whatever that is."

Clever, wasn't it? Whoever wrote that could have spent two minutes finding out that some people thought that learning that algebra and the zero weren't all part of the seamless brilliance of western civilisation might be something worth discovering about the world. What am I saying, “could have spent two minutes finding out that”? They probably did. But that's not the point. The whole point was to pretend you didn't know in order to suggest that there was some kind of conspiracy going on. Education had been taken over by fanatics who were preventing children from learning. Education had to be saved from people in education. There was, it was said over and over again, an “education establishment”, which was so powerful, so menacing, so entrenched in these kinds of ideas, that it would have to be seized and taken over by…er…an educational establishment. This wouldn't be powerful, menacing and entrenched. It would be on the side of the people, delivering stuff that works, like synthetic phonics and streaming. And Academies.

Yes, take Academies. I live in Hackney. Thanks to this on-the-side-of-the-people educational policy-making, London's education body, the old ILEA, was abolished and education was devolved to the boroughs. This meant in Hackney that one of the world's most incompetent and corrupt local authorities was suddenly in charge of a stack of schools. Partly because of the way the old boroughs' map was drawn and partly because of this incompetence, it was only a matter of months before Hackney was chronically short of secondary school places and thousands of children were being bussed out of the borough. As time went by, and various audits discovered that Hackney had lost tens of millions of pounds no-one knows where or how, its powers of running education were taken from it by central government and handed to a quango called the Learning Trust, which it turns out can't be trusted and learns nothing. With no local accountability and minimal consultation procedures, the Learning Trust closes and opens schools as if they were tins of cat food. Then, the great solution to the lack of secondary school places appeared from heaven. The

political harmony between Tory and Labour over the establishment of Academies has handed Hackney the mandate to invite in any old millionaire to help provide us with the kinds of schools none of us asked for. Stand by for forthcoming photo ops.

So where does this leave us in the political process? I was travelling on the train back from Birmingham the other day with an old friend and colleague, John Richmond. We worked together in the 1970s in a girls' comprehensive school in south London called Vauxhall Manor. An interesting time, an interesting place. I was a writer-in-residence and, looking back on it now, I can see that there was an immense amount of self-generated staff activity, producing policies, research documents, teaching materials and teaching methods. Some of it appeared in a book called, appropriately, *Becoming Our Own Experts*. What a dangerous and subversive title that sounds today! I think, naively, we thought that it could be a model for every group of teachers everywhere: becoming their own experts and sharing that with others. Indeed, wasn't there a moment in the eighties when something called LINC appeared? Language in the National Curriculum. Here there was a structure whereby teachers researched their own practice, shared with others what seemed to work, which in turn was shared with advisers and inspectors and academics, and bit by bit the whole profession would both be developing itself professionally and learning what seemed to be best. Well, that didn't last, did it? Someone somewhere saw it for what it was: a dangerous, autonomous, self-driven kind of an outfit that could well end up with something that most certainly would not make good election fodder for party conference speeches. So it was dropped and twenty million quid vanished into thin air.

But back to my train journey with John Richmond. We had just been filming a programme for Teachers' TV. I present a show called 'Reading Aloud'. A simple concept: I talk to teachers about how they make books enjoyable for their children they teach, and then we have a chat about some books that they enjoy reading themselves. On the train, I got to asking John about how it is that decisions are now made in education. How is policy made and implemented? I realised that I didn't know. How interesting. Here am I: someone with more than a passing interest in the subject. I come from a background steeped in education biz. Since 1979, every year has seen at least one of my children or step-children going through the state system, one more has just joined a Reception Class and there's one more about to go to a SureStart Nursery in six months time. Assuming that he stays on at school till he's eighteen, and I stay alive, I figure that I will by then have been a school parent non-stop for forty-four years. Even so, I stand before you as someone, prior to my conversation with John Richmond with no real idea of how it is that education today is run.

Perhaps at this point you're looking at me with faintly supercilious smirks on your faces. You mean you didn't know the relationship between the QCA, SIPS, the TDA, the GTC and the PM's unit in Number 10? Are you really saying that you had no idea that SIPS are private? They're run by Capita, the same people who run the conges-

tion charge? And you didn't even know what SIPS stand for? The School Improvement Partners Strategies which are making sure that standards are being achieved. And there was me thinking that I knew what's what because I thought that that was the sort of thing done by the QCA, because doesn't the Q stand for quality? Well it seems that it might just as well stand for Quidditch now, because it seems that they're feeling a bit sore about Capita muscling in on their patch. But hold on, wasn't Ofsted supposed to be rushing about doing what SIPS are doing? No, they've been pared down, while the GTC are getting a bit muscly themselves and wondering if they can get in on the whole curriculum development thingy. But if that's all true, what goes on in a room in Number 10?

The bit of it that concerns you here in tertiary education is apparently called the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit. Here's the explanation of what it is:

> “The Strategy Unit (SU) was created in June 2002 as the result of a merger between the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), the Prime Minister's Forward Strategy Unit (PMFSU) and part of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS). The Strategy Unit hosts the Government Chief Social Researcher's Office (GCSRO).”

But apart from that, I'll admit I'm floundering. After about half an hour on the internet, I've managed to glean that various people have floated through number 10 making policy and apparently delivering it, people like Michael Barber who it seems has passed straight from there to McKinsey Plc via a knighthood. I think people like Lord Macdonald and Lord Birt have been involved, but to tell the truth I couldn't figure out who it is or how it is that someone who is called the Secretary of State for Education will now learn what policy he will bring to the House of Commons next month. I am quite serious. Will we ever know how it was decided that synthetic phonics was made government policy? Are there minutes somewhere that will reveal how the Clackmannan project was evaluated?

So, yes, clearly education is highly politicised, but that word “political” is a complicated creature. When, in the sixties, some of us walked about saying things like: “the personal is political” or “everything's political, man”, I don't think we had in mind that this meant that everything I do or think should have a number 10 policy unit considering it. So when educational sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Apple and Henry Giroux started looking at what they called the politics or sociology of education, I thought this was about things such as the political significance of how a school is structured, or the politics of how the curriculum is divided into subjects, or how it is that the social structure of a society reproduces itself through the education system. So, in a way, I'll admit it. I feel that we've been hoist by our own petard. When we said that politics had a lot to do with it, there was what might you call a “professionalist” approach that said, no, education is just education - which some people took to mean that education is a way of imparting skills and knowledge, and others said, yes, it is all that but you should add on some stuff about turning out

decent human beings too. The Thatcher-Blair-Cameron consensus seems to say over and over again that politics has everything to do with it and we'll control what goes on though a set of committees, think tanks, quangos, exams, testing, inspections, selection procedures, compulsory curricula and prescribed teaching methods.

This, we are assured over and over again, will deliver anything from social mobility, to freedom, via achievement for all, leading to greater competitiveness in the world market and therefore more prosperity for all in the UK. Of course much political banter of the politicking kind can go on over whether this or that test or method will deliver more, but in essence these are struggles over who looks more like they're on the side of parents who want the best for their kids - as if there are any parents out there who don't want the best for their kids.

The rhetoric around education as delivered by politicians has become a shorthand way to talk to people at their most vulnerable. It talks to those people who are parents and who are therefore anxious about the small human beings in their charge. The politician who talks caringly about education and critiques the status quo is the politician who's on my side. He or she will be making a contribution towards lifting one of my many anxieties about my children off my shoulders. It also talks to those people older than parents who feel in any way that things are getting worse. At several removes from schools, the political rhetoric can confirm that these older people came from a golden age before things went to the dogs. For younger people without children, politico-educational talk can sound buzzy and techno. It can be all enterprisey and Bluetoothy. In other words, it's become a bottomless pit of connotation, a resonant signifier without a signified, a glory-hole and a catch-all. What a gift we are to the people who rule us.

But I'm not by nature a pessimist. Teaching is done by human beings. The past twenty years has seen a steady rise in the ways in which teachers have been controlled. It's the only model that politicians seem to have for getting things done. Command and control. In its origins, it's a military model which brings to mind that poem by Bertolt Brecht:

> “General, your tank is a powerful vehicle.
> It smashes down forests and crushes a hundred men.
> But it has one defect:
> It needs a driver.
>
> “General, your bomber is powerful.
> It flies faster than a storm and carries more than an elephant.
> But it has one defect:
> It needs a mechanic.
>
> “General, man is very useful.
> He can fly and he can kill.
> But he has one defect:

He can think."

'From a German War Primer'
- Bertolt Brecht

I have always thought that teachers can think. In the particular segment of education where I mostly work, with literature and language for primary age children, I've come to the conclusion that literature and reading have become so reduced, dissected, cross-examined, abridged, chopped-up and tested that the most subversive, exciting and political thing to do now is to rush about creating moments in schools where the children will know for certain that all that they'll have to do with a book, a poem, a story or a play is enjoy it. No questions, no tests, no learning outcomes.

Yesterday, five poets - myself, Francesca Beard who's Chinese Malaysian in origin, Jared Louche from New York City, John Agard from Guyana and Valerie Bloom from Jamaica - read, performed, danced and sang to nearly two thousand primary school children at the Barbican Centre, accompanied by a band, with art and photos playing on a huge screen behind us. The children themselves joined in the poems, sang and danced; they heard about Windrush, Singapore, New York cabs, Chinese names, Yiddish rhymes, migrations, birth, lullabies; they heard raps, free verse, chants, couplets, street cries, calypso and quatrains, boogy woogy and klezmer. Next term at the London Metropolitan University a pair of us are hoping to set up the first of many conferences that will be devoted to nothing more nor less than making literature fun. Anyone anywhere who's ever found a way of introducing the stuff we call literature to children and students in such a way that means that they have a good time and want more of it will be welcome.

I could spell out the politics of this. I could go in for some whole disquisition on let's say the jouissance of the text, the politics of ambiguity, the utopian imperative, the cultural significance of heteroglossia, subversive laughter, the art of the possible and the possible of art, rendering the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar, the raised status of the implied reader raising the status of the real reader, and the intertext in all of us. But do you know? I won't. To my mind, the premium in this time, in this moment, is: literature is fun, eh? Which I think makes the acronym L.I.F. E., which is something I'm rather in favour of.

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