The Puzzle of the Public: (Re)Constructing the Teacher in the Public Service[1]

Martin Lawn

I am part of a project team conducting research on the restructuring of work in English primary schools.[2] The project has two chief aspects. It deals, first, with the impact of new kinds of work relations and teaching skills under new legislation on decentralized management, and new curriculum and assessment policies. The project is also interested in the "restructuring" of the public education service.

The idea of the public service has been deeply bound up with descriptions of the growth and development of education in this century in England. In the civil service, local government, the health service, and so on, the idea of a public service has operated as a key descriptor of the responsibilities and practices of work and client relations.

Teacher professionalism, especially in postwar England, was broadly associated with the rise of the public service of education. Teachers came to be "viewed" after 1945 as a collective partner in local and national government of education. Teacher professionalism and public service were closely entwined and symbiotically linked. Teachers were thought to deserve autonomy over aspects of their work.

Our interest in restructuring arose partly because of the belief that a period of distinctive practice and discourse was ending. Broadly speaking, we researchers perceived a shift in the form, content, and purpose of education, from forms characteristic of public service professionalism, to forms required by a nationally defined curriculum, its implementation, and its delivery. The basis of public service professionalism (partnership, autonomy, and teacher responsibility) either had been displaced or had been reduced by the recent shift in the control and specification of work. The practical disappearance of the

---

[1]A portion of this paper was more fully developed in "Orderings and Disorderings: Questions About the Work of the Primary Head in the New Public/Private Mix," in Martin Lawn, *Modern Times? Work, Professionalism and Citizenship in Teaching* (London: Falmer, 1996), 140–53.

[2]Martin Lawn, with Mairtin MacAnGhaill and Shaun Fielding, "Teaching in a Restructuring Public Service: An Exploration of the Impact of New Kinds of Work Relations and Skills in Teaching Within the Context of a Restructuring Public Service Ethos and Practice" (paper presented at the Canadian History of Education Association/History of Education Society [U.S.A.] Conference "Challenging Orthodoxies," Toronto, 17–20 October 1996).

© *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 9, no. 1 (1997): 107–115.

discourse of professionalism, previously favoured by government and teacher associations and other education participants, was significant; it was the end of an empowering language for teachers. In a period of duty, contract, centralized curriculum and assessment, performance measures, and labour market flexibilities, teachers no longer spoke the language of power.

THE WEAVING OF THE PUBLIC

Some background on the interweaving of the idea of the public in education and the way it implicates teachers will be useful in showing how that idea affected teachers.

In 1918, Sydney Webb,[3] the Fabian thinker and a crucial influence on Labour Party thinking on education, described a new government function of a "systematic education," noticed the large number and the special knowledge of teachers, and accepted the teachers' claim to "exercise a professional judgement, to formulate distinctive opinions upon [their] own and cognate services, and to enjoy [their] own appropriate share in the corporate government of its working life."[4] This description of teachers taking "an increased measure of corporate responsibility" for the running of the service (partly to mitigate a state bureaucracy) has a striking resonance in the postwar period (the 1940s and 1950s). Webb was arguing for the co-optation by the state of a large and growing group of workers who had to be turned away from working for the rich and powerful and toward "the entire community," that is,

> . . . it is the duty of each profession to take the needs of the whole community for its sphere . . . it must claim as its function the provision of its distinctive service wherever this is required, irrespective of the affluence or status of the persons in need . . . it must emphatically not regard itself as hired for the service only of those who pay fees and it must insist therefore on being accorded by public authority and where necessary at the public expense, the opportunity and the organisation that will enable this full professional service being rendered wherever it is required.[5]

Webb's ideas worked with the grain of progressive thinking, assuming the employee should have a recognized stake in her work, its organization, and its management. The added advantage for Labour, when this principle was applied to the new state-provided services, was that the employees were likely

---

[3]S. Webb, *The Teacher in Politics* [Fabian Society pamphlet no. 187] (London: Fabian Society, 1918). (The Fabian Society was a pressure group within the Labour Party for gradual social change.)

[4]Webb, *The Teacher*, 3.

[5]Webb, *The Teacher*, 8.

to become Labour supporters. The postwar arrival of the Labour Government[6] in 1945, the urgent need to rebuild the schools (with a scarcity of resources), the implementation of a new education Act, the shortage of teachers, and the creation of the welfare system, which incorporated education within the distribution of benefits, followed the success of the schools as agents of welfare in the preceding wartime.[7] This association with the emerging welfare services probably affected teacher's work the most. There arose a prevailing sense of public service (now consolidated into this welfare version), but also in the new idea of professionals working in a subject-based curriculum and/or a pastorally focussed organization.

Teacher training was extended and consolidated to provide teachers for the new educational organizations. A human-capital policy, in which investment in training and education created the base and infrastructure needs of the new society, was crucial to the expansion of the teacher-training system. New relationships were devised between universities and colleges to enable the up-skilling of primary and secondary teachers. Marten Shipman, in a commentary on education in the public service, points to the crucial relation between education and the social services in the planning of the new welfare state: "The services were to be universalistic, serving general and not sectional interests. They were to be comprehensive. . . . They were to be organized by the state."[8] Shipman argues that the emphasis on universalism and comprehensiveness was underpinned by an assumption about equality of opportunity and ways of ensuring the potential of all. Again, contemporary observers saw a connection between the employees in the growing welfare state sector as supporters of its ideals—universal and comprehensive rights, their responsibility to produce practical and operational policies for this sector—and their likely support for Labour and their professional power.

The period from the 1940s to the late 1970s has been described as an era of social democracy in which many public organisations were shaped by "the mantle of professionalism" (Burns, 1977). Such was the dominance of professionals and their values in the post war period that Perkin (1989) has called it

---

[6]Even in the 1960s, it was possible for a Labour Minister, A. Crosland, to restate the same position: "We are educational politicians and administrators, not professional educationalists" (quoted in M. Kogan, *The Politics of Education* [Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987], 60).

[7]Martin Lawn, "What is the Teacher's Job? Work and Welfare in Elementary Teaching 1940–1945," in Martin Lawn and Gerald Grace, *Teachers: The Culture and Politics of Work* (London: Falmer, 1987), 50–64.

[8]M. Shipman, *Education as a Public Service* (London: Harper, 1984), 30.

the high point in an "age of professionalism."[9] In the postwar period, progressivism of different kinds was closely linked with, even congruent with, a pervasive ideology of Englishness in which England's democratic values were compared with Europe's authoritarian regimes. A free press, the distribution of power, and controls on the government established another pillar in support of the idea that as professionals, teachers were partners with the local and central government.[10]

This gradual correlation between professionalism, a mass schooling, welfare and reconstructionist ideologies, and the making of a national and democratic identity produced a powerful discourse in which the powerful position of teachers was acknowledged. They argued as heroes of reconstruction, as pedagogic innovators, as carers, as partners of and within the public.

Our research concerned the massive changes wrought by the market and by regulation in English education, deliberately created to produce a new system of education in which associations with welfare were severed, in which professionals were construed as the problem and difference was substituted for comprehensiveness. We quite naturally began with the proposition that a period of professional power had come to an end.

FIRST FRUITS

Although the project proceeded by case study of contemporary schoolwork in primary schools, I wanted to develop a recent history of a school that would help comparison between the past and the present, especially in light of a want of historical information about the workings of state schools. There is no difficulty finding out what schools should be doing at any time, but much difficulty finding out what they did do. The intended and unintended consequences of a shift into a quasi-market-based education system have configured educational research responses to the reforms of the late 1980s but one of the main difficulties in researching this area is the lack of comparative data.

One method I chose was analysis of the school logbook. The logbook is the official record of the school, produced by the headteacher daily. The school logbook is an official diary, exclusive to the Head, who is the only one with the power to write it but who has to produce it for more powerful outsiders

---

[9]S. Ranson and J. Stewart, *Management for the Public Domain* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 45, citing T. Burns, *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World* (London: Tavistock, 1977) and H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: RKP, 1989).

[10]W. P. Alexander, *Education in England: The National System and How it Works* (London: Newnes, 1954).

(inspectors and their like). The historian of education in England is familiar with the logbook as a source of information about schooling, particularly late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century schooling. It is often treated as true, a factual record of public schooling, a document that can be mined for empirical data on legislative effects at school level, for example, or the establishment of school discipline on social classes, and so forth. The logbook is an obligation on the headteacher and its contents are concerned with absences and with events.

The logbook I dealt with was produced by headteachers of a primary school built in the mid-1950s. The logbook allowed a comparison of the same primary school in the public service and in the public/private service of the quasi-market, in different decades. As this particular logbook ended in the mid-1980s, simple comparison was not possible. The logbook contained texts produced by three Heads, writing in the 1970s and early 1980s.[11]

My approach to the logbook and its contents was influenced by recent work on the sociology of organizations, especially on the ordering of work, thus to make comparisons between the two periods. Shifts or changes in the school, described and inscribed by the Heads, are understandable in light of a mode of ordering,[12] that is, a way to describe the patterning of work and its social relations by organizational narratives. "Modes of ordering" contain descriptions of working, serve as explanations of working, and embody place and structure. They are ways of describing work and physical presences in it. The modes of ordering will be used to illuminate the position and perspective of the headteachers and to raise questions about the way their organizational narrative and ordering of work contrasts with the official and dominant discourse about state schools at the time. The school logbook is not read here as a commonsense quotidian narrative but as a way of seeing the work of the school, an organizational narrative which orders the school, its spaces, and its personnel. The school in question has remained physically the same since its creation and furbishment in the early 1950s and its physical layout and furniture still determine what is possible in the routines of the school. However, the mode of ordering of the school embodies more than commonsense routines. It orders the way people work, their understanding of what work is, and who does it. It configures the work relations of the school. Routines of work are implied in socially located ideas about the school, its teachers, and its purposes. The logbook is not just a set of entries but an attempt to determine

[11]The first part of the logbook was written by a Head from the start of the school in 1954 to his retirement in 1973; the second one retired in 1984; the last Head began in 1984.

[12]John Law, *Organizing Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

the work of the school, to inscribe a pattern of work relations and meanings upon it.

THE SCHOOL IN THE 1970S

Work is principally noticeable in the ideas of presence, absence, and space. The logbook contains a dizzying list of entries and exits by teachers. "Presence" is all that was required. A class had to be taken but the purpose of the "taking" is obscured. A teacher's emergency exit is as preoccupying as the management of planned exits. Somebody has always to be with the children. We know about teachers only by inference. The Head is preoccupied with making sure children are in class and there is an adult with them. Descriptions of partial or whole school closures show how children were contained. Snow, gas leaks, and heating problems feature as major events in the logbook mainly because of the exclusion of children from school from anywhere from an hour to a week. The logbook expresses, in a fairly rational and abrupt way, the Head's overriding concern with defining work and keeping it ordered. It is "work" if there are teachers in all the classes with their children, but not if children are unsupervised or excluded by teacher absence or structural emergency. Work can be understood as the use and non-use of space: in the Head's patterning of work, the classroom is a workplace, dependent on all other school spaces being clear of pupils and teachers. The staffroom space had no work function and the Head's room is the space from which all others are ordered.

Another idea used in describing teaching work is number. The number of children, of classes, and of teachers becomes the subtext of work. At the beginning of every year, the number of pupils is noted, a list of teachers and their classes is made, and those teachers without classes (supernumeraries) are listed with an explanation of their mobile work pattern. Yet although the crucial teacher/class relation is reported regularly, only presence, absence, space, and number define the patterning of work.

In the mid-1970s, a new patterning develops. The arranging of teachers became more visible, shifting from organization by class age group into grading by new, special posts (described as "responsibilities"). In 1973, for example, sixteen teachers worked in the school and nine had "scale post" responsibilities. That is, they received additional payments, on a rising scale, to take on additional (that is, school-wide, not class-based) tasks. These responsibilities are not described and may have been a reward for seniority or gendered role or scarcity.

The arrangement of teachers shows the Head's imposition (with LEA Officer permission) of priorities among curriculum areas and teachers, which

become visible in the logbook for the first time. The highest scale was given to a teacher who had been with the school since 1954, regularly took the top A-stream class, and specialized in music. Since music was a feature of the annual parents' evening and other concerts, involved a school band (of varying sizes), and was regularly praised by the Head, the Scale 4 award seems logical (scale posts ran from the lowest point, 1, to the highest, 4, in this scale). Needlework had a "Scale 3" posting. This area of study was sometimes supported by two part-time teaching assistants and so was a prominent feature of the curriculum. The School Annexe is separated from the Junior School by a walk of approximately forty yards and consists of several classrooms and a single year group: it had a Scale 3 posting for the teacher-in-charge. This patterning of work showed the Head's preference for new structures and relations of work. It was a variable, single reward given, without other information, on the basis of presence and absence. There was no other statement on the substantive nature of scale posts and their application. Not until the end of the 1970s did the Head note in the log that he had discussed new areas of "responsibility" with all members of staff, but still without explaining the reason to do so or the content of the discussions. Not until the 1980s is there any mention of staff meetings. The looseness of the scale descriptions, their connectedness/disconnectedness from the "areas of responsibility," and their arbitrary grading and arrival/disappearance suggest a system new to the Head's ordering of work in the school.

The boundaries between the school and the outside world are well defined in this period. One day every year the Head left the school and went to a meeting of local schools, including an Education Authority Officer, usually the Chief Education Officer. Inspectors assessed various elements of teachers' work. No teacher left the school to attend professional training until 1977. Then again in 1978, a teacher went out for that purpose. There were no further professional development exits until the early 1980s.

The teachers' knowledge base has to be surmised from their training. They had no in-service program. There is a great silence about their skills, curriculum knowledge, and, most of all, their classroom life. What they know may come from within the school, for example, by discussion or by reflection on practical experience, or it may be imported privately through family or friends. The work is confining, it is physically bounded, and exit and entry points are overseen. In this mode of ordering, the silence about their work appears to be intentional. It may reveal a dualism in which the Head represents the significant, rational ordering of thought in the school and the teachers represent the labourers fulfilling that ordering.

The school may be seen as quiescent and compliant. It orders itself while waiting for the Local Education Authority to decide what it wishes to do. It

may try to prompt the LEA but the logbook only once shows irritation with lack of LEA support, and this when the Acting Head, in the late 1970s, underlined the fact that it took 10 weeks to get a roof repaired.

Usually the school waits. It waits for the By-Laws Officer, the Divisional Administrative Assistant, the Head of Supplies, the Caretakers section, and City Engineers. It waits for the Inspector to come, to observe, and to propose or confirm. It perfects arguments to convince a centralized bureaucracy that a new floor-polishing machine is vital or there is a gas leak or there are no secure cupboards. It waits for an Inspector to call and close classrooms that are impossibly cold and that make children and teachers ill. The collected correspondence on the new curtains for the Hall and the time spent placating, consulting, and waiting for decisions outweighs most other single events, including successful curriculum implementation and music shows. Inspectors call and promote social studies or environmental studies or invite (demand) teachers' participation in major children's exhibitions, or some engagement in city twinning.[13] Teachers appear, redeployed from elsewhere, almost without notice. (The view of the patterning of work in the school available within the logbook is partial, of course, and limited by the nature of the document itself. This does not affect the argument about the patterning of work though it limits its range.)

The key words I have used to analyze this organizational narrative of the school are presence, absence, space, grading, confining, quiescence, and compliance. Although modes of ordering appear in the logbook as expressed by Heads, I see them as partially constructed by the nature of the school context in the 1970s, that is, they are effects of the public school system at the time. For the school in question, this meant the city Local Education Authority visible in the correspondence about elements of the school, such as its staffing or new curtains, or its opening or closure; or in the visits of its officials, such as engineers or inspectors. The latter would command, intervene in, inform, or agree with the work of the school.

However else the school in the public service may be configured (such as by government policies or through restated public and media accounts of service in education), one version of its ordering of the social relations of work in the primary school in a period of public service hegemony leads to the following conclusion: The school orders itself through a significant person, the Head, and through the actions of the city authority. Significant ordering occurs around the quantifiable and visible aspects of the school (teacher and pupil numbers and spaces) and not around qualitative and invisible aspects (such

[13]A postwar phenomenon, cities, towns, and villages are often twinned with similar places elsewhere in Europe. Exchanges of various kinds then ensue.

as learning, development, change, or classrooms). Significant internal and external ordering occurs as an effect of the power relations that construct the school as confined and compliant.

CONCLUSION

From one school logbook little may be expected. Yet by reading it in a particular way, through the concept of the ordering of schools by the head-teacher's organizational narrative, we find a counterpoint to the dominant and powerful notions of public service and its democratic partnership. Compliance and confinement are pervading themes.

Key elements of the modernist project in education, particularly professionalism, public service, and responsibility, were and still are used to describe and to explain teaching. This dominant discourse was used to explain the past, and is still used to analyze the present. In effect, it is not possible to explain the work of teachers without using "service" and "professionalism" as descriptors. Yet the way that we "see" teachers was and is dependent upon a pervasive discourse. By using another perspective on schools, and treating historical evidence differently, the gap between discourse about and organizational narratives of school is exposed. Although public descriptions of teachers are powerful, teachers appear in the school narrative quite differently: presence and absence in work are not the same as being a significant actor nor are quiescence and compliance the same as responsible professionalism. Above all, the confining aspect stands in contradiction to the wide-ranging cultural agent the discourse demands.

The way employees in the system of education used ideas meant to control them, turning them into bargaining tools or oppositional capacities, must not be overlooked. Even though they were controlled at work, teachers still had access to a powerful discourse they could use to advantage. So, partnership, professionalism, and autonomy came to have complex meanings. It is essential to understand the context in which they were used, by whom, and at which place and time. The obscuring of the work of schools, and the obscuring of particular spaces in the system, was and is brought about by the power of the mythology on their workings. We are still wanting reconstructions of the ways schools worked, the ways teachers might be created to perform in those schools, and the oppositional behaviours teachers exhibited.