What's in a name, or electric cars for all

Meet Michael. He is now fifteen, in Year 10, though he hardly ever attends school. I could tell you lots about Michael. About car crime, theft from parking meters, extortion from younger children, about his appearances in court, his definitely-not-coping family. I'm not going to go into any more detail because you don't want to know: his experiences are not, dear reader, your experiences, his life is not your life. If I'm wrong and you do wish to know more, perhaps you should examine your motives. Take it from me: Michael is, without the smallest shadow of a doubt, a member of that social group which is now commonly labelled as the underclass. And he goes to a school, my school, which commentators would, with equal confidence, categorise as a school for the underclass.

Michael's attitude to, and failure to engage with, the whole business of schooling makes him representative of a significant layer of the school population. In nearly a year of the GCSE course, he has only attended a small handful of lessons. When he is not truanting from school, he truants within school. We have no bikesheds, but Michael finds plenty of other places to hide, to have a smoke, to hang out. He has only one year left of statutory education. It is hard to imagine that he will leave school with any qualifications, or with any sense that the school mattered to him in any positive way. Schooling has not been a success for Michael. And his failure will contribute to the continuing stigmatisation of my school as a failing school.

But I have another reason for introducing Michael to you. I want to recall his contribution to a lesson last year. His class was about to start *Romeo and Juliet*. I had presented them with Juliet's "What's in a name?" speech in DevTray, a computer program which functions as a glorified version of hangman: the players are presented with a text from which most of the letters have been deleted. Their task is to guess the words, and so make sense of the text. The class, a mixed ability Year 9 group with a number of very bright, very motivated students, had collaborated well, quickly making sense of the text, drawing on their often very extensive prior knowledge of the play. Jennifer and Savannah, Andre and Sakir, Afi and Rabia were sharing information about the Montagues and the Capulets, about family rivalry as the underlying motive for all that happens and for Juliet's specific predicament at this moment in the play.

I was beginning to think that it was a good thing that this was to be the last time that *Romeo and Juliet* appeared on the SATs papers, the last time that Year 9 students would read it. The text had become too well-known, too familiar. The process of uncovering its meanings — and the meanings that each class made — had become too predictable.

Michael had arrived late. He was quiet, not obviously attending to what was going on around him. If I considered him at all, I imagined that he was relieved that he was not being asked to write or contribute to any small group work: it was a lesson where he would be left alone.
The students were focusing attention on the final lines of Juliet's speech:

> Romeo, doff thy name;
> And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
> Take all myself.

I had engaged in a little routine about what "doff" meant, asking David, for the *n*th time that lesson, to doff his baseball cap. I was, I think, pushing the class to bring the whole speech together, to understand the coherence of Juliet's anti-essentialist argument and how it provides both a measure of her love and a resolution to her dilemma: if Romeo's name is not a necessary part of his identity, her love for him can exist apart from all the baggage of the families' enmity. So far, so straightforward.

And then Michael piped up. It's not that simple, he said. It's like *Titanic*. I asked him to explain. So he did. He summarised the film's storyline, the love affair between working-class, strictly steerage Jack (Leonardo di Caprio) and upper-class Rose (Kate Winslet). He analysed Rose's situation as one in which she was constrained by her name, by her family, by her place in society — and he suggested that Rose's very identity was not separable from her class position. Go on, I said. Well, Rose is like this one, Juliet. She talks about getting rid of her name, or Romeo getting rid of his name, but it's not as easy as that. She's part of a rich family. Her family name means something: without that name, she'd be no-one.

I do not pretend to quote Michael verbatim, but I have represented his intervention in the lesson as accurately as I can. What he said made me reconsider the whole speech and its relationship to the rest of the play. The problem that many students have with the Romeo and Juliet is that they find it difficult to understand why Juliet doesn't just leave home and find somewhere to live with Romeo. Michael's dazzling display of intertextual understanding presents an answer to this, an answer that is rooted in the realities of class society. In presenting a reading of Juliet's speech, Michael shows how her demand that Romeo doff his name, and her whole attempt to separate Romeo's identity from his name, is a desperate attempt to deny the reality and determining power of the society in which they both live. Michael's reading makes Juliet's words infinitely more poignant precisely because he has understood the complexity of the relationship between her words and her situation.

I have dwelt on this moment because it seems to me to pose in a very sharp way the problems that I have both with the current orthodoxies of education policy-making and also with the most well-publicised critiques of such policy.

When Nick Davies's essays on the crisis in the education system were published in the *Guardian*, they were met with a quite unprecedented reaction. Teachers, at any rate, read and talked about them with interest, enthusiasm and approval. I think Davies gauged this response accurately in his foreword to *The School Report* (Davies [2000]), the publication of the nine pieces in book form:

> Normally, when you publish an investigation in a newspaper, you hope you are uncovering something which nobody knows. With these stories, however, we did the reverse — we delivered something which masses of people knew but which no one with any power would admit (p. vii).

In saying that I think Davies is correct in this assertion, I recognise that I cannot claim to speak for all teachers, nor even for all teachers working in inner city schools. But my impression is that there was a widespread recognition that someone had dared to point out the obvious: that when it came to the Labour government's record on education, the emperor's new clothes were

the borrowed rags of the previous administration. And it would not be surprising if an analysis of the failures of Britain's schools were to strike more of a chord with someone like me, working in a school that was conspicuously failing — and which was conspicuously failed by government policy.

When the New Labour government came to power, it made it clear that it was interested in "standards, not structures" (DfEE, 1997, p. 7). In effect this single statement of intent located the problem of schools in the quality of teaching (and, by implication, the quality of teachers). David Blunkett, Secretary of State at the Department for Education and Employment, made the same point when he focused attention on "poverty of expectation". The clear implication was that the root cause of failure was that teachers' and students' expectations were too low, and therefore that any attempt to pose questions about the relationship between educational attainment and poverty itself — actual material poverty — was to be dismissed as mere special pleading, an excuse not a cause.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, the former chief inspector of schools, Chris Woodhead, has recently restated the position that he shares with David Blunkett:

> Why do some schools achieve such excellent results? The answer is down to the men and women who work in them. The better teachers teach, the more children learn. The more intelligent the leadership, the better the teaching is likely to be.
> Does this really need saying? It does. Some argue that everything depends on the quality of the pupil intake; that some schools serve sink estates and, therefore, will always be sink schools. Many inner-city schools do have to deal with children from difficult backgrounds, but there is clear evidence that schools can succeed whatever the problems of the communities they serve (*Telegraph*, 12 May 2001).

Woodhead's words are clearly intended as a reply to Nick Davies. What Davies has done is to reopen the debate about structures by demonstrating that they matter. What each of his nine articles reveals is that standards are inextricably linked to structures, to the ways in which educational opportunity is differently structured for different segments of the population, and the extent to which education itself has to be seen within the wider context of a society riven by structural inequality.

One of the essays makes an extended comparison between Roedean College, a top girls' private school, and its near geographical neighbour, the Stanley Deason Comprehensive Schol on the Whitehawk estate in Brighton. What emerges from this tale of two schools is a miniature history of British education in the past half century:

> The two head teachers with their very separate experience can see the same three factors at work in their success and in their failure: the intake of motivated children; the provision of resources; the freedom to be professional. The stars of the private sector have all three. The perceived failures of the state sector work with none of them. In each case, the state sector has suffered from government policy: from the Tory reforms of the late 1980s which polarised the intake of children in state schools, concentrating the least motivated in to struggling schools like Whitehawk; from the historic underfunding of British state education, which has been reversed by New Labour only in rhetoric; and from the enormity of the current interference by the DFEE and its agents with their highly politicised analysis. The great irony here is that the

> DFEE are trying to emulate private schools by adopting a superstructure of reforms which, almost without exception, is regarded with fear and contempt by the private schools themselves (pp. 80-81).

So where does Michael's reading of *Romeo and Juliet* come into all this? What makes me think that I can possibly use one moment in a classroom as a counterpoise to swathes of government education policy? Doesn't my approach make an alp out of an anecdote? Well, yes it does. And it does so quite deliberately. Because what bothers Nick Davies about the government's approach — the gap between the fine words of policy and the grim reality it leaves untouched (or, more often, reinforces) — bothers me too. But I am also bothered by the categories which operate in Nick Davies's book, the extent to which its journalistic roots are showing.

Where I think Davies is absolutely right is in his analysis of the structural problems of the education system in this country, his emphasis on the critical influence of funding, admissions procedures and government policies in shaping (and mis-shaping) the educational experiences and destinies of young people. Where I think he is on shakier ground is in his understanding of the history of what might be described as progressive educational currents and in his representation of the young people themselves. These flaws lead him to propose solutions that bother me; the solutions, interestingly enough, are in some respects quite close to what the government is now proposing in its Green Paper, *Schools: building on success* (DfEE [2001]*)*. Davies looks at schools as if there were a binary opposition between politics and education. His view of government intervention in education since the 1970s, at least, is that ministers "substituted ideology for understanding in a debate which has been poisoned by politics" (p. 44). He quotes with approval the words of Nigel de Gruchy, leader of the NASUWT, the second largest teachers' union: "The 1970s reforms were driven entirely by lecturers and education directors and politically motivated union leaders" (p. 45). The whole history of progressive education in the 1970s and 1980s is reduced to a caricature:

> There are teachers now who shake their heads in embarrassment at the memory of the days when they refused to mark their students' work for fear of criticising them; or when they re-wrote the curriculum to take account of their belief that they were all racist imperialists; or when they taught the children educational games about bosses and workers (p. 45).

This is not a history which I recognise. I came to train and work as a teacher in Inner London in the early 1980s partly because of the reputation of the Inner London Education Authority. But I also came from Oxford with a smug sense of how much I had to offer. What I found was that I had much to learn. I am embarrassed by the memory of my complacency. I am not at all embarrassed to recollect the teachers and teacher-trainers whom I met and worked alongside.

What was impressive about such colleagues was their commitment to principles of equality and justice; what was equally impressive was their working out of these principles in the day-to-day business of teaching and learning, in the thousands of interactions with school students which make up a teacher's life.

I have never encountered a teacher who refused to mark a student's work: I have worked alongside many who recognised the complexity of what is involved in responding to a student's work, who, out of a commitment to taking students seriously and to doing all that they could to

encourage and empower those students, used marking as a dialogic process. Such a view has become deeply unfashionable. And now, every day of my working life, I have to deal with the consequences of another model of marking. Every day I encounter students as young as eleven who have been marked for life by the new model of marking. "I'm only a level 2, I'm stupid." "I can't read that — I failed my SATs." And, just as pernicious, "I'm not working with him, I'm a level 5. He's thick."

Davies appears to sneer at revisions of the curriculum which took account of the reality of racism and imperialism. Is there something ridiculous about, for example, Said's (1993) project in *Culture and Imperialism*? Or is it only when school teachers presume to consider such lofty matters as the construction of the curriculum? I arrived in London having spent seven years in the English faculty at Oxford without reading a single book by a black author. Didn't my canon need a little re-examination, a little broadening?

Recently a colleague in my department has been reading Claudette Williams's "The Invisible Mass of the Back Row" with a Year 8 class. It's an autobiographical narrative, dealing with the author's childhood migration from Jamaica to England. It tells of two encounters, in two quite different classrooms, with the story of Columbus. And it enacts a conflict between two opposed models of history: traditional, eurocentric, imperialist history on the one hand, and on the other a history from below, a history of resistance and struggle, a history of emancipation. In the course of their reading of the story, Lorna's students produced their own definitions of history. Here are some of them:

> History is about the past; that means things that happened a long time ago. It can't be changed.
> History is about the past. It is something that happened a long time ago. Some people have forgotten history and some people cannot forget.
> History is the past culture of a country, religion, etc. – outstanding events that are in the past, e.g. apartheid, the assassination of Kennedy (JFK).
> History is anything from the past. Or anything from your past. You can identify any bits of information you had in books or records from the old age or the present.
> History is a thing that happened years ago, like famous events. Everyone has history. History has got us here today.
> History is a past-tense event – the things that got us here today, a file of dates with sense of the past, like when Martin Luther King led his people to where they are today, or World War I and II. They are still important today, even though they happened a long time ago.
> History is what happens in the past, to do with famous people and events. But history will stay with us to the day we die. History can be in books and it can be told.
> History is the past that is told differently over the years, take for example the Bible in the Old and New Testaments. *Who decides what is history?* It is a hard question, but I think the people with the money and the power decide.
> History is a moment in time that happened in the past, e.g. Noah, and history can be counted as something that happened a second ago. There are lots of sorts of history, e.g. black history.
> History is something that was done in old days and which is worked on today.

I have quoted a number of 8G's definitions because part of the point lies in the variety of responses. Here Lorna has provided the space and the opportunity for her students to think about

the definition of a school subject, and to think about their own relationship to the subject. Lorna's students understand the need to re-write curricula because they know that there are "lots of sorts of history", because they know that history is "told differently over the years." They also recognise, however, that it is legitimate to pose the question of the relationship between the construction of the curriculum and the power relationships that exist in society at large: "Who decides what is history?"

Davies's gibe at games of bosses and workers sits oddly in a book which is so honest about the class divisions in English society which exert such a profound influence on education. If these things exist, are they not a fit subject for school students to study?

David Blunkett has talked about the "tainted legacy" of comprehensive education. I am proud to have known and collaborated with so many teachers committed to comprehensive education, teachers for whom the notion of equality of opportunity has been a structuring principle throughout their professional lives. There may well be teachers who are now embarrassed by this legacy, who see it as a phase through which they have passed. There are many who are not. Davies writes movingly about the plight of many of the children in our society. He tells the story of a day in the life of a group of truants from a south London tower block — and he insists that these children are representative of many others:

> It is easy to imagine that there is a safety net somewhere else, that the children outside the liftshaft in the block are unusual. They are not. All over the country, we found children out of school whose lives are grossly disfigured and who were receiving no effective help: an eleven-year-old girl in Kent who was spending her evenings in a van while her mother, a prostitute, pleasured punters in the back (no school for eighteen months when we last heard of her); a fourteen-year-old girl in Hammersmith who had been living in a car with her homeless parents; an eleven-year-old boy, also in Hammersmith, who was found abandoned at Heathrow Airport; a diaspora of Somalian children, some of whom have seen their parents killed; a fifteen-year-old girl in North Wales who was sleeping on a bench outside the local social services office and still could not get help (p.140).

Davies points out the contradictions in government policy. For all the rhetoric of inclusion, schools are reluctant to admit pupils whose impact on the performance data — exam results, attendance, exclusions — will only be negative. He analyses the inadequacy of current provision, of mentoring schemes and the like. In his final chapter, he suggests some solutions. He argues that, though it is necessary to address the chronic underfunding of schools, there is also a pressing need to look at the content of education. I agree. But the question which Davies then poses seems to me to be entirely the wrong one: "Why have we accepted for so long that education is academic?" (p. 172). He goes on to makes the case, with examples drawn from Holland and Barking, East London, for practical and vocational education as a way of motivating students who are alienated by the "academic" curriculum that is the norm in English schools. In arguing for the creation of separate pathways, vocational and academic, it would seem that Davies has won the ear of government ministers. The DfEE Green Paper (2000), *Schools: building on success*, proposes a radical shift away from the model of the national curriculum as an entitlement for all students throughout the period of statutory education:

> From 14, the curriculum will offer a significant degree of choice. … A variety of opportunities will be tailored to each person's aptitudes, abilities and preferences … (4.41)
>
> In the future, a 14 year old who wants to pursue a career in the hotel and catering industry may choose a Hospitality and Catering GCSE in a wider programme involving practical activity in the workplace and vocational study at a nearby college (4.46).

I have two problems with this model, and both take me back to Michael and his reading of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The first is that it simply doesn't relate to the reality of life in a class society such as ours. We do not live in a world where jobs are of equal status or where different careers offer equal rewards. Which fourteen-year-olds will "choose" to pursue a career in the hotel and catering industry? How will such "choices" be made? How many middle-class children will choose this pathway? Over the years a number of students whom I have taught have spent their two weeks of work experience in hotels. The more independent-minded have usually not stayed the distance; the ones who have return to school with a sense of how (relatively) pleasant the school is, how much it has to offer. Most jobs in the hotel and catering industry match closely my students' experiences: they are very badly-paid, casual jobs, predominantly carried out by women, often by migrant workers. They are not rewarding jobs, nor are they jobs which demand high levels of skill or training. For all the fine words of the Green Paper, this is not about choice but about exclusion: this pathway is a road to nowhere.

The second problem is that the model is premised on a notion that it is possible, desirable and equitable to categorise children according to their particular "aptitudes" and "abilities" — and then to make separate provision on the basis of these categories. Is the problem with Michael that he is not "academic"? Is that the problem with all the damaged, neglected and disaffected children whose lives Nick Davies chronicles? Of course not. The whole reason for my starting-point is the evidence it provides of a powerful intelligence at work, making sense of a complex text in a collaborative context. But you can be absolutely confident that the pathway that Michael would be sent down would not be one which would present him with such opportunities. And what of Lorna's class? Should I have selected only those definitions that had been produced by students who might, in the current parlance, be labelled "gifted and talented"? Was it inappropriate to pose such big, abstract theoretical questions as those pertaining to the construction of knowledge to a mixed-ability class of Hackney twelve-year-olds?

I think Davies is absolutely right to problematise the current construction of the curriculum, to see it as a block on many students' learning. But his proposed solution will, I fear, only deepen the alienation. I want to suggest that the way out of this impasse is there, in the evidence he presents. It is there in the story that Mrs Metham, the headteacher of Roedean, tells Davies about the electric car project:

> Her head of physics decided that Year Nine would learn a lot from designing and building an electric car, to be entered into a competition at Goodwood racecourse, and so he rewrote the whole physics course for them. Mrs Metham said, 'We didn't have to check whether it fitted with Attainment Target A or whether the ticks would be in the right boxes. Being

> independent, we can choose how best to excite and inform our pupils — free from bureaucratic constraints' (p. 80).

Where is the academic/vocational divide in this curriculum? Which pathway are the Roedean girls following? What the physics teacher at Roedean was doing was designing a curriculum to meet the needs of the students. Which takes me back to the derogatory reference Davies makes to the tradition of progressive education. What he disparages there seems to me to be remarkably close to the practice which he praises at Roedean – a practice that is based on attentiveness to how children learn, a practice which seeks to engage students in meaningful, meaning-making activity, a practice not limited by bureaucratic constraints but also free from assumptions about each learner's (in-)ability.

The electric car project seems to me to fit perfectly with Carole Edelsky's analysis of the difference between literacy which is reading and literacy which is "NOT-reading" — in other words, literacy which remains merely an exercise, not a meaningful interaction with print. She makes the point that:

> some projects (like building a house or publishing a newsletter or organizing a science fair or lobbying for better playground facilities) have the potential to override their institutional *raison d'etre* so that other purposes can be foregrounded. If students take on any big project with multiple embedded tasks in such a way that learning is subordinated to production … then the embedded tasks at least, if not the big project, are no longer exercises. For instance, in the case of producing a newsletter, though the 'because motive' (what instigated the whole enterprise) might be instruction, the 'in order to motive' (the hoped-for outcome) of some of the embedded tasks … can become more tied to producing the newsletter. Instruction in writing headlines, then, would not be instruction for the sake of instruction but instruction for the sake of the newsletter. The 'lesson' here is that school tasks do not have to be academic (i.e. instruction- or evaluation-focused exercises) [Edelsky,1996, p.102].

Are such embedded tasks only for students at Roedean? Should Michael be constrained by the drills, the spelling tests and all the other paraphernalia of the National Literacy Strategy? Will they inspire him to attend school regularly?

Following Nigel de Gruchy's lead, Davies got his history wrong. Such practices did not originate in the fiat of a director of education or in the fanciful theories of an education professor. They started off from classroom teachers' awareness of what was not working, of what – and who — was being excluded from the curriculum. And they started off from the fact that students, their parents and their communities were prepared to question such processes of exclusion. Look again at Lorna's students' ideas about history. Look at what these statements begin to suggest about the complex subjectivities of the people who wrote them. And be wary of sending these children off down a pathway that is only a cul-de-sac.

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