

Chris Watkins

Institute of Education, University of London. Head of academic group – assessment, guidance, and effective learning 1995–2000, MA course leader 1992–2005; reader in education 2000–present

‘Not papering over the cracks’: Learning from a school-based MA at Hampstead School

I first experienced Hampstead School in 1975. I was new to London, and a friend through other circles, Chris Robertson, enabled me to talk with some young people about research I was doing into adolescents’ perceptions of social episodes. So I found myself walking along Westbere Road one morning with pupils arriving at school, and as I went in and found my way around, I immediately had a feeling I have in a small number of schools: I felt at home. Having been a teacher in a comprehensive school in Kent – the only comprehensive school in Kent – I was used to crowdedness and busyness, but here there was a great sense of engaged activity and connectedness.

Waiting outside the deputy head’s office, I noticed that any student who was late to school was asked to report to her office, or if she was unavailable, to write up their reasons for lateness. It made interesting reading, including gems such as ‘Abducted by aliens’ – a foretaste of the creative communication to come!

As the next couple of decades went by I continued to meet teachers from Hampstead School at a range of meetings and conferences that were commonplace in London teachers’ lives in those days, such as Saturday conferences where 200 teachers turned up to discuss such things as personal–

social education and the national curriculum. Hampstead teachers usually struck me as engaged and active professionals with a real commitment to make schooling an important aspect of young people's lives. Such commitment was not always a feature of the teachers I was meeting in other schools.

So when in 1997 the possibility arose of working with my colleague Louise Stoll to run a school-based Master's degree at Hampstead, I was keen. October 1997 saw a whole-school inset day to introduce the programme and invite teachers to join. In negotiation with the senior colleagues in the school, the theme was not the usual 'training' by outsiders that such days have mostly become. Its title was *Future Schools and How to Get There From Here*, with staff working in differently composed groups through the day. After a presentation on predictions about the future, staff were invited to say which three they would fight for and which three they would fight against. Then the conversation moved to school, supported by the results of a just-completed staff survey on key themes in school effectiveness. The highest level of agreement was with these two items: 'If staff have problems with their teaching they are likely to turn to colleagues for help', and 'Staff encourage pupils to try their very best.' These struck me as affirming evidence of the school's culture. Perhaps more important was the fact that when staff were asked to respond to the same questionnaire items in terms of rating their importance for a school to be effective, three items received almost unanimous support: 'The primary concern of everyone in the school is pupil learning', 'Teachers in this school make efforts to learn from their own practice', and 'Teachers in this school believe that all pupils can learn'. The potential that derived from such an explicit focus on learning excited me, and my own earlier impressions of Hampstead staff were affirmed by the fact that a majority of them agreed with the statement, 'I feel I am making a significant difference to the lives of my pupils'.

Staff comments in the questionnaire also highlighted the high energy level of the school at that time through comments such as, 'We've seen more pilots than British Airways'. But a thoughtful resolution to a time of multiple initiatives was also reflected in comments such as, 'We must replace bandwagons with successful innovations to avoid the unnecessary overload'. With this start, 14 colleagues began the core module, which was designed to address issues of understanding learning and teaching and then go on to examine how change may be promoted. After-school sessions in the staffroom saw the group involved in addressing active collaborative learning in an active collaborative way. Brief presentations, reading, and discussion took us into all the key areas. And very soon it was clear that these busy teachers were prepared to stretch themselves in thinking and practice. On

occasions when I might refer to a particular text and ask whether anyone was interested to read it, there were always more requests than copies. This was not my experience in other schools.

As the meetings went on it became clearer that participants were seeking to learn deeply, and they chose to address such issues as the quality of learning in classrooms, departments, and whole school; how matters of creativity and motivation were handled; and an examination of what dynamics explained the small number of disaffected teachers who did not engage in a learning culture.

The following term saw us addressing change, leading to colleagues proposing how change should best be handled in the school contexts they knew and worked in. After completing other modules at the IOE, the MA was completed by dissertation. These addressed and investigated a rich range of key issues, including pupil grouping, using ICT to improve learning, gender patterns in mathematics, disaffected pupils, and so on. The school carried out its own evaluation, which highlighted that ‘participants feel they have derived considerable personal professional benefits from the MA, in particular the core module, the way it was taught and its impact on teaching and learning’.

Because school-based Master’s degrees were an unusual form of provision at the IOE, we engaged the services of an external evaluator. The report included: ‘Teachers were unanimous in endorsing the MA in School Development, despite initial administrative hitches and some anxiety about the additional work’. One of the significant comments about the MA in relation to the school was: ‘Schools that wanted to paper over the cracks wouldn’t do it’. Respondents agreed that ‘Staff who were not participating in the course should be kept in touch with the programme and its outcomes, so as to involve as many people as possible in facing future challenges’.

The course could even have had impact beyond the school, with some of the group creating their own publications (Sullivan, 2000; Rayner, 1999), and – dare I suggest – one of them leading similar provision of a Master’s in Teaching and Learning in what may be a similar style.

So my first impressions with pupils were affirmed and extended with staff: that a socially active and engaging, communicative environment can also be one in which our key educational goals can be achieved. In today’s terms it has been shown that few educational systems achieve both equity and excellence. The key element of classroom and school effects is their culture, and here I saw a culture for achieving both. I saw that the school was run as an organization for learning and making a difference, rather than the corporate style that has been growing in secondary schools more recently and in some cases has led to the regression of schooling to an authoritarian past. The

staff at all levels were engaged with thinking about the future, and there was very little divisive talk, the sort that puts people – students or teachers – into categories and stops there. Certainly differences were noted and talked about, but in a way that sought to understand and address them for the greater good. Whether it related to disaffected staff or students, I found the people I worked with wanted to understand better in order to improve matters. And it seems significant that I can hardly remember any talk of ‘ability’, or the dominant classroom practices that utilize this hypothetical term.

My experience at the school affirmed my belief that committed teachers in demanding contexts are prepared to stretch themselves even further, if they are treated to a collaborative inquiry-based culture. In 1997 there had already been years of the ‘discourse of derision’ (Ball, 1990), which government used against teachers and schools. But Hampstead teachers were prepared to be resilient in the face of this and to continue to follow high-level educational goals. I left with a strengthened conviction that schools that focus on learning make the biggest difference to students’ lives. At about the same time as co-leading the MA in Hampstead, I founded the Institute-based MA in Effective Learning. This was in part a response to the post-national curriculum world, in which it became impossible to maintain courses in pastoral care and personal–social education, and my colleagues and I resolved to address the core matter that had motivated us: learning, in a rich and human sense. My years leading the MA in Effective Learning were a brilliant experience, with teachers from London schools transforming – and I do not use that word easily – the culture of learning in their classrooms (see some examples in Watkins, 2005). But they reported this as being an increasingly difficult job: in schools other than Hampstead, the context was not helping. So in 2005 I resigned my full-time post in order to work more with the contexts and dynamics that were affecting learning, and since then have been leading projects to support the development of learning-centred classrooms and schools in a range of places across England.

One of the peculiar things about schools is that in most of them, learning is rarely discussed (Watkins, 2003). Increasingly the talk about ‘performance’ in terms of grades and levels has forced out a focus on learning, even more so than the previous (and returning) focus on teaching. Yet the research evidence demonstrates that a focus on learning can enhance performance in learning and achievement in tests and examinations, while a focus on performance alone can actually inhibit these achievements, for a number of reasons related to how people learn (Watkins, 2010). This evidence contradicts what has become known as ‘the state theory of learning’ in England: the idea that a combination of the repeated high-stakes testing

of pupils, a national curriculum, and mandated pedagogy in numeracy and literacy will raise 'standards' (Balarin and Lauder, 2009).

The value of a developed focus on learning emerges as a finding in research, and more recently at international level as a hallmark of the top-performing countries such as Finland. It is increasingly hard to find in England's secondary schools. Examples such as Mathew Moss School in Rochdale or Bay View School in Gosport offer inspiring experiences, but the overall picture has changed as a result of successive governments adopting a pressurizing role, alongside a narrowing of educational goals to the achievement of grades in public examinations. The dynamics of fear (Galton and MacBeath, 2008) that I now experience affecting schools in England was not in evidence in Hampstead School.

My own learning has involved me and my colleagues spending a number of years on how best to organize decades of research and understanding about learning in classrooms (Watkins *et al.*, 2007). Our core headings were: active learning, collaborative learning, learner-driven learning, and learning about learning. These four apply equally to teachers' learning.

References

- Balarin, M. and Lauder, H. (2009) 'The governance and administration of English primary education', in R. J. Alexander, C. Doddington, J. Gray, L. Hargreaves and R. Kershner, (eds) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 733-750.
- Ball S (1990) *Politics and Policy Making in Education*, London: Routledge
- Galton, M. and J. Macbeath (2008). *Teachers Under Pressure*. London, Sage.
- MacBeath J, Kirwan T, and Myers K. (2001). *The Impact of Study Support: a study into the effects of participation in out of school hours learning on the academic attainment, attitudes and attendance of secondary school students*. London, DfES.
- Rayner L (1999) Weighing a century with a website: teaching Year 9 to be critical thinkers. *History Issue* 96, p13-22
- Sullivan, J. (2000). "Stand and deliver - the teacher's integrity?" in C. Watkins, C. Lodge and R. Best (eds) *Tomorrow's Schools Towards Integrity*. London, Routledge
- Watkins, C. (2003). *Learning: a sense maker's guide*. London, Association of Teachers and Lecturers.
- Watkins, C. (2005). *Classrooms as Learning Communities: what's in it for schools*. London, Falmer/Routledge.
- Watkins, C. (2010). *Learning, Performance and Improvement* Research Matters series 34. London, Institute of Education, International Network for School Improvement
- Watkins, C. (2012). "Driven or driving? Flat or flying? The state our schools are in." *Leadership Today* 4(2): 102-104.
- Watkins, C., E. Carnell, and C. Lodge (2007). *Effective Learning in Classrooms*. London, Sage.