WHAT’S WRONG WITH SCHOOLS?

Rob Donovan

A Teacher's Tale

This story starts at the end which was a beginning.

RESIGNATION

On Thursday 10th May at 12.45 p.m., in the lunch interval at school, I resigned from teaching in the State Secondary System. For twelve years I had been a paid employee of the state, first for five years with one local authority, and then for seven years with another. I had been a Department Head for eleven of those twelve years.

I knocked on the door of the Headmaster's room. I waited.

'Come!'

Greetings were exchanged. I waited. There was a perceptible delay and then I was offered a seat. I sat down and saw myself from outside. I felt cosy. I smiled and shut my eyes.

'Well, what can I do for you?'

'I think, Mr Johnson, the time has come for Mr Donovan and Benfield to part company.'

There was a pause. I searched his face for an emotion. It was the face of a politician. He was giving nothing away. I moved away from the prepared strategy and the rehearsed words, and instead I reached into my pocket and produced an envelope containing a copy of the letter of resignation I had sent that morning to the Director of Education. I handed it to him, explaining the nature of the contents. Still, no emotion – neither surprise, pleasure, disappointment nor anger.

'May I ask what you will be doing now, if that's not too much an intrusion into your private affairs?'

An opening, at last.

‘Of course. I shall be happy to explain – and I assume you would also be interested in my reasons for resignation.’

A barely discernible nod sufficed for an answer. It was going to be less painful for him, though, than he might have feared.

‘In brief, Mr Johnson, I have become increasingly aware over the last decade …’

‘The last decade!’ he exploded, with a derisive laugh.

‘Yes. For the last ten years”, I replied immediately and gently with something like a relieved chuckle. Now I could feel more in control of my emotions. The words began to flow more easily.

‘For the last decade I have had this developing sense of a mismatch between my educational philosophy and the values, beliefs and attitudes I find prevailing within the education system.’

I really was talking as if I was writing it down. He looked through me, pityingly.

And then I explained how I would be teaching privately in my own home in Oxford. I could earn enough to keep wife, dog, cat and myself off the streets.

He nodded again, thinking for a moment.

‘Now what ideas do you have about your successor? Your deputy, what do you think about his suitability?

That was it, apart from a few clichés about the excellence of the Department that I had already heard at intervals over the years. I walked out, a free man, back into the corridors of a school where I would see out the next nine weeks, envied I think by all the staff and the recipient of much kindness from the youngsters. There was a sense of sorrow on my part, but the overwhelming feeling was one of relief. I had made it. I had escaped, with my integrity and health intact – bruised but strong enough to re-group and develop a creative and fulfilling life.

SOME BACKGROUND

How had it come to this? Why had I concluded that teaching in Benfield, teaching anywhere in the state secondary system, was no longer for me?

I had come into the profession of teaching thirteen years previously as a man with a mission. I had a secular vocation. My first post – where I remained for five years – was in a secondary modern school in Slough. When I told my Oxford tutor that I had decided to make my career in teaching, he applauded my worthy choice and began to talk about the contacts he knew within the world of public schools. He said nothing at first when I explained that neither public nor grammar schools were my intended platforms. Then he uttered two words: 'Good luck'.

My Oxford life began with an open scholarship to read modern history at St Catherine's College and ended with a good second-class honours degree achieved on the back of a great deal of last term revision. I did win a college cup for debating which I then could not find when the time came to return it. My mind was not always as well focused as it perhaps should have been. In the summer vacation between my second and third year, I married the history student from St Anne's College whom I had met after ten days at the very beginning of the Oxford adventure. (She did get a first-class degree.) We were rather proud that we were both fined for our activities as members of the Committee of One Hundred, a subset of the Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students in 1968. After three years, I was all set to harness my talents in the interests of the under-privileged, the under-valued, and the so-called failures of the system.

Like a number of other youngsters from lower-middle/working class backgrounds who succeed academically and so gain entrance to new social worlds, I faced problems in reconciling the tensions that now had me in their grip. My solution at that stage was to reconcile myself with my roots through teaching those with whom I could in some sense identify. I had been a backward infant who

had been rescued by fine teachers. My entry into a grammar school came after failing the 11-plus first time around and passing only after supplementary tests and an interview. It was in that grammar school that inspirational teachers succeeded in boosting my confidence and nourishing my mind to the point of winning an Oxford scholarship. Now, as an adult, equipped with a degree and a post-graduate certificate of education, I was all set to return the favour. Moreover, I was a child of the sixties. I was a Romantic. I believed in the pursuit of the ideal and saw education as a most powerful and creative force. At its best, so splendidly subversive of all that is false in society.

Within eighteen months I had not only become the Department Head in this Slough secondary modern, through a combination of good fortune, hard work and proven success, but was also a paid-up, card-carrying member of the CPGB – the Communist Party of Great Britain and very soon the assistant secretary of the Slough branch. My head was in an ideological spin. Twelve months later this political love affair with the CPGB ended in disillusion. I left, with my wife, for the giddier heights of what we perceived as the truly revolutionary International Socialists. Throughout these years, my commitment to teaching and those I taught remained intense and more and more effective. Teachers' expectations are a critical determinant of pupil performance. I had discovered the research finding in my training and was thrilled to validate it in my professional life.

A couple of months after the split from the CPGB, my wife and I were extricated from the crushed remains of our maroon Ford Cortina that had become entangled around a lamp post on the A412 very close to the school where I taught. My wife's body was taken from behind the driver's wheel to begin a journey that would take it to the crematorium via the mortuary. I was eased from the passenger seat to a hospital bed. My journey through coma, consciousness, memory return, and grief, would in the end lead me to a more conventional life. As I began to pick up the pieces of my world I found that I had rejected political extremism. I was left somewhat incredulous that it was really I who had journeyed down those paths.

So, with more relish than most perhaps, I began to bite deeply into the cherries of life, occasionally pausing to reflect upon the significance of unexpected stones. I was still the optimist. Teaching remained the most satisfying activity I could imagine in the world of work and had played an important part in my own recovery. I was proud to be in education.

Two and a half years after the Cortina tragedy I left teaching for a year 'to revitalise my intellect', as I explained the project to myself and others, in order to return refreshed and even more knowing and useful. I would secure a Master's Degree in Education and, recharged, secure promotion and the power to shape the destiny of a school in even more significant ways.

The degree and understanding I gained – but not the promotion, not even an interview. I was learning the meaning of being over-qualified and under-experienced. A week or two after the final resignation date in the summer term as I began to despair of ever being reemployed, I secured an interview for the post in which I was to spend the next seven years as a Department Head. There was only one other candidate and only two people interviewing me: the Headmaster and someone from the Education Office. The school was in a London borough. I was offered the job and accepted.

My wife (for I did have the good fortune to fall in love again and marry a second time) tells me she was so relieved at the time. The dole queue had seemed more and more a reality. Yet she was aware of a strange blunting of emotional response in me. 'You wouldn't have said', she observed, 'you were glad'.

INITIAL THOUGHTS ON MY SEVEN YEARS IN A LONDON COMPREHENSIVE

Well, part of me was glad. I had secured employment, and the challenge of teaching in a school such as Benfield – an inner-city, multi-ethnic, social priority, 11-18 comprehensive – was one that appealed. It would be the ultimate test, a glorious opportunity to test my educational philosophy and to develop my own self in a number of new ways.

But part of me was scared. I had heard that noise in the corridors when I was taken around the school before the interview and the siren sounded to signal morning break-time. I remembered during the interview how I had responded, with an honesty that is not always appreciated, to the Head's question: 'Now, are there any difficulties you anticipate if you should join us?'

'Yes. I think I might find the level of noise in the corridors a little difficult to adjust to. In my previous school there was quite a thing about quiet movement'.

Perhaps at that moment my interview success hung in the balance. 'Well, of course, we have got some problems in that area, but you didn't find undue noise in any classroom, did you?' He looked directly through me.

I replied, truthfully, I had not. It occurs to me now how different my life might have been if my journey round the school had been by another route, or a little earlier or later, because I am sure if I had heard disturbances in classrooms I would have said so. By such accidents and contingencies are our lives shaped!

After I had been at Benfield for almost a year, in that long anticipated second half of the summer term when the Fifth and Upper Sixth have study leave and one's extra non-teaching time is reduced only by exam invigilation, I used one such invigilation period – for an A-level exam with very few candidates - to write a poem. I wanted to capture my feelings about that first year. Here it is:

For Kids and Students

Benfield – inner-city comprehensive

Multi-racial, multi-ethnic, social-priority

He said, “Are you sure you want to teach here?”

And I replied, “I like new challenges.”

Within a week the sweat had burnt my skin.

Children implode. Staff guts quiver.

So much anger, violence – and yet

Within this cauldron such raw talent stirs

Like crystals formed on top of boiling fat.

Only the strong survive

But what a show they make.

9th June 1978

That first year had been an astonishing revelation. By the time I came to write the poem, I too was a survivor of a kind, but I did not consciously associate myself with the student survivors. My particular 'show' was, in my eyes, quite muted. There were scenes within it over which I wished to draw a discreet veil. After five years of teaching in an ordered environment, the anarchic world I now inhabited came as a rude shock. The first time I was told to fuck off, when I explained, whilst on playground duty, that the break was over, stays in my mind. I recall also the little first year girl (I later had the pleasure of teaching her as a mature Sixth-Former) who greeted my arrival in the classroom one Thursday afternoon by dancing and singing in front of me. My arm-pits burnt that day.

The little girl's mocking song and dance routine had wounded my pride. It was a measure of how far I was failing. Yet it was the silliness of the timetable for the First Year on Thursday afternoons during that whole year which truly appalled my educational senses. There were four First Year classes, half the year, block-timetabled for the 140 minutes of the afternoon for Humanities. The particular First Year class I dreaded taking, spent 35 minutes with another teacher, in one room, studying one topic, using work sheets. That teacher then left and I arrived to teach, for 35 minutes, another topic using different worksheets. I had spent the previous 35 minutes with another First Year class on a different topic. I and the other teacher were, in fact, swapping classes so that, according to the official rationale, each would benefit from 'the skills of the Geographer' (her) and 'the skills of the Historian' (me).

After my 35 minutes of pain had drawn to an end, the children then left the room and me to run down the corridor to another room, where they spent the last 70 minutes with their first teacher studying with her another topic using yet more work sheets. I, meanwhile, went to another bigger room where two of the other First Year classes joined me and another teacher for a 'bulk' lesson, for 70 minutes, based around a film that was linked to one of the work sheets they had been doing. I quite enjoyed that. The films were not always that intelligible for 11 year olds (one-third of whom

had reading and comprehension ages of 9 or under) but I could keep order with those particular classes and the images on the celluloid has a soothing effect on them – and me.

After a month or so of struggling to make sense of these arrangements I approached the senior member of staff responsible for devising this curriculum structure. She was, as it happened, also the Geography teacher who was the first and last teacher of my problem class. I acknowledged the difficulties I was having with that class and pointed to the problems caused by this timetable. I talked about the need for stability and how important it was to secure consistency in teaching approaches. I urged that every effort should be made to establish continuity with Junior School practices that encouraged an identification with one teacher. I argued that these youngsters were not learning anything significant from this fragmented, so-called subject-oriented approach. And I was told how such movement was a good preparation for their life after school. The world was a fast-moving place and it was well to be trained for such a pace at school.

My early training has not made it easy for me to explode with anger and rude words and during my seven years at Benfield there was a premium on keeping good relations with colleagues in an already thwart environment. But inwardly I screamed.

Screaming at times – but never drowning. A fair judgement I think on that first year. When I collected my History department's summer 1978 examination results from one of the Deputy Heads just before the start of term at the beginning of my second year, he watched me carefully as I scanned the figures. 'Are you pleased?' he said. 'I'm disappointed with some of them', I replied. He shook his head. 'They are outstanding. You should be delighted.' Personal modesty got in the way at the time and afterwards, but my belief that pupil educational performance was critically shaped by teacher expectations, for better or worse, had been validated by these results. I and my two colleagues had helped 46 of the 56 candidates entered gain GCE 'O' level passes in World History (3 at A grade, 11 at B grade, 15 at C grade, 8 at D grade, and 9 at E grade with 10 Fs. The previous year, my predecessor had helped 28 of 35 candidates gain 'O' level passes, with 12 students passing at

Grades C-A. In these, my first set of exam results, another 34/51 candidates had gained a CSE pass (7 at Grade 3, 9 at Grade 4, 18 at grade 5, with 17 ungraded). My four A-level students studying Contemporary History had all passed (2 B grades, 1 C grade, and 1 E grade). How did other subjects compare? There are some English and Maths statistics presented later in this Introduction; my colleagues in the Geography department with many fewer candidates had secured 3 GCE 'O' level passes and no A-level passes in that summer of 1978.

When I had been a Grammar school boy, I used to motivate myself by keeping performance statistics. Now, as a Comprehensive school teacher I did much the same thing. My records show that this pattern of exam success continued throughout my time at Benfield. In the seven years between 1978 and 1984, the History department helped 26 students secure A-level passes (4 at Grade A, 6 at Grade B, 5 at Grade C, 6 at grade D, and 5 at Grade E). During the six years between 1978 and 1983, the Geography department helped 2 candidates gain A–level passes and 25 gain O-level passes (I did not record the Geography CSE passes). In those six years, there were 168 GCE 'O' level passes and 331 'CSE' passes gained within the History department.

My modesty must have been at least in part conditioned by the necessity of keeping good relations with colleagues who might have been a little threatened by the success of this educational philosophy of mine – and others.

MORE THOUGHTS ON MY SEVEN YEARS

A lot of personal learning was taking place during my time at Benfield. I was evolving an understanding of the extent to which the timetable and its organisation and the assumptions that lie behind that process are at the root of the problems facing schools. I am concerned with that issue in detail in Chapter 3. Also, I was realising, in an ever more profound way, the extent to which respect for others is central to the effective and sane functioning of any system – staff for students, students for staff; senior staff for junior staff, junior staff for senior staff; clerical and cleaning staff for others in the school, the rest of the school for clerical and cleaning staff; the local authority for the school, the school for the local authority. I concern myself with these matters throughout the chapters in this book.

So, if there are a number of 'horror' stories to be told, each personal experience of ego humiliation contributed to the clarification of my developing educational philosophy. My experiences were perhaps '*in extremis'* yet the insights that developed have a significance beyond the particular reality that gave birth to them. That reality constitutes education for, I would guess, about one-third of our society's school population – that is, youngsters in urban comprehensives facing problems. The scene could be Liverpool, Birmingham, London, Southampton, Cardiff, Newcastle, Manchester, Glasgow, Sheffield, Leeds … I find that a disturbing thought.

Such a reality, though, is a pointer to weaknesses and ineffectiveness elsewhere. The problems exist in all schools, to a degree, but their manifestations are disguised by the social control exercised by adults in those more stable communities. For it is true that the majority of schools are more ordered than that significant third I have identified above. In most schools, the teaching staff do succeed in controlling both classrooms and corridors and there are more possibilities for effective learning for a greater number of pupils. Most children in this majority of schools would not claim, as one of my

most pleasant fifth year students did in my last year, that their school was "a dump". Yet how many children would claim that their school was beginning to approach what they might wish it to be?

As I write I think back to the start of today when I read a Guardian review of a recently published study of the views of a group of Scottish school leavers. It is called '*The Best Years? Reflections of School leavers in the 1980s'.* I was gripped by the account of the study. This, I thought, is authentic; this is capturing reality. What the school leavers said more than seemed to justify the question mark in the title.

Nine months after leaving school with Scottish 'O' grades, Highers, or no qualification at all, few of the respondents looked back on their school days with satisfaction. Many made clear that they felt let down by their last few years in compulsory education.

Their complaints had three main themes:

- They disliked the type of school organisation that treated them as children after they had begun to feel more adult.
- They found option schemes in the upper school unsatisfactory and many subjects irrelevant to their lives after school.
- Very many found their teachers dismissive and uncaring if they did not fall into the academic minority who were expected to do well in public examinations.

(Hughes, J.M. (ed.) (1984). *The Best Years? Reflections of School Leavers in the 1980s.* Aberdeen University Press. Reviewed in *The Guardian.* 14 August 1984.)

The issues I have already drawn attention to are all apparent. Here is evident the inappropriateness of the timetable and its organisation. Here is manifest the lack of respect that so imperils the practice of education. Here we can see the truly enormous damage created by one of the most persuasive and insidious assumptions that underlies schooling. I mean the almost unquestioned acceptance that academic norms should provide the criteria for deciding how schooling should be organised and how youngsters should be judged.

Too strong a statement? I think not. Whatever good practice may exist, it is far outweighed by the barely conscious assumptions of the majority of the teaching profession that their real *raison d'etre* lies with the academically able. They are the ones that make it all worthwhile. They are the ones with whom one identifies.

The problem is that 'They' are about a quarter of the school population. So it seems to me that most schools are failing a large proportion of their pupils. As *The Guardian* reviewer concluded:

'… one is left wondering, whether tinkering with the curriculum or the examination system is anywhere near enough. What is indicated here is the whole ethos of the school system, not just its mechanics – and changing that is a hearts and mind job if ever there was one.'

Indeed! During my last year at Benfield I made a connection between a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale and how I saw the world of education. The story of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' has considerable significance for those who care and dare to see it.

'And thus the Emperor marched in the procession beneath the beautiful canopy, and everyone in the streets and in the windows said, "Gracious! How perfect the Emperor's new clothes are! What a beautiful new train! How splendidly everything fits!" No one would have it supposed that he saw nothing, for then he would certainly have been unfit for his post, or very stupid. None of the Emperor's clothes had been as successful as these.

"Why he has nothing on!" cried a little child.

"Listen to the voice of innocence!" said the father; for everyone was whispering to his neighbour what the child had said.

"He has nothing on! There is a little child here who says he has nothing on!"

"He really has nothing on!" at length cried the whole crowd.

The Emperor shrank within himself as he heard, for it seemed to him that they were right, but he thought at the same time, "At any rate, I must go through with this procession to the end".

So he put on a still haughtier air, and the gentlemen-in-waiting marched behind, carefully holding up the train that wasn't there.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON MY SEVEN YEARS

The last nine weeks of term, after resignation, served as a time for reflection and some initial writing. I looked back on my seven years and pondered. True, I was alienated but were there no silver linings to my critical clouds? What of the successes at Benfield? – ones that I had enjoyed and those that belonged to Benfield students. Was there no justification for the carefully fostered public relations image of an improving and developing school?

Of course there was some justification. There were the individual success stories in terms of academic achievement, musical proficiency, sporting honours, dramatic talent; achievements that owed much to the determination of those few individual youngsters, their family support, and at least a little to the talent and dedication of particular teachers. A place at Cambridge for an Arts student; a talented violinist and an exceptional pianist; a performance of Bernstein's 'West Side Story' that was breath-taking; the occasional county athlete or footballer. A few did begin to realise their potential. I cannot resist my own sense of pride in the tally of A-level and O-level and C.S.E passes that were achieved within the History department in my years at the school, as detailed above (pp.11-12). Chicken-feed, perhaps, compared with the record of some schools but in the context of inner-city, social priority schooling no mean achievement.

Yet in a sense all this is no more than one might expect. After all, as I have argued, academic norms do provide the criteria for deciding the ethos and organisation of schools. High achievement in sports, music and drama has traditionally been valued. It would be somewhat disappointing to record no achievements of success in the very areas to which the school is so evidently and overwhelmingly geared.

My case is that this so-called 'pursuit of excellence' is entered into largely to the exclusion of other worthwhile aims. I would also contend that most schools are really rather inefficient and ineffective in realising their dominant goal when one considers the degree of unrealised aspiration and talent that is evident in the later life of many, many people. To my mind, schools should and could be more successful in terms of academic goals, and, <u>at the same time</u>, could and should be more successful in designing frameworks for learning, literacy and numeracy for all those who, for whatever reasons, are not motivated sufficiently to pursue academic goals. It is that kind of dualism, however much lip-service may be paid to it, that is largely absent from the actual, manifest ethos and organisation of most schools.

As I looked around me at the 800 or so pupils at Benfield in my last year - seven years before, the school roll had been around 1600; we had become a falling rolls school - I did not see too many who could honestly claim they were enjoying their schooling in a positive sense. True, most would agree that schooldays were less boring than holidays, but what a commentary that is on the failure of schooling – that the interest provided by school would more likely be the excitement of the corridor or the disruptive class than the stimulation of a worthwhile lesson.

I will conclude these final thoughts in this introductory chapter with some of my diary entries from those last weeks. They will, I hope, throw more light on what might be termed student alienation. First, though, some further explanation for my own estrangement is appropriate. Speaking openly from the heart and mind is precious. I value such expression. Working in schools today – in my case in Benfield – it often seems better to keep one's mouth shut. Yet frankness is a pre-requisite for the kind of revolution in institutional ambience that I regard as both morally desirable and functionally necessary. The psychiatrist-cum-social ecologist Maxwell Jones (1982) advances such a case in *The Process of Change* (Routledge and Kegan Paul). He is not alone in urging that we seek an alternative to the present Western abuses of power and authority. But his ideas about shared decision-making in a therapeutic community in which everyone of its members is heard and respected, where individual opinions are voiced until a consensus is reached, have the virtue of having been practised over seven years at a psychiatric hospital in Scotland.

For that institutional revolution to take place, for that crumbling of a misdirected power hierarchy to happen, personal frankness and genuine attempts at objectivity are indispensable. Social and psychological idealism? I fear it may well be so, but I make no apologies. Unless the inadequacies and insecurities that are engrained within many school management hierarchies are themselves exposed as crippling symptoms of institutional disease, too many schools will continue to be less than happy and effective places. Schools provide the main context for the regeneration of a society. It is vital to keep reminding oneself of that fact.

And so to my own estrangement and my further explanation. After I had arrived in 1977, I could not believe that I would survive the three years of service that I wished to give and believed appropriate for my career prospects. Nevertheless, I did. My applications for promotion to more senior positions began in earnest during that third year. They met with little response. I was forced to resign myself to a further year of service, and then another, and another, and another. At the end of that three year initial period I had claimed jokingly, and with somewhat unsound theology, that I had earnt my place in heaven. After seven years of service was that not my due?

Well, during my final year at Benfield I was received into the Roman Catholic Church so a personal meaning did emerge. But the frustrations of sixty-five carefully considered and I thought well-worded applications for other positions which led only to seven unsuccessful interviews (three of these in the same school) over that four year period must have left a mark. I do not, though, believe it left me bitter. I did become more knowing. I now appreciate that my applications and interview performances would have benefited from assimilating the guidance in tracts such as 'How to write an Application and give a good Interview'. And throughout all those years my own skills as a teacher in my kind of school were maturing and developing. In part, this was because I had been around long enough to be accepted with all my idiosyncrasies, as any other long-serving teacher can be. But it was also in part in because my educational philosophy itself was becoming more refined. My experiences were making me more humble. My classroom performance was less coercive. The respect for those I taught became less of an abstract ideal. And of course my sense of estrangement from many of the practices I observed around me grew.

There were also the fruits of a remarkable experience that came my way at Benfield. I had arrived there fresh from my Manchester Master's Degree in Education. After one year of service not only was I still intact but I was also genuinely keen to continue my academic interests in the field of curriculum development. I was also curious to discover more about what was actually going on within Benfield, for although I was a Department Head within Middle Management I felt there were many areas that remained unrevealed to me and most other members of staff. Who made certain decisions? How were they made? Why did the consequences of these decisions take the shape they eventually did?

Mr Johnson, Benfield's Head, welcomed my proposed research with enthusiasm. His was an open school. His strategy of public relations management at this time ensured that any researcher into issues of educational significance was welcome at Benfield. During the two years it took to conduct my case study into '<u>Some Influences of School Management upon Curriculum Decision-Making in a Secondary School</u>', one other researcher was engaged in an external study of the effect of falling rolls and a complete research team from a University Department were involved in what they termed a Behaviour Problem dialogue. This was in fact a most revealing study of the views and attitudes of pupils and staff in relation to behaviour problems at Benfield. Chapters 1 and 2 of this book owe some debt to the data gathered by that research team.

When the falling rolls researcher completed his study and his report was published as part of a general survey into the effects of declining pupil numbers in inner city areas, a Deputy Head at Benfield kindly drew my attention to the article. He did, however, explain that the Head was not too

keen on too much attention being drawn to its conclusions. 'Some of the findings are perhaps a little controversial.' The report had drawn attention to a lack of effective communication within School Management. Indeed, that report might never have been written for all that it influenced Benfield. Open schools are not all they might seem, sometimes.

So too with my research. When I had completed my study, literally no one asked me anything about it for over a year. There was it seemed an unspoken and I think largely unconscious conspiracy of disinterest. It was almost an embarrassment that such a work should have been undertaken and then completed and written up and now rest within the bindings of a thesis within a University library. No senior member of staff ever asked me about my conclusions, bar one, and he eventually took out an official grievance against Mr Johnson, the Head.

I am not ungrateful for the opportunities provided by the Head and School Management at Benfield that enabled me to undertake and compete my research project. I interviewed twenty-six members of Management and attended scores of meetings during those two years and without their cooperation the enterprise would have been still-born. Yet my research findings and conclusions further developed my sense of estrangement and the subsequent lack of reaction and interest increased it still more. Chapter 3 owes a considerable debt to my own data and conclusions.

The last sentence on p.357 of my thesis reads as follows:

'Further research that examines School Management social systems in terms of where power lies may provide insights of use both to their members and to the academic community.'

Alas! However profoundly true that may be, I found my own thesis caught up within the power hierarchy of the academic hierarchy itself. My supervisor, initially congratulatory on my work but with little knowledge or sympathy to case study work as it had been practised previously, changed his tune when the Department's 'expert' within that field realised that I had produced a case study whose methodological justification involved a thorough critique of prevailing views which by implication included hers. She was not at the doctoral oral examination, but she might as well have been since the external examiner's case would have been her own. My supervisor thought it a shame, but was clearly outgunned. 'You should have speculated more', the external said. 'Your view of what constitutes Social Science is not shared by most other practitioners'.

I, for my part, had refused to go beyond my evidence. I was not interested in speculation as such, at the expense of validation. Still, if I emerged without the intended doctorate, I had gained a consolation Master's degree in Philosophy, an M. Phil., to add to my Oxford M.A. (the one that's purchased) and my Manchester M.Ed. Back at school, Mr Johnson looked wistful. 'My word! Now in America a triple Master's would carry some weight', he volunteered.

FOUR WEEKS TO GO

Some diary entries:

A siren sounds – a startling awesome noise – to signify a lesson change. The corridors reverberate with explosive cries, whoops of delight, and shrieks of anguish. It is as if humanity is laying claim to a barren waste, literally a no-man's land. The youngster's revenge: a token response to the abrasive, metallic symbolism of the siren.

A science lesson, overheard from below the confines of my own office – sounds of bedlam. A teacher's voice resounds above the noise. 'Stop work! Stop work now!' The noise level quietens. How strange that one should earn one's living by shouting at children to stop working.

Staffroom conversation, overheard from the workroom close by. 'After two years of spoon-feeding them … there's no way they can fail – but they do. It's astonishing. You teach them a principle in Maths and they appear to have understood it –and two weeks later they have forgotten it. You end up wondering why you bother.'

So why? Are most children stupid? Is the teaching inadequate? No, on the first count, and no in many cases on the second. I suggest that the answer lies in the very structuring of the school day and the assumptions and expectations that pervade our educational system.

Lesson change – there are pupils in corridors, moving between lessons, whistling and shouting and pushing and shoving and running. Not all, but enough to dominate the senses. Some open closed doors to see what lies behind them. If it's a lesson that I am taking the miscreants usually shut the door before running off – that's a tangible sign I've made it in my seventh year.

The haven of exam invigilation – this after all, is what school's about! But the harvest of neglect outside this silent hall! I remember one of the key images that came into my mind, after teaching here in this inner-city area for a year. It was that for many in schools such as mine, schooling and teachers and education all served as a piece of Elastoplast, binding the wounds that society in general, and in some cases parents in particular, had inflicted upon the young.

Six years on I am not so happy with the image. I fear it suggests too positive a role for schooling. The sticking plaster is too often ineffective, and I fear that schooling and teachers can inflict their own wounds in the name of education.

If schools do provide a degree of healing therapy for hurt minds it is, I suggest, in the main through the association with friends in their own peer group. And if this is a valid observation, what an

enormous cost for the rate-payer and tax-payer this represents! I, for my part, do not wish to finance a social club when I could be contributing to the development of minds.

THREE WEEKS TO GO

I compose and dispatch my reply to the Director of Education's acknowledgement of my letter of resignation. I also compose my response to the letter I know will never come from him in response to mine. First, here is the letter I did send:

Dear Mr Laud,

Thank you for your letter of the 21st May acknowledging receipt of my letter of resignation. I appreciate your thanks for my services to the school and your good wishes.

You say you would appreciate it if I could let you know the reasons for my resignation. As I said to Mr Johnson: 'In brief, I have become increasingly aware over the last decade of a sense of mismatch between my educational philosophy and the values, beliefs and attitudes I find prevailing within the educational system'. It has been my good fortune to be offered a post as an A-level History tutor in my home town so I have been able to resolve the tension caused by that growing sense of alienation.

Yours sincerely,

R. Donovan

And now here is the letter I composed knowing I would never be called upon to mail it, except perhaps, in a sense, through the medium of these pages:

Dear Mr Laud,

You have shown a further interest in my reasons for resignation. I am grateful. I hope your position and power and inclination is such that you can take action in relation to some of the points that follow. I don't expect you to have a magic wand to wave – please don't think me any more naïve than perhaps I am. But I do think that openness and frankness are better than concealment and disingenuousness, and I would like those who have power to use it to help face up to what's really wrong.

My comments are focussed on Benfield, but they have a more general significance as I am sure you will appreciate.

There is so much wasted talent at Benfield. Whatever the individual academic successes, and there are a number that reflect well upon both students and teachers, the significant majority of Benfield gain less from their formal education than they should. Do you know that one-third of the First Year, aged 11-12, have reading ages of 9 or under? That statistic is five years old now, but I see no evidence to doubt its continued validity and its applicability to other schools in the Authority. You might well consider the reasons why the first six years of compulsory schooling are not more fruitful. But that is not my immediate concern in this letter, although I am sure you will appreciate that this particular failure is intimately bound up with the explanation for the failures in secondary education.

If one-third of pupils aged 11-12 have such low reading ages, do you know what their reading ages are when they reach the school leaving age of 16? I don't expect you do know. At Benfield we don't either. The testing has not been done. You can, however, get some idea of educational attainment levels from examination results. All youngsters follow English language and mathematics courses in the Fourth and Fifth Year. Let's draw some conclusions from the available statistics.

In the summer of 1983, the Benfield intake of 1978-79 reached the end of their fifth year of secondary education. There were, in January 1983, 155 Fifth Year students, 81 boys and 74 girls. Here are their English Language and English Literature public examination results:

O-level passes	A	B	C	D	E
English Language	-	-	3	2	10
English Literature	1	4	5	3	1

A further 119 pupils were entered for the CSE Mode 3 continuous assessment English examination. 108 of these passed with 73 (68%) securing the lowest pass grades of 4 and 5.

Taking O-level and CSE entry together, 135 students were entered for an English examination and 123 gained some kind of certification. Twenty youngsters (13%) of the 155 in the year left school without any formal recognition of their English attainment.

Looking at these figures, you could say that a significant number have reached some level of recognizable achievement. But you might look again at the English Language passes and think twice.

However, before coming to a conclusion about Benfield's performance, consider these statistics for the previous summer of 1982 from a neighbouring school's Fifth Year with 217 pupils on roll.

O-level passes	A	B	C	D	E
English Language	-	2	11	5	6
CSE passes	1	2	3	4	5
English Language	9	30	52	20	11

Sixty-one youngsters (28%) of the 217 in the year left this school without any formal recognition of their English attainment.

I suppose it depends upon your expectations how you react to these figures. Having worked in Benfield for seven years and taught First Years and seen their weaknesses and strengths and watched their later failure to develop, I find no room for complacency in these statistics. It may be that compared in some ways with others, Benfield is doing fairly well. But against an absolute standard of what might be achieved I find it wanting. English is the medium of schooling. English Language is recognised by students as a relevant and intrinsically worthwhile subject. Yet only 16

(4.3%) out of 372 pupils in these two schools, structured on academic norms, could secure an O-level pass at Grade C or higher in English Language.

Let's take a brief look at the Maths picture. First, here are Benfield's summer 1983 Fifth Form results:

O-level passes	A	B	C	D	E
Mathematics	2	4	9	0	1
CSE passes	1	2	3	4	5
Mathematics	22	3	26	22	18

48 youngsters (31%) had gained no certification in Mathematics.

And now, the statistics for Benfield's neighbour, the year before:

O-level passes	A	B	C	D	E
Mathematics	1	4	16	3	9
CSE passes	1	2	3	4	5
Mathematics	0	2	10	20	19

145 youngsters (67%) had gained no certification in Mathematics.

Don't you find the combined picture in these common-core subjects of English and Mathematics just a little worrying? Perhaps not. If 51 (14%) pupils in a combined roll of 372 are gaining O-level passes and 179 (48%) are completing five years of secondary education with a certificate in these subjects, then that's not too far below national average figures of say 20% for O-level passes and 60% for certification. After all, this is officially recognised as an area of 'educational disadvantage'. So in some respects these statistics can be used to show that all is well.

As I have said, it depends upon your expectations. My knowledge of the school and its students, filtered through my educational philosophy and expectations, leads me to the belief that there is massive under-achievement alongside the individual successes.

What of the other O-level and CSE passes from these two Fifth Year groups? Here is a summary of the passes in all subjects, other than English and Mathematics:

	O-level passes	CSE passes
Benfield – 1983 – 155 on roll		
	32	340
Benfield's neighbour – 1982 – 217 on roll		
	84	475

Almost all these 372 Year Five pupils in these two schools will be following an option programme of five examination subjects, other than English and Maths, during their last two years at school. Therefore, two and a half subjects were gained, on average, from the five subjects studied. That's pretty good evidence for a misappropriate curriculum in the upper school, isn't it?

My case has been that there is so much wasted talent. I have called for the adoption of criteria other than academic success to help reshape our schools. But taking that academic criterion, Benfield and other educational institutions can be seen to be failing a significant number of their students. We are not happy, though, talking about our failures. We won't talk about them in depth until those in powerful positions such as yourself force us to confront the limitations of our present practice.

What do I think are the reasons for our ills?

First and foremost, the failure to discuss openly and rationally the significance of what can be observed in schools. And then, in no particular order, the following:

Archaic and misappropriate assumptions about the purpose of timetables and how schools should be organised;

Lack of respect within schools, and I mean staff respect for students and senior staff for junior staff before I highlight lack of respect from pupils because the latter phenomenon may well derive from the first two;

The assumption that academic norms and pursuit of academic success should provide the criteria for deciding how schooling should be organised and how youngsters should be judged.

It would take a book to elaborate these themes – and that is what I am writing. Nevertheless, I would be surprised if these ideas did not strike some chord of recognition and even partial empathy in you. If that is indeed the case, I hope that you keep such awareness near the front of your mind in the coming years. Few members of educational officialdom seem to do so, and I hope you are exceptional.

Yours sincerely,

R. Donovan

TWO WEEKS TO GO

Tuesday lunchtime – hurrying across the playground area on route for the shops to buy my lunch of rolls and juice. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. A group of Fourth Years, evidently what one might term dissident because so few were in uniform, gathered in a corner. I don't know most of them. Somehow my timetable has not included them in the last three years and more. That's a distinct disadvantage. One of those I don't know is deliberately inhaling on a roll-up. Ganja? I ask him politely but firmly to stop. He ignores me. I ask once more. This time he walks away, followed by the group, still smoking. I explain I will bring the Headmaster. He says he doesn't care. The others smile. I retreat, searching for a more powerful authority figure. *Deus ex machina*! The Head himself appears, heading for the canteen with a colleague. 'Mr Johnson!' I cry from some thirty yards. There is no recognition. 'Mr Johnson!' I exclaim from some twenty yards. 'Mr Johnson!' I more loudly utter at ten yards distance. 'Do you want me?' he replies, seeming surprised. 'If you don't mind, I would welcome your presence on the other side of the playground. There's a Fourth Year in a group who won't stop smoking. I think it may be dope.' 'Really! I'd better come and see what's up.'

We approach the group. There is scarcely a movement. The smoker's hands move behind his back. 'Now come on gentlemen. This isn't the style, you know. We can't have this. Give it to me, young man.' No reaction. The Head ignores the refusal. 'Now look here folks. Mr Donovan here is Head of History. He's got style. Now we don't want him going back to the staffroom and saying that all this was going on, do we? …' He continued, and I said I had to go and buy my lunch and walked off to the shops. When I came back, the group was still there. There was no smoking. Success? I looked across at them as I passed. They ignored me. I rounded the corner of the building. Suddenly, a sixth-former rushed up after me. 'Sir, there's a fire extinguisher that's been let off!' I turned round and back to see the group melting away. Inside the building I find an extinguisher squirting out its foam. I remove it and inform the caretaker.

Soon, the siren for afternoon school will sound. First though, five minutes in the staffroom. Enough time to hear this:

'Those girls in 1B are evil youngsters. I gave the exercise books to one of them to give out, and what did she do? She began throwing them to the class, sending chemical apparatus flying across the room. I had my tennis racket with me, and I wanted to hit her with it. I want to hit all that group of girls. Mr Smith, the Head of Year, he won't believe how bad they are. They are evil. That's the word.'

Thursday afternoon – I was given a cover-note for a class whose teacher was absent. It was the last hour of the school day. The lesson was Biology. So I arrived at the room indicated and waited. No

class arrived. I guessed, correctly, that the class was no longer taught in this room and the powers-that-be had not been informed. Some passing youngsters told me where the class had gone. It was the bottom corridor of 'B' block.

Now the bottom of 'B' block had been described by a colleague earlier that week as 'fast becoming a no-go area'. If I were to take you there, you would understand a physical reason why this might be the case. The corridor is low-ceilinged, has little natural light, and leads only to classrooms. It is, in more senses than one, a *cul-de-sac*. As in the rest of the school, artificial light is provided by flicking switches on the wall of the corridor. These switches are more often turned off than on by passing or congregating youngsters.

I disliked the atmosphere in that Science area intensely and had no intention of teaching the class there. Instead, when I arrived and found the class, I told them to go to my room in 'A' block. I knew most of them and did not foresee problems in the corridor movement.

I, for my part, remained with the laboratory assistant to collect books and papers and design a lesson. As we looked through the pages of the text book to find the point where the class was supposed to have reached, I became aware of the sounds of disturbance outside in the corridor. It was a 'B' block buzz. It did not bode well. It grew in intensity.

I picked up my pile of work for the lesson and walked away from the room, which was at the end of the corridor, out into the dim and menacing scene. There were twelve or so youngsters, mostly male, leaning against the corridor wall. Seven or eight girls were assemble on the staircase that led down into the corridor. One young teacher stood near the bottom of the stairs, surrounded by three or four other youngsters.

It was the Fourth Year. The year of ill-repute. Lessons should have begun ten minutes earlier.

The teacher was asking the assembled throng to go to their lessons. He asked in vain. I added my firm voice in polite request. There was no movement. I asked again, realising that there was almost no one I knew here. I recognised one face and added his name to my request. A mistake. 'Why pick on me?' he exploded. The others took his lead. The initiative was lost. The bridge-head had to be abandoned. I laughed, partly to relieve my own tension and partly because in such circumstances what else could one do to retain one's sanity? 'This is incredible', I said. 'I shall get the Headmaster. I cannot believe this.' My progress away from the scene was cut short however. A cry came up from the direction of the stairs. 'Mr Kettle!' The girls shrieked and raced, as one mass, down the stairs and along the corridor towards where I was now standing. Clutching my books and papers, I turned my back to absorb the shock. I managed to remain upright, still holding what was in my hands, as the

mass hit me and moved me some six feet further on. Mr Kettle was quite a physical teacher, you see, and had inspired a considerable flight.

I did not stay to speak with Mr Kettle. I accelerated away in the direction of the Headmaster's office. His secretary announced my presence. He and his two deputies were in conference. I remained standing. He beckoned me to sit down, and continued for a moment with the conference. Then he asked me what I wanted. 'I have come to report a breakdown in authority. I have come to tell you that children are not in their lessons. They are not responding to teachers' commands. I am telling you about scenes the like of which I have never seen before in my seven years' service here. You have a breakdown of control.' My words were uttered carefully. I was still feeling a little shocked. 'Come now, be more precise, please. What's the problem, exactly?' 'I have told you' I replied, raising my voice slightly. 'There are children – in the Fourth Year – who are refusing to go to their lessons'.

Now he rose, and summoning his deputies, swept from the room in the direction of 'B' block. I made my way to my cover class who were waiting patiently in my room. Next day, he passed me in the corridor. I enquired what had happened. He explained he had interviewed a dozen or so youngsters, and some of them would be on detention the next day. I never heard any more about that incident.

THE FINAL WEEK

On the Monday I covered a difficult Second Year French class again. I had met and confronted them the previous week when I first covered for their absent teacher. I couldn't bear to face them on their home ground again – the bottom corridor of 'A' block – so I pinned a note on the door announcing a move to my room on the top floor of 'A' block. A few children - the amenable ones – had arrived on time and followed me up the stairs. They waited outside the room which I did not unlock. Most of the rest of the class arrived, noisily, in a few minutes, grumbling about the distance they would now be from the dining room when the bell went for lunch. I quietened them and waited for the last to appear. These, I knew, would be the least amenable, the most frustrated, aggressive and dissident. Half a minute passed and then they were in sight, both of them. We could hear them for some seconds before as the sounds of shouting echoed around the stairwell that led up from the bottom floor. Chad and John.

They rounded the corner and saw the orderly line, heard the quietness. Instinctively, they began to turn on each other, fists were raised threateningly, and then they began to shriek with laughter. John launched himself in a hurtling run, past the line of waiting youngsters and down the corridor, pursued by Chad. John's path was taking him past me. I stepped out into that path and absorbed the shock, grasping him round the waist and physically halted his progress.

He, for his part, was furious. Pointing his finger a few inches from my face, he warned me of the consequences of laying a hand on him. 'Stay there!' I commanded, and turned round to the waiting youngsters who were breaking ranks to get a closer look. 'Get back in line!' They shuffled back. Behind me, much to my surprise, John had done what I had told him to. I unlocked the door and saw them in, one by one. The most dissident were last in the queue, and by their turn the spell was already beginning to break. Dancing movements were already starting to develop. Limbs and faces began to obey a rhythm designed to disrupt. I made the last four pupils re-enter the room. John, Chad, Mark and Ian. Then I entered the room and shut the door behind me. The lesson could begin. About fifty minutes of survival time stretched before me …

… Finally, the siren went for dinner. They left, one by one, quietly if not smoothly, the room tidy, my ego more or less intact, their guns a trifle spiked but the powder still dry. Their dislike of French – they were in the second of two sets – remained intact. I had raised my voice firmly on only five occasions, but had hushed and shushed countless times. I had been told by Mark to go to the Institute to learn how to speak English properly, and I, in my role, had eventually told Chad to pick himself up from the floor where he lay after falling off his chair.

During the lesson I had lent three pencils, then forgotten I had done so. At the end of the lesson, I received one back. In the corridor a few minutes later, Ian came up. Reaching into his back pocket he pulled out one of the missing pencils and returned it to me without saying a word. 'Thank you', I said, 'I respect honesty. Thank you very much.' He walked off. 'My God!' I thought, 'What games are we playing? That moment just now I can recognise as authentic. It did have something to do with what education, schooling and teaching can and should be about. But the containment exercise I had engaged in for the previous fifty minutes? I reminded myself I had four days more left to survive, and a book to complete.

And so it came to the last day. The final staff meeting. Gifts and farewell speeches. Three or four staff had actually asked me 'What are you going to say? Are you really going to say what you think?' I explained I would do nothing to spoil the occasion, nothing that might be thought to be cheap. If I had believed I could alter how things were by words at staff meetings I would have used them but I no longer thought that possible. I would nevertheless keep faith with my own sense of integrity.

The Headmaster thanked me for my service, noting the achievements of the History Department. I thanked him and pointed out how much was due to my two colleagues in that Department. I continued:

'Ecclesiastes says it well: 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven'. There was a time to come to Benfield, a time to be at Benfield, and a time to leave Benfield. I used to think that that time for leaving was four years ago, but I think I got my timing wrong. I've learnt a great deal through those four extra years …

… so for me this is a time of rejoicing, not a time for raking over the reasons why I find myself so alienated from the state secondary system of schooling. Some of you will know what I feel. Many of you will feel what I feel.

I am grateful to the particular twist of fate that has worked to my advantage this time and given me at 35 the chance of a new career, and fresh opportunities to exercise any talents for writing that I may have. Such prospects excite me.’

I hope that this introductory chapter has excited some interest in you, my Reader, about my perspectives on schooling. A former pupil at Benfield, now a community worker, whom I met for the first time in that last half of the summer term, said she thought the book I was preparing sounded an important work to write. ‘Out there, on the streets, people want to know what’s going on and what’s going wrong.’ So, for people in schools, for people on the streets, for people in high places – here is one small voice.