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Celebrating the profession of teaching

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It is impossible to assign a single characteristic to a profession or occupation, but teaching does face a particular constant that has profound implications for the way in which we think, feel and behave.

That constant is change. Every September, teachers greet new classes and set about the process of understanding the infinite variety of the children and young people they are working with, absorbing their capabilities and potential, gleaning information about their prior learning, health, hopes and aspirations.

There must be something within teachers that likes change and you hear it expressed very commonly when they describe why they stay in teaching and what makes it rewarding. "No day is the same." "Children are always coming up with something new." "They keep you on your toes."

Yet it is also the lament of teachers and headteachers that there is too much change, that they are suffering from initiative overload, that no sooner has one national strategy reached their inbox or pigeonhole, then another looms on the horizon. And change manifests itself across the whole span of the school's endeavour. The Key Stage 3 curriculum is 'freed up' – and then almost immediately added to. We have national strategies, tweaks to the data used in league tables, Academy, Foundation or Specialist school status, performance management, the Children Act, the Children's Plan.

Teachers often say that they feel that they are accountable to multiple audiences for their actions and their practice, but they wonder who is attending to their needs.

So how do teachers rise to the challenge of change and ride the tiger? Are there enduring values and skills that come to their aid? What role can, and could, the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) play in supporting and sustaining their professionalism?

Although independent opinion polling has consistently demonstrated over 20 years that teachers are held in very high esteem by the public, they don't always feel respected and valued, often quite the reverse. How meaningful is that positive opinion if it does not translate into practical support, for example from parents, for teachers' high expectations of pupils' effort and behaviour?

Over the next four years, the GTCE wants to focus strongly on a key part of its legislative remit – working to raise the standing of the teaching profession. We want government, opinion formers and the wider public to see teaching in a new light, according it a new respect for teachers' judgement and expertise.

I am optimistic that this is possible as I detect a genuinely new climate in Whitehall and in government agencies. There is growing recognition that externally imposed change can only drive standards so far before it reaches a plateau. Sustainable change must be built from the grass roots and from small changes in daily practice.

Formal and informal school networks are flourishing. It is now well understood that effective continuing professional development for teachers must be rooted in classroom practice and should involve peer exchange, mutual support, mentoring and coaching, and, vitally, an evaluation of what difference the development has made to pupils. We have used these insights to develop the Teacher Learning Academy, the first national system to recognise and celebrate teacher learning.

The Teacher Learning Academy is now moving from an extended pilot to an open system in which schools, agencies, national and local education organisations and higher education organisations will share the ownership of the Academy, and steer its development jointly.

The success of the Teacher Learning Academy to date is founded, in part, on the fact that teachers find it an accessible, enjoyable, but rigorous process that really helps them to change their practice and that influences the practice of their colleagues. It's all about teachers owning their sense of professionalism and pedagogy. So, it builds teachers' professional self confidence – and as improvements in teaching and learning follow, will feed through into greater public recognition that teaching is a highly complex and creative activity.

Alongside the development of the Teacher Learning Academy, the GTCE will be pursuing a range of programmes under the broad heading of “professionalism in teaching” through which we will explore and disseminate new insights into effective practice, and the principles and values that underpin our pedagogy.

Alongside this, Council has set out its vision for teaching in 2012 and invites teachers and partners to comment on that vision, to refine it and shape it with us. I hope we can help to invest greater meaning and substance in the concept of being a registered, qualified teacher, so that teachers feel proud to be part of a profession that is held in ever higher regard and aspires to continuing improvement in its practice.

“Active” registration is the phrase I have adopted to start a debate about how we might capture teachers’ commitment to their own professional learning, and how we can ensure that being a registered teacher provides genuine assurance to the public on standards of practice and conduct. Is it a realistic aspiration that teaching should, over time, become a ‘Masters level’ profession? Who should set the benchmarks for the levels – and who should set and monitor the criteria for equivalence between them?

As part of this endeavour, we will be looking at the values and ethics that govern teaching as a profession. We will be working with teachers, partners, parents and young people to explore what it really means to work in the public interest. Do parents and teachers have differing expectations about how teachers should conduct themselves? How can we use a dialogue to illuminate each others’ perspectives and ensure that teaching is deservedly held in high regard?

We are using our plans to revise and update our Code of Professional Conduct as a starting point for this dialogue. Through this, through a debate about “active registration” and by continuing to engage with teachers through our professional networks and the Teacher Learning Academy, we aim to reach out to the profession and the wider public in new ways.

I would very much welcome views through the National Education Trust. Do write to me at chiefexec@gtce.org.uk .

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