

Nathalie Bethesda - Foreword and personal statement

Where does this manifesto come from? Well, it comes from the sum of my personal and professional experiences and from some pretty hard won research. Yes, hard won is the right term, because the education road that I've travelled has been a pretty bumpy one and has taken a good few diversions along the way. If this document gets a bit jargonish in parts and feels relevant only to educators, I have used images that are easily accessible on Google and as ready explanations of what I am saying for those who are interested in how our systems might join the dots better for an egalitarian, interconnected education system.

I am the only person from my working-class family of five children to gain secondary school qualifications. This achievement was increasingly rare at the newly formed Dalston Mount Secondary School for Girls in Hackney, London, a chaotic amalgamation of a grammar school and a secondary modern in the service of the comprehensive experiment. Let me state now that I do not think that the experiment failed, more that like pure communism or capitalism, it's never really been tried, a conviction that will become apparent in this pamphlet where I outline how we must aspire for an authentic comprehensive provision.

I had two sons and supported a husband with mental ill-health which prompted me to begin thinking about psychology as part of the degree in Combined Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University that I was motivated to take. I was 24 years old and I wanted to understand this strange thing that is the human condition and how we arrive at it. So, Combined Studies - which was exactly what it says on the tin - was my first taste of the no-brainer that is multi-disciplinary studies. As it happens the Psychology didn't do much for me with its insistence on its scientific credibility and the contortions it seemed to go through to prove it, though in a continued search for answers I came across Carl Rogers, a developmental psychologist, whose ideas were to frame much of my mind-set with regard to our absolute need to have curricula and pedagogy based on child development needs.

I guess that it is only recently that I realise that I was always more of a philosopher. To that end I took in some History, Politics, Literature, and Art History in courses called James Joyce and Modernism in Art; Freud, Gender, Literature; Russian Literature and Revolution, which is why the main lesson element of the Steiner curriculum resonated as soon as I encountered it.

I juggled part-time study for eight years in total, with parenting, and with part-time receptionist work at weekends when hubby took over parenting. I came away with a 2:1 and the wealth of a new perspective on the world. My sons were now 4 and 6.

What do I do with this asset, paid for with blood, sweat and tears, not to mention the tuition fees because I had missed out on the grants that would have been my right if my circumstances had been different? Another no-brainer. As my boys were both at full-time school now, a PGCE beckoned – once I had the dreaded Maths GCSE!

I took a number of things into schools with me that were as, if not more important than the teacher training that I received at Bretton College, University of Leeds. There was my initial failure in education and so my late learning and, more specifically, being able to watch myself doing it, from a mature standpoint. I realised a couple of things that I continue to explore and develop here. Given the light bulb that went on for me from the multi-disciplinary fare that I had tasted as described above, it seemed to me that the diet of the atomised curriculum had been a disconnect that was unsuitable for healthy, balanced learning. And this is particularly

the case for children from a background like mine. We need curricula that brings the world together in order that we can explore our 'maps of meaning'.

Second my siblings' failure in education was wrong and avoidable. My older sister and one of my brothers had begun their secondary schooling in grammar schools. Their so-called cognitive abilities were clearly up to the mark. The same could be said of all of us and yet my other brother ended up in a pupil referral unit, for reasons that were easily identified and addressed, in his chronic ill-health and my parents' needs to both work full-time in order to cover living costs of their large family. This observed inequity meant that I only ever looked for potential in people, for the specific capacities in them that might unlock that potential and which ought to be what we cultivate for the benefit of the global community.

And I was a mother of children who were going to their primary school as I was going to work at mine in secondary. Always in my mind were the qualities of care for the bodies, feelings and minds of the children that I wanted my sons' teachers to have; the *art* of teaching that I wanted their teachers to exercise and that I tried to cultivate in myself.

Nevertheless, I would say that, though I was a competent practitioner from the off, it took me getting on for a decade to really feel that I had a grasp of the *art* and its delicate balance of qualities and competences that characterise effective teaching. If I brought so much prior experience, cross-cultural and inter-generational, how much more time and maturation should we afford to our teachers who have moved seamlessly from one education institution to another, from limited social backgrounds. This is why schemes such as Teach First leave me cold and why I believe that we must institute a much more organic teacher development.

The most important thing we must do though is move away from the standards agenda and high stakes assessment regime. They are part of a competitive marketplace which is damaging to the social fabric and to the individual minds and bodies of our young. We have to engage all of our wits and our energies to ensuring that theirs is a more equitable future than is on offer at present.

Nathalie Bethesda