



Check against delivery

Speech by Mary Bousted, General Secretary, ATL

NaPTEC Conference – Oxford

Friday 22 September 2006

Thank you. I am very pleased to be here in Oxford today at the NaPTEC conference. I feel rather nervous addressing you all because I trained and worked as a secondary school teacher of English, and then I worked in higher education, at York, Edge Hill and Kingston, training student teachers for the secondary sector. It was at Kingston, where I was Head of School, that I first learned about primary teaching. I can vividly remember visiting a student on our early years course and coming away from a two hour session in a nursery filled with awe and wonder that anyone could manage to get the little darlings into groups, engaged in wonderfully purposeful play which underpinned their development and learning, and get them all together at the end for a story. I was exhausted; she had the whole of the afternoon, with a different group of children to go yet. I went back to the university with my eyes opened and, from that moment, started to plan for greater early years provision at Kingston – which now has an early years foundation degree, taught in conjunction with eight local FE colleges. So, one experience can change a professional lifetime – and many experiences with my primary colleagues at Kingston changed my professional outlook and purpose.

ATL is the only education union to have members from nursery to Further Education. Our members teach across the full range of compulsory and post compulsory education settings. And although there are professional practices and professional concerns which differ – what I have learned as General Secretary of the union, is that teachers and lecturers, wherever they work, with what cohort of pupils or students, in what area, in different subjects, have much more in common than they have concerns and issues, and specialism in professional practice that keep them apart.

What binds teachers and lecturers together, wherever they work, is a strong sense of who they are as professional educators. Teachers and lecturers share a strong social mission – they want to make society a better place; they want to educate the nation’s children and young people so that they can reach their potential, lead fulfilled lives and contribute to the creation of a better civil society. For many children and young people, the place where they learn what it is to be a good citizen; how to respect difference and how to work together in common for the social good, is school.

But I want to argue, today, that in recent years (I am talking about the last fifteen or sixteen years) teachers do not feel that they have been treated as professionals. When I talk to ATL members up and down the country they tell me (and this is a constant and overwhelming response) that they feel constrained, compelled and corralled into pedagogical practices which they do not agree with and which they see as damaging, both to the children they teach and to themselves as professionals – and this feeling is particularly strong with primary teachers.

Now, what I am not arguing for is an end to innovation and change in the profession. I can see quite clearly why a New Labour government wanted our education system to change, and to change quickly. I can see why the government was impatient with a system which, quite clearly, does not produce acceptable outcomes for working class pupils, and pupils from some ethnic minority groups. I can see why the government made it quite clear that New Labour was going to be concerned with the consumers, rather than the producers in the education system. They were intolerant of expected and accepted failure for certain groups in our society – and they were quite right to be so.

That is why the pressure went on and went on hard. In addition to the National Curriculum, in England, the national assessment system of SATS at 7, 11 and 14 was maintained (although the increased role of teacher assessment at key stage 1 was welcomed by the profession in the second term of this administration). But New Labour went further and, for the first time in the nation's history, and the first time in the profession's practice, stipulated the pedagogy which should be adopted to teach pupils literacy and numeracy.

The strategies, whilst having no statutory framework, enveloped the land as teachers were told that they better have a good alternative if they altered, changed or used alternatives to the literacy strategy – or face the consequences of the awful judgement of Ofsted.

And that pressure is continuing – now teachers are being exhorted, on the basis of no reliable and systematic evidence, to use synthetic rather than analytic phonics. The fact that there is no evidence whatsoever which privileges synthetic above analytic phonics is, apparently, immaterial.

The Rose report was commissioned as a result of a bout of media hysteria – but the consequences, for primary teachers, is yet another constraint upon their pedagogical practice, and another coded message to them that they do not have the knowledge, skills or experience, to make the professional choices that they know to be right for their pupils.

As you might guess, I get angry about all of this. But whilst I get angry, the government gets worried. Because, what we now know is – that despite real rises in performance across the primary sector, the rises are nothing like as strong as the government have claimed – we know this for several reasons. One is because ATL, the Education union, commissioned research from Professor Colin Richards, who I see is talking to you tomorrow. We asked him to answer the key question: standards in primary schools – are they rising? He looked in detail at the research evidence and the data from the SATS compared with comparative international evidence of Britain's performance, and he concludes:

- **The data on performance relate to only three subjects (English, mathematics and science) and to only two age groups (seven year olds and eleven year olds)**
- **The national tests show a considerable rise in children's performance in English and mathematics from 1996 to 2001 followed by a general levelling off thereafter**
- **The rise in test scores does not necessarily involve a rise in performance against national standards unless these standards have been embodied in the same way and to the same degree in successive tests. However, there is no evidence that this has been the case**

- **Ofsted has published no inspection evidence on either national standards or performance in relation to those standards. It has simply relied on reporting national test data**
- **A number of major research projects throw doubt on the considerable rise in performance show in the national test data (Richards, C. 2005, p.26)**

And these doubts are also surfacing at secondary level. Just last week, you will know that there has been another bout of bad publicity – this time at secondary level, over the key stage 3 English results. What all this and more (our place in the PISA tables for example) tells us is that standards in English schools are flat lining. We are not making the improvements we need to compete in the globalised world of the 21st century – where China, this year, will produce four million graduates. Indeed, we are becoming the poor man of the world in terms of lifelong learning – we are 24th out of the 29 OECD countries for staying on rates post 16 – and I believe that our young people who leave school at 16, never to return, make rational choices. They reject a curriculum which they find uninspiring, and an assessment system which has narrowed and limited their learning experiences – and which has told them too often, and too early, that they are not making the grade.

Now, what has this to do with informed professionalism? Well, it sets the scene for the government's conversion – in its five year strategy, to a policy of 'new professionalism' for teachers. This term was first encountered in the government's five year strategy for children and learners.

(Workforce reform) will usher in a new professionalism for teachers, in which career progression and financial rewards will go to those who are continually making the biggest contributions to improving pupil attainment, those who are continually developing their own expertise, and those who help to develop expertise in other teachers....

Now, this is a powerful statement, with a powerful drive behind it. The government's conception of a new professionalism has become embedded, for example, in teacher's contractual terms and conditions – in the performance management system which, from next year, will link performance directly to pay and in workforce remodelling, which focuses teachers upon their core purpose of teaching and leading teaching and learning and relieves them of administrative tasks which are not central to their core role (and for primary teachers has given them, for the first time in their professional history, time away from the class for planning, preparation and assessment).

Because we could see very clearly that new professionalism was a powerful new concept in government policy development ATL felt strongly that it needed to develop its own version of new professionalism – which we could have termed informed professionalism – which is, of course, not a new concept at all. The government could have used this term – but they appear to be addicted to new – although that addiction may be waning during the course of the next few months...

But as ATL is a union which negotiates with the government for its members terms and conditions, we felt that it would help matters if we used the same vocabulary as the government, so we took the term 'new professionalism' and developed our own meaning of it – which, in many important ways, provides a fundamental challenge to the government's understanding of the concept. Here is what we say, in our policy position statement, is our understanding of new professionalism.

ATL argues that professionals, in whatever sphere, use their skills and knowledge to exercise judgement in dealing with their clients, but important judgements about curriculum, assessment and pedagogy have been removed from teachers. If there is no rebalancing, the ability to make judgements will be lost and system performance will suffer in the long term. So, more positively, how does ATL define New Professionalism?

We state that:

Teaching is an intellectual profession, based on a high degree of general and systematised knowledge. This includes an in depth knowledge of:

- 1. learning: how pupils learn, potential obstacles to learning, pre-conditions and dispositions to learning; how learning develops; and**
- 2. curriculum content: knowledge of subjects and the relationships between them, understanding of wider content such as the development of thinking skills, problem solving, questioning and group working, and a knowledge of how pupils' understanding of particular content grows and develops.**

We add:

The teaching profession is also practical, and has a wide range of practices and methods.

Teaching has a basis in care and responsibility for pupils' learning, leading to the need for knowledge and understanding of pupils as individuals, their interests, needs and potential obstacles to learning, knowledge developed through assessment and through relationships with pupils, families, communities and other professionals.

The teaching professional needs knowledge about the complex and compelling forces that influence daily living in a changing world, including the political, economic, technological, social and environmental, in order to know that pupils need to learn both in the present and for the future.

Finally, we say that:

...teachers have the ability to adapt teaching practices and methods to particular pupils, drawing on their theoretical understanding of learning, their knowledge of curriculum content and their knowledge of what pupils need. This professional knowledge and understanding is not static: it changes and develops over time. Some of the change happens externally to the profession: knowledge of how the brain works or developments in subject knowledge; changes in political, social and cultural attitudes affect the way that subjects are taught, or ways that children are perceived.

Professionalism therefore implies a responsibility to the continued development of practical knowledge through reflection and interaction. To review the nature and effectiveness of practice, and to continue to increase understanding of the purposes and content of education, individually and collectively.

So, that is ATL's definition of new professionalism. What we go on to argue is that the conditions for this concept to grow are not present in teachers' current working lives.

ATL argues that government policy has attempted to standardise teachers' professional practice, (and the strategies are central to this standardisation drive) and in doing so has shown a lack of trust in the profession and a denial of complexity. ATL believes that teaching has to be a learning profession, but also an innovating profession and the government's role should be to recognise and optimise the spread of good practice arising from classrooms. Local communities of teachers must be equipped to reflect on their practice, and to try out new ways of improving learning.

It is this drive to empower the profession, to enable it to regain its confidence and belief in its own professional skills, which has led ATL's work within social partnership on the revised performance management arrangements for schools. Central to ATL's position is a new concept of CPD which is now embedded into the revised system. We have achieved two major advances:

1. CPD as an entitlement – performance objectives must be accompanied by CPD to enable teachers to improve their practice
2. CPD must be tailored not only to the collective needs of the school, but also to the personal professional needs of the teacher.

Now, the proof of our influence is in the policy documents. Contrast the government's statement on new professionalism in its five year strategy with that in the 2005 RIG evidence to the STRB, signed up to by ATL, NASUWT, the DfES, PAT, NEOST and ASCL. This latter statement shows how much their understanding of the concept has developed, in large part due to the intellectual and professional lead of ATL:

Teachers have always sought to maintain and develop their expertise, helped colleagues to review and improve their practice, and seen themselves as learning professionals. However, this has not always been easy to achieve. Underlying the new teacher professionalism is the aim that professional development is an ongoing part of the everyday activities of a teacher, rather than a separate activity which adds to the work load of teachers.

The new teacher professionalism espouses a culture of greater openness where all teachers are engaged in effective professional development which enhances pupil attainment and teachers' job satisfaction, and supports school improvement and teachers' career progression.....Assessments of the impact of professional development need to take into account that it takes time for the benefits of professional development to be realized fully and reflected in improved classroom practice. They should not focus only on immediate results. (RIG, 2005 evidence to the STRB – new professionalism, chapter 9 pp.96/97)

So, finally, what does this new concept of new professionalism mean to primary educators? We know that we have the best educated and most able generation of teachers, ever – and that is down to the work of teacher trainers in higher education. ATL is working for your trainees to enter a new professional world – one in which they can regain a sense of professional autonomy, in which they are empowered to make decisions about the curriculum, about pedagogy and about assessment practices, which, on the basis of evidence, their expertise and their knowledge of their pupils, they judge to be most appropriate. Of course, such autonomy will always, and quite rightly, be conditional – teachers are accountable to a range of bodies (and this is work in train for ATL – to map out proper lines of accountability which will support teachers in raising standards). But the balance has to be redressed.

Real rises in standards will not be gained, or sustained, by command and control, but by developing professional expertise from within the profession, which will be supported by the knowledge, skills and professional expertise of you, helping teachers to identify issues they wish to address, supporting them in researching practice, and challenging them when your research uncovers uncomfortable findings which the profession would rather not consider. My final argument is that your work, with the profession with trainee teachers and teachers at all stages of their careers with whom you work as mentors and on award bearing CPD courses, will become more rewarding, more fulfilling and have much more impact, if you are working with teachers whose knowledge, expertise and practice is confident and generally respected.

Ends