

# John's sheep dip into visual aids failed to impress



**LES WALTON**

**T**HE DfE description of a good teacher in its publication Teachers' Standards says, "Teachers make the education of their pupils their first concern, and are accountable for achieving the highest possible standards in work and conduct. Teachers act with honesty and integrity; have strong subject knowledge, keep their knowledge and skills as teachers up to date and are self-critical; forge positive professional relationships and work with parents in the best interests of their pupils."

The DfE then goes on to say the first thing a teacher must do is to "Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils."

I was delighted to see the word inspire in their guidance. There is a little niggle in my mind that increasingly we focus on transmitting knowledge and skills and less on stimulating and challenging pupils.

In 1963 I was placed on 'Teaching Practice' in a secondary school together with my friend John Porrit. It was a nervous time. What type of school would we get? Would we be welcomed by the staff and most of all would we have credibility with the children?

This was a period in which students were often seen as bringing in new teaching styles that were less authoritarian and hierarchical than the traditional teacher scribbling on a blackboard. Today, tastes have swung back, and it is fashionable to denigrate those alternatives as so much hippy nonsense.

However, traditional standards were still being stressed. We were given clear directions on how we should speak and behave in a school. In particular, the male students were expected to wear a jacket and tie and the females were told to wear bright colourful dresses - to 'cheer up the child'. In most schools it was unacceptable for a female teacher to wear trousers.

A regional accent was also unacceptable. Together with my good friend John, the son of a Yorkshire Hill farmer, I was required to attend elocution lessons. John had a strong Yorkshire accent and I was, as usual, spouting Geordie. After John had tried to defend his right to maintain his accent he was told to be bilingual and speak the 'Queen's English' when in schools. John argued he



➤ A Swaledale sheep proved not to be an appropriate visual aid for teacher John as far as the headteacher was concerned

already was bilingual. 'Thou should hear me when am at yem' was his defence.

I, of course, switched into a version of posh Geordie which was maintaining the same accent but injecting the occasional big words such as 'iconoclastic' and 'antid-establishmentarianism'.

Being considered the sensible one of the duo I was 'put in charge' of John and placed in the same school for teaching practice.

On the first day at school I arrived with my carefully prepared 'visual aids', which were mainly large sheets of paper with diagrams. John arrived with a sheep.

I had never been up close to a fully grown sheep. This wasn't just any old sheep. It was a Swaledale. A thick coated, black faced, curled horned, off white, smelly, sticky beast.

John had succeeded in leading the sheep into the school and was waiting in the classroom excited to show the children his surprise. As I entered the building crowds of children were outside the classroom trying to get a glimpse of the sheep.

Unfortunately John's brilliant 'visual aid' did not go down too well with the headteacher. Within ten minutes of arrival, John and I were packed off back to college. I never saw the sheep again.

I have often wondered what makes a great teacher. Too often I have seen teachers figuratively and literally chasing after children distributing knowledge. Wouldn't it be great if it were the other way round? On the other hand I have met teachers who

were almost like magnets to the child arousing their curiosity and their desire to learn.

Great teachers make children think more than teach them things. I have observed English teachers read books to children in such a way that the children would yearn for the lesson to never end. Mathematics teachers who so love their subject that the children would strain every part of their brain in seeking to understand the complexity of the task.

So where are we today? Increasingly we are treating our teachers as technicians, to be scrutinised, analysed and then categorised. Teaching is more than imparting knowledge; it is inspiring change. Learning is more than absorbing facts; it is acquiring understanding. I would much prefer children being taught how to think rather than what to think. Schools should be creating young people who are capable of doing new things and thinking new thoughts, not simply regurgitating the deeds and thoughts of past generations.

William Butler Yeats summed this up perfectly - "education is not filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire".

How many fires did John light when he brought that sheep into the school? Without doubt, the curiosity of the children would have been awakened. Einstein always considered it was a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.

If teachers can teach students to learn by creating curiosity they will continue the learning process as long as they live. Curiosity will lead us to open new doors, create new paths and do new things.

Are you not curious about what John's lesson would have been like with the sheep standing in front of the class? After 50 years I am still wondering.

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