

One teaching career



THE HIGHS AND LOWS, THE JOYS AND WOES



Called... but not equipped

I was interested to read Dr Trevor Cooling's 'Called to teach?' article (*ACT Now*, Summer 2006). When I started teaching in 1960 I found myself with a class of about thirty 7–8 year-olds, half of whom had reading ages of five and below. I really did not know how to start teaching them. The classroom was largely equipped with ancient textbooks, which most of the children could not read. Group reading was in vogue at that time: at least every child read something every day, even if it was only about the adventures of *Janet and John*. Mathematics, never my strongest subject, was particularly difficult to teach, with a dull textbook called *B & A Arithmetic*, which also demanded a fairly high level of literacy.

Yes, I felt called to teach, but was I properly equipped? Not really. I knew what it was like to go to a Secondary Modern School, where most of my pupils would go. I experienced a deep sense of failure as a child, and now I was having a similar experience as a teacher. No doubt, like many new teachers I had very high expectations for myself. Everyone assumed, it seemed, that having trained for three years I knew exactly what to do. No advice was offered. I expect I was too proud to ask for any. I used my voice far too much. I remember that one afternoon my voice was so weak one of my talkative pupils, Erica, came to my rescue with a dazzling display of loquacity.

Teaching Religious Education – from the Bible – was easy. Keeping order was another matter. If only I had known then what I learnt over the next 40 years, life would have been so much easier. The old pupil-teacher system had much to recommend it for raw beginners. I am glad that after several experiments (like the Plowden Report) education has been organised on a national basis. Hopefully, child-centred education is a thing of the past.

Finding and nurturing talent

When I went to my next school, Christ Church, JMI, Ware, things were much better. Arthur Blundell was the Headmaster and virtually every member of staff was a Christian.

One afternoon every week after school most of the staff helped with a Scripture Union group for the children. I think I began to find my feet as a teacher in this school. Having a strong Christian leadership and support from colleagues was wonderful. We had our share of difficult children or, more

accurately, children with many problems in their home lives. I remember one particular girl who was a very slow learner. During one craft lesson, I think the children were making cardboard castles, she turned out a really magnificent piece of work. I suppose it was then that I realised that every child had a talent to do something. Our job as teachers was to find and nurture this talent.

My time as Supply Teacher was probably the happiest period of my career

St Luke's CofE Junior School in Wolverhampton was where I next taught. What a different environment! Wolverhampton Wanderers FC had started from this school and the Parish Church next door, in association with Blakenhall FC. The area was changing rapidly with a large number of old back-to-back houses surrounding the school having been cleared away. Soon high tower blocks dwarfed the school. Many white families had moved out as immigrants from Asia and the West Indies moved into the area. The children were taught in mixed-ability classes at this time, and I remember a bright group of girls sitting at the back of the classroom taking notes as I was teaching.

The slipper

Corporal punishment was legal at that time. I had an old PE slipper that I used more in jest than reality. I remember an overweight boy with West Indian parents called George. I recall that one day George did something I didn't approve of and I called him out and told him to bend over to receive his punishment. He did so. My classroom dated from Victorian times and had a high desk and chair to match, also Victorian. Sitting on my chair, I raised the slipper and tried to strike George's behind. But, as I did so, my chair collapsed and I finished up on the floor. *The Sun* newspaper, which had at that time just changed its name from the *Daily Herald*, was running a competition called 'Laughter in Class'. I sent in my entry describing the incident. The piece was published in *The Sun* and I received the princely sum of £2. I used my winnings to purchase a box to contain my photographic slides.

During my eight years at St Luke's I was responsible for Audio Visual Aids, choosing books for the school library and being Head of Religious Education. Some of the time I was preparing children to take the 11-plus examination. In my

spare time I was the Sunday School Superintendent. I feel those years were some of the best of my career. I remember one child asking me if the Bible was full of fairy stories. I replied that I believed that the Bible was true. I couldn't help but be glad that I was there to answer his question positively.

Times of testing

The aforementioned Plowden Report recommended the creation of First Schools with children transferring to Middle Schools aged 8 and then moving on to High Schools at 12. I responded to an advertisement for a Deputy Head for a newly created First School in North Warwickshire. I spent ten eventful years there under two successive Heads. I had to learn infant teaching methods, which were really not my style. Soon after I arrived we had a roof crisis and we had to move most of the school into huts. The Head was then falsely accused by some parents of forcibly feeding their child during school dinners and we were besieged by the media. The Head left soon afterwards and I was appointed Acting Head for a term until the new Head arrived.

When the new Head arrived things were very different and I was extremely unhappy. I asked God to remove me from the school. When He did so it was a difficult and painful process, but I believe He used it to strengthen my trust in Him. I believe God does allow bad things to happen to us – times of testing – but He is there with us, taking us through whatever happens. I remember Ian, a six year-old, saying, 'Jesus died that we might live forever.' I hope Ian continued to believe that.

Thanks to the friendly intervention of an Education Officer I spent the rest of my career as a Supply Teacher. First, working for the authority and then, after a generous early retirement package, making my own arrangements. My time as Supply Teacher was probably the happiest period of my career. I taught in many different schools and I was given opportunities that I would never have had otherwise. Am I bitter? Not really. Finding and following God's plan is what the Christian life is all about, isn't it?

■ David Rawlings

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