

My teacher's eyes

'I wish'

'I wish ...,' says a young person at the start of a well-known poem by James Berry. It is an appropriate way to start a poem – or, indeed, a book or a website – about education. How does the education system see and treat children and young people? What sort of future for them is being prepared? What hopes do they and their teachers have for a fairer and more inclusive society?

I wish my teacher's eyes
wouldn't
go past me today. Wish they'd
know
it's okay to hug me when I kick
a goal. Wish I myself wouldn't
hold back when an answer
comes.

I wish I could be educated
to the best of tune-up and earn
good money and not sink to lick
boots.

I wish I could go on every
crisscross way of the globe,
and no persons or powers or
hotel keepers would make it a
waste.

I wish life wouldn't spend me out
opposing. Wish same way
creation
would have me stand it would
have me stretch, and hold high,
my voice Paul Robeson's,
my inside eye a sun.

(From ***Dreaming Black Boy***, by
James Berry, in *Bluefoot
Traveller*, Harrap 1981)

The first wish is utterly simple, and the meaning is both literal and metaphorical. Literally, the kid wants to feel that they're noticed, that their presence is taken account of. Metaphorically, and even more importantly, they want to be cared about and attended to. It follows that when they do something praiseworthy – when they achieve some worthwhile target or goal – they want this to be noticed too, and affirmed. It's not empty or ritualistic praise he's asking for, not a sweet nothing, but something focused, genuine and spontaneous, and in relation to real achievement.

Berry stresses that attention and respect are expressed and received (and sometimes of course not expressed, not received) in a range of ways, not by words alone. Tone

of voice, facial expression, gesture, posture, demeanour, closeness or distance, the arrangement of objects and furniture, all these affect the messages which human beings give and send to each other, and which they receive and get. Also, there is such a thing as 'institutional body language' – messages are given and received through an organisation's customs, procedures, rules, regulations. This is true in schools as everywhere else. The point is obvious and well-known, yet needs stressing.

Particularly the point needs stressing in wherever much communication – both in words and in body language – is inherently and inescapably cross-cultural. For this reason alone there may be misunderstandings and crossed wires. A further complicating factor is inequality. It is particularly within a context of inequality that what is said is not necessarily what is heard.

Berry's next point is about learning, and about the inevitability in all learning of risk-taking. All learning is hazardous, for you have to risk making mistakes, getting it wrong before you get it right. 'I wish I myself wouldn't hold back, when an answer comes.' – a thought, a possible solution to a problem, a possible resolution of an enigma, an anomaly, a puzzle. It comes from within you and you have to test it out by uttering it and this can be scary. But this is what learning and education entail, there is no way forward other than through risks. Again, Berry is saying what everyone knows, but which needs recalling and rehearsing.

An essential task for teachers, it follows, is to provide both security, which comes from attending to and affirming the pupils, and also challenge, in order that they may learn. In David Hare's play *Skylight* a teacher observes that 'education has to be a mixture of haven and challenge'. And she goes on: 'Finding that balance, it stretches you, it stretches you as far as you'll go.'

'Education has to be a mixture of haven and challenge. Reassurance, of course. Stability. But also incentive. At the very least you offer the kids support. You care for them. You offer them security. You give them an environment where they feel they can grow. But also you make bloody sure you challenge them. You make sure they realise learning is hard. Because if you don't, if you only make it a safe haven, if it's all clap-happy and 'everything the kids do is great', then what are you creating? Emotional toffees, who've actually learnt nothing, but who then have to go back and face the real world ... Finding that balance, it stretches you, it stretches you as far as you'll go.' (*Kyra Hollis in Skylight by David Hare, Faber 1995.*)

Security and challenge are means, not ends: pre-conditions or foundations, not the final goal. The goals says, Berry, are an educated mind and the capacity to take part in society. 'I wish I could be educated to the best of tune-up, and earn good money, and not sink to lick boots.' You want your mind to be like a well-tuned engine or musical instrument. A specialist term here is 'cognitive and conceptual development': he wants thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills, and control of concepts in the

main academic disciplines. 'Education,' said Albert Einstein, 'is not the learning of facts but the training of the mind to think.'

And at the same time, wholly reasonably, young people want good paper qualifications, leading to a good job and to a respected place in wider society: '... earn good money, and not sink to lick boots.' They want their contributions to society to be welcome and worthwhile, not wasted: 'I wish I could go every criss-cross way of the globe, and no powers or persons or hotel-keepers would make it a waste.'

Definitely they want to be part of society, to be able to say yes to it. The contrary, to spend their life saying 'no', would be a waste: 'I wish life wouldn't spend me out opposing.'

Finally, in this extract from James Berry's poem, they dream of their own personal creativity and powers of insight and imagination, their own unique involvement to the building and maintaining of justice ('my voice Paul Robson's') and their place and part in the total universe: 'wish ... creation would have me stand, stretch, hold high, my voice Paul Robeson's, my inside eye a sun.'

Source: the opening page, slightly adapted, of *Inclusive Schools, Inclusive Society* by Robin Richardson and Angela Wood, produced by Race on the Agenda, the Association of London Government and Save the Children, with a foreword by Doreen Lawrence, Trentham Books 1999.