

STAYING POSITIVE: CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS



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INTRODUCTION

I love education. I love working with the young, helping them to discover their abilities, achieve new things, find direction for their future.

But sometimes I worry about teachers. So many have lost their sense of worth and their sense of purpose. They feel put upon and powerless. They have lost the excitement of teaching. They feel alone in a difficult job.

I understand why. Teachers are confused about the many changes being forced upon them; resentful of the presumption of expertise by people who have no real concept of what happens in a 21st-century classroom; depressed by the unending expectations of politicians and the community; hurt by society's lack of respect for the work which most teachers do with a deep sense of care, commitment and purpose; and frustrated by the many demands of systems, governments and the community that take time and energy and often make no contribution to learning.

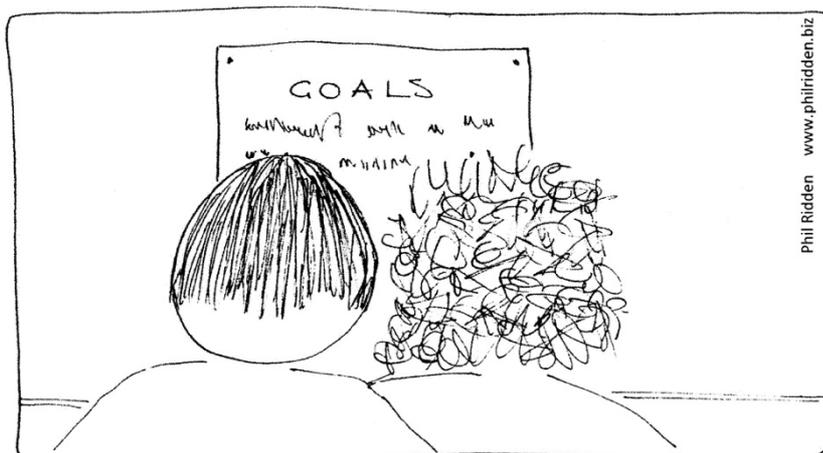
I understand, but I am aware that much of this is unlikely to change in the short term. Cycles may pass, particular issues may change, but the feelings will remain, transferring to new issues. Fullan puts it bluntly: 'There is no point in lamenting the fact that the system is unreasonable, and no percentage in waiting around for it to become more reasonable. It won't.'¹

Yet, although there are many things about schools over which teachers have little control, we do have control over our own attitudes — how we choose to respond to these things. Our attitudes affect our actions, and therefore our work. How we look at things, think about them and understand them has a significant impact on how we deal with them.

By changing our attitudes we are able to change the quality of the teaching and learning in the school. We are also able to change our own feelings of worth, and our ability not only to cope with the pressures, but to influence the agenda ourselves and to forge a path ahead.

In *For those who teach*, I outline some things we can do to impact our attitude to our work. That book includes some short conversations between two teachers, which are reprinted here.

Find a colleague and read these conversations aloud together. Two fonts represent the two parts. There are also some cartoons which might strike a chord!



If you want to know more about how to respond to these issues, *For those who teach* (ACER Press, Melbourne) can be purchased from ACER Press (www.shop.acer.edu.au/for-those-who-teach) or from www.philridden.biz. You may find some other books that interest you too.

If that's where we want to get to, we shouldn't start from here.

¹ M Fullan, *What's worth fighting for in the principalship?*, 2nd edn, Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation, Toronto, 1997, p. 6.

BE AWARE OF THE BIG PICTURE

I'm sick of these changes that keep landing on me. I've heard people say to keep your head down and let them all blow over. How do you cope?

I apply what I call 'The Clay Blob Theory for Coping with Change'.

I haven't heard of that. How does it work?

There are many changes blowing in the educational wind. Some of them are mostly fluff. They are thrown into the air, but are so lightweight that the wind simply blows them away, never to be heard of again. Some changes contain grains of clay. The material scatters over a wide area, leaving little spatters or grains sticking on assorted surfaces. These changes are irritating, rather than impacting. With little effort they can be mopped up or just ignored. But occasionally there comes a change which is a large blob of clay, falling in a sticky mess right in the middle of the classroom or school. It can't be cleaned away. These are the changes which matter, which are beyond our control.

Well, exactly! What do you do about those things?

Some teachers spend a great deal of energy trying to pretend the blob doesn't exist, covering it up, finding ways to skirt around it, or rationalising its presence as unobtrusive.

You've been watching me, haven't you?

You, and thousands of others, and myself, sometimes! I've learnt that a better approach is to roll up your sleeves, dig your hands into the clay while it is still wet and mould it into a shape you find attractive or useful. If you get into it soon enough and vigorously enough, before it sets, you can remould it to your purposes. You may even get to like it!

You make it sound like fun! But how do I know what to discard and what to mould?

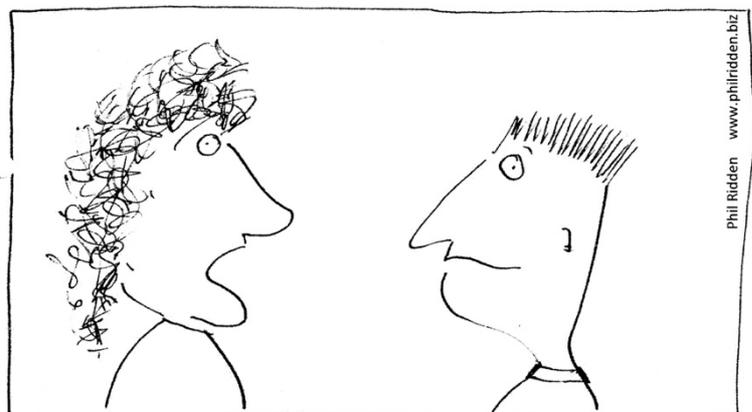
The first step to survival is to understand the big picture. Watch the press, educational journals, politicians and others, and you'll get better at discerning the clay blobs from the pieces of grit and fluff.

I have a new slogan: Be bold—mould!

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Now I know why they call this the lobby.



The problem with most problems is they're not problems until they become problems.

BE COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY

Schools and teachers are under pressure all over the country. In the past few years, education authorities have been introducing new structures, policies and practices. And in most cases, who has to implement them? Me. The classroom teacher. I'm the bunny at the bottom of the burrow.

But look at the opportunities the changes bring. Look at the things you can change.

Me? But I'm just a teacher.

What do you mean— just a teacher?

I mean that I'm at the bottom of the ladder. I take orders from everyone. Nobody cares what I think.

Who should?

The hierarchy. The directors, school council, the principal. They're all busy formulating wonderful new policies that are going to make education so much better, but I have to make all the great ideas work.

Isn't it like that in any enterprise?

Maybe. But nobody ever asks my opinion. These wonderful policies are supposed to have been worked out by committees or working parties, with input from teachers. But no one's ever asked me to be in a working party. The members never seem to be ordinary classroom teachers who are interested in putting the ordinary teacher's point of view. I have to read and listen to all these things that I'm supposed to do in the classroom. I make no contribution to what's decided, and I can do nothing to protest if I think the ideas are ridiculous. I'm just a teacher.

But you're more than JUST A TEACHER. You're A TEACHER!

Eh?

The problem is that word 'just'. You're the most powerful person in the system.

Powerful? How?

Because everyone depends on you. Those above and those below. You see, without you, nothing gets changed, nothing gets done. The reason the superintendents, directors and others have to tell you to do everything is because they can't. If you want your class to learn about, say, environmental pollution, how do you get it done? Who do you see? Who do you have to convince?

No one. I just teach it!

Exactly. But if the hierarchy want your class to learn about environmental pollution, they can't just go ahead and teach it. They don't have access to children like you do. They have to convince YOU to teach it. They also have to make sure you have the skill, knowledge and resources to do it. And in the end, they can't be sure whether you're doing it the way they wanted, or not. As long as you address the basic curriculum, you can teach almost anything you like, in whatever way you like, at whatever time you like, for as long as you like. Who else in the system has that much power?

I don't know. I'd never thought of it like that.

There's something else to consider. The problem with such power is the responsibility that goes with it. As a teacher, who are you trying to change? Who are you really trying to influence?

The kids.

That's right. And do you succeed?

I guess so. Sometimes. In some ways.

That's about all any of us can hope for. But when a 25-year-old comes up to you in the shopping centre, shows you her children and reminds you that you taught her in primary school, what is she remembering from 15 years ago? How the Minister for Education introduced new regulations for parent involvement in schools? A new health education syllabus? The government refusing to lower the student-teacher ratio?

Hardly.

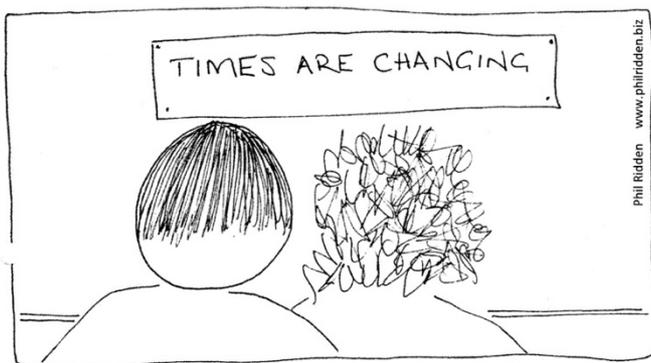
Of course not. What she's remembering is a person who taught her, cared about her, and helped her through a year of her life. And most of the students remember you with fondness or kindness and respect. In ways that they may or may not recognise, they remember that you influenced their lives, and that a little bit of what they are now is due to you.

Knock it off, you're making me cry. When do the violins start playing?

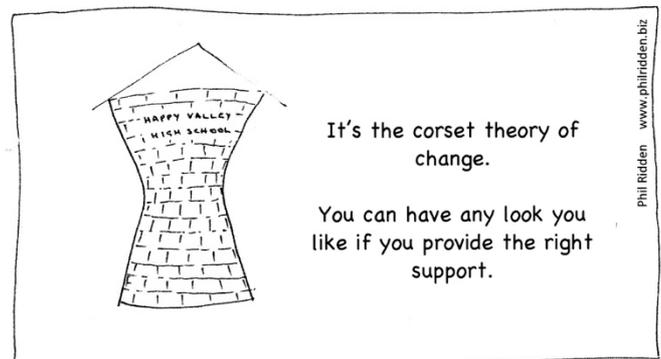
Forget the violins. Bring on the trumpets. Look who's here: It's not JUST a teacher. It's A TEACHER! Da-dah!

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Nothing else around here is.



BUY IN TO TEACHING

I'm thinking about resigning from teaching and doing something else.

Why?

What's the point? Teaching consumes several nights a week. My family complain I never have enough time for them. My holidays are spent planning for the next term or attending courses. Then some politician says that teachers should be doing a better job of teaching children to read, another says that kids don't know basic geography, and someone else complains that we're not teaching kids values, although if we do, we get accused of imposing our values on them. We get blamed when unemployment increases, when kids take drugs, when they aren't physically fit. The job is hard enough, but, to make it worse, whatever we do is wrong!

The job can be like that. So what's the solution?

I don't have one.

Do you remember why you became a teacher?

Well, it seemed like a good occupation—secure, good pay, holiday times that coincided with my children's holidays. And I enjoyed working with children.

And what motivates you now? Think about the days when you have gone home glad that you're a teacher, days when you've known that teaching is what you want to do. What made you feel that way?

The kids. When Jason figured out addition, and couldn't contain his excitement. And when Shane, after a week when I came close, several times, to throttling him, came to school with a card he'd made himself saying that I was his favourite teacher and he was really sorry for upsetting me. And just the other day, in the shopping centre I was greeted by a young woman, wheeling a pram, who asked if I remembered her, because I had taught her in Grade 4, the year her parents split up, and I was the person who helped her through because I cared about her. I nearly cried.

So at heart you want to make a difference. If we are to stay motivated in any job—not just teaching—we have to know why we're doing it. And we need to find examples of the things that keep us going.

Well what about you? Why did you become a teacher?

Because I thought I could have an influence in children's lives, not to satisfy any personal passion for power, but for altruistic reasons. I thought I had something to offer children and I wanted to offer it. I still believe that.

That's pretty idealistic.

Sure it is. But I believe there is a thread of idealism in all teachers. We believe we can achieve something, sometimes against all odds. We see something good and special in each student that is worth nurturing and find ways to do it, no matter how frustrating and unrewarding it may appear to be.

The thing that gets me is that the job is so exhausting. At the end of the day, I feel like something the cat dragged in, the dog and cat fought over and the dog dragged out again! Why do I feel that way?

Perhaps it's because you cannot teach without being intimately involved in students' lives, and that costs.

So who'd be a teacher?

Good question! This is no job for the faint-hearted or cynical. It's a vocation for the idealist, the person who has some concept of a good or a better society and some faith in the ability of well-guided youth to create it. So are you still going to quit?

I don't know. Do you think I'm motivated enough to keep me going?

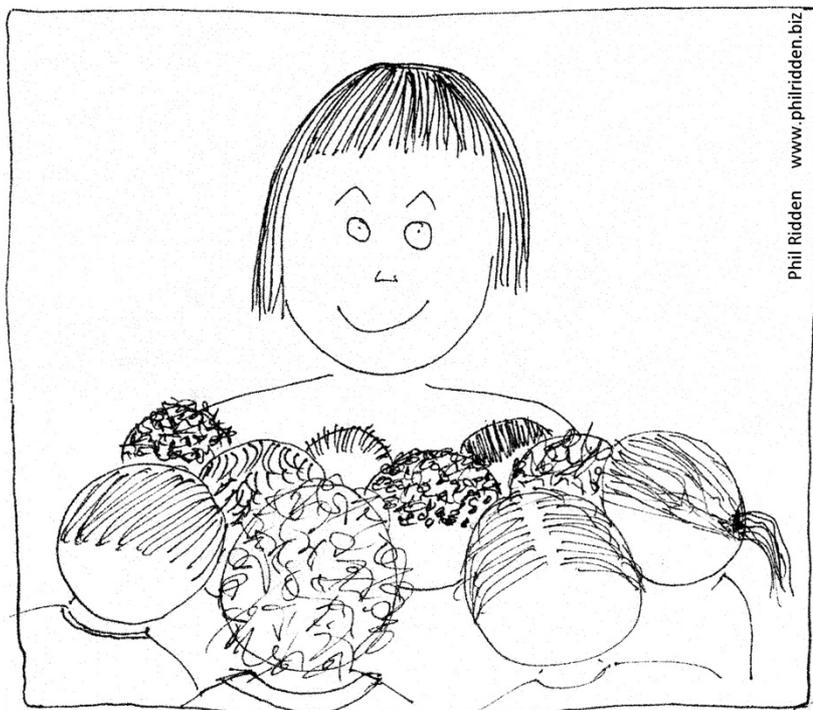
Only you can answer that. But let me give you a test. If this story tugs at your heart a little, then perhaps there's still hope: An ancient king decided to honour the people judged to be the greatest of his subjects. Before him paraded a great architect, who had designed wonderful buildings which stood as monuments to her creativity. A doctor was honoured for her compassion and her ability to develop new cures. A statesman was honoured for the great contribution he had made to the welfare of the people and the management of the economy. And so the parade continued, each nominee having brought honour to themselves and their country. Finally there came an old woman, stooped and plainly dressed, but with a light of wisdom and love shining from her eyes. 'Who is this and what has she done?' asked the king. 'Your majesty,' came the reply, 'you have seen all the other great people of your kingdom. This was their teacher.' The people applauded mightily and the king honoured her.

Perhaps there is a spark of hope left.

Perhaps.

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It doesn't get much better than this.

BE COMMITTED TO LEARNING

As I was walking along the beach the other day, I saw a man coming towards me. He was throwing a stick for his dog to chase. As he came nearer, he threw the stick out into the water. The dog immediately leapt over the breaking waves, ran across the top of the water, retrieved the stick and ran back across the top of the waves to place the stick at his master's feet.

I was astounded. I said to the man, 'That was amazing. Your dog ran across the top of the water to retrieve that stick. I've never seen anything like it. What an amazing dog!'

The man replied, 'He's no so wonderful. I've been trying to teach him to swim for ages.'

I know how he feels. Did you know I taught my dog to whistle?

What? I've seen your dog. He barks, but I've never heard him whistle.

I didn't say he'd learnt to whistle. I just said I'd taught him.

Now you're just being silly.

Not really. When does your responsibility as a teacher end?

When I've done a good job of delivering the lesson.

But what if some students haven't understood it or learnt it?

Then they need to work on it for homework.

So if they didn't understand while you explained it to them, how are they supposed to understand it on their own at home?

That's not my problem; that's theirs. Learners have to accept some responsibility for their own learning.

And if they still don't get it?

Then they fail the course. It's a competitive world. Perhaps they were doing the wrong course in the first place.

I'm having trouble imagining myself telling my Year 1s to give up on reading and choose a different course.

That's different. Everyone has to learn to read.

And if they can't?

Well, I guess teaching's a flawed process.

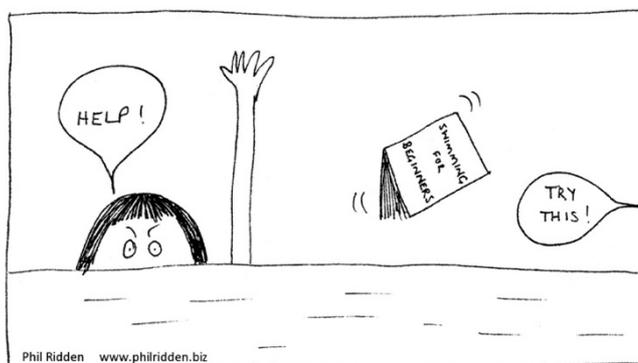
I guess it is. But although I'm called a teacher, it's not really about me and my teaching—it's about the students and their learning.

So you're one of the trendy 'learning facilitators'?

I'm not sure I'm mad about the term, but it does give a different message from 'teacher'. Teaching's just a strategy: Learning's the thing!

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PARTNER WITH OTHERS

I don't need this collaboration. I have enough to do without wasting time telling everyone else about it. Let me use the time to get on with my work.

But we need your insights.

No you don't. If people can't do the job, what are they doing here?

Well, two heads are better than one, as the old saying goes.

Not always. My head's fine on its own. If I need help, I'll ask. After all, I spend most of my time here locked in a room with a bunch of kids. The only time I see anyone to collaborate with is lunchtime. They do their thing with their classes, I do my thing with mine, then we all go home.

But that's a waste of our combined knowledge and insights. Altogether in this school we have well over 500 years of experience. It's a shame not to use that to find ways to help students learn better, to develop strategies for dealing with difficult students, to create more interesting learning experiences.

I thought the students in my classes were my problem.

During any particular lesson, they may be your 'problem', as you put it, but they're the school's responsibility. You are expected to play your role in their education and growth, but we should use all the resources of the school to help you to do that. And the most powerful resource we have in the school is the combined experience, knowledge and insights of the staff.

Perhaps you have a point. But when do we do this?

It's like any other aspect of our work. If it matters, we'll find time for it. Let me show you that it matters.

Fair enough. Let's do it. Convince me.

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If we promise to hold hands during staff meetings, can we skip the team building stuff?



For Those Who Teach

PHIL RIDDEN



There are many things over which teachers have little control and which are difficult to change; but teachers can change how they view the challenges they face, and how they deal with them.

Phil Ridden loves education, but he is worried about teachers. So many seem to have lost their sense of purpose. They feel put upon and powerless. They feel alone in a difficult job.

For Those Who Teach draws on the author's wealth of experience and on his passion for teaching. Much more than mere words of advice, this book seeks to actively engage teachers and help shape their attitudes.

In a direct and positive manner, *For Those Who Teach* addresses the realities of the profession: from context to curriculum, from collaboration to community, from understanding teaching as a calling to the days when we struggle to cope.

Whether a novice teacher-trainee or a veteran of many years, *For Those Who Teach* will inspire teachers to regain their balance, their focus, their motivation, and their determination to make a difference in students' lives.