

How are you doing?

Nick Luxmoore

There are easier ways of making a living. There are better-paid ways of making a living. So for most of us who work in schools, it's personal. We do it because it matters.

We say we do it because we want young people to have the best possible start in life (which we do), but working in schools also matters because (like any job) it resolves or attempts to resolve for us something much more personal. It may be that – *in loco parentis* – schools allow us to parent young people the way we were parented ourselves or the way we needed to be parented. We may do the work because it makes up for something in our lives or allows us to express important parts of ourselves that can't be expressed elsewhere. We may do it because the order and disorder of school life is the way in which we try to address our own capacity for control and chaos.

Our decision to do this difficult work arises, in part, from unconscious need. Sometimes that need continues throughout our lives and is never (or only partially) resolved. So we continue with the work, year after year. Sometimes the need is resolved or changes and we no longer need to continue in schools because we no longer need whatever the work once offered us.

Because it's personal, the work has an inevitable effect on us. To do it, we must live with a perpetual sense of inadequacy, knowing that we can be doing our best, staying up half the night, and yet *still* we won't be doing it for all of the people all of the time, *still* the inspectors will find fault, *still* we know that we can improve. With an acute sense of inadequacy, we can turn into rebels ourselves, defending against our helplessness with anger and indignation, accusing others of being the inadequate ones – not us! Our ability to tolerate the sense of inadequacy that goes with the job will partly determine how we behave as professionals and whether or not we continue with the work.

We also live with the effects of projective identification: all the ways in which our colleagues and young people get us to feel their feelings for them. We might call these experiences 'wind-ups'. Normally, other people project their feelings onto us, accusing us of various things we know aren't true and so the projections don't stick: they bounce off us. But when we're angry about the injustices of life, for example, that's when we're likely to absorb other people's anger as if it were our own. When we're accused of inadequacy and know – secretly – that it's true, that's when we're likely to absorb everyone else's projected sense of inadequacy as if it was our own. That's when we fill with rage or despair or vengeance unless we have somewhere to take those feelings, someone with whom to make sense of them, disentangling what belongs to us from what doesn't.

In addition to this, we live with the neurological effects of the work. Years ago, some Italians were researching the effect on monkeys' brains of various stimuli, feeding raisins to the monkeys and watching what happened to the neurons in the monkeys' brains. It was lunchtime. The monkeys were still wired up to the computers scanning their brains, and one of the researchers was hungry.

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He took some raisins for himself. By chance, another researcher saw a monkey watching this and noticed that the neurons in the *watching* monkey's brain fired in exactly the same way as if the monkey itself had been eating the raisins. This led to the discovery of 'mirror' or 'empathy' neurons: the fact that observing an experience can have the same neurological effect as having the experience itself. So when we talk of 'vicarious traumatising' or 'burn-out', we might be referring to the cumulative effect on us of being surrounded by powerful feelings, of working in a stressful environment with people who are angry or afraid or despairing and whose feelings will have a toxic, neurological effect on us. Over the years, this effect builds up unless we have some way of decontaminating ourselves.

Some people decontaminate by simply passing their feelings on, taking them out on colleagues and young people. Others do it by cutting off altogether ("I don't let it get to me!") but, as professionals, are usually less effective if cutting off means refusing to empathise with other people, refusing to care in order to stay safe.

Working in schools, it's normal to feel angry. It drives us on. It gets things done. It informs our passion and compassion. But over time our anger can turn into bitterness. We therefore need regular opportunities to think about and review how we're doing or we risk going under. An annual performance review is important but inevitably addresses the more tangible, practical aspects of the work. These tangibles matter – of course they do – but so do all the intangibles: the personal motivations, the conscious and unconscious reasons why we do the job, the ways in which we cope and don't cope with inadequacy, the ways in which we try to make sense of our lives. Hard work gets things done but can also be a way of trying to deal with doubt and unhappiness.