

# Inspirational Teachers Inspirational Learners – Will Ryan

Crown House Publishing Limited

ISBN 974-184590443-2

## The Prologue

It was 1993 and the early spring sunshine was streaming through the high Victoria windows as I walked into the classroom. Skies were blue, trees were turning green and the birds sang. I was feeling positive because I thought. I was turning the corner in my second headship. At last, I thought, the school was on the way up. I moved towards a table with a spare chair and sat with a group of children. I turned to Jenny, a rather sweet eight-year-old with flowing blonde hair, and asked, 'Tell me, Jenny, what are you learning about today?' In gruff, flat Yorkshire vowels she replied, 'Well, if you ask me it's all a load of rubbish.'

The thing about working in primary education is that the highs can be very high but the lows can be very low.

The children were cutting out part of diagrams from a pre-published worksheet and sticking them onto another piece of paper to depict the water cycle under the heading of 'The Journey of a River'. The activity was relatively undemanding and there was little evidence of pride in what was going on.

I asked Jenny to explain why she wasn't enjoying the lesson. She told me to walk to the end of the lane and look at the river because there were dead fish floating on the surface. She then told me that her grandfather and a group of friends (who were local miners) had in the past 'clubbed together' to buy fishing rights. They told her how they had racked their brains to prevent kingfishers and herons from robbing them of their investments. She knew about the boats that used to travel between the local coal mine and the power station pulling huge floating skips full of coal that would be used to generate electricity. She spoke of paddling and damming the small brook that feeds into the river. Then she told me how the river would eventually flow under Europe's largest suspension bridge and into the Humber ports. She concluded: 'We shouldn't be doing the journey of a river – we should be doing the story of a river.'

Those thoughts stayed with me for many years. I learned so much from her comments and further researched the idea of using an emotional hook to engage pupils' learning. I started to explore the concept further and found out how the limbic system in the brain works in precisely that manner. I also spent much time considering the key elements that would be in Jenny's story of a river. I pictured the group of enterprising miners and their need to think in order to seek solutions. I thought about how literacy and the arts could be involved and how the 'story of a river' would create a sense of 'awe, wonder and spirituality. As I did this, a new model of pupil creativity started to emerge in my mind that would be fit for the century we live in.

Time moved on. Jenny continued to point out the school's failings to me. She was a 'school council' all on her own. Jenny moved to the secondary school and I moved on to join the local authority's school improvement service.

More or less fourteen years after that fateful day in Jenny's classroom I was sent to a school with several newly qualified teachers to observe them teach as part of the borough's monitoring programme. The head took me to the first classroom and introduced me to one of the NQTs saying, 'Will, may I introduce you to Jenny Cole.' We both looked at each other and said, 'Oh no,' followed by, 'We have met before.' Both phrases were uttered in perfect unison. I was looking straight into the eyes of the former pupil who had seemed to invent the concept of student voice.

I asked about the lesson I was about to watch and I was told it related to the journey of a river. I was handed the lesson plan which had been downloaded from the internet. The session involved a diagram and children sequencing the sections of text so that they could piece together the story of the water cycle. In Ofsted terminology the lesson would have been graded satisfactory.

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When it came to providing feedback, I reminded her of our conversation all those years ago and told her how I had learned so much from her remarks.

Without further comment from me, she said, 'I didn't follow my own advice then, did I?'