


Dare to be Different



A leadership
fable about
transformational
change in schools



Will Ryan



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This book is dedicated to those brilliant teachers who dare to be different and whose pupils develop a love of learning while making brilliant progress.

I would especially like to thank the following schools who have been kind enough to allow me to work with them on a regular basis and whose work has helped to shape this book:

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Foreword

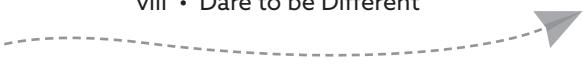
by James Kilner



Will Ryan has broken the mould when it comes to educational leadership textbooks! He skilfully weaves a believable and engaging work of fiction with a golden thread of truly inspirational educational philosophy which will appeal equally to the newly qualified as well as battle weary school leaders. Will's sharp wit and insightful take on current challenges facing schools makes this a very easy read. By lampooning the pomposity, hypocrisy and shenanigans of politicians both locally and nationally he strikes a blow for freedom for those willing to 'dare to be different' and take up the very practical ideas which fall from every page. Through his apposite quotes, reference to current research and exploration of the mythical 'golden age' of education he is able to convince the reader his ideas are a worthy road map for successful school leadership. He lays before us a concept of leadership he encapsulates in the 'brave school leaders' who play by their own rules. I suppose what Will refers to here is that group of leaders who have managed to retain their integrity and sustain their deep-seated philosophy on primary education despite the meddling of central and local government.

I have known Will Ryan for practically the whole of his time in the world of education. It comes as no surprise to me that he is able to articulate his own deep-seated philosophy on primary education since his work as a classroom teacher – and later as a school leader and education adviser – always put enjoyment at the forefront.

As a teacher he honed his skills well working in local authorities and with teachers and leaders who were fully committed to 'the West Riding philosophy' which brightened the lives of so many children. It was a philosophy promoted by the legendary Sir Alec Clegg (CEO of the West Riding of Yorkshire from 1945 to 1974). It enriched the lives of children growing up in south and west Yorkshire from the



1950s right up until the first ‘raspberry ripple’ *Curriculum Matters* booklets published as Margaret Thatcher’s Tory government was preparing the ground for the 1988 Education Reform Act, which was to impose the national curriculum on schools.

I remember accompanying Will on a visit to Alderley Edge in the mid 1970s as part of our class study of *The Weirstone of Brisingamen* by Alan Garner. Well before health and safety Will and I crammed together in the caves of Alderley Edge with fifty-three Year 6 pupils (J4 in old money) and read extracts from the book describing the sleeping knights under the hills. I still meet men and women in their fifties who remember that day and that experience and how, for some, it brought reading alive for them in every sense.

Over the course of the book Will provides the reader with a rich bounty of ideas for enriching children’s learning which he draws from the inspiration he gives to schools as he invents the crafty twists and turns of a vibrant curriculum with which to hook the imaginations of today’s children.

Will takes us through an inspirational curriculum through the eyes and experiences of an inspirational head teacher, Brian Smith, and his various friends and foes. The villains of the piece; Roger Stonehouse, a chair of governors and leader of the council who bullies his way to power; the inept secretary of state, Rupert Brinton; and the head of Ofsted, Sir Compton Urquhart, are a compilation of so many who have held those offices in recent years.

Brian’s allies are the inspirational Tom Featherstone, a local authority adviser, together with Andrea and Eve who keep Brian focused and motivated and ensure he keeps believing in himself.

The battle lines are drawn and Will successfully convinces the reader that Brian’s vision will conquer the dull and lacklustre curriculum facing schools.

Within the first few pages we see Will’s simple ideas of teaching three-generational lessons within a fourth-generation curriculum. The reader is left tingling at the prospect of a Disney film leading to the type of high quality maths, design and literacy and spiritual, moral, social and cultural experiences on offer with just the right amount of encouragement and inspiration. Here, even the least confident teacher, given just the right amount of freedom, can design learning which has no boundaries.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that almost every page of the book contains some nugget which causes the reader to sit back in amazement at the achievements of the various characters Will parades before us.

Will has no time for ‘The Vicars of Bray’ who chop and change their theories of education in a vain attempt to convince inspectors that their institutions are good or outstanding. His message is loud and clear from the outset – Will is setting before the reader a vision – backed up with specific and practical school based ideas – which can rekindle in the primary schools of this country the belief that greatness and success for our future generations can be achieved: if only the leaders at the chalkface hold fast to their beliefs in how children learn and make our schools the envy of the rest of the world.

A head teacher once said to me during a review of his large primary school in the centre of a west Yorkshire city, ‘My aim for the children is simple, I want our children to become good neighbours.’ Mind-blowing in its simplicity but what a world our children would create for themselves if the overwhelming majority were ‘good neighbours’. As you read through Will’s amazing examples and practical solutions for this ever-changing world of primary education you feel the urge to take his ideas and run with them. You know deep down that Will is capturing the reason why you went into primary education, because it is your vocation and not just a job.

It is an inspirational tale. As schools prepare themselves for the next onslaught of government initiatives, as the press continue to blame teachers for all the ills of the world, Will hands to those willing to take the challenge the opportunity to take back ownership of what happens in the classroom.

In Will’s time he has seen off the barmy ‘Initial Teaching Alphabet’ of the 1960s, with its forty-five symbols that nobody ever really got to grips with, Fletcher Maths, SMP maths (Still Millions Puzzled), reading by osmosis and all the fads and fancies which came and went over the years. No, Will sticks to what he knows best and what is proven to work well, good old-fashioned fun learning which engages and excites the children to discover and causes parents to have to listen to ‘what we did at school today’ open

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mouthed. Above all, Will inspires teachers young, old or anywhere in-between to 'dare to be different' and get back to enjoying the job they are proud to hold as a vocation in life.

Preface



The current educational climate has become obsessed with data and the collection of evidence, so here comes my contribution. Within this text you will find:

- At least one-hundred-and-eighteen tips that are based around exciting primary practice and which should make the hairs tingle on the neck of the most wizened school inspector.
- At least forty-five significant ideas that will strengthen leadership and have the capacity to transform your school as a learning community.
- At least fifty quotations that will make you think about how our most inspirational leaders create inspirational teachers who get an inspirational response from their learners.
- Compelling pieces of evidence to demonstrate that primary school teachers are doing a fabulous job, despite what any politician or reporter from the *Daily Mail* would tell you.

I have been a very lucky man. I have now spent forty-three years going in and out of the best primary schools and classrooms in this nation, and if there is one thing I have discovered it is that these wonderful places tend to make up their own rules. It was Michael Korda who said, ‘The fastest way to succeed is to look like you are playing to someone else’s rules whilst quietly playing by your own.’ The problem in education is that politicians and administrators have constantly been changing and making up rules, leaving behind a workforce that is committed to the children in its care but worn down by political meddling. It may be a personal view, but I seriously believe that a significant proportion of actions have been taken by politicians driven by a quest for power rather than by a deep concern for the welfare of children. Indeed, sometimes their well-being has been totally neglected. For example, in May



2016 *The Guardian* carried a story about the then mayor of London concealing a report revealing that 433 schools in the capital are in areas that exceed rules on nitrogen oxide pollution. In the same edition there was an article by Jonathan Wolff based on Bernard Williams' paper 'Politics and Moral Character'. This argued that 'the characteristics that allow politicians to rise to the top might not be the virtues we seek in those who govern us: "Lying, or at least concealment and the making of misleading statements; breaking promises; special pleading; temporary coalition with the distasteful; sacrifice of the interests of worthy persons to those of unworthy persons; and (at least if it is a sufficiently important position) coercion to blackmail."' ¹

If this is the case, then it really is time for brave school leaders everywhere to start playing by their own rules. However, this can be easier said than done. I have always been impressed by the influential leadership fables of Patrick Lencioni. I believe they have the capacity to bring about transformational change. As a consequence, I have always had a desire to write a similar leadership fable within a primary school setting, and this is it. It is the story of a primary school head teacher who listens very carefully to the things his political masters say and then sets out to achieve greatness by doing the exact opposite. While the characters in the story are all fictitious, the wonderful Tom Featherstone and the butterflies he creates (i.e. the little things that make a huge difference) are based around the work of Sir Tim Brighouse.

Those forty-three years of going in and out of wonderful classrooms while trying to make sense of constant government meddling have left me with a story I have been dying to tell. As Zora Neale Hurston said, 'There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.' So here comes the story. I hope it proves to be a good one, because we all love a good story. We were made for them!

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Chapter 1

Begin with the end in mind



Budget 2016: Every state school in England to become an academy by 2022

Daily Mail Online, 15 March 2016

Wilferd Peterson famously told us to begin with the end in mind and ‘walk with the dreamers, the believers, the courageous, the cheerful, the planners, the doers, the successful people with their heads in the clouds and their feet on the ground’. This is a leadership fable about a school and its head teacher who did just that.

Brian Smith had grown tired of wave after wave of government initiatives and meddling politicians with their vanity projects. These projects were often ill-conceived and seemed to be designed to spread fear and unrest among school leaders. This was despite the fact that Ofsted inspectors were reporting that primary schools were doing well. Brian hated this approach and he also loathed the way in which certain newspapers disparaged the wonderful young people and their dedicated teachers in the nation’s schools. While Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools was praising the work of primary schools, some tabloids preferred to publish distorted stories that potentially corroded the spirits of committed teachers. They seemed especially to aim their venom at leaders like Brian, driven by a moral imperative to make a difference in some of our most challenging communities by daring to be different.

Brian had certainly dared to be different. Three years earlier he reached a bold and momentous decision to listen to everything his political masters said and then achieve greatness by doing the opposite. This was simply because he considered that there was



more research behind his approach. Instead of feeling demoralised by the fabrications of journalists, Brian was determined that they galvanise him into action. So, for the last three years, Brian had led Springett Lane Primary School with his head in the clouds and his feet on the ground. Wilferd Peterson also told us to begin with the end so, perversely, we will start our fable at the end.


The inspector calls

The inspection of Springett Lane Primary School had gone well. In fact, it went better than that. The inspectors witnessed some remarkable primary practice taking place within a learning community where both children and adults believed they could achieve, had a duty to achieve and had a duty to help others achieve. This was the culmination of brave and inspired leadership and, rightly, it was about to trigger much celebrating.

The inspection had taken place late in the autumn term when the whole school had become absorbed in a project entitled ‘Fire and Ice’, to reflect not only the winter months but also the forthcoming Winter Olympics. The school was looking spectacular. By this stage the teachers had fully embraced the concept of immersive learning environments – where learners become totally absorbed in a self-contained and stimulating environment – which may, in reality, be artificial, but to the children it is absolutely real.

Armed with their clipboards, the inspectors joined the children as they passed by the lamp post and through the old wooden wardrobe that had replaced the door to Claire’s Key Stage 2 classroom, before entering the fictitious land of Narnia. The children in this class became hooked into a huge project around C. S. Lewis’ classic children’s novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Another stunning learning environment could be found in Year 5. The classroom reflected the huge success the children had achieved with their project based around that most ill-fated of British ships, the RMS *Titanic*. The work had culminated in the children running a museum for the day. Following invitations written by the pupils, the lord mayor had arrived in all his finery to open the proceedings. At the centre of the museum was a large-scale model of the liner. The displays celebrated the pupils’ considerable achievements in all areas of the curriculum. Children dressed as passengers and crew

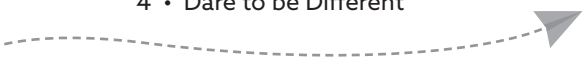


members and circulated among the parents and wider community to share their information with confidence. There were PowerPoint presentations and films as the children took up the mantle of the expert, leaving visitors astonished by the youngsters' capacity to hold their audience. It was one of those rare occasions when you could reach out and touch the children's passion for learning. The school's emphasis on spoken language had paid huge dividends.

Another great success story had been in Rob's class. As a teacher, he had initially shared immense concerns when Brian had introduced the notion of teaching three-generational lessons within a fourth-generation curriculum. (If you are confused by these terms, dear reader, all will become clear in the fullness of time.) Rob feared there would be a lack of textbooks and of the structures he had become reliant upon. On more than one occasion he had sat in Brian's staff meetings saying, 'It's no good. I just don't get it!' During the Christmas holidays he had settled down in front of the television to watch a rerun of one of his favourite films. He had seen *Cool Runnings* so many times that he knew virtually every word. While watching it again, he reached out for his coffee cup and froze as he suddenly said out loud: 'Feel the rhythm! Feel the rhyme! By Jove I've got it, it's bobsleigh time!' In a flash of inspiration, he set about building a term's work around the Disney film which tells the story of the almost-true trials and tribulations of the Jamaican bobsleigh team who took part in the Calgary Winter Olympic Games in 1988.

Springett Lane Primary School had developed a unique approach to its fourth-generation curriculum, which was based around teachers taking unusual ideas and running with them and encouraging children to imagine what a better world might look like. While all this was going on, the youngsters would be learning some real, interesting and hard stuff. For Rob, *Cool Runnings* proved to be the ideal vehicle. Yes, it just happened to be his favourite childhood film, but that was a significant advantage as it gave him huge subject knowledge.

The project was never about the children sitting and watching the DVD version of the film. Rob simply took extracts from it and told stories about what happened next. As a consequence, the children studied the climate and topography of Jamaica. They also found out about the scars slavery had left behind. In trying to




establish why Jamaicans would be any good at bobsleighbing, they looked at the history of cart racing on the Caribbean island and also the significance of the sprint start. It is a well-known fact that, over recent years, many of the world's best sprinters have come from Jamaica and the children duly set about researching and writing biographies of famous Jamaican sprinters.

The children became totally engrossed, but it didn't stop there. The children also examined deeper and more emotive issues. When they heard about the Jamaican team being disqualified because their bobsleigh was deemed to be rickety and old, they explored how this totally went against the Olympic ideals. From this they considered whether these principles would make a good set of classroom rules that could guide them. The film shows how athletes from other countries turned their animosity on to the Jamaican team and announced, 'This is not for you, Jamaica. Go home.' This comment was driven by racist attitudes and, as a consequence, the children started to investigate the thorny issues of racism and how it might be possible to change attitudes. The coach of the Jamaican team had previously been banned from the sport for cheating, so the learners questioned whether or not it was ever right to cheat. The infamous bobsleigh crash in the film – when the bruised and shell-shocked Jamaican team raise their sleigh onto their shoulders to carry it across the finishing line, to the applause and cheers of spectators – made the children think deeply about when they too had dug deep and demonstrated resilience to ensure they finished their own metaphorical race.

A further requirement at Springett Lane Primary School was that, at various stages, the teacher had to plan a lesson that was so exciting it stayed with the children forever. These lessons had to be so powerful that, in later life, these memorable experiences would return to the fore. Then, the former pupils would describe their magical moments at Springett Lane Primary School first to their own children and then their grandchildren. This made the lesson truly three generational.

This three-generational lesson proved to be a magical highlight for Rob's class. It took place on a crisp February morning and the day dawned cold but bright. Frost from the night before glistened on the school field as the temperature struggled to rise above freezing



point. One by one, as was the procedure at Springett Lane, the teachers went out onto the playground to bring their classes into school. On this particular morning, Rob quite deliberately didn't do this. Instead, he left them outside where they remained for a further ten minutes. Then, either because they felt cold or from a sense of duty, the children decided to take themselves into school. When they arrived at their classroom they received an electrifying surprise that gave them goosebumps. In the centre of the classroom was a shiny blue bobsleigh with the union flag emblazoned on it. If a gasp can be audibly silent, then that was the impact of this spectacular sight!

The next person to come into the room was wearing a Great Britain tracksuit. She was called Nicola. She looked at the youngsters and announced, 'Good morning children, I have come to tell you my story.' She went on to tell them that when she had been at primary school and sports day came around, she was entered for a race called the fifty-yard dash. Having felt totally deflated when she finished in last place, she decided that practice was the order of the day. Over the following days, weeks and months, she went away and trained and trained and trained. But the gains were only marginal, as the following year she finished next to last. Clearly some progress had been made but further training was called for, and this led to further gains as the following year she finished third to last. However, by this stage Nicola had started to enjoy running and had joined an athletics club. Over time she ran in many races, but in the big races that really mattered she could only ever finish as a runner-up. As a keen sportsperson desperate for success, she then decided that drastic action was called for and decided to change sport. At the suggestion of her coach, Nicola took up bobsleighbing. It was reasoned that her strong sprint starts would be a great asset in her new bobsleigh racing career.

At this point Nicola stopped speaking and sat the children in teams of four staring up at a giant screen where a computer-generated bobsleighbing animation was ready to run. She went on to explain to the children that she wanted them to understand what it felt like to go down an icy bobsleigh track at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour. The film started to roll. In perfect synchronisation, the children swayed left or right to go through the bends, with each member of the team matching the movements of their leader

Brian Smith: head teacher, hero in waiting

Dare to be Different is the fictional tale of a primary school head teacher who listens to what his political masters have to say, but then sets out to inspire real transformational change by doing the exact opposite and leading through his own values and beliefs.

In this light-hearted yet insightful journey into the soul of education, Will Ryan shares the trials and tribulations of the story's fearless protagonist, Brian Smith, as he strives to take back ownership of what happens in the classroom and build a vibrant curriculum with which to hook the imaginations of today's children.

Exploring the significant challenges that heads often have to overcome in order to turn their dream into a reality, *Dare to be Different* is a must-read leadership fable for all school leaders – in both primary and secondary settings – who are looking to promote excellence and raise aspirations within their schools and wider communities.

Sure to stimulate debate, reflection, laughter and hope.

John West-Burnham, Honorary Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Worcester

Will Ryan skilfully weaves a believable and engaging work of fiction with a golden thread of truly inspirational educational philosophy.

James Kilner, Director, JEK Education Ltd, former Ofsted inspector

Dare to be Different is quite an achievement and is a treasure trove for anyone interested in education.

David Cameron, education consultant, The Real David Cameron Ltd

Laced with humour and good practical advice, *Dare to be Different* deserves to become required reading material in staffrooms for years to come.

Neil Short, Chair, National Association of Small Schools

If you want to create a school in which everybody thinks they can achieve, and in which they have a duty both to achieve and to help others achieve, then this could be the book for you.

Amanda Wassell, Head Teacher, St Bede's Catholic Primary School and Nursery

Will Ryan has worked in schools in South Yorkshire for over forty years as a teacher, head teacher and local authority adviser. As a head teacher he led a school that prized itself on genuine pupil creativity and was described by Ofsted as 'outstanding'. He is a speaker and Associate of Independent Thinking Ltd.



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