

Sir Michael Wilshaw, teaching and the fatal flaw in Tor...

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I have noted with interest [the discussion in the Observer](#) this weekend on the morale of teachers. I am not in the slightest surprised that it is widely reported that their morale is low.

Teaching is a tough job, and has always been. It's tougher now than ever because of the growing, and maybe misplaced, self confidence of many children and young people is challenging.

That, however, is nothing like as challenging, I suspect, as being told, almost continually that as a state employee you're a drain on the national economy who is (according to most right wing politicians) inherently inefficient. Teachers may know that's nonsense, just as they know that their colleagues in the private sector are no different to them, but the reality is that being told such things is wearing, or worse.

And that's been exacerbated by the appointment of Sir Michael Wilshaw as head of OFSTED. Let's ignore for now the crass insensitivity of his comments about teachers over the last week or so, and let's instead look at the bigger management issues that this appointment exposes.

Wilshaw made his name as a tough head teacher, turning round difficult schools. Now that's something I know a little about. I was, as a new chair of governors, involved in turning around a school with a new head in Wandsworth 15 or so years ago. The objective when doing so is to effect a lot of change in a short period of time: it's also the logic of the Academy process. And during that change you hope to turnover staff who do not like the new regime and make way as a result for new personnel who you hope will deliver the change. Of course the management team has to be good or that's pointless stress; but have no doubt that in the micro environment of a particular school this is how the process works. It's Machiavellian, but that's how it works.

Now the logic might work for a particular school. There will be fed up teachers all too willing to leave (and hopefully get jobs elsewhere) and a pool of new ones willing to take their place. It may well be that the new ones are that much different from those

they do replace; the process of change and the resulting enthusiasm for a new challenge that many will be taking together will be the biggest component in the success of the change process, and can be enough.

I know this can work for a school. I saw it work. I was quite proud that I helped it happen. And I suspect it's what Michael Wilshaw has done; and that's no bad thing.

But, and I can't stress it enough, whilst the process may work for a particular school to assume that it can be applied to the education system as a whole is a massive error of judgement, and one which Wilshaw, Gove and the Tories have made en masse. The fact is that you can lose the teachers from a school and import others with relative ease (although I do not for a moment discount the personal cost of the disruption). But you can't apply the same shock process to the whole teaching profession. There is no pool of new teachers out there to bring in and no way the teachers dispensed with can be replaced. But it seems highly likely that Sir Michael Wilshaw's plan is to apply this shock tactic to the teaching profession as a whole; no other explanation for his attempt to alienate as many teachers as possible so soon after his appointment can be offered. But it will not work; it cannot work, and that's because, I repeat: the micro logic of managing a school cannot be applied to a whole education system, not least because those who leave as a result of being alienated by him won't come back since he's, in effect, the boss of the whole system. They'll just quit.

Now, it's no surprise that Sir Michael Wilshaw was the chosen Tory candidate for OFSTED. And it's also no surprise that they bought his logic for management of schools. They have, after all, made exactly the same mistake in the management of the economy where they have assumed that the rules that apply to the management of a company also apply to the economy as a whole. That assumption on Osborne and Cameron's part is exactly the same as the logical error that Wilshaw is making about education.

A school, or a company, is what might be called an open system. It is relatively easy to lose people from a school; once they have gone they're not your responsibility. You don't pay them any more, and you know they're very, very unlikely to apply for a job again. You can ease your conscience with the hope that they will get alternative employment, but that's not the task you've been given to worry about; the task you've been given is to turn a school round and the focus is on that and the children you're serving (or in the case of a company the remaining employees, the customers, suppliers and shareholders).

An economy, or an education system is nothing at all like that. For all practical purposes the UK's education system is closed. Of course there are new teachers each year, but they replace the retirees. There is no net massive pool of teachers to be called on who'll rush into the profession if Michael Wilshaw pushes out masses of those teachers currently employed. Those people don't exist, and no can they be imported from abroad because first of all they're not trained, secondly they don't have the language

skills and third there are now restrictions on immigration. So the shock tactic that might work in a school can't work in the system itself. Anyone who leaves will have to be re-employed, much disgruntled, and with the cost of the disruption as a result having no net impact on the system as a whole. I very strongly suspect that thought has never occurred to Michael Wilshaw.

Of course the same is true of the economy, where a company can lose staff and have little or no further responsibility for them, but in the economy as a whole Osborne can apply his shock tactics and then find (and he seems quite shocked by this) that he still has to pay them, even though they're now on the benefit system and are offering nothing back in return.

What's the result of this failed logic? Well in the case of education it will be a serious teacher shortage. That's inevitable if things go on the way they are. And we will, of course, have a worse state education system and a small elite who will but themselves out of it whose attainment will be even more removed from the rest.

Think of what Wilshaw is doing as being like the football manager who has been promoted to run the whole league, Premiership and all. You can apply the shock and change players and staff tactics at a club and change fortunes. That's apparent and happens many times (not always successfully) a season. But if you're then appointed to run the whole league and are told to raise standards you can't say there are hundreds of players you want to get rid of immediately and still hope there will be a functioning league. The reality is that there is a scouting system in existence that means most of the best available players are already in the league - alienating or sacking them will not change anything except some clubs will be left with too few players to play viable, or entertain crowds whilst a few clubs would exploit the mess to pull even further away from the crowd, in the process demanding that their league be made smaller so they can play clubs of equivalent standard, of whom there will be fewer and fewer. Such a policy would destroy football whilst serving a few very well.

The same is true in education. The Wilshaw approach then is not the answer. The answer is to ask why we have the problem; what are the social factors that have left schools under resourced, teachers underpaid, pupils alienated and the outcomes ones that no one, whether they be pupils, parents, schools, universities or business really wants. That requires real change. But the Tories can't get their heads round that, so they shout at people instead. It's possible the worst management style of all time. But that's just what, I am sure, they asked Sir Michael Wilshaw to deliver and it's just what he's doing.

The trouble is teachers are paying the price now and we all will later. And all because they have no idea at all about managing system rather than micro scenarios, which reveals them as the real incompetents here.