A portrait of Mick Waters, an older man with white hair, wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a light blue and white striped shirt, and a dark blue tie with white polka dots. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred, textured wall.

THINKING ALLOWED
ON SCHOOLING

**MICK
WATERS**

Praise for *Thinking Allowed on Schooling*

Mick Waters is a calm, seasoned voice in the rising clamour of debate on the future of education. Drawing on his long experience in classrooms and in national policy, *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* offers a wise, well-informed and practical perspective on the challenges that face education and on how to meet them. Unlike many passing politicians, Mick Waters has spent his life in education. This insightful, compassionate book distils the essence of what he has learnt and what we can learn from him. An essential read.

Sir Ken Robinson

With his characteristic lightness of touch, Mick Waters maintains a steadfast hand on the tiller as he navigates the challenging waters of today's fast-changing educational landscape. Highly accessible, eminently readable and earthed in the experience of teachers, this book exposes the absurdity, complexity and utter joy invested in the business and busyness of schools. Through reflections, anecdotes and distinctive humour, the authoritative voice of Mick Waters liberates education from its historical, political and cultural context by offering a compelling critique of educational policy, based on the belief that public service, pride in the teaching profession and an unequivocal commitment to the most aspirational outcomes for children and young people provide the only way forward.

Ann Jones, Principal, CTC Kingshurst Academy

Mick Waters has produced the right book for the right time. He penetrates to the heart of the many open discussions we are having about education today. We may not agree with all he says, but we cannot help but be stimulated to think at a deeper level by reading this book.

Dr Anthony Seldon, Master, Wellington College

Thinking Allowed on Schooling is a truly seminal work, which should become required reading, not just for head teachers and those charged with delivering education, but for all those with an interest in how our children become educated rather than simply schooled, how they become engaged members of our society rather than tabloid stereotypes. Mick Waters goes beyond analysing the triumphs and failings of our system. He suggests practical solutions to the miasma of challenges facing us today, with a clarity and sharpness of thinking, liberally interspersed with humour and humility – things our political masters only achieve unwittingly. This is a brilliant contribution to the informed debate that is yet to be had.

Ian Fenn, Head Teacher, Burnage Media Arts College

This is a 'must read' for anyone involved in education, including the politicians! Mick's common sense approach to education – that is so evident in his inspiring, motivational talks that have endeared him to teachers across the country – is exemplified and expanded on in this book, which is full of words of wisdom. In this era of radical educational change, this book should be our educational bible as we strive to find a better educational system that, in Mick's words, 'moves away from undue, short-term political influence,' towards a system and curriculum that truly serves the needs of children. I shall be buying multiple copies of this book, to ensure that all of the staff at our school have the opportunity to read it!

Iain M Erskine, Head of The Fulbridge Academy in Peterborough

Listening to Mick is always a pleasure – his down-to-earth, common sense beliefs are forged from exhaustive research, vast experience and a commitment to providing high-quality learning experiences for our young people, regardless of their backgrounds. His book is no different – it is as thought provoking and challenging as I had hoped it would be. I am looking forward to some very interesting and productive staff development sessions, using his questions and suggestions as the basis for discussion and change.

Siobhan Collingwood, Head Teacher,
Morecambe Bay Community Primary School

Professor Mick Waters is not afraid to challenge our beliefs and our practices in this new book.

His holistic approach takes the reader beyond questioning and evaluation with a passion that demands action. He offers so many suggestions for new ways forward that it will have your head spinning.

Whilst I do not necessarily share all the views expressed, this book is stimulating and thought provoking at all times and I would recommend it as a 'good read'.

Mrs Brenda Bigland CBE, Education Consultant, Trainer and Coach

Thinking Allowed on Schooling is, of course, an inspiration!

Unlike most educational books, this one will not be read and then shelved. Mick's absolute commitment to the best education for our children is apparent throughout, as he shares his wealth of knowledge and experience. The book, whilst being accessible and colourful, provides enough hard-hitting research and challenging quotes and examples to make it a very interesting read for people at all levels of education and a credible point of reference for years to come. I hope that *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* will become both a valuable source of guidance for educators and an essential read for future Secretaries of State!

I am a head teacher and therefore not in the business of critically evaluating and editing material for publication, so I can't be of help in reviewing the language, organisation and structure of the text itself. But I can comment on how the book could, and has already, helped me as a practicing head teacher. *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* justifies my exhaustion; it also revels, with me, in the joy of schools and education, making me laugh out loud and nod my head at shared experiences! *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* sets out, with real clarity, the very complex context for education and the huge agenda faced by schools. It gives enough history for us educators to understand how we got into this educational situation, and enough inspiration and guidance to help us prioritise, refocus and manage things better for our children and our communities. I liked the book being crammed with page after page of things I'd wanted to have explained, and reminders of why we are all trying so hard to get 'it' right. I felt reassured that I could have this book on my desk as a constant source to tap into – for clarity, reflection and deeper thinking. It is helpful to have chapters focussed on crucial things like pedagogy and curriculum, aspiration and assessment. It worked well for me that each section concluded with What could we do/What might be done? – clear next steps which we can all consider and/or act upon. I have pulled out key messages to help clarify our strategic thinking as a school (when I'm given the go ahead to share the content) and have clung onto 'innovate with integrity' and 'learning which is irresistible'. The book has highlighted some key questions I need to ask of myself as a leader, of our team within the school and of the parents and children. I think that this book will become invaluable to senior leaders within education and could go a lot further towards raising standards than Ofsted Inspections, testing systems or political grand speeches ever will!

I feel very privileged to have been asked to read this book and even more privileged (though not surprised) that Mick is willing to share so much with us all.

To conclude – what could Mick do next? Find a structure to update schools leaders and teachers with filtered information to help us prioritise; a way to help us feel informed but not overloaded with information and political claptrap. Press for a National Council for Schooling. Pat himself on the back (for once) and know that he has provided us with something practical and tangible that WILL make a difference to education in our schools.

Caroline Vernon, Professional Colleague

Mick Waters has done it again. Sometimes you read something so blindingly obvious that you wonder, 'Why didn't I think of that?' But whereas most of us only manage to glimpse parts of the problem and fragments of possible solutions, he pulls all those elements together, succinctly and coherently. He presents educators

and policy-makers alike with a challenge that is huge and daunting, to be sure, but which, in his masterly analysis, is eminently capable of being addressed – if only we have the will to do so.

That analysis is dispassionate, but there's no mistaking Mick's passion for education and for its purpose that we owe to our children, but in which we so often fail them. Notwithstanding his clear love for teaching and for teachers, he doesn't flinch from criticising the uninspiring and formulaic; nor does he flinch from laying the blame firmly at the doors of the qualification-obsessed policy-makers and the data-dominated inspection system for creating and perpetuating the focus on what is narrow, tedious and purely utilitarian.

Mick is a positive thinker – hence the book's title. So, although he paints a bleak picture of the current state of affairs, he also offers solutions: they are challenging but realistic, if only policy-makers would find the courage. If we don't pick up the gauntlet Mick throws down, we risk (as he writes graphically) continuing to 'beat the drum of progress and march to the drum of tedious accountability'.

Dr Bernard Trafford, Headmaster, Newcastle upon Tyne Royal Grammar School and former Chairman, HMC

In this highly readable book, Mick gives a brilliant review of the Good, the Bad, and the Plain Old Ugly of the current educational landscape. He is right to conclude that we need 'an Education Spring - a rising of intolerance about the way schooling is being manipulated in a piecemeal and uncoordinated way to serve too many purposes with unclear measures.' His call for the establishment of an elected National Council for Schooling as a way forward is also spot-on. It is, indeed, time for politicians to hand over the direction of the Profession to the Profession itself.

Andrew Chubb, Principal, Archbishop Sentamu Academy

**THINKING
ALLOWED
ON SCHOOLING**

MICK WATERS



Independent Thinking Press



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Author's note

Dr Ishmail ran the end of his reflex stick up the sole of my foot and his expression changed. Apparently my toes curled the wrong way. Within no time he was organising MRI scans. A few weeks later and a couple of days before I was due to chair the annual three-day North of England Education Conference in Leeds, I found out that I would need tricky surgery on the spinal cord in my neck and it would take a few months before I was up and running. Not that I often run.

Here was the chance to write the book I had been asked for before and so often put off because of pressure of work. When, coincidentally, Ian Gilbert offered to edit it the project was underway.

How long does it take to write a book? It depends when we start counting. It could be said that this book has taken a career to write. It is a collection of thoughts that have built up as I have reached the twilight of my career. The shadows are long behind me as I head towards a setting sun. At the same time, it has taken just a few months of actual writing during my convalescence and the Olympics and then onwards through the autumn and winter of shifting educational activity. Some will expect a book on children, teaching approaches and classroom practice, a book full of ideas to try, for that is how I have always worked. There is relatively little of that here. Instead, it is a book about the state of schooling in England and it reflects the many conversations I have had with those I have met who are trying to make the system work for all our children and young people. It is a book to pick up, dip into and hopefully debate, wherever it is that we work in the schooling system.

While we might write a book alone we also need help and support. The team at Independent Thinking Press has helped me enormously and Ian has been a great source of wisdom. In my career's worth of thinking, I have been sustained by a family that has tolerated and supported my unending appetite for getting involved in schools and their work. Across the country and beyond, I am proud to know

professional friends who have provided me with so much inspiration as I have worked alongside them, glimpsed their incredible practice, shared their enthusiasm for teaching and wondered with them how it could all be better. In the book there are references to schools but I do not name them; the people involved will recognise themselves and for each of those I mention, there are many similar examples.

I hope you enjoy the book and that, whatever your involvement with schooling, there is something in it to make you think. I have always believed that improving schooling is about shedding light, offering challenge and building confidence and reassurance. I hope the book does that in fair proportion.

It is a book about schools so it will hardly be a blockbuster. My operation was a complete success and my follow-up tests came to a climax with the repeat reflex test on my feet. This time the toes went the right way. This book is for you, Dr Ishmail, and all the colleagues who helped me to recover. It is my educational toe-curler.

Mick Waters

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Some background, explanations and disclaimers

It was relatively early in my teaching career when I realised the point of the old joke about someone asking directions and being told, 'If you were trying to get there, I wouldn't start from here.' It dawned on me that there was a world of difference between education and schooling and if we were truly trying to offer education to young people, we really would not organise schooling in the way we do.

As a novice head teacher I found myself restrained by resources, staffing structures, tradition, habit and parental expectation. Maybe I couldn't change the world but I could change a bit of it; I could make it as good as possible for the people we are meant to serve, the children in our care. I remember thinking that my task was to make the most of a bad job or to make a silk purse from a sow's ear. This is not to be negative but realistic. I have taken the same attitude to every job ever since: keep the highest ideals and at the same time be pragmatic. Do the best for the young people in whatever way you are allowed and give them the best experience and prospects possible.

I reflect that it must have been the same for the bosses of the train companies in the mid-1980s. If we were really to run the rail system properly we would want to start again. Wider tracks, bigger, longer trains, more lines in the right places, better tunnels and modern stations would all be top of the list. However, the infrastructure was already there so it was a case of making the most of it and giving the passenger the best travel experience possible. It may not be perfect, and there are plenty of moaners, but the reality is that the railways are generally better than they were.

The history of the school system in England places a similar burden on those trying to make it work for the future. This is one of the reasons why sections of this book dwell on the background to our current

situation. History can create insight, although it may not stop it repeating itself.

I have tried, though, to make the book readable without too many references to academic texts and official papers (although these are listed in the bibliography). The risk in this is that points may appear to be unsubstantiated or conjecture. There is personal opinion and much of what I have written is a commentary on what I see in the hundreds of schools in which I spend time in the course of a year as they go about their daily business. I am with them because I might be teaching a class or two with the teachers watching. I still think this is one of the best forms of teacher development; watching your own class with someone else. I don't do it a lot, but enough to still be that teacher I was when I started out. I might be in schools at the invitation of a head or governors to discuss ways forward. I might be speaking at a conference or seminar with teachers, heads, governors, parents or employers. All of these exchanges over many years have fuelled the writing in this book.

One real problem I encountered in writing the book is the use of the collective noun. We all do it to describe teachers, schools, children, parents, inspectors and politicians as though all of their category was the same – yet we know they are not. We generalise and in every generalisation we recognise there are subtle differences and polar opposites. Maybe not all children in Africa walk ten miles each way to school and there are many children in Africa who wouldn't wish to go to school if the opportunity were freely available. We realise that not everyone who left school with few qualifications, like Lord Sugar and Sir Richard Branson, ended up as successful multimillionaire business leaders. Not everyone who goes to private school ends up as a success and some people who can't read do very well for themselves as adults. Please forgive the use of the collective noun where it needs forgiveness and be charitable as you read the text in the way I might have intended.

I hope the book is one that can be opened at any section and enjoyed as a 'think piece' for its own sake. Because of this, there is the occasional repetition as the same issues can affect a range of agendas. Some sections are longer than others and some much more focused on the

practice of schooling that might be discussed at a staff or departmental meeting. I have integrated some previously written articles into the text where they fit and I have tried to respond to changes of policy late in the process of publication. Here and there are some musings and passing thoughts that might make the reader think again about the routine of their world. Sometimes these are humorous, a wry reflection on the odd world of schooling.

Schools are fascinating and busy places and there is much that happens in them that is very funny and sometimes absurd. One of the sadder aspects of recent years is that teachers and others who work in schools seem to have less time to laugh with the children and each other at some of the amusing things that happen. Childhood should be joyous and schools should feel part of that happy outlook.

... on the confused purpose of schooling

During the month that you are reading this around 50,000 babies will be born in England. Most will be greeted with joy and be referred to as wonderful and a miracle. Some will be unwanted but most will be loved. What might we hope for these children as they begin their life's journey that many predict will see most of them living into the next century? Most parents would say that they want their child to grow up to be contented, happy and fulfilled.

During their lives our young people will have more opportunity than ever before and will face more complex challenges. The chance to travel is greater than ever with the prospect of journeys into space becoming fact rather than fiction. Most will need to work to sustain themselves and their families; some will move beyond routine work and achieve significance, celebrity or greatness. At today's rate, one in every three month's batch will become a star for a while on television or film and one every month will make a music recording. Some will take on representative roles; ten of our babies every year will become a Member of Parliament. One baby in every six month's batch will become an Olympian.

In our batch of babies, society needs some who are pioneers, exploring new frontiers in science, technology or engineering. We will need people who can make things and sell them. We will need people to grow things. There will need to be some who seek a just and fair society on behalf of all of us and there will be those who seek to help us to avoid conflict and uphold rights. We will need people to entertain us. We will need people to do the dirty jobs and the unthinkable tasks that most of us would turn away from. We will need people who are happy to work behind the scenes to make things happen. We will need people to whom we can turn to for organised solace and comfort. We will need people who are brave. We will need those who will care for others and

sticky experience where children are sucked into learning and unable to let go? What sort of teachers will be needed to make learning authentic and enable it to come alive? What sorts of spaces will we need and how will learning be organised? How much learning needs to take place in classrooms and how much could occur in situations which reflect real life?

Of course, every school needs *internal systems*, ways of looking at themselves and making sure they are an effective institution. The term 'internal systems' refers to everything from the way in which responsibility allowances are allocated through to the detail of what to do at playtime when it is raining. It is the macro and micro of management of schools and is applied to everything from environment to experience to personnel. It is budget, data management, performance management of staff and premises management. It is cloakrooms, buses and routines. It will determine whether the school is efficient or not. The most efficient schools are often the most effective schools. The weakest schools are ones with relatively few systems. How do we run an organisation so that the internal systems support what we do rather than dominate, such that the systems do the bidding of the school rather than the other way round?

Lastly, we need to think about the way in which the school manages *external relationships*. So, if it is a primary school, how does it relate to the secondary schools to which its pupils move? A secondary school might need relationships with all its feeder primary schools. Every school needs to link with its community, with its governors, local businesses and employers, the local university and teacher training partnerships, and with social services, health and police professionals who can bring that roundedness to children's experiences.

If we take the notion of qualities, linking them carefully with strategies, and fuse that with the idea of the warp and the weft in a piece of material, what emerges is something that might be seen as the *fabric of school leadership*. Our schools are successful when the qualities we seek are supported and enhanced by the strategies that help us to achieve them.

		Qualities		
		Environment	Experience	Personnel
Strategies	Attitudes, values, relationships			
	Curriculum			
	Learning approaches			
	Internal systems			
	External relationships			

The notion of the fabric of leadership provides one framework for explaining the decision-making processes in a school. Every decision should slot in somewhere on the tapestry, and how it fits indicates our approach to achieving the quality of schooling that we seek. The purchase of a set of mathematics textbooks, for example, would fit on the coordinate of experience and learning approaches. Do we want a set of textbooks that offer a drill-and-practice experience or one that sets and applies practical challenges? If we cancel a games session because of wet weather, we might argue that there is a link between curriculum and environment. Often it is more likely to be a decision made to avoid conflict with potentially irritated parents, faced with muddy children and clothing. If that is the case, the decision fits on the environment and external relationships coordinate. Decisions about lost property might fit with environment and internal systems in most schools; however, it might correspond better with environment and attitudes, values and relationships. In schools where pupils are taught about taking

responsibility for their belongings, lost property ceases to become an issue. Where schools use internal systems as a dominating force, they might consider what pupils might learn about personal attitudes from a different approach. What is the purpose of the school drama production? Is it about the quality of experience, linked to teaching approaches, or is it to satisfy external agencies, particularly parents who want to watch their own children and feel that well of pride without being overly concerned about the purpose or quality of the overall learning experience? If it is the latter, and we need it to be the former, we have some work to do.

Some schools are a beautiful tapestry and a joy to behold. The way in which qualities and strategies overlap creates a pattern which entices the whole community to believe in education in its truest sense and ultimately enables youngsters to achieve. Some schools are stretched along one strand, so that something like the school production becomes the dominant factor for a short while or perhaps the physical and aesthetic environment dominates everything that happens. The beautiful displays are still delightful but they don't seem to emerge from an embedded outlook for the school. They look good on the surface but when we peer underneath there are knots and tangles. In a way the knots and tangles are useful; they show the history of problems that have been overcome or challenges that have been met. And some schools, very few, are beset with holes in the middle and are unravelling because of a lack of purpose or direction.

Some expectations, often arising from outside the education system, got stuck in the institutional mindset of schools many generations ago. We often refer to this rigid institutional behaviour as 'traditional values' because it sounds so much better. The leadership point in all this is to be able to articulate a framework that helps the school to move forward and gives everyone concerned a sense of the importance of various aspects of our work without letting any particular aspect dominate.

Institutional features

I have visited various prisons, purely in an effort to understand the educational opportunities available to those at Her Majesty's pleasure. They are frightening places. Just getting in is dehumanising: the endless locking and unlocking of doors, being kept in a holding pen while searches are done. The pervading smell of cabbage (really), all day, every day, whatever the menu offers.

I have also visited hospitals, both as a patient and as a visitor to friends and family members. I usually experience a feeling of uncertainty as the signs, with ever more complex ward names, guide me towards my destination. Not knowing the systems induces a lack of confidence. Those who spend their time in these, staff and inmates or patients, are much more at ease. Most prisons and hospitals are well-managed institutions run for efficiency. Some people also see schools as institutions. The difference between school leadership and school management comes through to me when considering the features of the organisation. How far does the efficient and effective management of the institution support or hinder the overall hopes for our young people and how much do the systems become an end in themselves?

So, what are the features of an institution and how well do they apply to schools?

- Once enrolled you have to be there. Not only that, but checks are regularly made to ensure that you are present. Hence, roll calls and registers and all sorts of alarms when someone goes missing.
- There are bells which ring to tell people it is time for the next phase of the day and to take away decision-making on the part of the individual.
- An inordinate level of importance is placed on routines – who should be where, who has access to space and when, movement around the building, keeping to the correct side of corridors or stairs.

School leaders use these four levers with subtlety, depending on circumstances and the task in hand, to encourage their staff to behave in the way they require. Reflect for a little while on the recent decisions in your own school and you will see what I mean.

If we take this forward we can start to see the influences upon a school in the way they organise their development. These four levers are placed on a quadrant and it is worth reflecting on the way in which the shape of a school can be depicted, both in leverage terms and the pressures upon it. In this first diagram we can see that the professional lifestyle aspect is emphasized.

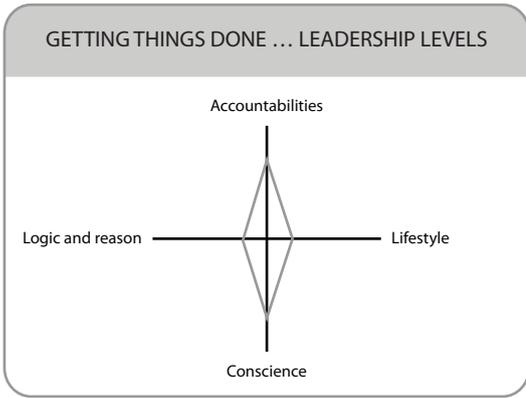
This is the sort of school where, on showing a visitor around, the leader would emphasise the efforts made to increase the facilities for staff and



to create a more productive working environment. Similarly they might talk about the new approach to parent consultation evenings that are more economical or more valuable for the parents or the

staff. They might describe the way in which school reports are now produced to a common format, so that staff are working in a more efficient way and feel better about the finished product.

In this second example, the school is driven currently by pressure, accountability and conscience.



Typically the head teacher will say things like, ‘We’re near the bottom of the league, and it’s essential that we get out of this position. Therefore some of the things we do may not have all the logic and reason that I would want to

encourage in an educational sense, but we have to get away from the bottom of the league because these children do not need tainting with that image. And, in any case, it’s our job to give these children the best possible start we can, so I’m not having them seen as people who are not worthy; our conscience cannot allow it. Lifestyle? We don’t really have one. We’re so busy, we’re here before it’s light in the morning and we don’t leave until it’s dark. In fact, some of our staff think we work in Finland.’ (Maybe it could be a new government strategy to raise performance – teach in the dark and pretend we are in Scandinavia.)

In this next example, we see the school driven by logic and reason and professional conscience, with less emphasis on accountability and lifestyle.



In this school you hear the sort of conversation that goes, ‘Well, we don’t bother with the league tables and what Ofsted inspectors say. What we believe



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Mick Waters uses the experience he has gained from a career in which he has both worked in schools and had major roles in shaping education policy at local and national level to offer a unique perspective: that of someone close to the classroom, but with an ability to see through innovation, policy and practice. Mick tells it how it is, explains his beliefs and sheds light on progress and problems in the school system.

Mick Waters is a calm, seasoned voice in the rising clamour of debate on the future of education. Drawing on his long experience in classrooms and in national policy, *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* offers a wise, well-informed and practical perspective on the challenges that face education and how to meet them. Unlike many passing politicians, Mick Waters has spent his life in education. This insightful, compassionate book distils the essence of what he has learnt and what we can learn from him. An essential read.

Sir Ken Robinson

Mick Waters has produced the right book for the right time. He penetrates to the heart of the many open discussions we are having about education today. We may not agree with all he says, but we cannot help but be stimulated to think at a deeper level by reading this book.

Dr Anthony Seldon, Master, Wellington College

If you have ever heard Mick Waters talk and been inspired and influenced by what he has to say then this is the book you have hoped he would one day write.

Iain M Erskine, Head of The Fulbridge Academy in Peterborough

In this highly readable book, Mick gives a brilliant review of the good, the bad, and the plain old ugly of the current educational landscape.

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