Editorial

Time to move on

Mary Shaw

I am sure it is no coincidence that in the year I have turned 40 a new challenge has beckoned. In a few months I shall be heading off to train for a new career. After 20 years, six different universities and four countries it is time to venture beyond the world of higher education. I am not being terribly bold, though, quite the opposite, as I am moving into primary education. Grant applications, conferences and wise professors are to be replaced by the literacy hour, Ofsted inspections and a staple gun.

So what have I gained from two decades in the worlds of sociology, geography, epidemiology and public health? It is a mixed bag, but on reflection, quite a full one. Through my work I have acquired a husband, whom I met on a multiple regression statistics course 5 years ago, and subsequently a daughter: these results are by far and away the most significant for me.

I have written a handful of books and a fairly sizeable pile of miscellaneous papers, book chapters, reports, letters and editorials that will now be filed away for posterity. I have learnt how to write a press release (perhaps the most useful skill for an academic these days) and made the headlines—‘Health gap now at record level’—building an academic reputation on bemoaning health and social inequalities without contributing anything tangible towards their reduction. I have no doubt bored a fair few undergraduates in lectures and tutorials, and learnt more, I suspect, from my post-graduate students than they have learnt from me.

My greatest contribution to academia? I suspect my legacy might be a snappy book title (The Widening Gap), but I hope it will be my passion for photography—not what I had been trained for and not what I was supposed to be doing, but in my view the most pleasurable part of putting together material for publication or presentation. I have spent most of my days sitting at a computer keyboard typing page after page of carefully referenced text, but it has been the power of photography to reveal and confront the social world that has thrilled me most.

Although we are bombarded each day by photographic images, they tend to only appear in certain types of publications, and rarely feature in high status academic journals with reputable citation scores. As adults, and as academics, we lose the visual imagination that was so powerful in our childhoods and replace it with methodological rigour, conformity and constraint. I am not suggesting that every academic should become a documentary photographer, but with recent developments in digital photography and online publishing it is now much more feasible to include photographs with papers. So please, at the very least, consider showing people what the part of the world and the people you are studying look like.

As I head back to a child-centred world of creativity I leave you with some of my favourite photographs and the role of IJE photo editor in the capable hands of Debbie Lawlor.

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