

# Teaching is the opportunity to learn together with my students – Interview with Professor Mhairi C. Beaton

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*Professor Mhairi C Beaton is a Professor in the Carnegie School of Education. Having worked as a teacher in the Highlands of Scotland and following the completion of her Masters in Education, Mhairi joined the School of Education at University of Aberdeen as a Lecturer. During her time working at University of Aberdeen, Mhairi was Programme Director for the MA in Inclusive Practice and was a tutor on the MA in Autism and Learning. Whilst at University of Aberdeen, Mhairi completed her Ph.D examining the development of pupils' learner identity in primary schools and led a number of externally funded research projects focusing on teacher development, inclusion and assessment. Since joining the Carnegie School of Education, Mhairi has led a number of externally funded international research projects focusing on inclusion, teacher education and student voice. Mhairi is also the Leeds Beckett University representative on the University of the Arctic Assembly having successfully led the university's application for membership in 2018. You can read an edited version of the interview with the Professor.*

*Keywords: teacher education and learning, career motivation, career socialization, inclusion*

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DOI: 10.37205/TEL-hun.2021.1.11

*Kolosai Nedda: Thank you very much for accepting this interview! I would like to ask you to imagine your life as a journey, walk back a little down this road until the time you went to school for the first time in your life. Do you remember your first school experiences?*

Beaton, Mhairi C: I attended a very small, rural school in the north-west Highlands of Scotland. All the pupils in the village attended until they were eleven and then they had to board in town 60 miles away to attend secondary school. When I arrived, there were 16 pupils, but by the time I left there were only about 8. All the different age groups were in the one classroom and I remember my first day, all the pupils were sitting at individual desks in two long rows with the oldest at

the back and the youngest at the front. So I sat in the front desk and next to me over the aisle was the other pupil in my year group.

I don't remember much about my first day at school. I'm told I cried when my mother left me at the front door of the school, but I do remember my first reading book. It was called 'Janet and John', and I loved being told about how the squiggle at the bottom of every page represented words. I also remember my first maths book. You had to count numbers up to ten, and there was a specific pattern for each number in little boxes. I loved the symmetry and reliability of the numbers always being the same. I also really loved having a pencil to write with.

The big boys at the back of the classroom scared me a little, and I was most intrigued by the lunch which included a pudding of coconut tart and hot custard.

*How was your school bag, your school equipment?*

I think I had a very traditional leather school bag to go to school. I was pleased to bring my reading book home every night to share with my parents and grandparents. We didn't have to wear school uniform, because the school was so small and there was only the one classroom. There was no gym, but there was a small bookshelf and I longed to learn to read those books.

*Did you like going to school?*

I think I probably did like going to school. I liked the learning and the books. I really liked playing with the other children, and I liked my first two teachers, which was a good thing as I had the first one for two years, and then the second one for three years. I liked cycling to school on my red and white bicycle, and I liked when the library van came once a month as I was allowed out to choose my new books with my mother.

*Do you remember your teachers between the ages of 6-12, at least one of them?*

I don't remember much about my first teacher. She seemed very safe and substantial, and in control of the big boys.

I do remember more of the second teacher we had. By then my little brother had come to school, and, of course, he was in the same room as the rest of us. She was English rather than Scottish, and didn't speak my home language of Gaelic, which seemed very strange to me. She liked to do project work with us, which was different to the first teacher, who was perhaps a little more traditional.

*Do you remember your teachers teaching you between the ages of 12 and 15?*

By secondary school, we had moved to a large town, and I attended a grammar school called the Inverness Royal Academy. I loved being at the school moving between classes and learning all the different subjects. All the teachers wore their university gowns, and we were very aware of the high expectations they had of us in all sorts of areas – study, sport and our personal development.

There was usually a very good atmosphere in the classes as the teachers were all committed to their subjects and expected excellent behaviour from all of us. As we got older, there were good relationships between staff and pupils that spilt into the after schools clubs that we were all expected to join – debating society, French club, sports clubs, orchestra, choir etc.

*Between the ages of 14 and 19, do you remember a memorable university lecturer who taught you?*

I moved to University of Edinburgh to study English literature and Philosophy when I was 17. There were 5-600 students in my first lecture, and I didn't realise that the lecturer lived next door to my uncle. I was hoping to hide at the back of the lecture hall, but he started the first lecture asking if I was present. I must have gone bright red in the face.

However, he became my favourite lecturer and also my tutor for my final thesis. He was always losing our assignments on the bus home, and he wore a super-long multi-coloured scarf, but he was so interesting and challenged our thinking every time we met.

*Did you have a memorable teaching personality (memorable university professor) during your university life? How do you remember Him/Her?*

My most memorable university professor was Professor Martyn Rouse. He was my doctoral supervisor. He worked at University of Cambridge for most of his career, but moved to Scotland to lead a very significant teacher education/inclusion research project.

Martyn exuded knowledge, generosity and kindness. Although he retired during my doctoral studies, he continued to supervise me, and we became friends as much as colleagues. He passed away during 2021 after a long illness, and it is hard to think that he has gone and I won't be able to phone him up for advice any

more. Our last conversation was when I was promoted to professor, and he was the first person I phoned after my family to share the news.

*How long have you been teaching at university?*

I worked at University of Aberdeen for 9 years, and have worked at Leeds Beckett University for 4 years.

*What were and what might have been your motivations, what were the inspirations that prompted you to choose the teacher profession?*

My mother was a teacher and as I always loved school, I never really wanted to do any other job. I was one of those children that ran schools with her dolls and teddy bears when I was little. The grammar school wanted me to become a doctor or lawyer, but those professions just didn't interest me.

*Tell us a little about your university. Please tell a specific story that happened to you in your university.*

Carnegie School of Education is part of Leeds Beckett University, which is what is referred to as a new university in the north of England. After Aberdeen, where everything was 600 years old, I wanted to try a new university to see what it was like, and a new policy context for teacher education. England has a separate system of education from Scotland, so it was all new to me when I arrived.

My Dean of School had only been working at Carnegie for two years and had been employed to improve its teaching and research activity. He is always willing to let staff try new things, and trusts many of us to make decisions for ourselves. During the first week I was working there, I popped my head round his door and said, 'Can we join the University of the Arctic?' He said yes even though he didn't know what it was, and trusted me that I was making a decision that would benefit the school. I think that type of leadership is very special.

*What was your relationship with your colleagues in the past and what is your current relationship? Please tell us a specific story in this regard as well.*

When I still taught in primary schools, I always valued working in a team rather than as an individual. I believe that working collaboratively with other teachers and teaching assistants has always allowed me to provide the best learning op-

portunities for the young people in my classes. This approach continued as I joined the university staff at University of Aberdeen and latterly Leeds Beckett University, both in teaching and research work.

Currently my work is primarily focused on research activity, and I find that working as a co-lead on all our projects whilst building a strong and dynamic partnership between all members of the research project team is key to a successful outcome. One example of this way of working is exemplified by our ESRC ADVOST project, where I am exploring the use of student voice with very young children as a pedagogical tool to ensure that the learning opportunities that are provided are inclusive. The project would not work without the collaborative approach taken by the staff in both schools as they have worked with me to explore these ideas.

*How is your relationship with university students? Also tell a specific story.*

Currently, the only students I am working with are my doctoral students. I am supervisor to both Ed. D. and Ph. D. students – many of whom are undertaking their studies whilst still working full time as teachers or lecturers. I consider it a privilege to supervise these students and very much enjoy seeing them develop – and often – blossom as academic researchers.

*Which course, and which area of expertise do you prefer to teach?*

Although my teaching is currently limited at the moment as I am involved in a number of international research projects, I think it is important that as a university employee, if possible, you should try to align your research and teaching interests so that both can mutually inform each other. My research and teaching focus therefore is at the interface of teacher education, inclusion and student voice.

*What are you currently researching?*

I have a number of really interesting research projects on the go at the moment. I particularly like being involved in international research projects, and I find my ideas are expanded when I get to work with international colleagues, who are working in different linguistic, cultural and historical contexts.

One project I am involved in currently is exploring very young children's voices as a pedagogical tool in early years' settings. Colleagues at University of Lapland in Finland and Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada are also

looking at the use of voice with very young children, but in slightly different contexts. We are all working collaboratively with teachers in educational settings and bringing all the different project team members together to share emerging research findings and practice, which has been a most rewarding experience.

*During your career, what is your favourite research topic?*

I am particularly interested in examining – and improving – the experiences of potentially marginalised young people in education. Any research that contributes to young people having a better experience in education makes the work worthwhile.

*I would like to ask you to talk about – in the light of everything you have just mentioned – what is the significance of your pedagogical profession in your life? What does pedagogy mean to you?*

I work with one school where the professional guiding question is ‘Am I getting it right for every child?’ My main objective as both a school and university professional was to get it right for each student – for everybody. That is a significant challenge, but also the reward for the work that you put in to your professional activity.

*Please finish the metaphor*

*Teaching is the opportunity to learn together with my students...*

*Learning is an opportunity to expand my mind to new possibilities...*

*Thank you very much for the interview!*