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Gove's call for openness is all one way - government isn't open to teachers' ideas

How can Michael Gove say those who don't support academies and free schools are against school improvement?

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Gove's "openness" strategy won't work if he doesn't listen to teachers. Photograph: Alamy Photograph: www.alamy.com

I've been thinking about Michael Gove's views about education, specifically about his call, in a speech to think tank Politeia, for "openness". He demands that we in the "education establishment" should be open to new ideas, fresh thinking, risk-taking and innovation. I agree.

The moments in [teaching](#) that stand out for teachers and pupils are the times when you ditch the lesson plan and follow a child's idea; when you change the layout of the classroom; or when you hear an expert speak and it changes how you see the world. But this isn't what Michael Gove means.

On 23 October, he wrote to MPs in Derby and Leicester, areas of high deprivation, large multi-ethnic communities, and [schools](#) which are "below the national average" to tell them that they had to choose between supporting [academies](#) and [free schools](#), or backing those who are blocking school improvement.

This beautifully crafted rhetoric places Gove and his government firmly on the side of the angels, and the rest of us as the "enemies of promise". Robin Alexander, who led the Cambridge Primary Review, describes this kind of government rhetoric as "[the discourses of dichotomy, derision,](#)

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(33)



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myth and meaninglessness"

The dichotomy is pretty easy to spot: you either have academies or you have failing schools. According to Gove the only one way to improve a school is to change its status and support mechanisms so that it is accountable to him as secretary of state for education.

His derision is clear too. Those who don't believe academies and free schools are the solution to all education problems should be mocked as the forces of conservatism. By daring to call for consultations, suggesting that changes should be trialled and reviewed, and asking the government to assess the impact of changes on children and teachers we are derided for "urging delay" and blighting children's lives.

Michael Gove is clever at creating myths about education as much by what he doesn't say as by what he does. Most people could be forgiven for believing that academisation is the only way to improve schools. We hear a lot about successful academies because government ministers visit them to make their announcements. And of course they should be celebrated; particularly those in enormously deprived areas. But there are also other extremely successful schools which are rarely mentioned.

The most worrying aspect of the government's, and Gove's, one-solution school improvement policy is the single-mindedness with which it is pursued. Schools which fail an Ofsted inspection or fall below floor targets will be converted into academies. Outstanding schools will be turned into academies. Parents who are dissatisfied with their child's school will be persuaded to set up a free school. Any new school has to be an academy or free school. And quite conveniently Ofsted has tightened its criteria, floor targets are getting higher, exams will be harder and a shortage of primary places means we need new [primary schools](#) – all speeding the growth of academies.

Of course there is always room for improvement. There are always pupils who don't do as well as they could, and schools which need to be challenged. There are innovations in teaching practice and leadership, and new research about how children learn. Teachers should be, and are, continually striving to become better teachers.

But Gove's call for openness is all one way: teachers must be open to

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the government's ideas. A government that really believed in openness wouldn't start a consultation on the biggest exam shake up for decades by asking whether it's given the new exam the right name. It would listen when the public and professional consensus is that the phonics check forces six-year-olds to learn nonsense.

I'm insulted to be told that I don't put children first by a government which is presiding over an increase in child poverty. I'm angry to be told this government knows better than teachers, parents and academics about children's needs.

True openness requires the humility to realise that you might be wrong, an ability to listen to people with different ideas, and an acceptance that people with different views might also want what's best for children and young people. It will be too late to apologise in 30 years time; the damage will already have been done to today's children and teachers.

Nansi Ellis is head of education policy at the [Association of Teachers and Lecturers](#).

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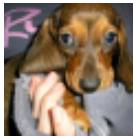


MrArthurCook

04 November 2012 2:59pm

24

The government's promise is the same in education as it is in health. The promise to deliver state education and health budgets to their friends and business partners in the private sector. The corporate sector is not interested in "markets" or "competition". Far easier pickings are available in the virtual monopolies of government contracts. Of the "Free schools" set up by parents and teachers...how many will, in a few years, mysteriously have the corporate logos of "the usual suspects" appear on everything. They'll own the exam boards, own the "on-line" courses which go with the curriculum, they'll own the burger supplier who serves school meals and they'll own the school itself. And then it begins. First we see the emerging notion of "entitlement services" and "premium services" that parents have to pay extra for. "Music tuition?...certainly...that's and extra £250 per year". "Julie probably needs extra support in maths which we can provide for just an extra £25 per hour".



hawtdawg

04 November 2012 3:59pm

5

I dispute the opinion that Mr. Gove "is clever at creating myths about education as much by what he doesn't say as by what he does". I think the courage of his convictions is causing him to run a horse and cart through much peer reviewed, international research about successful education, much of which he could learn from and impliment here.



bonty

04 November 2012 4:50pm

56

All the talk about improving education is a smokescreen and double-speak so that teachers employment rights and conditions can be eroded. Teachers please stand up and be counted!

12 PEOPLE, 18 COMMENTS

CongestionCharge

04 November 2012 5:40pm

5



I'm angry to be told this government knows better than teachers, parents and academics about children's needs.

You might be angry, but as a parent and foster carer, I could not care less. What I care about is the education the various children in my care received. What I learnt is that my own kids, with access to good state schools, and also private and grammar educations, received a far better standard of teaching than the foster kids did. Partly that was due to being surrounded by other motivated children and parents, but it was also because of too many teachers preferring to stay in their comfort zone and parrot cliches about inequality; cliches that got them off the hook for the total lack of ambition they showed for their charges.



Ghostworld ▸ CongestionCharge

24

04 November 2012 6:18pm

Well perhaps you should care. You're another one that comes on to these topics simply to grind your axe..... Rather than grinding that axe why don't you go into teaching and see what it is really like



kennainspain ▸ CongestionCharge

14

04 November 2012 11:27pm

you're def right- all the teachers i know spend all their day in their comfort zone trying to find new ways of not helping their students. damn those pesky teachers!!!!!!!!!!
it's ok though gove will save your children (both biological and foster) as he will create a nation of academies and free schools where children will be taught by all knowing, all caring non-teachers. that should make you happy.



kennainspain ▸ CongestionCharge

19

04 November 2012 11:31pm

ps- i almost forgot you don't have to be a teacher to teach at one of gove's

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Last reply: 12 November 2012 11:13pm

scattj

1



We are, unfortunately, in the middle of an incoming ideological tide which is set upon imposing structural change as the only solution to the government's view of a collapsing education system. Well we can take solace from the fact that politicians are merely transitory, but the quality of professionals in the education system is permanent, and we are the people who must be listened to. The tide is probably unstoppable now, so we must take the initiative and start using the freedoms given by 'academisation' to subvert the system and create the sort of education we want for our children and young people.

My philosophical heart which says good schools and local democratic control for all local children is being ruled by my political realist's head; positive choices need to be taken before, in true Big Brother style, they are made for you.



aremjay51

05 November 2012 7:50am

12

"On 23 October, he (Mr Gove) wrote to MPs in Derby and Leicester, areas of high deprivation, large multi-ethnic communities, and schools which are "below the national average" to tell them that they had to choose between supporting academies and free schools, or backing those who are blocking school improvement."

Mr. Gove is yet another politician who fails to understand that 50% of all schools will remain at or below the national average no matter how much you improve standards. That is what an average means. I am reminded of a conservation councillor on Wandsworth Council stating she wanted all children in Wandsworth to be "above average". An epic fail.

As a primary school headteacher I saw the introduction of the National Curriculum and all its revisions over the past twenty years. When it was first introduced we were instructed that the expectation was for 50% of pupils to achieve the national average of Level 4 at 11 years of age.

The expectation for the number of those achieving Level 4 is now above 80% and rising. The Tory controlled media celebrate this success with headlines aiming to denigrate schools with "1 in 5 pupils fail reading tests" and the like.

In 1978 the Warnock report recognised that some 1 in 5 pupils of the school-aged population would have special needs and would need to receive additional support in order to progress to a comparable level of their peers. It also recognised that a proportion of these pupils although entitled to be taught the national curriculum, due to their profound needs, would be eligible for disapplication.

The pupils who have special education needs, whether they are disapplied, or not, from the national curriculum, are still part of the school population and counted in with the results of SATS and national qualifications as far as school performance tables are concerned. The argument, quite rightly, is that they are part of the 100% of the school population, but leads to the conclusion that there will be an absolute limit to school achievement close to 85% above which there will be no further 'school improvement'. The fact that school achievement has nearly reached this point is a cause for celebration and recognition of the tremendous work of the state sector in particular.

Mr Gove's attempts to improve the national average is doomed, but serves him well in his denigration of state schooling and his increasingly successful drive to privatise the state education system.



Xopher

05 November 2012 10:55am

7

I am not an educationalist as such, but I do work in a Local Authority admissions team and can see that the autonomy given to Academies (and free schools, although we don't yet have one) and consequent de-localisation go far beyond classroom matters.

Academies can set their own admissions policy and in our area, this resulted in one (already popular) secondary did away with catchment area, going purely on distance, giving some nearby children priority at two schools while other children in the furthest corner of the catchment will miss out on both. It will be impossible to have a borough-wide catchment review, of course, because all the schools can do their own thing, which isn't so much of a problem at present with plenty of surplus, but I dread to think what the situation will be when the current infant bulge reaches secondary age.

While Local Authorities have the power to direct a school to take a child in certain circumstances, this does not apply to Academies - for which the Authority has to ask the Secretary of State to direct. This, we have just found out with our first direction, is a very lengthy process and has resulted in the boy in question being out of school for 3 months despite there being three local schools with places.

Academies are finding all sorts of woolly reasons for refusing, the hope being (says he cynically) that the children with the deepest problems are those from families less likely to appeal against these questionable refusals.

A lack of cohesion between schools is subtle but seriously felt. What exactly do you do with the child from hell who has moved into the area, where no school agrees to

residents, but no power to impose admission on any particular school.

There has to be a better way to do things!



blackfirscharlie

05 November 2012 10:58am

13

Gove is completely deluded. This notion of 'openness' only applies when he is badmouthing teachers and state schools. When the reverse applies he gets ever-so prickly about free and academic schools and wheels out his toadies and bootlickers to slag teachers off.
Pure Alice Through the Looking Glass.



tdaniel

05 November 2012 11:32am

3

All attempts to respond rationally to this government's action will have no effect whatsoever. Their agenda is to destroy the welfare state and to impoverish the public sphere so that their friends in business (who will employ them when their parliamentary careers are over) can benefit. There is no dialogue because it is not needed when your ideas are determined solely by ideology.

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



esjcx

05 November 2012 11:54am

11

The major problem in learning that Gove, and now OFSTED, do not accept is that arbitrary targets are not fit for purpose. Progress is the real measure. Statistically, it is possible to collect achievement figures across the country, average them, and expect all schools to meet them. We all know that this is nonsense. As an example, train all the children in schools to run a set distance every summer. Take the average time taken to run the distance and then expect 80% of children to achieve this speed. Usain Bolt on the line with children of different sizes and capabilities: who would accept this as a sensible way to set targets for schools? Gove might, but no trained educator would. Trained educators know that progress, not end results, are the key to judging a school's performance. All schools measure children's competences when they enter in order to set targets for their steps in learning in

language acquisition, mathematical development, physical development, understanding of science, history, geography, music, art etc. All schools then measure the progress children have made over a set time, usually term by term, and summarise at the end of a year. Given that the judgements on entry levels are correct (and there is a temptation to down play entry level skills: I know as an OFSTED inspector for 17 years that a small minority of schools do this in order to up the level of progress stats. Some junior schools complain that infant schools have over-assessed, secondary schools say that junior schools have over-assessed....) and that the assessments termly and at year end are accurate, the best measure of a schools and teachers' performance is the progress made by the children, pupils, or students. OFSTED knows this, but it pretends that standardised results are the best measure of school performance: utter nonsense. Just as with an athletics coach, the judgement about their skills and input is based on the progress made by the athlete. So should a school be judged by how well it has helped children learn from the level at which they entered to the level they reach on leaving. There are many schools in middle class areas that coast along because the pupils are supported outside school as well as in it, and achieve what look like good results. Measure the progress accurately, and many are barely satisfactory. Without a doubt, the best schools are those in our big inner cities. The staff work tirelessly to lift these children's expectations of themselves and to accelerate their progress to achieve the best they can. Gove is now punishing these schools because they do not reach the levels that those schools in affluent areas achieve. Progress is the best measure of as chool's contribution to learning.



amateurdramatic ▶ esjacx

05 November 2012 12:53pm

5

Excellent post! There's only so much teachers can do. How can you compare the achievements of a child who reads, is active, has a comfortable home life, is spoken to regularly, with his or her opposite?

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



amateurdramatic

05 November 2012 12:47pm

7

@Lerxst26

"If your girlfriend is working 55 hours a week AND all day Saturday she needs some help as she is clearly struggling to cope. It is true to say that teaching is not a 9-3.30 job as some seem to think but nor is it 11 hours a day, 5 days a week with another 8 hours at the weekend every weekend. Teachers DO attend work for fewer

weeks than most other employees (and before you protest I do know that some do some work in the holidays) and I have no doubt that they work more hours, on average, in the weeks they are in school. Taken together these probably cancel each other out."

Since when is attending work got anything to do with how much work you do? I had a "week off" last week, and worked three days of it! Most professionals take work home and people should start to recognise this, rather than making blithe comments about how long teachers are in school. You don't judge a lawyer by how long he's in the court, or a shop owner by how long they're on site.



LondonMix ▶ amateurdramatic

12 November 2012 11:25pm

1

I would agree. Lawyers also do not get constantly berated in the media for being crap at their jobs. And they get paid more. They are treated and respected as professionals. They get paid a lot too.

This is why teachers complain so much. Most of us love what we do but can you imagine every week being told by strangers that you're rubbish, you're lazy and you get too much holiday. What hurts all the more is that we've trained - we're professionals too, just like lawyers and doctors. We care about doing our job well. We too take work home, work through our time off and as classroom teachers, get paid relatively little.



amateurdramatic

05 November 2012 12:48pm

This has gone so off topic to "teachers good" versus "teachers bad". I would love a discussion in the education section that involved pedagogy. But Gove (and Guardian journalists) seem to know (or care) very little about it.



SelbyBoy

05 November 2012 12:50pm

6

For Gove to call on other people for more openness is probably **the biggest hypocrisy I've ever seen**. There is *nothing* open about the way Gove is ruining this country's education system. He has the most closed mind of anyone I have come across, refusing to pay any heed to what anyone tells him unless it confirms his own

prejudices. He is pushing ahead so many different policies without a shred of objective evidence in support of a single one of them, without ever stopping to consider an alternative viewpoint. All decisions are made behind closed doors, everything is kept secret.

I do like the phrase "the discourses of dichotomy, derision, myth and meaninglessness". It really irks me that the rabid right are always such good sloganeers, playing on people's fears without ever having any evidence or substance behind them. I've realised that this is because the left, who believe in truth and honesty, justice and fair play, are not prepared to squash or simplify complex and cogent arguments into soundbites, far less misrepresent anything; whereas the rabid right don't give a shit about truth, honesty, justice or fair play, all they care about is winning at all costs, and they are prepared to lie and cheat every step of the way. Gove is a prime example of this, although not the only or even the best example.



mrjonathanr

11 November 2012 11:36am

In response to Congestion Charge:

" I have considered going into teaching; I quite fancy the hours and the holidays "

Do it if you think you have what it takes.

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