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Evidence era to let schools call the shots?



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Rigorous research should be the main driver of education policy, according to unions, politicians and academics. Helen Ward investigates what it holds for teacher freedom

It has been a remarkable few weeks in education - agreement has broken out among politicians, academics and unions. A consensus seems to have appeared. The future is all about teachers deciding on their own classroom practice based on solid research evidence - with minimal central interference.

Robin Alexander, director of the Cambridge Primary Review, led the charge with an impassioned plea to wrest the educational debate away from the "trendy" vs "back to basics" factions and give professionals greater control over what and how they teach - it is they, after all, who have the children in front of them.

"Spot on," agreed John Bangs, head of education at teaching union the NUT.

And then more. Sir Jim Rose, speaking at the RSA last week, added that in 10 years' time the call to "trust the teachers" would be looked back on as a sterile debate of years gone by - because it would be so

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accepted. "I think it is a push at an open door," he said.

The key move in giving teachers the freedom to teach what they believe is needed is to give them the evidence that will allow them to decide which programme will suit them and their class best. Again, this appears - at least in part - as if it is pushing at an open door.

Both the Conservatives and Labour have said they will gather and disseminate evidence of best practice. For example, when Ed Balls, Schools Secretary, moved to scrap The National Strategies, he said: "I think the right thing for us to do now is to move ... to something that is essentially being commissioned not from the centre, but by schools themselves."

A sea-change - from education, education, education to evidence, evidence, evidence - seems to have taken place.

But some observers think it should go further. It is not just practitioners, but politicians who need to take research seriously, they say. And, of course, many agree. After all, which politician would say their policies were not based on evidence? That is why respected academics and others are asked to advise politicians on policy.

It seems to be clear that in the not too distant future education will be shaped more by the growing consensus on providing evidence for practitioners to pick from than any central diktat.

Jean Gross has been in the thick of the debate. She is director of the Every Child a Chance Trust, which piloted the Every Child a Reader (ECAR) programme. Despite strong evidence for the positive effects of Reading Recovery - a core part of ECAR - the programme also has some vocal critics.

Grilled by members of the Commons' science and technology committee last week, Ms Gross suggested the minefield of deciding which scheme to use could be solved by setting up an educational equivalent to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, the organisation that assesses medical treatments and which has a huge international reputation.

Of course, there are already bodies of this kind already. Much of the evidence for Reading Recovery's effectiveness comes from the United States, where a What Works clearing house collates research. In England, there is the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre at London University's Institute of Education. The University of York has also set up its own Institute for Effective Education, expressly to advance evidence-based education.

Speaking after the committee hearing, Ms Gross said: "When looking for evidence, there is always the question of, 'Whose evidence?' And even where researchers agree on the evidence, there can be different views on what to do with it."

A single, independent body would be able to answer the question, "Does it work?" and, "What kind of return on investment would I get?" Schools may be free to pick their own reading schemes, but they are bound to a testing regime which much evidence suggests narrows the curriculum.

So could such a body have an influence on ministers?

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"I think it would protect politicians from themselves," Ms Gross said. "They have to look over their shoulder and think about what the Daily Mail and the Telegraph are going to say. I think it would help politicians if they set the overall goals of what children ought to achieve in terms of well-being and standards, and then left it to the professionals to choose by what route to get there."

This, of course, begins to sound rather like the debate surrounding the sacking last week by Alan Johnson, Health Secretary, of Professor David Nutt when he publicly questioned the Government's policy on illegal drugs.

Could politicians in education be persuaded to do a reverse Johnson? Could they be convinced to lift education out of the political quagmire and create a culture in which independent and verified research is used to inform teaching practice? Could these politicians be persuaded that such a move would be good for pupils and schools?

Barry Sheerman MP, chairman of the Commons' committee for children, schools and families, points out that the issue is more complex than this. Democracy requires accountability.

"Of course evidence-based policy is a very good tool in the kit of any minister, but it is about getting a balance," he said. "Professor Nutt is one of the best pharmacologists in the world, but ecstasy and cannabis are a blight on education. Where cannabis gets a hold in secondary schools, it creates a subculture of children losing concentration. It can't be seen just in pharmacological terms.

"Politicians are the people who have to face the electorate and get ready to form a government by listening to evidence that is never 100 per cent in agreement, and then listening to the people who vote for them. It is about prioritisation. You are never going to dictate policy with a machine where you put in all the material and then out comes the answer. It is just not going to happen."

It seems a safe bet that while teachers are in the process of winning more day-to-day independence over their classroom practice, politicians still have a valuable role - but perhaps a smaller one.

PRESCRIPTION VS JUDGMENT

In 2002, Sir Michael Barber, then head of the Prime Minister's delivery unit, developed a radical axis to define the evolution of teaching practice. He plotted on one scale knowledge-rich vs knowledge-poor, and on the other classroom independence vs national prescription. Under Margaret Thatcher, he claimed, practice had moved from uninformed professional judgment to uninformed prescription; from 1997-2001 it shifted to informed prescription, and from 2001 the era of informed professional judgment began.

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