



Government policy has created 'impersonalised education'

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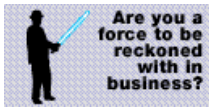
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A flurry of government education policy initiatives have reduced teachers' role and led to children being viewed as "targets and outputs", researchers warned today.



An "audit culture and the pressure for accountability" have narrowed the curriculum and the teacher's role and created an "impersonalised education", according to the latest research findings of the biggest review of primary education in 40 years.



The study, conducted by Dr Liz Jones, Dr Andy Pickard and Prof Ian Stronach at Manchester Metropolitan University's Insitute of Education suggested that more "light touch" accountability could loosen up an "overly prescriptive micro-management of professionals", including head teachers.



Their report, published today as part of the Cambridge University-led Primary Review, suggests that many older teachers feel their autonomy in the classroom and professionalism has been curtailed.



"The system appears to have been damaged over the last 15 years or so by excessive policy intervention, and by frequent successions of initiatives, task forces and projects of various kinds," the researchers claim.

They said: "These have 'irrationalised' policy development by making it difficult to implement all such changes simultaneously. They have also made it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives individually.

"The preference for short-term initiatives of sometimes conflicting ambitions rather than long-term development is regrettable, although there are some indications that research-based criticisms of this 'churning' culture are now being taken more seriously in policy contexts."

The academics called for "slower, more deliberative and consultative policy development" involving more research and teachers.

And teacher training should be made more innovative and evidence-based rather than "tied to explaining the latest initiative".

Whether the government's current policy drive to "personalise" education will introduce a more liberal conception of schooling across the system remains to be seen, the researchers said, "especially as there is an unfortunate tendency for such corrections to be simply added to the policy deficiencies they claim to address".

Leadership and management procedures need to avoid "fads" and research needs to inform policy and practice

"more systematically and enduringly to deep issues concerning learning and motivation, rather than tied to the evaluation of ephemeral initiatives in a naïve kind of 'what works?' rationale", the researchers found.

Jones said: "Teachers have had to deal with a huge amount of initiatives. How people have dealt with that varies but there's a significant thread of people clinging on to their own sense of identity and professionalism.

"There has been insufficient time to reflect, consolidate and to critique. Just as teachers get used to something another policy comes along."

Teachers were beginning to get back some of the autonomy they felt they had lost, she said. But younger teachers often welcomed the support and guidance provided by the initiatives.

Huge changes in education policy have been introduced since the national curriculum in 1988.

The government has introduced a national literacy strategy, a national numeracy strategy, school league tables, new qualifications and more testing.

A separate study on teacher training for the Primary Review suggested that increasing centralisation in the past decade had raised quality but more bureaucracy had created a "culture of compliance" among students and staff.

Researchers Prof Olwen McNamara and Prof Rosemary Webb at Manchester University, and Dr Mark Brundrett from Liverpool John Moores University, said the "politicisation of education and professional learning" had led to a "welcome investment of energy and resources".

However, "it has left the sector subject to short-termism and the vagaries of political whim and ideology, resulting in instability and vulnerability of organisations and programmes", they said.

Programmes and standards for teacher and leadership development had been "subject to contradictory ideological forces" and some of the values and principles behind them were incoherent and inconsistent.

Christine Blower, acting general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "The evidence from the Primary Review is that 'initiative-itis' in primary schools has got in the way of teaching and learning, not to mention improving standards.

"It is clearly impossible to introduce personalised learning into primary schools and at the same time micromanage them from the centre."

Teachers' professional judgements must be trusted, she said.

The schools minister, Lord Adonis, said: "Our partnership with the teaching profession has led to radical improvements in working conditions and has recently led Ofsted to conclude we have the 'best trained generation of teachers ever'.

"Schools and teachers have the freedom and autonomy to do what they do best - teach. We make no apology for policies which are delivering the highest standards ever."

A further report from Dr Hilary Burgess at the Open University suggested that teacher training should pay more attention to how to coordinate and mentor teaching assistants in schools.