

## Leading article: Fads, and a sense of failure

Friday, 18 April 2008

Previous instalments of the epic Primary Review into the condition of Britain's primary schools have evaluated areas such as the prevalence of testing, the burden of the national curriculum and standards. The latest reports, published today, turn their attention to those individuals charged with delivering the actual education service in our primary schools: teachers.

In line with previous instalments, the conclusions are somewhat less than heartening. One report argues that the National Curriculum and the twin National Literacy and National Numeracy strategies have "decreased teacher autonomy". It reports the complaints of teachers that they feel "de-professionalised" and "deskilled". Head teachers cannot be "hands on" because of the expansion of "management, marketing and financial responsibilities". It ascribes this to the Government's pushing of "fad" theories of heads needing to "turn around" schools, in the same way that executives "turn around" businesses. Another report concludes that the "increased prescription and control" of primary schools has impeded the ability of teachers to develop the necessary skills to be effective.

In fairness, the picture painted is not entirely bleak. The reports also find that new teachers are more likely to be positive about their job than they were a decade ago. And primary school teachers are pleased with some central reforms of recent years, such as the mandating of greater planning and preparation time, and an increase in the use of classroom assistants. Perhaps most encouraging of all is the conclusion that not all teachers have succumbed to Government attempts to micromanage their work.

Yet, as a whole, these latest verdicts are hardly something from which ministers can draw a good deal of pride. A Government which came to power promising that its three main priorities in office would be "education, education, education" would have wanted a rather more positive final report; so would most parents and taxpayers.

So what is to be done? An end to attempts to micromanage teachers' lives is clearly needed. One report recommends "a slower, more deliberative context of policy development" from the Department for Education and argues that "the relation of research to policy and practice needs to be linked more systematically and enduringly to deep issues concerning learning and motivation, rather than tied to the evaluation of ephemeral initiatives".

In non-academic speak, this means that ministers need to concentrate on reforms that will genuinely improve the performance of our primary schools, rather than what might grab a few positive headlines in the next day's newspapers. We agree entirely.

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