

## 'Moral panic' and 'policy hysteria' harming primary schools, report says

By Sarah Cassidy, Education Correspondent

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Primary school education has been damaged by "prescriptive state nationalisation", which has taken all the fun out of children's learning, the biggest review of primary education in 40 years has concluded. A mixture of "moral panic", "policy hysteria" and "fad theory" has had a devastating effect on primary schools in England, according to the latest reports of the Cambridge University-led Primary Review.

The three reports published today examining teacher professionalism, training and leadership followed 22 earlier reports that have delivered a damning indictment of the Government's record on primary education.

Children had been reduced to the status of "targets and outputs" in a school system ruled by political "whim", researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University said.

Their report, part of the ongoing Primary Review, warned that teachers had been de-skilled and demoralised by the constant Government interference and that the relentless focus on targets had created an "impersonal" system. The study, by Liz Jones, Andy Pickard and Ian Stronach at Manchester Metropolitan University, concluded that many older teachers felt demoralised by lack of freedom to run their own lessons in the face of government "micro-management of their work".

Centralised control over primary education has increased in the past 15 years as ministers introduced new targets, more testing and league tables. Initiative overload, hysterical response to media scares and scapegoating of schools and teachers had become "a permanent feature of contemporary modernisation by New Labour", the study warned.

A second study, on teacher training, for the Primary Review warned that ministers' strict control of training courses had created a "culture of compliance" among teachers and pupils. The report, by Olwen McNamara and Rosemary Webb at Manchester University and Mark Brundrett from Liverpool John Moores University, warned that successive governments had "progressively increased prescription and control", which had left schools subject to "political whim".

The third report, by Hilary Burgess, from the Open University, examining staffing reforms, warned that children with special needs were missing out on time with their class teacher because they were being left in the care of classroom assistants.

The Liberal Democrats accused the Government of treating teachers like robots. David Laws, their education spokesman, said: "There is a danger of the Government squeezing the life out of education and preparing teachers in a robotic way to deliver a very prescriptive curriculum."

Andrew Adonis, the Schools minister, defended the Government's record. He said: "We make no apology for policies which are delivering the highest standards ever."

### The problem areas

\* A narrowing of the curriculum – primary schools are increasingly focusing on literacy and numeracy to boost their league table positions but at the expense of children's wider education. "The remorseless pursuit of grades had unhealthy effects on other educational goals."

\* Loss of self esteem of pupils and teachers – pupils are being demoralised by the "impersonal" education system with its excessive focus on targets and tests. Teachers, particularly older staff, feel deskilled by government "micromangement" of their lessons. "The reconstruction of the child in terms of targets and outputs... has impersonalised education in ways that are now being recognised."



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*Schoolchildren are reduced to the status of 'targets'*

\* A reduction in creative pedagogy – government interference in teacher training has led to increased focus on preparing teachers to deliver government strategies rather than developing them as thinking professionals. Teachers are under increasing pressure from politicians and the public to be more accountable and raise standards. "There is evidence teachers are being deskilled and their work intensified."

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