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Friday 29 February 2008

Professor Alan Smithers: Lessons of the Soviet Union should have been learnt



Far too many children have been leaving primary schools unable to handle words and numbers properly, and the Blair government was

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determined to do something about it. It believed it had found the way. Set clear targets for schools, devise strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy, and hold everyone to account.

It may have sounded a very good idea in No 10. But the Government might have been warned by the collapse of the Soviet economy, which depended on numerical targets, strategies and sanctions. What has happened to primary education in England is not unlike what happened to Soviet industry.

The whole emphasis becomes on driving up the numbers. Because these numbers are so important to, in this case, the schools and teachers, all sorts of gaming takes place. Moreover, the schools and teachers had to demonstrate to inspectors that they have been following the prescriptions of not just what to teach but also how to teach it.

The scores on the national tests have gone up, but the quality of education is questionable. Still too many children go to secondary schools not being able to read, write and add, even though they have scored well on SATs. Concern has been expressed at the dip in performance on moving up to secondary, but more likely is that the primary scores were inflated.

Ministers have essentially reduced education to a series of numerical targets. The emphasis on achieving targets

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numerical targets. The emphasis on achieving Level 4 numeracy and literacy scores has led to a narrowing of the primary school experience and insufficient attention to raising all children to the best levels they can achieve.

My own recipe for rescuing primary education would be tests, but not targets or league tables; broader more supportive inspections; and above all allowing teachers to exercise their professional expertise within a national curriculum.

Alan Smithers is director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham

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