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PRIMARY SCHOOLS: THE PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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This briefing draws on Primary Research Report 6/2, *Primary schools: the professional environment*, by Liz Jones, Andy Pickard and Ian Stronach. **The full report lists all sources consulted and is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.**

Research field and scope and character of research surveyed

Research Report 6/2 reviews empirical and analytical research on the nature of professionalism in English primary schools. It considers professionalism in terms of leadership and professional responsibilities, and draws on relevant literature from the UK, continental Europe, the United States and Australia. It provides some historical background to developments in England and discusses what seems to be in prospect.

Themes, questions and issues covered, and the character of the coverage

The report addresses:

- the historical context of recent reforms to the professional role of the primary teacher;
- the evolving role of the primary head teacher in terms of remit, management, and leadership;
- the policy context within which such work is located;
- the distinctive nature of the primary school context;
- the potential for future development.

The remit for this research survey was broad, so the authors adopted a selective approach, addressing those features which seemed most significant for the future development both of policy and practice. The survey therefore concentrates on the nexus of government policy, professional autonomy, and the reconstruction of pupils and pedagogy in the light of the National Curriculum, the National Literacy Strategy, the National Numeracy Strategy, the Primary National Strategy and Every Child Matters. The latter is seen as suggesting something of a return to the spirit of Plowden, albeit in a more economically-influenced form. Nevertheless, the standards agenda with its insistence on tight inspection, target-setting and the continuous monitoring of 'outputs' in terms of SAT scores prevails alongside and despite growing concern that its side-effects have included a narrowing of the curriculum, a loss of self-esteem on the part of pupils and some teachers (older rather than younger), a reduction in creative pedagogy and a loss of public trust in teachers. There is a tendency for government initiatives in this area to accumulate in a way that leaves the 'patient' taking all possible medicines for all conceivable ills. We refer to this phenomenon as a mixture of moral panic, policy hysteria and 'fad theory'.

Main findings of the survey

We consider these under three headings: (i) teacher professionalism, (ii) leadership and management developments, (iii) policy in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and structure. We consider these together because commitment, morale and status all feed into perceptions of autonomy.

Teacher professionalism

Across the research literature there is a preponderance of studies that point to the de-skilling of the primary teacher. The National Curriculum decreased teacher autonomy in relation to content, the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy likewise in relation to pedagogy. Teachers were reported to be 'proletarianised', de-professionalised, de-skilled, and sometimes demoralised. But this bleak picture had exceptions. Younger teachers were much more likely to be positive about the job; levels of enthusiasm were generally high amongst newly-qualified teachers (NQTs), although teacher retention rates in urban areas remained a concern. In addition, not all teachers succumbed to government micro-management of their work. Instead, they juggled with competing versions of the role – their personal educational convictions in tension with more directive versions of pupils and learning in terms of targets and outputs.

Leadership and management

There is evidence that primary head teachers' preference for a 'hands-on' approach to educative or pedagogical styles of leadership and engagement has become more difficult to maintain in the face of the expansion of their management, marketing, and financial responsibilities. Policy trends have emphasised the role of the head teacher in 'turning round' schools and 'delivering excellence' via highly proactive 'visions' and leadership 'mission' strategies. The impact of these imported styles of leadership has been mixed and has followed the sort of 'fad theory' policy meanderings reported from the US business world. Currently, these supposedly transformational approaches to leadership seem to be giving way to more 'distributed' and pluralist forms, with recent invocations of the approach to teacher leadership developed elsewhere in Europe. The National College of School Leadership (NCSL) has been influential in developments in this area, although there is a dearth of critical studies demonstrating the longer term effectiveness of various leadership strategies and a suspicion that local contexts and personalities are more important than approved 'styles' of leadership engagement.

Policy development

The national educational reforms in England from 1988 onwards reconstructed the child as a Key Stage performer measured by SAT results. The reforms in turn fed teacher appraisal, school appraisal, and national comparisons via league tables that were highly attractive to media, even if they were not very stable in their outcomes, or very useful as formative feedback to teachers and schools. These reforms were paradoxical. On the one hand they served a market in education that was opened up to at least the appearance of choice and competition. They set out to serve the future of the nation within a global economy. On the other hand they were a kind of prescriptive state nationalisation of the means, ends and procedures of education in the primary field. 'Market Stalinism' was the charge. Their effect on the perceived autonomy of the teacher was considerable.

Implications for policy, and divergence in the research surveyed

On balance, we find that the claimed de-professionalisation of teachers is an over-simplification. Traditional professional values and child-centred beliefs have been in considerable tension with more recent prescriptions. It is clear that this tension has contributed to teacher stress and perceived overload, as well as to a feeling that the status of the professional teacher is diminishing (unsupported by parental views). On the other hand, current moves to re-insert qualities such as 'trust', 'creativity', 'personalisation' and 'self-esteem' all point to a kind of return to a more liberal view of professionalism and the role of the child in his or her education, as well as a recognition that teachers need motivating more than they need managing. In particular the most recent research into the early professional learning of teachers suggests that current systems of preparation and CPD do not sufficiently recognise how teachers 'invent' themselves in their early career and are not as amenable as assumed to prior scripting of curriculum and pedagogy. Beginning teachers need space as well as support in order to develop their classroom skills and to create productive relationships with their pupils.

We conclude that professional leadership and management have certainly been systematised in ways not achieved before in the English system. Unfortunately, this has led to an accent on management that has increasingly downplayed *pedagogic* leadership. The more recent models of leadership acknowledge that more distributed management is desirable, and that collective and collegial

approaches are returning to favour. Explorations of 'democratic professionalism' look interesting although there is as yet no clear evidence on their effectiveness.

The evidence suggests that the audit culture and the pressure for accountability have certainly narrowed for a while both the curriculum and the teacher's role, although it is possible that more 'light touch' accountability will loosen up an overly prescriptive micro-management of professionals, including head teachers.

The evidence also suggests that the policy context within which teachers exercise their responsibilities has been unhelpful to the development to extended forms of professionalism. Similarly, the reconstruction of the child in terms of targets and outputs, while having its own efficiencies of transparency and performance, has impersonalised education in ways that are now being recognised. Whether 'personalisation' will introduce a more liberal conception of schooling across the system remains to be seen, especially as there is an unfortunate tendency for such corrections to be simply added to the policy deficiencies they claim to address. 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. 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.

There needs to be a slower, more deliberative and consultative context of policy development, one that engages teachers in development as well as in research into its consequences. Professionalism needs to be rethought in terms of juggling of different priorities that makes teaching a motivating and challenging job. CPD needs to be made more innovative and evidence-based, rather than tied to explaining the latest initiative. Leadership and management procedures need to avoid the same sorts of fads as have characterised leadership debates, and accountability scenarios. 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 a naïve kind of 'what works?' rationale. Innovation is too often a matter of ill-considered policy borrowing. Research needs to consider not just outcomes within a rubric of effectiveness and efficiency but also the slower and deeper emergence of enduring excellence in classrooms and schools. This can be achieved by more ongoing, strategically targeted qualitative research that seeks to understand the profound processes of learning and development.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Jones, E., Pickard, A. and Stronach, I. (2008) *Primary Schools: the professional environment* (Primary Review Research Survey 6/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-25-4.

The report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Settings and Professionals**.

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