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Politicians ignore educational experts

There is real research about what works in schools, but Labour and the Tories prefer policies about headlines, not children

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guardian.co.uk, Friday 16 October 2009 14.30 BST

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The most interesting thing about the independent primary review published today isn't its recommendations: it's the political reaction. Unless the subject is moats and duck houses, politicians are normally scrambling over themselves to say what they think about the latest news headline.

But the response from the government has been infantile – rather than engaging with the evidence and recommendations in the report, they've acted like a child with a temper tantrum, dismissing the work of respected education academics and professionals as "out of date" and "woolly". From the Conservatives, on the other hand, the response has been a rather ominous silence. So neither party has engaged directly today with the recommendations around starting formal learning later at age six and scrapping Sats at age 11.

Why the silence? The answer, unfortunately, lies in the politics. It is a no-brainer for the government to pooh-pooh the report, and for the Tories to keep stubbornly quiet. Despite both parties making positive noises about decentralising power to education professionals, Labour and Conservative politicians have no problems in telling schools what they think they should be doing. So Ed Balls has no problem in dictating to schools how they should organise their pastoral systems. And just last week, Michael Gove told the Conservative conference how he thought all schools should have uniforms, set classes by ability, and make use of ex-troops to promote discipline.

But the threshold for politicians weighing in with their diktats isn't evidence – it's politics. There is no evidence that insisting every school in the country should have personal tutors or setting is the way to improve educational standards. But these are policies designed to appeal to the electorate in the run up to the next general election.

On the other hand, there is a strong evidence base to suggest that children respond best to a variety of different learning styles, and that learning through structured, teacher-led play is an important way through which children around the age of five learn. This is not to undermine the importance of children developing the skills that will underpin successful learning later on during these early years. It is simply to say that the way in which hard skills like literacy, numeracy and communication are taught is just as important as recognising the importance of developing these skills. This is why Sir Jim Rose's review of phonics teaching argued that the best way to teach phonics to children is through methods that exploit the power of "play, story, songs, rhyme and drama". Countries such as Finland introduce formal, desk-based learning into the curriculum later, at age seven – and enjoy some of the best education results in the world.

Many would argue politicians have a more legitimate role in shaping the basic building

blocks of the national curriculum than in telling schools what their uniform policy should look like. But the Conservatives, in particular, are worried about how a policy that could be presented as being soft and liberal will go down with their core voters. The approach has been a cowardly one – fear of what the voters will think has trumped evidence and common sense.

The education system is dismally failing too many of our young people. Each year, a shocking 8% of 11-year-olds leave primary school without the literacy and numeracy skills of an average seven-year-old. Their lives will be forever blighted by this failure to develop these key skills. It's time to get the petty politics out of education: our children's future is too important.

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