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## The NUT has cried wolf too often, but this time it's right

Our children are being chewed up by the misguided strategies of the education system, and they need rescuing

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Really, has the National Union of Teachers lost its head? Monday's news from its annual conference was headlined, "NUT calls for the return of the liberal policies of the 1980s." Surely this most political of unions should have picked up the most crucial lesson of the past dozen years - that the Labour government will accept nothing if it is presented as a return to the past. Every initiative must look as if it is new, forward-moving, looking to the future. It might be nothing of the sort, but presentation is all.

It's a shame that the teachers' unions should prove themselves, year after year, to be so lousy at the politics of education. We've become so accustomed to the annual and off-putting sight of intemperate delegates denouncing any government policy - yesterday's targets were faith schools and the MoD's teenage recruitment drive - that it is hard for us to take them seriously when they finally have something important to say. For years, they've not only been crying "Wolf!", but "Tiger! Bear! Lion! Shark!" But this time they're right. Our children are being chewed up by the misguided strategies of the education system, and they need to be rescued.

There is now a torrent of evidence emerging that Britain's rigid, centralised approach to teaching has utterly failed in what it set out to do. It has not raised achievement, enthused pupils, narrowed the gaps between rich and poor, or given children the skills they need to make the most of their working and private lives. International surveys, small-scale studies of classroom practice, and the reports of the government's own agencies are all leading to the same conclusion: that real learning has been fatally abandoned for the sake of some very minor improvements in test results. Teachers are so preoccupied with telling pupils the answers they need for their exams that they can rarely respond to children's curiosity, arouse their interest, or find out what they think.

Over the past six months some of the most measured, and therefore damning, criticisms have been those laid out in the 23 interim reports of Cambridge University's Primary Review. This independent inquiry, involving research by more than 70 academics, is the most extensive review of primary education since the Plowden report 40 years ago. At the end of February the latest batch of reports concluded that the government's micro-management of classrooms and its constant meddling had had a devastating effect on schools. Teachers had lost much of their autonomy and discretion, and were frequently obliged to follow pre-prescribed lesson plans laid down by Whitehall, rather than engaging with the children in front of them. High-achieving pupils were bored and frustrated, while the introduction of Sats had made the low-achieving ones considerably more anxious, and more afraid of being exposed as failures. The evidence for a genuine improvement in standards, as opposed to test results, was "at best equivocal, and at worst negative". There had been "a decrease in the overall quality of primary education, because of the narrowing of the curriculum and the intensity of test preparation". It is hard not to conclude that, for all the effort invested, it might have been better for the government to do nothing at all.

One quote sums up what is happening in so many schools: "It is difficult to avoid a sense of children in flight from an experience of learning that they found unsatisfactory, unmotivating and uncomfortable."

When I first began writing about the deadening effect of school policy six years ago, the government still had reason to suppose it was right. The evidence against it amounted to straws in the wind - unhappy children here, some small-scale research there, some vociferous complaints from disillusioned teachers. A year later, when more weight was accumulating - independent schools inspectors began to warn that even their clients were beginning to resort to fact-stuffing as a way of getting children through exams - the then education secretary, Charles Clarke, asked me in to discuss the issue. He accepted, he said, that some children were having a very stultifying and limited experience of education. The question was, did that apply to 5% or

95% of them? Clarke appeared to be a rare example of an education secretary who was prepared to entertain the possibility that the government wasn't always right. He published a document encouraging primaries to be more creative and flexible in their teaching, but he moved on before he could lend political muscle to that instruction.

Since then, every education secretary and minister has been distinguished by an almost wilful determination to ignore the mass of research that does not suit their agenda. Politically, that is the easiest choice. They are encouraged in this by their senior civil servants, whose careers have been built around delivering a particular agenda, and who have nothing to gain by seeing it change course. What is truly alarming is that ministers rarely even glimpse the reports they dismiss. Last year I mentioned a particularly critical Ofsted report to one minister. "Oh, my people tell me there's nothing new in that," he said, breezily. In fact, it had a great deal that was new, and important, and the individuals who put thousands of man-hours into preparing it were probably writing it for an audience of three - of which the minister who never read it was the most important one.

It seems that the Primary Review is meeting the same fate. This extensive, diligent review of published evidence and new research was dismissed in 10 seconds by another minister in a private conversation: "My people say it's rehashed." Publicly, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has written the latest reports off as "recycled, partial and out-of-date". It said: "We do not accept these claims ... We have had a decade of success in raising standards."

A decade ago the sight of teachers' antics at their annual conferences was enough to make one think that the government was right to demand a change of approach and greater rigour in schools. I can still applaud the government's good intentions. But now that it has become so clear that it is on the wrong path, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that it is the government that's behaving in a ludicrous fashion. With its fingers in its ears, and its eyes screwed up, it is determined not to accept reality. Unfortunately, it's our children's lives, hopes, minds and futures that are being sacrificed in the process.

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