

RESEARCHERS LAMENT 'IMPERSONAL' PRIMARY EDUCATION SPECIAL NEEDS PUPILS 'NEED MORE TIME WITH TEACHERS'

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A battery of Government initiatives has reduced children to the status of "targets and outputs" in a school system ruled by political "whim", researchers warned today.

Centralised control over primary education has increased significantly in the past 15 years as ministers introduced new targets, more testing and league tables of schools based on results.

Research conducted as part of the biggest inquiry into primary education in England for 40 years warned that the focus on results and initiatives had created an "impersonal" system.

The study was conducted by Liz Jones, Andy Pickard and Ian Stronach at Manchester Metropolitan University as part of the Cambridge-based Primary Review.

Their report said many older teachers felt they had lost the freedom to run their own lessons in the face of government "micro-management of their work".

"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," the study said.

It "remains to be seen" whether the Government's drive for more "personalised" education will bring about a "more liberal" concept of schooling.

"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," the study said.

"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."

The academics called for a "slower" and more carefully-considered way of developing education policies, involving more discussion with schools.

"Innovation is too often a matter of ill-considered policy borrowing," they said.

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the 1988 Education Reform Act, the school system in England has seen repeated reforms to exams, a national literacy strategy, a national numeracy strategy, the introduction of league tables, more national testing, and a battery of Government targets.

A separate study on teacher training for the Primary Review warned that red tape and targets have created a "culture of compliance" among both teachers and pupils.

The report, by Olwen McNamara and Rosemary Webb at Manchester University and Mark Brundrett from Liverpool John Moores University, said increased central government control over education in the past 10 years had seen results improve.

"An increasing level of centralisation over the last decade has raised the quality of provision," the report said.

"The politicisation of education and professional learning has led to a welcome investment of energy and resources but has left the sector subject to short-termism and the vagaries of political whim and ideology resulting in instability and vulnerability of organisations and programmes."

Christine Blower, acting general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "The evidence from the Primary Review is that 'initiative-itis' in primary schools has got in the way of teaching and learning, not to mention improving standards.

"It is clearly impossible to introduce personalised learning into primary schools and at the same time micro-manage them from the centre."

Schools Minister Andrew Adonis said: "Our partnership with the teaching profession has led to radical improvements in working conditions and has recently led Ofsted to conclude we have the 'best trained generation of teachers ever'.

"Schools and teachers have the freedom and autonomy to do what they do best – teach. We make no apology for policies which are delivering the highest standards ever."