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A year of changes in education

By Mike Baker

So farewell to 2007: the year when education in England was "personalised", the school motto came back into fashion and a new prime minister sent out the potentially ambiguous message: "Balls - to the department of education".




It was way back in January when Christine Gilbert produced her report on personalised learning, 2020 Vision.

Much has already flowed from it, not least the plans for individual "learning guides" for all secondary pupils and the new timetable for introducing "testing when ready".




Indeed, 2007 may turn out to be the year that marked the beginning of the end for Sats, at least as they have existed since 1991 with all children taking them at the same age and

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the same time.

However, although the recent Children's Plan announced a possible "end to the key stage tests in 2009", anyone thinking this spells the end of all national tests and league tables is, for now at least, indulging in wishful thinking.

Meanwhile a popular education quiz question for the next few years is likely to be: what was Gordon Brown's school motto? (The answer, should you need it, is "I will try my utmost").

The new prime minister, who took over in June, used his first big set-piece education speech to reveal that he believed in the "aspirational and inspirational" value of school mottos.

Noting that school mottos belonged to the spirit of a former age, when education brought social mobility, he urged a return to the idea that education should "make it possible for young people to bridge the gap between what they are and what they have it in themselves to become".

Social mobility

Indeed, in an interesting shift from the Blair years, the government's new mantra is all about closing the attainment gap between rich and poor.

A look at the spending priorities and Treasury targets in the Comprehensive Spending Review, published in October, reveals a relentless focus on narrowing the differences in achievement between young people from different social backgrounds in everything from the Early Years Foundation Stage to university admissions.

However, another notable aspect of 2007 was the growing

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evidence from bodies such as the Sutton Trust that social mobility has stagnated compared to earlier decades. So Gordon Brown will have his work cut out to deliver on his education targets.

The changes in Downing Street meant yet another change at the education ministry, where the current average tenure of cabinet ministers is only about 18 months.

Ed Balls arrived with a plan and immediately announced the end of the Department for Education and Skills.

In its place he created two new departments: one for children, schools and families and another for universities and skills.

While it was logical to bring all the various aspects of childhood under one Whitehall roof, it meant further education was left rather awkwardly between the two.

It is also rather odd that England, unlike most other countries, no longer has a ministry for education.

Meanwhile, those of you still struggling with the new acronym for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) can always fall back on the alternative name now doing the rounds: the Department for Curtains and Soft Furnishings.

Abrupt exit

Of course, 2007 was as much about departures as arrivals. This was a watershed year in which we said "farewell" to several big players who have shaped education policy for the past decade.

Tony Blair, forever associated with the mantra "education, education, education", was the biggest player to leave the stage. Whatever one thinks of his achievements, no previous prime minister ever made education such a high priority.

While Blair's departure was well signposted, and self-imposed, a rather more abrupt and enforced exit came for Sir Cyril Taylor, chairman of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

If anyone's departure marks the end of an era, it is Sir Cyril's. He was an advisor to every education secretary from Kenneth Baker in the late 1980s right through until Alan Johnson.

Perhaps the writing was on the wall when Sir Cyril was not reappointed as an advisor by Ed Balls, Gordon Brown's right-hand man.

Sir Cyril's "Tiggerish" energy, his North American policy influences and extensive business contacts have been the drive behind city technology colleges and then specialist schools and academies.

He has been closely involved in transforming a programme for a tiny minority of inner city schools into one that now covers the great majority of secondary schools.

But it seems Sir Cyril's ebullience and gregariousness also got him into one too many scrapes and he had lost the confidence of head teachers, partly because of his style of leadership and also because of comments he reportedly made about incompetent teachers.

Anxious children

There have, of course, been many other significant events this year: the continuing development of the Diplomas, the plans to raise the education leaving age to 18, and preparation for the compulsory start of the Early Years Foundation Stage. All are set to be bigger stories in 2008.

Finally, we cannot leave 2007 without noting the growing sense of unease over childhood in Britain.

In February, a Unicef study placed British children last of 21 industrialised countries for their emotional well-being.

This impression was reinforced by the Cambridge University based Primary Review which reported that children were suffering from "deep anxiety" about modern life.

The Cambridge researchers, and many head teachers, laid part of the blame for this stress on testing, targets and league tables. Further concern came with the fall of England's ranking in the international Pirls assessment of reading. Not only had our scores slipped behind other countries', they had also declined compared with previous performance.

Most worrying were the indications that English children were less likely to read for pleasure than their peers elsewhere.

With 2007 ending with the publication of the Children's 10-Year Plan, perhaps our New Year's resolution should be to make childhood happier, and reading more fun, in 2008.

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