The Impact of New Labour's Education Policy on Teachers and Teaching at Key Stage 2

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ABSTRACT This article portrays Key Stage 2 primary school teachers' perspectives on, and experiences of, New Labour's education policies. Evidence is derived from fieldwork conducted in 2003-2005 in a sample of 50 schools throughout England, replicating a study conducted a decade previously in the same schools. It is suggested that there have been more changes in teaching methods in the last five years than in the previous two decades. However, the ability to motivate and develop children's learning has remained at the core of primary teacher professionalism. It determined teachers' condemnation or approval of government prescribed changes in classroom practice and led to reassessment of some of their professional values concerning desirable teaching methods.

An ongoing four-year (2003-2006) research project commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is examining the impact on primary school teachers' work of the New Labour government's education policies. The first phase of this project completed in 2005 focused on the impact of government reforms on primary teachers' classroom practice at Key Stage 2 (KS2) (Webb & Vulliamy, 2006). Day (2000) has suggested that 'teachers' voices are an important and under-represented part of the macro debate which focuses on whether educational reforms in England and elsewhere are resulting in the 'deprofessionalization' or 'technicization' of teachers' work or whether they result in 'reprofessionalization'' (pp. 110-111). Given this, one of the aims of our research was to give primacy to teachers' perspectives on the New Labour reforms in order to supplement earlier research in the PACE project (Osborn et al, 2000) on the impact of the Conservative government's reforms on primary teacher professionalism in the early 1990s.

Drawing on data analysis from the first phase of the research, this article argues that there has been more change in KS2 teachers' classroom practice over the last five years than in the previous twenty. The main force for change

in teaching methods and classroom organization not only in literacy and numeracy but across the curriculum has been the combined impact of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS). The Primary National Strategy (PNS) has enabled teachers to combine these methods with the best of past practice. The changes brought about by the strategies have been enhanced and supplemented by the development of ICT in primary schools and the increase in the number of teaching assistants as part of the government's workforce remodelling agenda.

For teachers participating in the ATL research project the core of primary teaching, the very heart of primary professionalism, was the ability to motivate and develop children's learning and to boost their confidence and self-image – a finding that is consonant with other research into primary teachers' professionalism and identity (see, e.g., Osborn et al, 2000, Webb et al, 2004). Consequently, teachers' reflections on, and experiences of, education reform reveal the ways in which they sought to meet and interpret government requirements in the 'best interests of the children'. The perceived beneficial or detrimental impact on children's learning and well-being of the changes in classroom practice resulting from government policy determined whether or not these changes met with their approval. However, as discussed in the following sections, in a context characterised by highly centrist educational policy initiatives, the 'best interests' of the children were subject to competing interpretations.

Research Methodology

The research incorporates a longitudinal dimension through the replication of a previous ATL-funded research project carried out between 1992 and 1994 in 50 primary schools in England and Wales. The same qualitative research strategy based on condensed fieldwork was used as in the 1992-1994 research. In its first phase (2003-2005), this project involved day-long visits to 50 schools in 16 Local Authorities (LAs) throughout England and comprised 188 tape-recorded in-depth interviews with primary teachers in these schools, supplemented by school documentation and classroom observations of 51 lessons. With two exceptions the sample schools were the same as in the original study. We decided not to include the single Welsh school – as educational policy in Wales has become increasingly different from that of England – and one small school closed in the first year of the research. Therefore we substituted two other schools of similar size for which we had data over the decade. Our primary concern in selecting the original 1992 sample of 50 schools had been to ensure that it reflected the full diversity of KS2 provision in terms of size and type of school giving, for example, a mix of inner-city, suburban and rural schools, a multicultural mix (from all-white schools through to one school with 98 per cent ethnic minority pupils) and a mix of religious denominations (including Church of England, Roman Catholic and Methodist). We provide a full discussion of the criteria for the selection of

the original 50 schools in the 1992-1994 study and of the manner in which these schools have changed over the subsequent decade, together with full details of the composition of the teacher interview sample in Webb & Vulliamy (2006, chapter 1).

Targets, Tests and More Targets

In common with other studies (Osborn et al, 2000; Jeffrey & Woods, 1998), the project findings strongly reflect the 'performativity discourse of assessment' dominating current educational policy-making (Broadfoot, 2001). National targets in literacy and numeracy are crucial to the government's standards agenda. In the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004, p. 43) the government predicts that by 2008 'we will have reached and sustained our literacy and numeracy targets of 85 per cent of children reaching the expected level at the age of eleven; and the proportion of schools in which fewer than 65 per cent of children reach this level reduced by 40 per cent'. Such an emphasis on test attainment is crucial to policy-makers' and some academics' redefinitions of the moral purpose of schooling to embrace the 'new professionalism' agenda. For example, David Hopkins – an academic known for his contributions to the 'school improvement' literature who became Director of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit at the Department for Education and Skills – views the contemporary moral purpose of school leadership as 'the vital importance of closing the gap between our highest and lowest achieving pupils and to raise standards of learning and achievement for all' (2003, p. 60). This narrow conception of 'moral purpose' contrasts with that of teachers who stressed the importance of primary schooling in 'developing the whole child' and enabling children to discover and develop a wide range of potential abilities and aptitudes:

> What I hang onto more than anything and what I have always
> believed in is that we are here to develop the whole child – not only
> attainment in literacy and numeracy but the qualities of
> independence, articulation, self esteem, organisational skills – there
> is a myriad of qualities you need to develop as a human being.
> (Headteacher, February 2004)

Teachers described the unremitting pressure on heads, themselves and pupils exerted by the government's standards agenda. It had created a culture whereby however hard teachers worked they never considered it adequate to meet expectations:

> Most teachers are here well before eight. It is that culture and ethos
> that we have built up ourselves … we could work our directed hours
> and do no more. The very nature of teachers, they don't want to do
> that, they want to do what is best for the children. There is going to
> have to come a point soon where a line is going to have to be drawn
> to say if these resources aren't made, or this isn't marked you are

> going to have to go home, but no-one seems to see that because
> pressure comes from above. So the head is constantly under pressure
> to perform, she puts the pressure on us, we put the pressure on the
> children and then everyone is just under immense pressure and
> stress. (Fast track Teacher, November 2004)

For teachers 'testing has gone far too far' resulting in primary schools being 'over tested, scrutinised and squeezed' with 'no allowance for your professional judgement'. Schools provided booster classes, made use of standardised tests and QCA optional tests for years 3, 4 and 5. The optional tests were often administered at the same time as the Year 6 tests in order to instil quiet throughout the school, accustom all KS2 children to test conditions and emphasise to parents the importance of their child's attendance during 'test week'. Test preparation adversely affected the curriculum throughout KS2 and completely distorted provision for Year 6. Before the tests in the Spring term Year 6 children were unlikely to engage in activities, such as residential fieldtrips or class productions, which might disrupt their work on the core curriculum. Other school-specific initiatives to support children's test preparation, such as homework programmes and the after school SATs clubs, were also provided.

Teachers tried to achieve a balance between getting pupils to realise the importance of doing their best but without making them over anxious. Pollard et al (2000, p.238) after interviewing 103 children across nine schools about their experience of taking the tests concluded that while the children's comments reflected both the reassurances of teachers and parents and the pressures of their expectations 'overall, the children seemed only too aware that whilst 'trying' was worthy, 'achieving' was actually the required outcome'. This perception was reflected in the accounts of the teachers that we interviewed of the responses of individual pupils to their test results:

> I whispered in each child's ear the results – outside the classroom so
> nobody else could hear – and when I came back in the classroom
> one lad, who had actually achieved a level four, which was what I
> expected him to achieve, – he was crying. Nobody else had said
> anything to him but he just felt that level four wasn't good
> enough… For him, that level 4 was a good result and, although I'd
> said so to him, his own self image couldn't let him see that. So, for
> children like that, and for children who do, plod on, and who still
> can't achieve a level 4, I do feel very sorry. (Teacher, June 2004)

Some confident, competitive, high attaining children were regarded as finding the challenge of tests exhilarating but for many others, particularly lower achievers, the tests were demotivating, stressful and alienating. Also teachers in the 50 schools often commented on the inequitable nature and demotivating effect of SATs that rewarded ability often largely irrespective of effort.

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The schools were collecting and analysing increasing amounts of assessment data, particularly performance data, aided by the development of school management information and communications technology in order to make comparisons between: the school's results and those of other schools in the locality and nationwide; current and past cohorts of pupils; test results and teacher assessment or other assessment data; and pupils' results with their own previous results. Increasingly, teachers were expected to set attainment targets for individual pupils and their performance was judged according to their ability to enable pupils to meet these attainment targets. One of the consequences of such target-dominated schooling has been 'mutual instrumentality' (Pollard et al, 2000) whereby both teachers and pupils cooperatively work together to improve assessment outcomes. As characterised by Jeffrey (2002) 'relations between teacher and child have changed from the Plowden form of inter-dependency, in which teachers and children relied on humanist connections between them, to a dependent relationship based on a mutual necessity to achieve satisfactory performance' (p. 534).

Curriculum Balance and Organisation

Osborn et al (2000) and Galton et al (2002) concluded that the standards agenda focused teachers' attention on curriculum coverage in literacy, numeracy and science to the detriment of the rest of the primary curriculum, especially art, music and PE and our research showed that this situation remained unchanged. The complaints from teachers concerning lack of spontaneity and creativity that were documented between 1990 and 1996 in the PACE Project (Osborn et al, 2000) continued to be reiterated. Lack of time to respond to children's interests was viewed as particularly demotivating for children and damaging to pupil teacher relationships:

> We keep saying to children 'You have got news on Monday
> morning. Great, tell us Thursday afternoon because we have got five
> minutes then'. We feel that we are losing that communication with
> the children if they had things to tell us and we didn't have time to
> listen … they were enthused and then you knocked it out of them.
> (SENCO, November 2004)

The government's Primary National Strategy (PNS), set out in *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003), stated its intention 'to encourage schools to take control of their curriculum, and to be innovative' (para 2.4). In the foreword Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education, claimed that 'enjoyment' derived from 'excellent teaching' is 'the birthright of every child'. However, for him 'excellent teaching' means the achievement of high standards in literacy and numeracy which 'gives children the life chances they deserve'. Thus the PNS maintains the emphasis on the standards agenda and upholds the continuance of a performativity culture. As Alexander (2004) argues, the mixed messages coming from the DfES on the purpose of the PNS and the

'doublespeak on professional autonomy' within the document reflect 'a desire to be seen to be offering freedom while in reality maintaining control' (p. 15).

The PNS was interpreted by teachers in our research as 'giving them permission' to depart from government and LA recommendations:

> You can be a bit more relaxed with the children and enjoy – and do things which don't exactly fit in with the QCA documents. They are not statutory anyway, but I think you would be expected to follow them pretty closely. However since this Primary Strategy I feel happier doing stuff that is not fulfilling targets all the time. (KS2 teacher, February 2005)

Albeit tentatively, the perceived 'freeing-up' of the curriculum enabled teachers to exercise some professional judgement about ways of teaching that supported the children's 'best interests'. Schools already involved in their own or LA-wide curriculum and/or teaching and learning initiatives saw these as consistent with the recommendations of the PNS. The most popular initiatives involved: exploring alternative teaching approaches as a way of personalising learning, such as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning; accelerated learning and thinking skills programmes; the 'blocking' of some subjects to provide longer periods of time for in-depth work in the foundation subjects; and experimentation with cross-curricular work which often took the form of variously labelled theme/project/topic days or weeks.

As predicted by Alexander (2004), headteachers experienced an irresolvable tension between the government's drive for excellence through the standards agenda and the desire for schools to be creative and foster enjoyment. Given the performativity culture, they were reluctant to reduce time spent on literacy and numeracy in order to devote more time to the rest of the curriculum. Curriculum integration, as was the case when the National Curriculum was first introduced, was considered the best the way to cover too much subject content (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996). However, it was also viewed as once again offering diverse opportunities to excite and motivate pupils – for example, through involving school visits and a range of practical, physical education and/or aesthetic activities. While for some teachers this was simply 'topic work coming around again', others disassociated the 'new' approaches from topic work and the criticisms it incurred by stressing the importance of the National Curriculum in ensuring cross-curricular links were conceptually sound and by beginning planning from specific learning objectives. The cyclical nature of change was a common theme in teachers' perspectives of the PNS that 'put back in the curriculum that which had been lost'. Fifteen different teachers used the phrase coming 'full circle' while others used similar phrases such as 'coming full cycle' and 'reinventing the wheel'.

Teaching Methods Across the Curriculum

Based upon fieldwork conducted in 1996 that replicated the influential ORACLE research study of the late 1970s, Galton et al (1999) found that 'two decades of classroom research, curriculum reform on an unprecedented scale, and a shift in educational thinking which has produced calls for a return to whole class teaching and more subject specialisation has had almost no impact on the way in which teachers organise the pupils' (pp. 41-42). Writing and listening to the teacher still dominated most lessons. The layout of classrooms with children sat together in groups and the patterns of teacher-pupil interaction also remained remarkably similar (p. 174). They speculate that little or no guidance on National Curriculum implementation could be largely responsible for the lack of change in classroom practice. In contrast to the implementation of the National Curriculum, the NLS and the NNS prescribed both content and teaching methods. The justification for this was that 'the time has long gone when isolated unaccountable professionals made curriculum and pedagogical decisions alone without reference to the outside world' (DfEE, 1998, p. 14).

The teachers that we interviewed were highly critical of the government for imposing the strategies 'in such a way that "You don't have to do it, it is an option, but woe betide anybody who doesn't!"'. Consequently, the strategies were viewed as yet another expression of the government's lack of trust in the teaching profession and a public declaration that teachers lacked expertise in teaching basic subjects which further lowered morale and reduced teacher self confidence. However, perhaps surprisingly, given the importance attributed to ownership in the findings of research on educational change (see, e.g., Osborn et al, 1992), we found that the experiences of many teachers through complying with the strategies led them to reassess some of their professional values and beliefs concerning teaching methods. In their final evaluation report on the strategies, Earl et al (2003) found that 'many teachers in our sample schools spoke about how the strategies had altered their practice and that of their colleagues, not only in literacy and mathematics, but also in other subjects' (p. 80). Our data also contain many positive responses by primary teachers to the imposed changes in their pedagogy:

> I think that the Literacy Strategy and the Numeracy Strategy
> changed everybody's views… I am saying 'everybody's', but it
> certainly changed mine, it really did change mine – my views as a
> teacher and how to teach the subjects because I think that if we are
> all honest we weren't teaching literacy as it should have been taught.
> (Deputy head, October 2003)

These responses usually contained explicit criticisms of past practice that was contrasted unfavourably with teaching methods adapted from the strategies. Frequently the basis of this contrast was the implication for children's learning – for example, for many teachers, making learning objectives explicit and sharing

them with pupils constituted a major beneficial change from much past practice that had been brought about specifically by the strategies:

> Going back a few years I didn't know what I was teaching, the kids didn't know what they were learning and at the end of the lesson we didn't know whether we'd learnt it and nobody bothered to find out whether we'd learnt it. Now I know what I'm teaching, they know what they're learning and at the end of the lesson I'm going to know whether they've learnt it and what's more important they're going to know whether they've learnt it – and that's what's improved teaching. (Year 3 teacher, July 2005)

The strategies have been criticised for not being adequately research-based (e.g. Brown et al, 1998) and for failing to achieve the intended fundamental changes in teacher-pupil interaction (e.g. Hargreaves et al, 2003). Also, we share Richards's (2005) and Tymms's (2004) scepticism concerning the government's claim that the strategies have been responsible for a dramatic increase in primary school literacy and numeracy standards. However, our data show that the influence of the strategies has led to widespread changes in primary classroom practice since the New Labour government came into power in 1997. These changes, which are described in detail in the Webb & Vulliamy (2006) report, include:

- a move from an activity-based topic-centred curriculum to an objectives-led subject-centred one;
- a dramatic increase in whole-class teaching at the beginning and end or throughout lessons;
- lessons with instructional introductory and plenary sessions;
- teachers maintaining much tighter control over the pace and direction of lessons than previously;
- an increase in the use of setting in literacy and numeracy;
- changes in classroom seating patterns with very much more use of pupils seated in rows rather than grouped around tables; and
- a virtual eradication in our sample of certain practices – such as the integrated day and open-plan classrooms – often associated with the Plowden 'progressive' era.

Also, as revealed by our data, ICT is making a considerable contribution to change in teachers' classroom practice. Over the last decade there has been a dramatic increase, first, in the development of ICT suites in primary schools and, second, in the installation of interactive whiteboards in classrooms. Both of these developments promote whole class participation in lessons and require the teacher to lead (directly or indirectly), manage and monitor children's learning in these lessons. This is in sharp contrast to the predominant situation in the original 1992-1994 study where ICT use generally occurred when individuals, pairs or small groups of children worked largely unsupported at one or two classroom computers while the teacher taught and/or monitored the rest of the

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class engaged in often unrelated work. The teachers we observed used ICT to provide additional learning opportunities for children, for example, through putting pictorial information on an interactive whiteboard for them to discuss and annotate and placing material on the school intranet for them to access individually and in groups. In a few schools pupils: exercised choice and decision making in their learning, such as through the use of digital cameras and PowerPoint presentations; used the school intranet and the internet for independent learning within the school day; and used computers to pursue school-initiated interests at home and in after-school clubs and shared these with peers in class the next day. Teachers generally agreed that when pupils were able to use ICT to do their work it promoted greater engagement and better concentration from most children, especially those with learning and/or behavioural difficulties, or those who were difficult to motivate, such as Year 6 children after SATs.

The recent rapid expansion in the numbers and responsibilities of teaching assistants (TAs), particularly in response to the government's workforce remodelling agenda, means that it is now commonplace for primary teachers to share their classrooms for all or part of each day with one or more TAs. This increased classroom support has also encouraged changes in classroom practice. While the nature of TAs' work with individuals and groups of children is well documented (e.g. Smith et al, 2004) our lesson observations revealed TAs contributing to the quality of whole class interaction in a variety of ways that were both spontaneous and planned in advance with the teacher. For example, TAs created opportunities for the pupils that they were supporting to contribute to whole class discussions, initiated debates on lesson content with the teacher into which the children were drawn and brought resources into lessons to generate pupil interest. Teachers perceived this kind of support that TAs gave as crucial to their effective classroom management and teaching and very valuable for promoting pupils' self esteem, motivation and achievement.

Conclusion

High stakes testing, which holds schools and teachers accountable for pupil attainment in literacy and numeracy, has narrowed the curriculum, diminished opportunities for teachers to develop the whole child, caused considerable stress for many children and changed the basis of teacher-pupil relationships. Teaching in ways that are not in the 'best interests' of children and contrary to their professional judgement in order to boost test results has compromised primary teacher professionalism.

The strategies have been widely criticised by academic educationalists for their centralised prescription of pedagogy, which they see as resulting in the further de-professionalisation and deskilling of teachers. Critics have argued that such prescription on pedagogy will result in teachers becoming 'little more than 'operatives' whose professional expertise is reduced to a command of the technical aspects of teaching and classroom management necessary to the

pursuance of state-sanctioned standards' and that 'the literacy and numeracy hours and the exemplar schemes of work could be seen as the pedagogical equivalent of painting by numbers' (Davies & Edwards, 2001, p. 100). However, far from acting as 'operatives', our research suggests that teachers responded to the imposition of the strategies in the reflexive manner of a professional rather than that of a technician. They sought to implement the strategies as intended, then evaluated them in relation to their impact on pupils, adapted and/or rejected unsatisfactory elements and applied key lessons from them to their teaching across the whole curriculum (Webb & Vulliamy, 2006). It is a testament to teachers' commitment to children that they were prepared to change often deeply held beliefs in order to adapt practices promoted by the strategies that they considered would improve pupils' learning.

Generally teachers argued that the enhanced skills that they were gaining through the strategies and through other innovations, such as ICT, were making them more professional rather than less so. Interestingly, Silcock (2002) in his survey of members of the Association for the Study of Primary Education (ASPE) into the effects of legislated changes on teacher professionalism provides insights into the differing perspectives of educationalists. He found that 'central prescription of literacy and numeracy' was the item with the most conflicting responses as between academics in higher education, who were overwhelmingly negative, and practitioners (teachers and LA advisers), who were very positive. As in our research, he also found that practitioners' perspectives on professionalism were strongly filtered through core values of putting the child first. This was by contrast with the academics from higher education in his sample who typically explained their views 'by reference to abstract principle (the nature of teaching and professionalism, historical trends etc.)' where 'legislation is judged in a somewhat sceptical manner, with legislators blamed for a decline in teacher professionalism' (p. 144).

As one teacher in our research put it: 'I have to be far more professional [now] … however I don't feel that I am recognised and treated as a professional'. This, as Michael Barber admits, is a direct consequence of the fact that 'in order to promote radical change the government has to spell out a compelling critique of the present but, in doing so, too often portrays schools and teachers negatively' (2001, p. 37). The government's approach to change severely damaged morale in primary schools and almost totally undermined teacher confidence. However, we found signs of that confidence returning because teachers were secure in the teaching methods adopted from the strategies and felt able once again to incorporate some spontaneity and creativity into their teaching for 'the best interests of the children'. Nevertheless for creativity, experimentation and innovation by teachers to flourish, there will need to be a fundamental change in the educational climate. This can only be brought about if the government dispenses with the testing regime responsible for the current all-pervasive and stifling culture of performativity, changes the accountability mechanisms so that teachers are first and foremost accountable for the all-round development of the children at the heart of their

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professionalism and demonstrates its acceptance of evidence from teachers' experience on ways forward to improve pupil learning.

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