
Reconciling the Irreconcilable: coping with contradictory agendas

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ABSTRACT This article discusses some of the Government's current agendas for schools that appear to be in direct conflict with each other. For example, the positive effects of *Every Child Matters*, personalised learning, inclusion and collaboration are seen as complementary, but their implementation is viewed as being held back by the current regime of 'tables, targets and tests'. As these different directions cannot be reconciled, the suggested solution is for schools to forge ahead with the agendas that will benefit all pupils, while making it clear to government that the current testing regime and all that it entails is counterproductive and should be abandoned without delay.

Introduction

This year's round of teacher union conferences produced the usual concerns about workload overload and the debilitating effects of trying to manage the unmanageable. While this might be viewed as an annual ritual, a note of desperation could be heard creeping in to this year's debates, giving fresh impetus to a well aired topic. Teacher unions may fight amongst themselves over many issues, but they are united over the way that the growing expectations of what schools will accomplish threatens to overwhelm the profession.

This sense of despair is caused in part by the Government's hyperactivity, as it appears to be meeting some internal target to produce a never ending stream of ideas, and partly by the fact that some initiatives appear to be in direct conflict with others that are already in place. Many years ago, Estelle Morris, the former secretary of state for education, apologised for not given teachers a route map, so that they could understand how the pieces of the jigsaw fitted together. Many of us felt then, that it was not so much a question of not being given a map, but that there might not be one. Today, it seems even more apparent that no 'big picture' exists, but that schools are being pulled in several

directions at once. This causes quite unnecessary strains on top of a unreasonably heavy workload.

Where the Conflict Lies

Amongst the plethora of ideas that are being promulgated, I want to concentrate, first of all, on four aspects of current policy that seem to have widespread support and which can be seen as complementing each other. These are:

- Every Child Matters
- Personalised learning
- Inclusion
- Collaboration.

I want to consider each of these in turn as positive moves forward that the majority of schools are happy to support. This is in direct contrast to the current regime of 'tables, targets and tests', which is not only having a very negative effect on pupils and staff, but is actually putting a brake on schools' ability to implement these four important aspects of government policy, and the contribution that each might make to raising standards.

Every Child Matters

The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, which was outlined in the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and followed through in the Children Act of 2004, is helping to ensure that services work closely together, in order to provide more effectively for children and families, who are seen as being at the heart of the process. The five outcomes of ECM, designed by young people themselves, have been seen as well chosen and highly relevant for all children and young people. They are rapidly becoming ingrained in the consciousness of all those who work with children, whether in education, health or social care. The outcomes which mattered most to children were:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a positive contribution
- Achieving economic well-being.

The move to combine services at local level, with local education authorities becoming subsumed within local authority services for children and families, is well underway. Although it will take many years to achieve a truly integrated service, as established structures disappear, professionals from different backgrounds and training are climbing out of their separate silos and gaining a clearer understanding of each other's work and contribution. Schools, as the only one of the three main services to be involved with all children and families,

and who see pupils on a daily basis, are central to this move towards closer interagency working. As well as establishing new ways of working, the outcomes of ECM can only be achieved if learning becomes more individualised and education is increasingly focused on the needs, interests and abilities of each child and young person.

Personalised Learning

Personalised learning is hardly a new concept, but it was given fresh impetus by David Miliband, the former Minister for School Standards when he spoke at a North of England Conference, and it has been picked up since as a main thrust of Government policy. Miliband described personalised learning as:

shaping teaching around the different ways youngsters learn; it means taking the care to nurture the unique talents of every pupil.

If we are to talk about every child being of equal importance, then learning must be tailored to individual needs, rather than planning for, and thinking solely in terms of, cohorts, classes and groups. While the national strategies are generally becoming less restrictive, the latest diktat about the teaching of reading, in the wake of Jim Rose's report *Independent Review of the Teaching of Reading* (DfES, 2006), as outlined in the *Draft Framework for Teaching Literacy* (DfES, 2006), harks back to a belief that children can all be taught in a similar way. Phonics, whether synthetic or otherwise, may not be the right method for those with a communication disorder, the hearing impaired, those who are strongly visual but who have weak auditory skills, and those who do not have the maturity to understand grapheme/phoneme relationships or to apply that knowledge in order to blend sounds into words. In any case, we no longer need to produce cohorts of clones reciting information dictated by the teacher, but, as Miliband said, to respond to the different ways pupils learn. This will help to develop young people who can be flexible, creative, innovative and adaptable, so that they can function in a world beyond school, where the nature of work is rapidly changing. E-learning is one of the ways in which a more individualised approach can support the learning of pupils across the ability range, combined with a curriculum which is broad enough to offer genuine choice to students and give them a greater involvement in their own learning.

Inclusion

If every child matters, then, clearly, every child must be included and there is a growing consensus, in the wake of the Government's SEN Strategy *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004), that it is time to move away from a dogmatic stance which dictates that all pupils should be in mainstream schools, and look at placing pupils in the context where they will be most fully included. This approach recognises that it is not just a question of whether *schools* are able

to cope with a particular child, but whether that *child* can cope with a mainstream environment.

The majority of schools have gone to enormous lengths to include pupils with an increasingly complex range of needs, but the greater the needs of pupils with SEN, the more we should be prepared to adapt the environment to them rather than expecting them to fit in with what is provided for the majority. For instance, pupils on the autistic spectrum, who think and learn differently, and who may lash out in fear against a world they struggle to understand; the sensorily impaired who may need to learn Braille to become literate, or sign language to give them the words with which to think; and those whose emotional disturbance or disturbed behaviour inhibit their ability to learn and who may be part of the frightening figure of one in 10 said to have mental health problems. Inclusion should not mean shoehorning children into an inappropriate environment, but deciding the support and setting that will enable every child to feel included in the life of his or her school.

The move to giving special schools a dual role, as suggested in the SEN Strategy, rather than talking about abolishing them, is a genuine step forward. This would see such schools, as many have for some time, work closely with mainstream colleagues in order to share responsibility for pupils with SEN. This is one of many ways in which schools are increasingly being encouraged to collaborate.

Collaboration

On many fronts, the emphasis on schools competing with each other as a way of driving up standards is giving way to a shift towards greater collaboration. This suits the majority of those working in schools, who are altruistic enough to want to improve standards of education for all pupils, rather than striving to succeed at each other's expense. Increasingly, schools are working with each other in a range of partnerships, clusters and other groupings, including 'hard' and 'soft' federations. Secondary schools, in particular, are likely to belong to a number of different partnerships. This trend will gather momentum as schools collaborate to offer new opportunities to people in the locality, as part of becoming 'extended schools', which are described in the prospectus about them as:

... providing a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community. (DfES, 2005)

Changes to the 14-19 curriculum, as outlined in the White Paper, *14-19 Education and Skills*, and carried through in the Education and Inspections Bill, will result in further collaboration as schools seek ways of offering greater scope for pupils to take different routes, including the new specialised diplomas, a variety of apprenticeships and a mix of school and work-based learning. Although the Government's refusal to implement the proposals of the

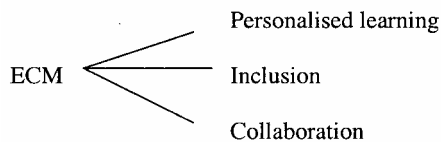
Tomlinson Committee was a severe disappointment to the majority of those in education and there is a danger that the new diplomas will not give equal weight to the different routes, at least students will be offered a far greater range of opportunities, with the hope that more will find courses that suit their abilities and interests, and remain motivated to stay longer in education. Offering this much broader curriculum can only be achieved by schools, colleges and businesses working together and taking shared responsibility for students within a locality.

Similarly, if, as a result of the *Education and Inspections Bill*, currently steering a controversial course through parliament, the move to establish Trust Schools takes off, this again will see schools linking together rather than maintaining completely separate identities.

Interconnecting Issues

Every Child Matters, then, can be seen as an overarching policy, whose implementation can be supported by tailoring learning to the needs of the child, supporting pupils with SEN in ways that will include them in the life of their school community, and relies on schools collaborating to take joint responsibility for improving the educational chances of every child.

So far, then, there is a sense of cohesion, in which it is possible to view the ECM agenda as the starting point from which personalised learning, inclusion and collaboration could be said to flow:



This programme on its own, would provide enough for schools to get their teeth into and holds out the promise of increased choice for pupils, better support for families, and schools taking collective responsibility for all the students in the area. However, this sense of cohesion is lost when set against the Government's 'targets, tables and tests' agenda, which has blighted the lives of children and their teachers for far too long.

Tables, Targets and Tests

If we return to the ECM outcomes and consider each one in the light of the testing regime, we might ask the following questions, in order to clarify the negative effects of the whole panoply of key stage tests, exams, and the targets and 'league tables' that determine so much of what goes on in schools:

1. Is it *healthy* to hothouse all pupils into passing tests and exams for which they may not be ready or cut out?

2. Does it help to make children *feel safe* in schools, when they are under pressure to reach certain levels they know they cannot reach however hard they try?
3. Does it help them to *enjoy* school when the so-called 'Achievement and Attainment Tables' (commonly known as 'league tables') recognise the attainment of *some* rather than the achievements of *all* and when the broader curriculum that gives them a better chance of *achieving* gets crowded out by an emphasis on getting children through tests?
4. Does it enable them to feel they are making a *positive contribution* to their school when, in terms of a narrow range of results, they are branded sub-standard?
5. Does it help them to become *economically independent* when academic worth is rated above all other abilities, including the ability to form relationships, to show qualities of leadership, to work as part of a team, to master practical, sporting or artistic skills, all of which may help them in the workplace?

It is hard to see how anyone can believe that the current testing regime and all that goes with it is compatible with the ECM agenda, which emphasises treating people as individuals, giving them an educational experience they will enjoy, (and happier children, as we know, are more likely to learn), helping them to feel their contribution is valued, and that the education they receive will give them the start they need to play a full part in society as an economically independent adult.

When it comes to personalised learning, the whole regime of tables, targets and tests becomes an even greater absurdity. There is absolutely nothing personalised about expecting pupils to reach set levels at certain ages, when any parent or teacher (but apparently not minister) can tell you that no two children are alike, that they develop at different rates and if we are to meet their individual needs, we must stop pretending they are all the same. If the whole of the overblown, pernicious testing regime, and everything that flows from it, were halted tomorrow, it would not be a day too soon.

Thirdly, we come to inclusion. At present, tests and the allied league tables penalise schools for accepting pupils with SEN. Even those that have recognised specialist provision, such as units or classes for particular kinds of needs, are dragged down the tables as a result. What sort of encouragement is this for schools to admit the pupils with SEN who can benefit from the provision they can make? And what do the tests do to the self-esteem of the children themselves, where the notion of 'average' levels over time came to mean 'expected' levels, making those who fall below feel like failures?

Finally, the current testing regime is used for the iniquitous 'league tables,' which force schools into competition with each other. This will become increasingly ludicrous over time, as schools are encouraged to collaborate, dual roll placements are used to give pupils with SEN the best of both worlds, and

schools combine to provide the range of courses identified by the new 14-19 curriculum. More and more, schools will not operate as single entities but in a variety of partnerships. It should be clear to all, that combining the best that schools can offer between them is a surer way of raising standards than encouraging some schools to succeed while others go to the wall.

Conclusions

Given that it is impossible to implement ideas that are diametrically opposed to each other, this may be the time to focus on what we feel is right for the children and young people we teach and to go all out to win the argument over the current pressures that stand in the way.

There is a new Secretary of State for Education and Skills, who has a chance to be his own person, to say that the overblown testing regime has run its course and we need to move on, to argue that the enormous amount of money squandered on the whole panoply of key stage tests and the compilation of league tables would be better spent on personalising learning. At a stroke, this would remove the most unproductive element of teacher workload, redirect the money into more profitable channels and give back to teachers the ability to teach creatively, so that they can develop creativity, flexibility and a love of learning in others. What an opportunity for a new Secretary of State to make his mark!

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