
The Simple View of Education or Education Policy for Dummies

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ABSTRACT In November 2009 the current Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, gave a speech at the Centre for Policy Studies in which he set out the Conservative Party's priorities for education. This article explores some of the proposals in his speech, with particular references to initial teacher education and his attraction to Nordic and US models, and suggests that he has a limited grasp of his subject and the potential cost of his proposals.

We have had the simple view of reading from Sir Jim Rose; now we are presented with the simpleton's view of teaching from Michael Gove. In a speech in November 2009 Gove talked about the importance of 'raising the prestige, esteem and professionalism of teaching'. To support his argument, he cited examples from other countries, expressing his particular admiration for the Scandinavian countries. I share some of this admiration but for very different reasons.

Gove's particular enthusiasm for the Scandinavian countries hinges on the fairly high level of private sector involvement in the provision of education. This is particularly true in the early education and care sector. What he omits to mention in his speech is that the state uses the high level of financial support given to the private sector as a lever for regulation. This is unlike the financial free-for-all that the Tories would wish to see here, as is evidenced by their proposal that under a Conservative government, academies will be free to make a profit. In the Scandinavian countries state funding is used as a tool to ensure that the private sector employs teachers (and other practitioners) with the same level of qualifications as those working in the state sector. They are subject to the same degree of regulation in other areas too. This presents a very different picture from the situation in the United Kingdom (UK) where qualification levels vary greatly between the sectors.

All this comes at a cost though. In Finland, like other Scandinavian countries, levels of taxation are higher than in the UK (Tarr, 2007) and the

State plays a bigger role in the provision of services than it does in the UK, even under New Labour. What Gove proposes simply cannot be achieved without replicating this degree of state funding, regulation and involvement. It will not save money either. All the Scandinavian countries spend a higher proportion of GDP on primary and secondary education and almost four times as much on early education and care as the UK (OECD 2000, 2006).

If we want to know what the future holds for the maintained primary and secondary schools sector under the Conservatives we need look no further than the current situation in the early years sector. Under New Labour there has been a massive expansion in the private sector and successful lobbying has resulted in the announcement in 2007 of the Early Years Single Funding Formula. This proposal requires local authorities to shift funding from the maintained nursery schools and classes staffed by qualified teachers to the private and voluntary sector where qualification levels and rates of pay are lower. The net result of this will be the closure of local authority provision in order that the private sector can make a profit. There is no reason to believe that under the Conservatives' proposals, local authority maintained schools will fare differently.

Gove goes on to talk about initial teacher education and states that only the best qualified teachers will do. I have no argument with that, but he goes on to say that a Conservative government will not fund any Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students with less than a lower second class honours degree. He conveniently ignores the fact that it is only in exceptional circumstances (usually related to shortage subjects), that universities accept students with a degree below this level. He talks about teaching being a high-status, well-respected profession in Finland and Singapore, but doesn't explore why that isn't the case here. In Finland, teachers have high levels of professional autonomy and are trusted by the Government (Tarr, 2007) to do the job for which they were educated. They are not heavily policed like they are in the UK and USA, nor are they subject to 'myth making' (Alexander, 2010), routinely vilified by the media or subjected to negative comments about teacher quality by politicians in all parties who still believe the unsubstantiated accusations made by Chris Woodhead about teacher quality. Teachers in Finland and elsewhere in Europe have an education that is deeply rooted in pedagogy (Alexander, 2010). They understand how children learn and develop and know that it is a complex process that can't be reduced to quick fixes and formulaic strategies so loved by the UK Government or the 'recipe like' programmes favoured in the USA.

Requiring all teachers to have a Master's level qualification is yet another quick fix, identified by New Labour and now adopted by the Conservatives, but it will take more than raising the qualification bar to Master's level to raise the status of teachers in the UK. So why is there such a difference in Finland, where MA is the most common level of qualification? A comparative study carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 2003 highlighted the high levels of autonomy and self-regulation experienced by Finnish teachers. In Finland, the teaching union OAJ contributes to policy development and has a

major say in the curriculum – quite a contrast with the situation in England and what the teaching unions can expect under the Conservatives. Essentially teachers in Finland are trusted and respected by the Government; Gove says he wants to do the same but the lessons from history, coupled with pronouncements from the opposition front bench, suggest that is unlikely to occur. The Conservatives remain committed to a rigid curriculum model and publication of league tables. Unlike Finland, where teacher education places a high level of importance on pedagogy and knowledge of how children learn, as well as relevant subject knowledge, the Conservatives favour the current model where teaching is a process whereby highly qualified teachers package up and deliver required bodies of knowledge in the classroom. Master's degrees can make a difference, but in Finland they do so only because they are relevant to the needs of the teachers and relate to either subject specialisms or the age-specific pedagogy so important for effective teaching. Just having a Master's degree does not automatically deliver better teachers; pupils, teaching and learning are all much more complex than that! More important in my view is the fact that in Finland they do not begin formal teaching until the age of 7 (like almost all the other European nations that outperform the UK post-16). This lesson has been learned by the Welsh Assembly, but sadly not by anyone responsible for shaping the future of the English education system.

Gove also seeks answers from the USA from where many of the 'quick fix' initiatives so loved by New Labour have originated. While many of the initiatives he reports have produced positive outcomes, these have not always been sustained and often end as the focus shifts, funding ceases and a new panacea emerges phoenix-like from the ashes. Blame for the failings of the English system is laid at the door of bureaucrats and Gove holds them responsible for the ills of the English education system. However, lest anyone forgets, it was Conservative governments that established the unaccountable quangos, especially Ofsted, the Training and Development Agency (TDA) and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), that they now blame. If Michael Gove were serious in his intent to improve the quality of experience and outcomes within the English schools system he could have taken the time to read the Final Report of the Cambridge Primary Review and consider its recommendations with an open mind. Instead, like his counterparts in the other political parties, he chose to rely on the distorted media summaries of the Report. Gove is quick to offer solutions but all he really offers is an illusion that he understands his brief. Unfortunately, just like candy floss, Gove's speech is full of dodgy content, spin and lacks real substance.

References

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