
Education Policy and Practice 'under' New Labour: an epistolary critique

COLIN RICHARDS

ABSTRACT: Since the election of 1997 New Labour's education policy has been subject to variety of forms of critique – in this journal and others. One of the sources for such critique has been a barrage of letters unleashed for over a decade by Colin Richards in the *Times Educational Supplement*. Here are reproduced a self-edited selection of his published and unpublished letters, many of them informed by his belief that a sardonic sense of humour is perhaps the most potent weapon against an insensitive and professionally uninformed officialdom.

On Professionalism

Like many of your readers I am genuinely puzzled and anxious about the effects of New Labour's policies on primary education. Are we experiencing the re-professionalisation of primary teachers through the increased flexibility given schools over the non-core subjects of the national curriculum, the valuably detailed teaching approaches of the national numeracy and literacy projects, the Teacher Training Agency's new demanding standards including the mandatory national professional qualification for headteachers, and the long-awaited setting up of a General Teaching Council? Or are we witnessing the de-professionalisation of primary teachers through the imposition of a neo-elementary curriculum, denial of autonomy and flexibility in respect of teaching methodology in number, reading and writing, a monolithic state-controlled programme of so-called 'professional' development; a headship qualification which does not involve participants in scrutinising education policy, and the absence of any real power in an advisory-only GTC?

I don't know but I fear the latter.
(January 1998)

On Trust

Your correspondent's letter about the contempt shown for teacher assessment data is eloquent testimony to professional concern at the Government's lack of trust. For this Government and its advisers the measurable and testable are the only expression of educational standards and quality. How can a 'world-class education system' be created without trusting teachers' judgments.

(October 1999)

There has recently been an important ministerial announcement. 'We trust our teachers to judge how well pupils are learning. Our teachers are well placed to make those crucial judgments. I do not propose to take those important professional responsibilities away from teachers by imposing a new system of regular, externally marked, fixed-point written tests.'

Should we breathe a huge sigh of relief? Not if we are working in England. That pronouncement was made in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

(March 2001)

As the newly-appointed and self-styled director of the National Trust Strategy (to replace the recently announced Primary National Strategy) I would like to congratulate you all on your impressive achievements in raising standards – at least as 'measured' by tests. Our new National Trust Strategy has very different emphases from the recently announced Primary National Strategy. It might almost be called a national non-strategy. It is based on an approach pioneered in the United States 30 years ago in Vietnam. It is a policy of benign neglect. Its fundamental assumption is that primary teachers act in the best interests of children and that they know what they need to further those interests. It assumes, too, that agencies are there to support, not to replace, the professional judgments of those in schools.

But does it have a future under New Labour?

(January 2003)

Ted Wragg's comment that 'without teachers society would slide back into primitive squalor' reminds me of an older, more telling quotation from George Tomlinson, minister of education in the Attlee government and a great admirer, and truster, of teachers. In 1947 he said: 'At a pinch you could do without local education authorities. At a pinch you could do without the civil service. You could certainly do without the minister. But without teachers the country would degenerate into barbarism in the space of two

generations.' George, who had only a part-time elementary education, is famous for admitting that the 'minister knows nowt about curriculum'. Would that current ministers were so modest! (February 2006)

On Ofsted

In view of widespread misgivings about the Office for Standards in Education inspection process and the new Government's proposals for closing failing institutions and making a fresh start with new senior staff on the same site, I am tempted to send the following report to Ofsted (copy to the head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, Department for Education and Employment). It follows the required form of wording for institutions judged to be in need of special measures:

As a registered inspector, I have consulted the criteria listed in Annex 1 of the 1996 Ofsted Framework for Inspection. I am of the opinion that special measures are required in relation to Ofsted because it is failing (or likely to fail) to give the Secretary of State an acceptable standard of advice and some primary schools an acceptable standard of inspection. In accordance with Section 206(2) of the Education Act 1993, I am sending this report to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools and will await his judgement whether he agrees or not that his own organisation requires special measures. Ofsted is in need of special measures for the following reasons:

- * low standards of inspection in a significant minority of primary school inspections;
- * a high level of exclusions (self-imposed or enforced) of senior professional staff;
- * significant levels of harassment;
- * inspection teams have inappropriate expectations of many primary schools and are not adequately qualified or experienced in the primary phase;
- * poor provision for inspectors' and schools' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development;
- * the confrontational relationships between the chief inspector, his staff and the teaching profession;
- * a great loss of confidence in the chief inspector by Ofsted staff, teachers, governors and parents;
- * demoralisation and disenchantment among staff and teachers;
- * poor senior management and inefficient use made of resources, including finance;
- * poor value for money provided on too many primary inspections.

In the spirit of the new Government's principles, I recommend that Ofsted be closed down and replaced by a truly educational association. This could be based in Alexandra House and termed 'Her Majesty's Inspectorate'.
(June 1997)

The issue of 'Who inspects the inspectors?' has long intrigued me. Given the parlous state of Ofsted it seems clear that the organisation needs inspecting by a combined team from the RSPCA, the Nuclear Inspectorate, Amnesty International and Age Concern.
(May 2004)

Much is made currently of schools' need to engage in self-evaluation as part of 'intelligent accountability'. Ofsted has provided a succession of self-evaluation forms. However, none to my knowledge remotely compares in educational value to the following checklist devised more than 50 years ago by Teddy O'Neill, head teacher of Prestolee elementary school, Lancashire.

Asked what a school should be, he replied:

- * a place for lectures and teaching
- * a workshop for young and old – of both sexes
- * a den of hobbies and indoor games
- * a studio for drawing, painting and plastics
- * a music studio
- * a hall for song and dance
- * an educational shop window
- * a reference library
- * a picture gallery
- * a museum
- * a reading room
- * a book stall for magazines and newspapers
- * a club
- * a refreshment bar
- * an orchard
- * an aquarium
- * a vivarium
- * a home for pets
- * a playing field
- * a gymnasium
- * a bathing place
- * a fair garden
- * a kitchen
- * a dining place
- * a laundry

* a first-aid post

* cleansing department

Isn't that better than any Ofsted school self-evaluation form ?
(September 2004)

The chief inspector's annual report is a reasonably balanced document that is generally positive. Predictably, the media have seized on her remarks that 'the challenge of dealing with some persistent weaknesses remains. Too many schools are inadequate.' Equally predictably, she has allowed herself to be dominated by the negative in interviews. As a partial explanation for inadequate schools, the report says 'the new inspection arrangements have raised the bar'. Quite right, too. As schools improve, more should be expected of them. But 'raising the bar' needs also to apply to Ofsted. Where is the evidence that Ofsted has raised the expectations of its inspectors or improved its new-style inspections on which its credibility ultimately rests?

The report reflects the imposition of standardised inspection on non-standardised schools. Its Mao-style template cannot cope with the growth points in practice or unusual, inspiring or fascinating developments in the system. The report (and the regime it reflects) is satisfactory with some poor, and a few good, features. Too many inspections are 'inadequate'.
(December 2006)

Who says that computers lack intelligence? My spell check has just replaced 'Ofsted' by 'Ousted'.
(Unpublished, March 2008)

Christine Gilbert and her advisers have trumpeted their utterly unsurprising finding of a link between boring lessons and pupil disaffection. Tim Brighouse has similarly pointed out a link between Ofsted inspection and boring, 'playing safe' lessons. It doesn't take a genius to announce to a startled world that there is therefore a link between Ofsted inspection and pupil disaffection. Publicity-conscious and self-righteous as ever, Ofsted has announced a 'crackdown' on boring lessons. If my logic is correct, it also needs to announce a 'crackdown' on its own practices.
(January 2009)

No-notice inspections are good in theory but would be disastrous in practice given the climate of distrust between Ofsted and schools. But if no-notice inspections are to be undertaken I suggest (with my tongue only partly in cheek) that the same principle should apply to inspectors as to schools. Under my proposed regime inspectors

would only get notice of the school to be inspected by a text message very early on the day of the inspection. With no prior test data to inform them they would have to visit the school to inspect what they found on the basis of what they actually saw in classrooms, not on the basis of pre-conceived ideas, or data analysis or lengthy discussions in the head's office. Both inspectors and schools might be surprised, even gratified, by the findings and a degree of trust might be restored to the inspection process.
(March 2009)

In introducing the 2008-9 annual report at her press conference HMCI Christine Gilbert commented 'There is too much that is mediocre and persistently so'. That clinical diagnosis may or may not be true of schools and children's services but it is certainly true of too many inspections. 'Physician, heal thyself' is the obvious response.
(November 2009)

Though as usual taking the moral high ground and refusing to acknowledge any deficiencies on Ofsted's part Christine Gilbert is correct to point out that 'Ofsted inspections have never stood still'. The newly introduced framework is no exception to that rule. The switch to this more punitive, exam-fixated regime certainly constitutes movement – unfortunately, in the wrong direction.
(January 2010)

We have to give a half-welcome to Christine Gilbert's assertion that 'With two full days of inspection there is more time now spent observing and discussing the quality of teaching and learning than under the previous framework', so going 'a long way towards achieving optimum balance'. But why half-welcome? 'More time' from a low base of classroom observation may still not give sufficient time for the considered observation of practice and dialogue with teachers necessary to get beneath the skin of teaching and learning, especially in such a short period as two days. Also, the fact that 'more time' is now being spent on helping achieve 'that optimum balance' means that under the previous framework (which on her own admission has taken her three years to change) the teaching and learning in many hundreds of schools did not receive sufficient attention. Why no explicit apology to those schools who suffered from an inadequate appraisal of their core activities? Sorry appears to be the hardest word of all in Ofsted's lexicon.
(Unpublished, February 2010)

Why, on her own admission, has it taken Christine Gilbert all of three years to move the inspection system she inherited in 2006 away from undue reliance on data?
(Unpublished. February 2010)

On Ofsted's Second Chief Inspector

How hypocritical of the Chief Inspector to lecture teachers not to listen to the views of those outside the classroom?
(June 1999)

As a former English teacher the chief inspector might well expect a short but apt quotation from Shakespeare to mark his departure from Ofsted. There is one obvious choice: 'For this relief, much thanks.'
(Act 1 Scene 1 Hamlet)
(November 2000)

The most telling and eloquent response to Chris Woodhead's tirade is silence.
(May 2009)

Like so many of readers I find myself agreeing with virtually every word of Chris Woodhead about Ofsted's deficiencies. How will we ever be able to forgive ourselves?
(Unpublished, February 2010)

On Primary Reviews

In line with his penchant for league tables – inherited from his predecessor – David Blunkett has unofficially reorganised the primary curriculum into a 'premier division' consisting only of English and mathematics and a reconstituted 'first division' of science, information technology and religious education. All other subjects, including the arts, have been relegated into the lowest divisions, where children's full entitlement to the curriculum need not apply – unless schools and their governing bodies decide otherwise.

However, there is more to soccer than the Premier Division; there is more to living than schooling; there is more to schooling than the curriculum; and there is more to the curriculum than reading, writing and number.
(June 1998)

Older readers may recall a TV series in which an aged disc jockey tried to fulfil viewers' wishes. New Labour has also had its share of wish fulfilment. It wished to ensure its alleged success in boosting standards in primaries was not compromised by claims that it had unduly influenced the interpretation of test results. Years later, it wished to be seen to be doing something to revive flagging reading results by pandering to a lobby of synthetic phonics zealots. In both cases it called on Jim Rose, its primary fixer, to provide reassurance. It is now repeating the process in commissioning him to review the primary curriculum to allow yet more time to be spent on literacy and numeracy, thus reassuring a sceptical public and profession that the Government is still committed to raising primary standards. No doubt 'Jim'll fix it', but for how long and with what effect on a curriculum which needs to be designed for the 21st, not late 19th century?

(January 2008)

When primary teachers have found time over Christmas to look at Jim Rose's interim report they will have realised that he's missed a great opportunity to challenge the disproportionate predominance of literacy and numeracy and has run away from addressing many of the most important issues, especially the relationship between national testing, the content of the curriculum and individual school accountability.

And in those memorable words of Janet and Jim:

'Look, Jim, look.'

'Fix, Jim, fix.'

'Fluff, Jim, fluff.'

'Run, Jim, run.'

(January 2009)

The government has scored a spectacular own goal with its publication of the so-called 'independent' review of the primary curriculum and the report of the so-called 'expert' group on assessment. The review led by Jim Rose (which is ingenuously silent about the implications of testing) and the assessment report (which intensifies rather than alleviates the malign effects of testing) will reinforce professional perceptions that 'experts' have been brought in yet again to give the Government what it wants, not what it needs.

(May 2009)

Politicians never cease to surprise. As reported, at the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review Barry Sheerman MP described our report as 'a treasure trove for the future' but also admitted that he

hadn't had a chance to read it! So is it a 'treasure trove' or 'outdated' currency or even 'Pandora's box'? There is no substitute for reading the real thing – and you don't need a crash course in synthetic phonics to do just that.
(October 2009)

A major review of English primary education has recently been published – one which argues for a framework for accountability more comprehensive and tougher than the current test-fixated one. The Prime Minister demands clear accountability through testing at the end of primary school, but makes no mention of the arguments of the Cambridge Review. There seems to be a deliberate policy, not so much of disinformation about the review (though there has been some of that), but of malign neglect by the Government. Senior civil servants clearly hope the review will go away. It won't.
(November 2009)

On Testing

While reflecting on the effects of the tyranny of testing. I came across this in the National Union of Teachers' journal *The Schoolmaster* of May 29, 1953:

'A junior school teacher gives harrowing details of the strain and anxiety felt by her children during the weeks before the 11-plus examination. She reports that ... the tension mounted. Children evaded PT, invented illnesses, showed signs of nervous instability, had disturbed nights and bad dreams. Worried parents sent notes or came secretly to talk about their children's health.'

Fifty years on, plus ca change ...?
(June 2001)

One of your correspondents asks which are we supposed to trust – the tests showing rising standards or those showing no change? The sensible answer is to trust neither. Neither can provide more than a very limited view of something as complex and multi-faceted as standards. Trust in tests should be replaced by professional scepticism.
(July 2002)

We are at the height of the testing and examination season where national tests are defended by a Department for Education and Skills spokesman as 'the most reliable, objective and consistent measure of what young people have achieved' It is important to acknowledge

that government officials haven't always taken such a blinkered view. In 1943 they wrote:

'Instead of the schools performing their proper and highly important function of fostering the potentialities of children at an age when their minds are nimble and perceptive, their curiosity strong, their imagination fertile and their spirits high, the curriculum is too often cramped and distorted by over-emphasis on examination subjects and on ways and means of defeating the examiners. The blame for this rests not with teachers but with the system.'

This quotation came from a publication called *Educational Reconstruction*. Sixty years later we could embark on much needed educational reconstruction using this as a basis.

(May 2006)

At a time of the year when examination and national test results are released and revised school profiles are published, we need to ask questions about the value of 'learning to the test or the exam' and about the uses to which results are being put, whether by a government showing off its achievements or by schools producing statements for their school profiles. In his essay on schoolmasters' learning, published in 1580, Michel de Montaigne commented that 'their pupils and their little charges are not nourished and fed by what they learn; the learning is passed from hand to hand with only one end in view: to show it off, to put into accounts as though it were merely counters, useful for totting up and producing statements, but having no other use or currency'. How far have things changed since 1580?

(September 2006)

The large majority of primary teachers who want to scrap national tests for seven year olds and for eleven year olds are absolutely right to deplore the tyranny of testing they have to endure. Tests for the younger pupils need to be abolished forthwith; testing at eleven in England ought to be replaced by testing along the Scottish model. But of course abolition won't happen – not while this version of New Labour is in power.

Perverse as it may seem I partly blame those same primary teachers for the situation they so vehemently criticise! Through their efforts (aided, I suspect, by subtle changes in testing requirements and marking) they have provided New Labour with its single greatest, 'measurable', educational achievement – the progressive raising of test scores.

The only way for this testing madness to end is for primary teachers to either boycott the tests or to cease preparing for them in such a thorough, time-consuming way. Paradoxically, New Labour may be

most likely to end its testing obsession when results fail to improve or even go down. It is most unlikely to do so while results continue to rise.

(Unpublished December 2006)

I have long been sceptical about the findings of international tests. They are important, not for the spurious league table positions they generate, but for the questions they raise. A recent Unicef report makes for unhappy reading. There must be very many factors contributing to British children's unhappiness and dissatisfaction but a major one must be the damage done by an assessment system which regularly and remorselessly compares them one with another and finds so many lacking. No wonder an eleven-year old, when asked about her likely Key Stage 2 test results, said 'I'll be a nothing'. Too many others – confirmed 'nothings' or 'nothings' in the making – have their self-esteem damaged on a systematic basis.

(Unpublished, December 2006)

Some years ago on hearing that his secondary school was to be renovated, a disillusioned pupil sardonically remarked 'But it would still be a bloody school'. If eleven-year-olds were allowed to swear (which they aren't) and if teachers were to be consulted (which they aren't) they might well respond similarly to the government's renovated proposals for testing.

(May 2008)

David Reynolds, one of the many advocates of educational measurement, is absolutely right to assert that 'we only measure academic outcomes. We don't measure the things that matter'. However, like so many of his ilk, he is absolutely wrong in failing to recognise that the things that matter cannot ever be measured.

(July 2008)

Reflecting on the marking fiasco and the Government's insistence on publishing dubious national figures, I don't know which is more disturbing: the fact that standards of marking have deteriorated or Ken Boston's claim that standards have been maintained. On close reflection, I'm much more disturbed by the latter. Just think about it.

(August 2008)

The new English primary curriculum to be introduced from 2011 offers us a clear way to the top of the international league tables. Under what that curriculum designates as 'Essentials for Learning and Life' we could teach phonically-simple Finnish to at least the age of eleven, thereby dramatically improving test results in reading

and writing. English as an additional language could be left to fight its corner among the non-essentials in the small proportion of curriculum time left over after Finnish literacy and Finnish numeracy.

(February 2010)

On Grading and Levelling

When will this obsession with grading children end ... or begin? Perhaps with a starred grade on birth certificates for children with well above average birth weight?

(March 2002)

I fear for young children in our primary schools when an Ofsted spokeswoman (presumably speaking on behalf of that organisation) remarks that 'Youngsters at level 2c are not necessarily no-hopers'. The clear implication is that some or many of those achieving level 2c ARE in fact 'no-hopers', their chances written off, their educational fate predetermined at the age of seven. What are we doing to our children through an assessment system which labels them prematurely according to arbitrarily-defined levels and then assumes that many will depressingly conform to our labels? There is a crying need to re-examine the bases (and assumptions) of our national assessment system. Why should any of our children at any age be treated as so many measurable packages of predetermined value ?

(Unpublished, September 2007)

In the debate about A* grades at A2 level no one seems to question the need for universities to differentiate between the rising number of pupils gaining the top grade. But what is the educational justification for the need? Shouldn't any university be able to provide an appropriate higher education for anyone with this type of initial qualifications? Can't Oxbridge cope with students who are 'merely' of A rather than A* standard? What an indictment of its undergraduate teaching if it can't.

(September 2009)

On Targets

Through the 'new' primary strategy Charles Clarke intends to bring the magic back into teaching. What an admission of failure of the government's policy of the three Ts (tests, targets and tables) when it

has to acknowledge that it can only meet its targets through magical means!

(January 2003)

No doubt teachers will be delighted at the chief inspector's concerns that 'an excessive or myopic focus on targets can actually narrow and reduce achievement'. It may also help restore faith in the Office for Standards in Education. Or will it?

In the same week David Bell's primary inspectors produced guidance on how teachers 'can discover the secrets behind the successful implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies'.

This included endorsing schools which ensure that children as young as six are 'made aware' of the levels they are achieving and how to 'meet the criteria' for a higher level. Many teachers will feel that this reinforces the 'excessive or myopic focus' which the chief inspector appears to deplore. Whose guidance should teachers heed – the chief inspector's wise counsel or the pre-Bell prejudices of some inspectors?

(March 2003)

On National Strategies

While thinking about the centralising, state-moulding national educational strategies beloved of New Labour I came across this quotation from William Lovett and John Collins's *Chartism: a new organisation of the people* published in 1841. Does it sound familiar? 'While we are desirous of seeing a uniform and just system of education established, we must guard against the influence of irresponsible power and public corruption; and therefore we are opposed to all concentration of power beyond that which is absolutely necessary to make and execute the laws, for independent of its liability to become corrupt, it destroys local energies, and prevents experiments and improvements, which it is most desirable should be fostered, for the advancement of knowledge, and prostrates the whole nation before one uniform, and, it may be, despotic power.'

(March 2002)

I don't want to disparage the praise heaped on primary teachers by the chief inspector. Like him I have no doubt that, since 1994, the quality of teaching has improved. But I suspect part of the reported improvement is due to what I would call the 'demon Barber' effect. Inspectors judge how far lessons conform to models of effective teaching enshrined in the numeracy and literacy strategies. Teachers

have become willing to comply with these, at least during inspections. This does not necessarily mean children's learning has been enhanced.

(Unpublished, June 2004)

I have always been slightly bemused and disturbed by the National Literacy Strategy's fetish for the carpet. My concern is clearly shared by the five-year-old who, it is reported, dreads carpet time and reports that 'it wastes your life'. The carpet may, however, be an indirect godsend to those teachers worried about their financial future consequent on the pensions crisis. My advice is for them to invest now in pharmaceutical companies specialising in the production of haemorrhoid cream. In years to come they will reap the dividends resulting from children spending years squatting on the carpet and suffering in consequence later in life.

(Unpublished, October 2004)

On Secondary Education

Following the 1944 Education Act the Labour government, though committed in principle to equality of opportunity, presided over a tripartite system of secondary grammar, technical and modern schools which denied it to the vast majority of pupils. Fifty-seven years after that betrayal is about to be repeated. New Labour is about to preside over a new tripartism – of 'advanced specialist', 'specialist' and 'bog-standard' comprehensive schools.

(February 2001)

As an opponent of private education (from whose exclusive elements my family and I have never benefited) I would not presume to pass comment publicly on the quality of education provided by independent schools. My bias and ignorance would be all too apparent. Prince Charles has no such reservations. As a critic of state education (from whose inclusive benefits neither he nor his family ever benefited) he feels able to comment authoritatively – but with no less bias or ignorance. While acknowledging that over the years the Prince's Trust has helped many young people, I would argue that the Prince's 'Mistrust' needs to be applied to his coterie of educational advisers, most of whom have sharp axes to grind, albeit with blunt instruments.

(December 2004)

On the assumption that one size doesn't fit all, the Government needs to differentiate its expectations of secondary schools when

setting ultimatums for improvement. If the 638 schools identified for possible closure for failing to meet the 'floor target' of 30 per cent 'good' GCSEs are comprehensive or even secondary modern schools, then that target needs to be drastically modified to identify 'failing' grammar schools. Perhaps a floor target of 98 per cent might be set for them? As a firm believer in the abolition of independent schools, I'm tempted to set their target as 101 per cent.
(June 2008)

I have long held the belief that the educational leaving age should be raised to 18 and the school leaving age lowered to 14. In light of that belief, I judge that the argument for selection at 14 is half right. It would make sense if, after three years of orientation, 14-year-olds were able to pursue different kinds of courses of study. But my emphasis would be on self-selection of courses, to be pursued in a variety of educational settings – both formal and informal, school and non-school. I wonder, would self-described 'world-class selective schools in the independent sector' be able, or willing, to cope with the consequences?
(Unpublished, June 2009)

I was dismayed at the oxymoronic headline 'Top 50 worst-performing schools to be 'named and shamed', unions warn'. But what about the bottom 50 worst-performing schools, I wondered? Are they to be spared? What needs to be named and shamed is the moronic 'worst-performing' government policy that leads to such headlines.
(Unpublished, November 2009)

How rich (in more ways than one) for the head of Harrow to be concerned about the social mobility of 'pupils from poor homes' and how this is affected by their subject choices when his school epitomizes the very class system which militates against that mobility. Though completely impossible in the current climate, abolishing the independent sector would do far more for social mobility than tinkering with pupils' subject choices.
(Unpublished, January 2010)

I find it impossible to believe the assertion of the chair of the Independent Academies Association that there are many primary schools, well-established and fully accountable to their local communities, who are queuing up to be incorporated in (taken over by?) academies who are not fully accountable and, as yet, of unproven value. Rather than the 'explosion in the numbers' he

prophesies there needs to be an explosion of indignation at the temerity and arrogance of these educational johnnies-come-lately. (Unpublished, February 2010)

How far does Michael Gove's trust of teachers extend? To allowing them to set up a state-funded Summerhill or a Dotheboys Hall? To allowing them to teach history as long as it's imperial British history? To allowing them to organize their classes anywhere they want provided their pupils are set? Or even to giving them choice over the colour of the blazers their pupils are to wear? (March 2010)

On the Misuse of Language in Education

While wholeheartedly supportive of 'targeting creativity' I cannot help remarking that it is an oxymoron. 'Targeting' implies a precise, measurable, predictable process while 'creativity' implies the reverse. Nevertheless the oxymoron is a memorable one. It got me thinking about other possible oxymorons. The following came to mind: ministerial understanding, DfES transparency, Ofsted sensitivity, QCA efficiency, TTA relevance, union unanimity, New Labour modesty, Conservative compassion, Liberal Democrat assertiveness ... American diplomacy.

Perhaps your readers could offer others?
(May 2003)

Have chief inspector David Bell and his senior colleagues in the Office for Standards in Education been employing a latter-day Lewis Carroll to help them prepare the latest inspection guidance? In it we are told that 'generally satisfactory' really means 'unsatisfactory' when applied to the quality of teaching. Does this mean that 'generally good' now means only 'satisfactory' and 'generally very good' only 'good'? In re-writing the Queen's English into the Queen of Hearts' English, Ofsted is inadvertently undermining its own rhetoric. In the past it has made much of the claim that a large percentage of heads and governors are 'generally satisfied' with the inspection process. Presumably, on this latest interpretation of 'generally satisfactory' this really means that they were dissatisfied! If so, shouldn't the process be fundamentally re-considered?
(September 2003)

If, as the Association of School and College Leaders proposes, the title 'headteacher' should be replaced by 'principal' to allow people who have not qualified as teachers to run schools shouldn't the

British Medical Association replace the title 'surgeon' with 'master butcher' to allow people who have not qualified as doctors to lead operating teams?
(July 2006)

On Incentives

Faced with a major teacher shortage in particular areas of the country New Labour is thrashing around seeking incentives to woo back retired teachers but seems to be woefully lacking in imaginative ideas to make a return to teaching more attractive.

How about the following as incentives to entice returning retirees:

1. 'fast-track' procedures for medical care with guaranteed places in private hospitals;
2. free viagra, plastic surgery and gene therapy on demand;
3. Ofsted-exemption vouchers for the duration of their return;
4. confidential access to SAT questions six months in advance of the tests;
5. share options in commercial enterprises such as Nord Anglia and Tribal Education;
6. their own personal civil servant to deal with all their paperwork?

None of these possibilities would run counter to New Labour policies, would they?

(Unpublished, July 2005)

On Waste

I was amused to read of an LEA advertising in the *TES* for a waste education officer. I wondered who might be encouraged to apply for the post. Perhaps the DfES officials responsible for collecting but never acting on responses to its multitude of consultations? Or the Ofsted functionaries who demanded but never commented or acted on the million and one post-inspection action plans dutifully submitted? Or, again, former directors of education passed over in the appointment of directors of children's services? But I had a sudden thought. Perhaps I ought to be applying myself given the considerable number of letters I write to the *TES* which go unpublished!!!!

(Unpublished, September 2007)

On Dismantling the State Education System

As chairman of Cognita, a company providing independent education, Chris Woodhead would say that, wouldn't he?
(January 2009)

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