
The Future of Primary Education

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ABSTRACT In this article the author argues that an incoming government should establish a new values base for educational policy focused on the well-being and educational entitlement of all children rather than the education market. A new government must prioritise learning and teaching: rather than pursuing an ideological agenda and attempting to control how teachers teach, it should respect the knowledge and expertise of educational professionals. The author illustrates how the instrumentalism of free market ideology carries pedagogical assumptions that are inappropriate and detrimental to children and their learning. Government's role, she suggests, should be to provide the right conditions for the development of education: the alleviation of poverty; the provision of equality of opportunity for all; and respect for the agency, voices and knowledge of the professional and wider communities, including children.

One of the most damaging legacies of the current UK Government's term in office will be the increase in child poverty (Carr et al, 2014) and the widening gap between rich and poor reported, for example, in the *State of the Nation 2014* report (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014) and by the Resolution Foundation Think Tank (Corlett & Whittaker, 2014). Both poverty and the growing divisions in society reduce children's educational opportunities. The Coalition Government's poor record on the well-being and rights of children should be addressed as an immediate priority.

The neo-liberal agenda that has driven educational policy for decades has been taken to new extremes under the Coalition, demonstrated, for instance, in the inequities and the lack of accountability of the Academies and Free Schools programme. It has arguably led to the high levels of pressure and anxiety experienced by schoolchildren in England (Maddern, 2013). The 'free-market' imperative of providing data to stimulate competition between schools has distorted the aims of the curriculum, prioritising excessive testing, leading to 'teaching to the test' so that the educational experience of children has been focused more on 'levels' than on learning. The logic of such instrumental

approaches has shaped language and policy under the current government in ways that have become increasingly detrimental to children. The notion that primary education should be focused on making children 'secondary ready' is one example; testing the very youngest children is another. Further consequences of the need for comparative measures have been the ever-increasing emphasis on the outcomes of Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection of schools and the teacher stress that this has induced.

In the interests of children's well-being and their educational entitlement and empowerment, an incoming Labour government should challenge the current ideological agenda and engage as widely as possible with all stakeholders, including children themselves, to articulate what education is for, and thus establish a new direction for education policy based on a reappraisal of values. A good starting point may be the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010), which addressed such issues and consulted widely. In addition, it provided a comprehensive review of educational research to show how aims might be realised. Revisiting the 'Every Child Matters' (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) policy of the previous Labour Government may also be helpful. In any case, a future Labour government should shift the focus immediately to prioritise learning and teaching and the educational entitlement of all children, ensuring local accountability and planning so that communities are fully and equitably served.

For all the rhetoric about freedom for teachers and schools, an insidious development has been the attempt to control learning and teaching methods. Although this contravenes the 1988 Education Act, the Coalition has implicitly directed teachers towards particular, preferred ways of teaching. An example is the teaching of reading. Minister for Education, Elizabeth Truss, said in her letter to *The Guardian* of 17 March 2014: 'the new national curriculum states what children need to know, rather than telling teachers how to teach'. However, the stipulation in the new national curriculum (Department For Education, 2014) that children need to be taught to read 'through a rigorous systematic phonics programme' is clearly the imposition of a teaching method. Similarly, the statutory curriculum document emphasises particular methods for aspects of mathematics, which amount to prescribing how to teach those mathematical concepts.

Inevitably, the reason for the Government's need to control teaching strategies in the classroom is ideological: the belief that teachers are overly influenced by the political left was expressed by Michael Gove quite explicitly in his 'Blob' (Gove, 2013) attack on educationalists and academics. Again, the drive to impose the pedagogical assumption that teaching is about transferring a pre-existing body of knowledge to the learner is a limited, linear model that suits the instrumental, performance-driven agenda. It is reflected, for instance, in Gove's insistence on the teaching of facts, as if 'facts' have some kind of autonomous existence and are unproblematic, and in his approval of 'learning by heart'. Such simplistic ideas about learning and teaching are not fit for educational purpose in the twenty-first century and I propose that a Labour

government should fully acknowledge that theories of learning and teaching and educational research have moved on: children's agency; the role of participation in learning; the role of community and the mutual dialogue in which children develop their thinking and which generates knowledge must be taken seriously. This may require a paradigm shift in ministers' thinking.

If schools have been successful during this government's period of office, I would suggest this might have been in spite of government policy rather than because of it. As successive governments should have learned, ever more detailed legislation (and it is disingenuous of the current government to claim that the new statutory national curriculum – at least in the core areas of English and Maths – is less detailed than the previous one) cannot control interaction in the classroom between teachers and children. It is in these encounters where actual autonomy lies and that are the real content of education. Teachers know this; I have heard many teachers say that this is what keeps them going. Labour politicians should fully acknowledge that this is a space that government cannot and should not attempt to control. It would be misguided to attempt to micro-manage teachers' classroom practice as the previous Labour Government did through the – albeit non-statutory – Literacy and Numeracy strategies.

Teachers' professional knowledge and skills need, then, to be respected by an incoming Labour government, in much deeper and more sincere ways than the lip service paid by the Coalition. There needs to be clarity on how to support and achieve change in learning and teaching. Provision for teachers to engage in reflection and research and to exercise agency in developing practice should be a priority. As reported in *The Guardian*, 'Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "Successive governments have ignored the importance of investing in teachers", including teacher education, continuous professional development and teacher retention. Instead, policy has erred on the side of believing that changing the status of a school will somehow raise the quality of teaching within it' (Adams, 2014).

In short, my proposals are that in order for children – and their teachers – to flourish, a Labour government should establish a new values base for educational policy focused on the educational entitlement of all children rather than the education market. It must relinquish control of decision making around learning and teaching, which should be in the hands of educational professionals. Governments must resist the compulsion to continually impose sweeping reform on the education system. It takes up the time and energy of the profession and destroys morale. Change needs to be planned for the long term, in the interests of children rather than political success. Government's role, I suggest, should be to provide the right conditions for the development of education: the alleviation of poverty; the provision of equality of opportunity for all; and respect for the agency, voices and knowledge of the professional and wider communities, including children. To quote the Rt Hon. Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and the Rt Hon. Baroness Gillian Shephard, Deputy Chair: 'The circumstances are so different, the challenges are so great that the old ways of thinking and acting that have

dominated public-policy making for decades will simply not pass muster. What worked in the past will not serve as an adequate guide for the future. A new agenda is needed' (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014).

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