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The impact of New Labour's educational policy on primary schools

Peter Woods, Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman

Introduction

The shift in emphasis in official policy from the liberal and egalitarian view of the 1960s and 1970s (an 'empowering' ideology) to one dominated by economic considerations, focusing on the need for a highly skilled work force to enable the country to compete successfully in the global economy, brought a more instrumental, technicist approach on the part of government to primary teaching in the 1980s and 90s (Woods et al, 1997). Primary teachers have a broader conception of educational aims embracing the whole child, and many have felt a conflict of values in implementing government policy (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Nonetheless, Webb and Vulliamy (1996) writing about the first five years of the new order following the Education Act of 1988 introducing the National Curriculum, concluded that, despite overwork and stress,

Many (primary teachers) have come through...clearer about their educational beliefs, recognising what is worth fighting for in primary education and what needs to change, more politically aware of how to go about this at the micro and macro.

Does this continue to be the case under New Labour? Are primary teachers being re- or de-professionalised? Are primary schools, and the standards of education within them, 'improving' – the declared aim of Government policy?

In addressing these questions, we shall consider some of the issues connected with curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, school culture, and the ongoing monitoring of schools. We shall do this through case studies of two prominent New Labour initiatives: first, the strategy for improving levels of literacy, the key contribution so far of New Labour to the curriculum (together with numeracy, just introduced), and, secondly, the strategy for improving schools.

Improving Literacy?

Technicism

The National Literacy Strategy, launched in September 1998, is designed to raise standards of literacy in all primary schools in England. The official definition of literacy lays a heavy emphasis on skills (DfEE, 1999, p.3). The model, as with the National Curriculum in general, is based on 'performance', with fixed goals, task analysis and testing, and the exclusion of any alternative view (Ball, 1998a; Broadfoot, 1998). This warrants a high level of prescription. The underlying philosophy has been challenged (for example, Cox, 1998). There is little about the creative uses of literacy and of 'critical awareness', of meaning and understanding. Dadds' (1999) teachers considered that literacy should 'serve a wide variety of purposes' and that there are 'multiple literacies that grow from, and work for, effective communication in different cultural and social circumstances' (p. 13). The DfEE (1998) training video, however, 'shows the dominance of preset objectives' and 'may be promoting a convergent, monocultural perspective' (p.13). This promotes a 'getting done' (Apple, 1986) mentality, and works against the needs of the individual child and of learning and understanding, and of the promotion of 'personal literacies'.

Even where skills alone are concerned, evidence is beginning to come through that children learn best through a child-centred framework. Medwell et al (1998), for example, found that effective teachers of literacy 'placed a greater emphasis on children's recognition of the purposes and functions of reading and writing and of the structures used to enable these processes'. Teachers 'owned' the literacy knowledge in the sense that 'they appeared to know and understand the material in the form in which they taught it to the children, which was usually as material which helped these children to read and write' (p. 76). Their pupils were 'much more heavily involved in problem-solving and theorising about language for themselves rather than simply being given "facts" to learn' (p. 77). To these teachers, the creation of meaning in literacy was crucial. They did not ignore technical skills, but sought to embed them within a meaningful framework. Fisher and Lewis (1999), also, found that the most effective teaching of literacy among their sample of small rural schools was well paced, discursive, interactive, confident and ambitious. They also draw the contrast between teaching as a technical activity, where pedagogy is specified, and teaching as a professional activity, where teachers have pedagogical flexibility among a broad repertoire of methods. The latter has strong support

in general as a feature of effective teaching (see, for example, Alexander, 1992; Alexander et al., 1995).

This does not mean a return to polarities. With regard to literacy, for example, it is not a matter of either literacy techniques or creativity. Both would seem to be required - the techniques within a creative framework. Some teachers seem dismayed at the further prescription and what they see as another assault on their professionalism. Others have managed to appropriate the literacy hour, as they have the National Curriculum.

Appropriation

In general in recent years, there is less time and space for teacher experimentation, more prescriptive curricula and assessment, and pressure for more whole-class teaching. In teaching methods the trend is towards traditionalism (Galton et al 1999). Teachers today feel obliged to 'deliver' a curriculum and consequently they still maintain a low level of pupil participation (see also Francis and Grindle, 1998). Is this inevitable?

We have used The Coombes County Infant and Nursery School at Arborfield in Berkshire as a test case of the possibilities of teachers' appropriation capacities in these increasingly prescriptive times. This school has a high national and international reputation for its creative approach to teaching. Its teachers identify strongly with the same kind of values articulated in the Dadds' research. They were dismayed with those aspects of the National Curriculum and especially national assessment which threatened to inhibit creativity and force an education of what they regarded as a very narrow and limited kind. 'Things are so well tailored that the spontaneous gets neglected. The magic cocktail of the children's reaction is missing' (headteacher). Also, while the National Curriculum is strongly compartmentalised, Coombes has weaker boundaries around subjects in their quest to integrate knowledge. However, in time, the Coombes teachers managed to reconcile their own values with those of the National Curriculum. They did this through the cultivation of their own political awareness, the refinement of their own philosophies, and engagement with the National Curriculum 'as a baseline from which to grow' (Woods, 1995).

Our latest research suggests that this is being sustained under New Labour. Coombes' teachers continue in their creative use of space, of bringing the community to the school and nourishing a 'learning community' (Woods, 1999), and including 'grand topics' as

part of their pedagogical armoury. These are similar to 'critical events', which the teachers of Woods 1993 research thought would not be possible under the new order. They can last a term, have a hands-on element for children, permeate the subject-centred 'contents', make links across subject divisions, and carry an air of excitement (see Jeffrey, 2001). In general, the Coombes' approach seems an interesting example of a 'reconstructed progressivism' (Sugrue, 1997, p. 227) more suitable for the current age than the child-centredness of the 1960s and 70s so roundly condemned by government and others (see, for example, Alexander, 1992; Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992). It is even approved of by OFSTED. Following their inspection, they reported

The school provides an exceptional standard of education, which not only pushes the boundaries of imaginative teaching but ensures pupils achieve well in all areas of learning. (OFSTED, 1997, p. 1)

In these ways, then, it might be claimed that Coombes has appropriated the National Curriculum. They have found a way, it seems, of reconciling two apparently opposing discourses (see also Wood, 1999). How, then, are they coping with the Literacy Strategy, operationalised within a daily 'Literacy Hour', which is presenting such problems for Dadds' teachers and others?

Coombes and Literacy

Coombes teachers saw the Literacy Hour as a

Challenge.....but we did it our way. We did it within the school's value system, and put the school's stamp on it, and made it ours. {Carol. D.}

They ensured that the children were actively involved, and that learning was fun. They sent the children on 'detective' hunts for a set of "initial sounds" that they had secreted around the grounds, which when rearranged correctly spelt a relevant phrase; they composed a variety of songs with actions that related to phonemes and digraphs. 'I write songs driving back from Sainsbury's. They get into the syllabus very quickly'; they employed a "Joseph coat of many colours" to investigate words with an "oa" sound; they made hand puppets and represented particular digraphs, for example a frog; they regularly brought in something to eat for the children related to that week's 'sound', for example,

maltesers and brown bread with Bramble jelly, and they encouraged the children to write letter sounds and words in coloured chalks on the playground.

They maintained their holistic approach to children and to knowledge. They tried to involve all the children's senses. Opportunities were taken to reinforce this work during the school's allied activities involving visits by Community artisans and performers, environmental activities and during their other curriculum subject work in an attempt to integrate the literacy hour subject matter across the children's experiences.

Constructing a working timetable for a first school that valued mixed age, class 'family' groups was also a challenge, for the literacy hour was programmed for age groups. Nevertheless, the teachers perceived advantages for the children in that they were exposed to a varied diet of experiences, and gained more independence and ownership as they took themselves off to their respective cohort classes for literacy every morning.

A programme focusing on the same curriculum for each parallel year group encouraged the teachers to work even closer than they had done previously. This, in turn, promoted teacher development. You 'bounce off each other', and 'learn so much'. The children also are 'sometimes able to choose between us which is good for them'.

However, despite these successful aspects of appropriation, teachers did have some concerns. The Literacy Strategy is based on a theory of like individuals and like systems, and 'is such a rigid one, delineating what you teach in each half-term'. It did limit their teaching:

If I have wings then I fly and, sometimes I think, they want to withhold my rights and the children's' rights to fly and to think, to swim, to float around.

The teachers' commitment to creative pedagogy, necessary because the Literacy Hour 'is a massive amount of time in one chunk for a 5-year-old', takes its toll:

There has been an enormous drain on energy in the making of resources and trying to think of inventive ways of delivering it, making it better and exciting, so that it isn't a 'bottoms on seat' experience.

The characteristics of time, pace, intensity, opening and closing, meeting deadlines, 'getting done' {Apple, 1986} become prioritized. They have consequently lost some valuable methods and curriculum areas, such as children hearing each other read, sharing news, reading and writing, parents helping with reading, creative art. One teacher

reported herself 'running from an hour of literacy to an hour of numeracy, to an hour of science, and then to curriculum groups. There is no in-between'. 'We have lost sight of the child in education'.

On the whole, then, while Coombes teachers have appropriated the literacy strategy to some degree, they have done so less successfully than they had the National Curriculum before, and are finding their child-centred principles increasingly squeezed. There seems little likelihood of this easing in the foreseeable future – rather the reverse as the Numeracy hour fills more of the day.

Improving Schools?

New Labour's chief agency for raising standards generally is the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), established in 1992 under the Conservative government, and charged with the oversight of new national arrangements for the inspection of schools. We demonstrated in previous research how the values that informed OFSTED's conception of a good education and their mode of operation contrasted sharply with the prevailing child-centred discourse preferred by primary school teachers (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). During inspections, teachers were conscious of a deep and damaging value clash in areas of knowledge, pedagogy, assessment and culture. Inspectors used a technicist, managerialist approach which impacted against the holistic and humanistic values of the teachers, producing a high degree of trauma amongst them. No advice or guidance was offered. They were simply 'inspected'. At the more traumatic moments of the inspection itself, teachers felt deprofessionalised. Yet all six schools of our research emerged with good reports. Teachers asked 'Was it worth it?' and one opined 'There has to be a better way.'

Despite a number of criticisms of this nature, New Labour endorsed OFSTED, and the drive for improvement along narrow, managerialist lines has continued. A Parliamentary Select Committee examined OFSTED in 1999, and made certain recommendations, the impact of which remains to be seen. Up to the time of writing, Ofsted has continued along the same lines, most notably through the development of the policy for naming, blaming and shaming 'failing' schools. If a school is judged by OFSTED to be failing it is made subject to special measures. (Ofsted, 1999, p.1) These include an action plan that has to be approved by the DfEE, and regular monitoring inspections by HMI until the school is deemed to be providing an acceptable standard of education.

Schools that have been through this process do improve in some ways – unsurprisingly given the extra resources that are made available or a key change in management that occurs (Scanlon, 1999). The question is – at what cost? Do the ends justify the means? Is there a better way? In a recent survey of schools that have been placed under special measures, a majority of which were primary, compared with a similar number that have not, Scanlon reports resentment, tension and divisions among the staffs as some were seen to ‘pass’ and others ‘fail’, and worsening relationships between heads and their staffs. There was a marked deterioration in staff morale among teachers in both groups. Some schools had problems of recruitment and retention. Most of Scanlon’s teachers, while acknowledging improvements, felt that

There were better and more cost effective ways of achieving the same ends..... It had also created new problems or aggravated existing ones.

We draw on a study of one such school from our general research on teacher stress (see Troman and Woods, 2001) to highlight some of the issues. Gladstone Street Primary School (a pseudonym) was cited in 1996 as a failing school, and spent two years in special measures. Of the 14 full-time teachers in post in 1996, 8 left during this period, including the headteacher and deputy headteacher.

As with Scanlon’s schools in general, Gladstone might have seen ‘improvement’ at a technicist level, as judged by measurable tests, so that ‘pupil sausages would be popping out at the other end as neatly as Walls could do it in their real sausage factory’. This would be at a cost to other aspects of what some consider a full education, such as developing the individuality of children. Another teacher identified multiculturalism, emotional development and caring as important aspects of the school’s ethos. Teachers spoke of ‘much more tolerance of children with difficult home backgrounds’, and the school’s determination to face and deal with difficult social problems.

Indeed Ofsted acknowledged these caring and sharing aspects as strengths of the school in their inspection report. However, the school was judged to be failing because of : poor leadership and management; poor financial management (including a budget deficit and not providing value for money); poor pupil behaviour; teachers' low expectations of the pupils; and poor teaching quality.

The teachers experienced a considerable trauma during the inspection week when they realised they were failing. Joan explained that it was 'a total shock nobody had expected - it just hit me - my whole life was affected - it was a horrible time'. Richard said 'the atmosphere was hysterical - people were crushed - everyone was stripped raw - the teachers were crumbling'. Frances said 'the foundations of the school had been kicked hard'. It might be argued that the school needed a 'shock' as a first stage to its transformation. But inducing these profound emotions, it might equally be argued, goes far beyond the bounds of professionalism, striking at the teachers' innermost selves. In cutting the ground from under teachers' feet, the inspection induced a state of anomie with the only direction being given a narrow technicist path. The broader aspects of teachers' expertise were put at risk.

Though most of the teachers received good individual reports, they felt collectively condemned by the judgement on the school. At a time when the media were searching for the 'worst school in Britain' and headlines were appearing such as 'Failing School Named: Incompetent Teachers to be Sacked' (Ball, 1998b, p.78), teachers had strong feelings of guilt and shame. The teachers questioned their accumulated knowledge and experience of schools and teachers. Sean felt that the school's failing had brought everything into question'. Joan thought 'It was that total confusion because people couldn't believe that some of their colleagues had been criticised. People they thought were good teachers. It was just a total muddle really'. Edith felt her 'judgement had all gone wrong' and 'found it difficult to evaluate if (she) was a good teacher or not'. Ann, who had considerable experience as a support teacher and had worked in the classrooms of many colleagues over the years was 'shocked because I thought I knew what teaching was. It made me question if I knew anything about teaching at all even though I had a lot of experience to judge'. Richard wondered if he had 'chosen the wrong career'. Teachers that had managed to find out Ofsted's evaluation of them started comparing themselves with their colleagues, and, for some, this tended to lower their already low self-esteem.

Shame involves experiencing feelings of inadequacy. Sean said that before the inspection he used to 'feel quite a good teacher'. The experience of failure had resulted in what he felt was an 'erosion of personal skills'. Ofsted had found 'skills missing' in Richard's practice and he felt 'A complete failure - I didn't think I had a future in teaching'. Rita was made to feel 'such a useless lump; you're not a good teacher. You're a waste of time and space. And it feeds on itself really. So your confidence is just hacked away'. Even some of those teachers judged to be successful felt acutely inadequate. Vanessa, who

achieved a '1' rating, found the process leading up to it 'utterly stressful'. Some of the teachers with good personal reports felt a strong collegiate responsibility and experienced collective inadequacy. Edith, for example, 'found the inspection so awful. I think it was because there was this strong feeling here of being part of a team....I identified with the school sufficiently to feel criticised by the general criticism of the school'. Joan had been anxious lest her potential personal failure would 'let everybody down'. Anthony was concerned in case the 'succeeding' teachers were 'dragged down' by the failing ones.

Some teachers, though not experiencing stress-related illness, became 'stressed at seeing colleagues go under and extremely angry at seeing what the system has done to others' (Sean). Frances became stressed because a colleague with whom she worked collaboratively and who was also a close friend was absent from school owing to a nervous breakdown. Alan was on his 'knees physically and emotionally and ground down by it all'. Anthony said many teachers were 'exhausted and couldn't keep working at that pace; they were on a stress-ridden downward path; and stress levels were high and morale was low'. Sean experienced sleeplessness prior to the termly inspections. Throughout the special measures, Frances 'couldn't stop crying'. Richard got 'more and more depressed, and tired and tired'. Four of the eight teachers who left the school during special measures were diagnosed as suffering from clinical depression. The problem in such circumstances is that where a teacher becomes subject to competency procedures 'you couldn't tell if she couldn't cope with it because she couldn't adapt or if she couldn't cope with it because she was very stressed' (Rita).

It was not all negative trauma. Some of the teachers passed through what Anthony described as a 'cleansing' or 'healing' period. In this phase they regained confidence and a sense of self-worth. Colin said that some had found it necessary to 're-invent themselves to re-establish self-esteem'. Some teachers were 'girded' into action and saw special measures as a 'new starting point'. Richard was 'galvanised into action' and 'excited by all the changes that could be made'. Sean thought his confidence 'will come back hopefully as I work with a team'. Richard 'wouldn't let the bastards grind him down' and Joan said: 'No, no. I wouldn't give in. I was determined, even if I stayed here till I was 65, to get out of special measures. Because I felt I couldn't have left and got another job. Some people did. But I felt, for me, I had to stay and prove something'. For some being in special measures had been a 'learning experience'. One teacher gained promotion on the strength of it.

On balance, though, most of the teachers argued that, save for the improved SATs scores, the school was no better after leaving special measures than it was when entering. Indeed, in some respects, it could be considered to be worse. Half way through special measures a group of middle class parents complained to Anthony about the school's increasing concentration on increasing 'standards' in the children's academic work. This group explained at a school meeting that they had chosen the school for their children because of its multicultural ethos and curriculum. They were objecting to the decision to reduce time spent on celebrating and learning about customs and festivals in a wide range of cultures. This time was to be devoted to preparation for increasing pupil performance in the National Curriculum. As for the teachers, they felt deprofessionalized, in the same way as those featuring in the school studied by Jeffrey and Woods (1998, chapter 4)

Conclusion

New Labour has continued the education policies introduced by the New Right Thatcherite administration, bringing creative and child-centred teaching in primary schools under greater strain. This has to be seen within the context of the 'low-trust society' (Giddens, 1990; Troman and Woods, 2001). Teachers are no longer trusted to implement reform, and must be directed and monitored. The 1999 Green Paper aimed at increasing teacher motivation, job satisfaction and morale and making teaching a more attractive and 'modern' profession by the introduction of performance-related pay and firmer appraisal. However, in our analysis, as illustrated by our case study, it is likely to bring about the opposite effects, increasing divisiveness and leading to further erosion of trust among the participants in primary schooling. As for the curriculum, it is the overload of prescriptive work that brought most complaints, and despite the rationalisation by Dearing (1994), the introduction of the literacy and numeracy hours are introducing new pressures.

There have been some, what many regard as, good effects of the reforms. The National Curriculum itself is generally accepted in principle among primary teachers (Webb and Vulliamy, 1996) as providing a useful framework and improving teaching in certain key areas, such as science. Some teachers feel enhanced and re-skilled by the reforms, particularly in areas of management and assessment (Gipps et al, 1995; Woods et al 1997). As far as our case studies here are concerned, there are some not unpromising signs. For example, the Government set up a National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education,

which reported in 1999. The report was welcomed by the Education Secretary of State, David Blunkett, who said he had set up the Committee because

I was concerned that pupils should not only be equipped with the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, but should also have opportunities to develop their creative potential...The Government wants to develop young people's capacity for original ideas...The revised curriculum (ie The National Curriculum currently under review for the year 2000) will offer teachers more flexibility in their delivery of the curriculum with more opportunities for pupils to explore their creative potential. The increased emphasis which will be placed on thinking skills in the revised curriculum will also enable pupils to focus more on their creative talents.

At the time, Kenneth Robinson, the chair of the committee, felt 'the government's plan would not be enough to restore creative energy to the classroom' (The Guardian, May 15, 1999), and since then the report has become marginalised. It remains to be seen if the 2000 revision of the curriculum bears out the minister's promise.

Ofsted, too, is evolving. Schools identified as 'improving' will now only be subject to 'light touch' inspections, with much less paperwork, less stark confrontation, more collegiality and trust, less pressure on staff. One headteacher has commented, 'This is a new relationship with Ofsted. I felt as though we were being treated in a grown-up way' (Hoare, 2000, p.4). Other schools will still have full inspections. For these, also, Ofsted has a new code of conduct, aimed at lessening teacher stress, cutting down paperwork, giving feedback and explanation – in other words treating teachers more as professionals. However, an inspector comments, 'I can see a stigma being attached to a full inspection. It makes parents believe a school is not first rank. It's a clearer message than the league tables. It's the difference between premier league and first division'. (Ibid)

We still have, therefore, a hierarchical framework and a calculated divisiveness. There is still, in practice, a narrowness and exclusiveness of vision and a homogeneity of practices based on performativity. There is a unilinear and simplistic conception of learning and a socially decontextualised view of school effectiveness (Pollard, 1999). These are the parameters of 'success' and 'improvement', as measured by correlational tests. Teachers are still not trusted, and are seen in a managerial, rather than developmental context (Batteson, 1999). We still have league tables of schools, and summaries of Ofsted findings on individual schools are still published in local and national press. There is still continuing media and 'policy hysteria' about low standards and international

competitiveness (Stronach and Morris, 1999). New Labour has recently made noises suggesting a broadening of view. It remains to be seen whether this broadening will be concretised in policy and practice, or whether, as many feel about the rest of New Labour's activity so far, it remains at the level of rhetoric.

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