Stand Up for Education

English teachers wrestling with educational policy shifts

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Pressures for educational reform to build an economically competitive edge are being experienced on a global scale (Bush, 2011). Alongside this, the global financial crisis has resulted in measures to bring public spending under control. Moutsios (2007) argues that the goal of the European Union is to become the "most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world". (p. 19). As a consequence many are attempting to improve educational outcomes whilst at the same time bring spending on education under ever greater control. Such 'market-based' drivers require the workforce to be both skilled and compliant which results in the use of stringent accountability measures to ensure that schools meet this agenda (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013). Penalties for failure are high and this has led in England to an educational workforce that is largely compliant in relation to Government requirements (Leaton Gray, 2013; Ball, 2012). Inglis (2000) likens the pressure of accountability in schools to the ability to fire a pistol filled with blame at the head of those who can't answer for any failings of the organisation. Moreover, making judgements on schools on this basis is a practice which Power and Frandji (2010) pointed out is viewed as an extremely unpopular and ineffective approach by teachers. The fall-out from such measures is an understandable reduction of risk-taking, inventiveness and the ability to view education with the clarity necessary to develop a curriculum that reflects a lively questioning and reflective understanding of the world in which we live. Further creativity and innovation often evolve from risk-taking. Risk averse schools can thus become places where staff are tired, bored and frustrated.

Webb et al. (2009) stated,

> In England in the name of public accountability the controls over the work of schools and their teachers have escalated and strengthened challenging teachers' integrity and promoting 'a low trust relationship' between society and its teachers ... national testing, OFSTED [*Office for Standards in Education*] inspections and performance management had intensified the teachers' work through generating escalating paperwork in the form of school policies, lesson plans, pupil assessment and recording, written responses to national and LA [*local authority*] initiatives, and reports to parents and governors, thus creating a situation whereby however many hours teachers committed to school, they never considered the time adequate to meet expectations (p.416-417)

Further as Glatter (2012) has argued, the English government stated pursuit of teacher autonomy has resulted in teachers who feel more constrained than ever before. My own research suggests the same with head teachers commenting,

> I think it is easy to forget what your educational values are with the maelstrom of decisions that we have to take all bound up with legalities and the threat of Ofsted. (Primary Head 1)

> ...if the wrong approach is taken by school leaders this can lead to a culture of blame with low expectations for performance, behaviour and job satisfaction. (Primary Head 2)

My research also demonstrates the challenges felt by teachers in balancing their responsibility to children and the public, their educational values and the potential for censure. The consequence is that teachers act to moderate the effects of poor policy decisions rather than to question poor policy in the first place. Thus teachers expressed their sense of power loss around decision-making, the use of their professional judgement, and being forced to undertake new initiatives with little time to relate these to their philosophical position in relation to the pupil and to education. Further as Galton and MacBeath (2008: 105) have argued,

> Teachers continually operate at both the cerebral and the emotional level in their decision-making and that teaching is as much about the heart as it is about the head.

The emotional toll on teachers was also evident in my research through their discussions of loss of sleep, worry, lack of time to reflect all adding to the stress that they were experiencing. The overall consequence of restrictive accountability agendas and the emotional toll for teachers result in professionals who can become too worried to take risks.

In order to maintain the lively and enthusiastic interest of teachers it is important, as Friere (1985) argued, to facilitate the development of teachers' 'critical consciousness'. In other words the ability to reflect critically on fast changing educational initiatives and consider ways in which such initiatives may enhance or detract from the educational experience of their pupils. Glatter (2012) also states the need for teachers and school leaders to be freed to consider educational issues without distraction. Indeed Greenfield and Ribbins (1993) believed that educators are bound by their professional role, to seek better values and openly question and seek justification for the positions they take and the ways in which they utilise power. This then enables teachers to make educated and careful decisions about new policy ideas and moreover, enables them to lead and develop new approaches to education in ways that demonstrate a professional respect for and trust in what they are undertaking.

If we want children who demonstrate an enthusiasm for learning and a zest for life then we need to facilitate our teachers to do the same. Teachers must be able to respond creatively and without fear in order to bring new excitement to the curriculum and its delivery.

See also: Hammersley-Fletcher, L. (2014) "Educational Austerity and Critical Consciousness: English Primary School Leaders wrestling with Educational Policy shifts" in *Éducation comparée* 12, pages 99-124

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