

How did we get into this state?

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It is a common complaint heard from all teachers in all sectors: if only we could be left to get on with the enjoyable, if exhausting and occasionally infuriating, job of teaching children and not have to spend so much time checking, reporting and writing down what we've done – or what we're going to do – then our lives as teachers would be blissful. How have we reached the stage where finding interesting ways to get young people to learn has, for some teachers, become almost the last thing they think of as they prepare their working day?

It is worth starting by saying that there has never been a golden age of teacher independence. However, it was only as far back as 1976 that a leader in *The Guardian* newspaper could confidently proclaim that 'no principle has been more hallowed by British governments than the rule that they should not interfere in the curriculum of state schools'. That was twelve years before the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 introduced us to the National Curriculum, age-related testing in the form of SATs and the marketization of schools through open enrolment and local financial management – thereby diminishing the role of democratically accountable local authorities. In the following decade, the body charged with inspecting schools, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) was largely replaced by Ofsted – an organization whose whole tone and approach was, and remains, punitive and unsympathetic to teachers. This suite of measures has, over the quarter of a century following ERA, had the effect of making England's teachers (things differ significantly in other parts of the UK) among the most scrutinised, controlled and publicly accountable educators anywhere in the world.

It was in the same year of that *Guardian* leader, 1976, that the Prime Minister of the time, Labour's Jim Callaghan, made a famous speech at Ruskin College. Callaghan – who was one of only a handful of British Prime Ministers since 1850 not to have been to Oxford or Cambridge – acknowledged at the time that he was stepping into the 'secret garden' of education where few politicians before had dared to tread. To read the speech now, at a distance of nearly forty years, is to recognise much of the rhetoric of education policy since, with little to distinguish between the language and intent of any of the major parties. Notions of value for money in straitened times, along with a bemoaning of a perceived drop in standards, inform much of what is said. Callaghan also seized on an episode in William Tyndale School in London to launch an attack on progressive methods, positing the notion that all of this educational experimentation flew in the face of the

common-sense position that it was the job of educators to prepare young people for the demands of a modern economy.

By the time Callaghan's successor, Margaret Thatcher, left office some fifteen years later, the apparatus for ensuring greater regulation and accountability was firmly in place, albeit that the NUT in particular continued to fight vigorously against this, most notably with an eventual, if short-lived, boycott of SATs in 1993. If Callaghan might have considered himself unfortunate in that he had been left to deal with the end of any post-war prosperity, Thatcher and her close allies busily set about the business of applying the principles of the free-market and deregulation to all elements of social life. Everything was up for sale from council houses to nationally owned companies: the stage was well and truly set for the privatisation of the state education system as well.

When Labour's Tony Blair took office in 1997 with the now infamous proclamation that his three priorities were 'education, education, education', mechanisms were fully in place for the market to work its magic on schools, teachers, pupils and their parents. Test results were used for league tables that were placed in the public domain so that parents could exercise free choice when deciding where to send their children. In reality, this so-called 'choice' was a complete fiction for most people and could be exercised only by a privileged few. The publication of the outcome of Ofsted inspections helped to further entrench the idea that the quality of schools could be categorised in order to help the 'customers' exercise this choice. By the turn of the new century it was unsurprising that this espousal of the market values of competition, 'driving up standards' and customer choice resulted in the first academy schools, thereby irredeemably letting the privatisation genie out of the bottle.

The impact of this unremitting imposition of market values onto the school system has been profound. Test results become the driving force behind practically everything school leaders demand of their staff. The quest for high Ofsted ratings now manifests itself not just in the frantic scabbling in the period prior to an inspection, but in the language and manner of competency-led, reductive lesson observations, at the end of which individual teachers are branded according to their ability to comply with whichever set of priorities enjoy current favour. The proliferation of a breed of so-called 'middle managers' in schools spend inordinate amounts of time checking and scrutinising a whole raft of meaningless actions and data as they chase the specious measurable outcomes that can cement their school's market position.

Unsurprisingly, all of this has had an effect on teachers' daily lives. Targets, questionable learning objectives, collection of all sorts of unreliable information and the unrelenting measuring of

outcomes and ‘progress’ mean that many teachers spend their times on mind-numbing routines, drills and rehearsal. Fortunately, thousands of teachers still harbour a strong sense of what is right for young people and do everything in their power to subvert what Finnish author Pasi Sahlberg has dubbed the GERM – the Global Education Reform Movement. However, to understand just why those who wield the clipboards have become the demi-gods of the educational world, teachers need to look to a political system that, in a reflection of the wider world, has privileged market forces, privatisation and the so-called measurement of performance. And, of course, teachers will need to join forces with parents, students and others to point out the error of their ways to those who persist in foisting such unfairness on us all.

Further reading:

Ball, S. (2008) *The Great Education Debate*. London: Policy Press.

Cox, B. (1995). *The battle for the English curriculum*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College Press.