

Extracts from David Bell's speech to Association of Science Education annual conference, 9 Jan 2015

Outlining the problem

Despite three decades of promises from central and local government to free schools from state management, the teaching profession still feels pulled from pillar to post ... Trusting the frontline should have been a priority in the enormous reform programme in English schools since 2010 - by ministers and the agencies accountable to them...

I provoked some controversy last year by suggesting that it was a mistake for ministers to dismiss those giving legitimate advice about ongoing reform as being the voice of 'The Blob'. If you know your pop cultural references, you will recognise that 'The Blob' isn't science – it is of course science fiction. The idea that academic excellence was only valued by a small coterie holed up in Westminster was as insulting as it was wrong. And allowing public debate to be couched in such language meant that goodwill and trust was undermined when, in a period of reform, it was desperately needed. Whether intended or not, the unfortunate impression was allowed to develop that teachers didn't care about standards and were complicit in the 'dumbing down' of the education system...

Failing to build consensus results in the sort of highly dangerous experiment by Ofqual and ministers to separate the grade for assessed practical work from the main grades at A-level and GCSE science. .. It sends out a message that hard-nosed practical skills are not valued equally to theory. It risks diverting cash from science department budgets for equipment, technicians and training...

It was on my watch as Permanent Secretary that the last Labour government removed science from the Key Stage 2 tests - a reaction in part to political pressures created by the implosion of the SATs marking system in 2008, in part to appeasing teachers' unions. The tests as they stood were weak - giving a perverse incentive to drill pupils to regurgitate basic facts, failing to stretch the brightest and having too little incentives for practical work. But in retrospect it was perhaps a decision ministers took at pace, too close to an election and without piloting or sufficient preparation time in the system to absorb the changes...

Recommendations

I would advocate three measures to depoliticise education policy in England:

First, a strong, permanent, independent strategic advisory body for curriculum and assessment. Backed by all the main parties. Underpinned by proven pedagogical practice and current research.... Building a system which constantly self-improves without the temptation for constant top-down tinkering and intervention...

Second, let us finally build cross party consensus on expanding A-levels into a broader, richer baccalaureate-style system – with core specialist subjects supplemented with extended project work and top-level literacy, numeracy, computer science and softer, non-cognitive skills.

I have talked about the need for collaboration between academic disciplines. The sciences needs the arts. And the arts needs the sciences. Yet five years of permanent revolution has seen us come full circle to a decades old system which culminates in sixth formers still specialising in three or four 'gold-standard' A-

levels, with two years of study ending in a pass-and-fail exam. The economy and society is changing out of all recognition - and yet we still have an out-of-date system, when the UK can least afford it...

Third, trusting the frontline must apply to universities and the central part they play in initial teacher training and continuous professional development... I am hugely frustrated by the implementation of the School Direct system so far. And I urge the next government to fully review the system after May and change tack. It is right to create a range of training routes. And I back the argument that trainees need practical experience early - that's why I am closely involved with Teach First. But not if it means squeezing good, proven providers out of the sector.

School Direct as currently configured is starting to choke off the best university postgraduate courses because of a false ideological fixation that university education departments are Marxist hotbeds. Here at Reading, I'm still searching to find my first Marxist in the Institute of Education! We have been stepping in at the last minute to take on unfilled places from schools. That safety net will not be there if higher education institutions start pulling out of teacher training completely.

Individual schools do not need to take a broader strategic, national or even regional view of supply - but universities must. And the best initial teacher training and professional development is research-orientated. Ministers need to take a more grown-up view of policy - not cut their noses off to spite their own faces.

Conclusion

Trusting the frontline does not mean letting teachers and schools do exactly what they want. Governments, acting with a democratic mandate, have the right to propose reforms and make what might seem to be unpopular decisions.

But think of what I have said, even in that context.

- An expert advisory body turning round the best researched advice.
- Allowing more teachers to design reform locally based on national ambitions.
- Ensuring that teachers are spoken of as the solution not the problem.

These alone would change the dynamic and allow the people in this room and beyond to drive forward the improvements we all seek.

Let me close with the words of my distinguished predecessor and the first Voice-Chancellor of the University of Reading, W.M. Childs. Written almost 90 years ago, his words could not be more relevant today:

It would be absurd to say that in education there is no room for organising genius. Nor is anyone so foolish as to suggest that education is best served when it is unbusinesslike, slipshod, piecemeal and starved. But the first thing that ought to be pondered and understood by anyone who approaches education as organiser or critic is that it has to do not with dead material but living personalities. Once that fundamental truth is grasped, a whole batch of irrelevant heresies slough away.

So, ladies and gentlemen, let us hope that 2015 will be the year when irrelevant heresies are no more and living personalities are at the heart of our education system once again.