

‘The Importance of Teaching’ An analysis of the Government’s Education White Paper

When I left the National Union of Teachers as its Head of Education in mid-September, I said in my farewell speech that, in future, my core business would be teacher policy. Working with John MacBeath and Maurice Galton on ‘Re-inventing Schools, Reforming Teaching’ reaffirmed for me the very obvious fact that it is teachers’ self-efficacy, their learning and pedagogy which is vital to raising standards (Bangs, MacBeath and Galton, 2010). These are the areas I am focusing on as Senior Research Associate at the Faculty of Education and Visiting Fellow at Wolfson College.

During this year, Parliament passed the highly controversial Academies Bill, which, as I wrote in an article for the Times Educational Supplement, included much rhetoric about teacher liberation but obscured and left unrecognised a fundamental question: ‘what strategy does the Government have for the future of the teaching profession?’ (Bangs, 2010). Is the answer to that question the Government’s Schools White Paper, ‘The Importance of Teaching’ (DfE, 2010)? After all as Michael Gove said in his Foreword as Secretary of State for Education, the intention of the White Paper is to introduce ‘whole system reform’ of education so that it can be ‘one of the world’s top performers’. How does the White Paper match up to his aspiration? I consider aspects of the White Paper using as benchmarks the proposal that we argued for in ‘Re-inventing Schools, Reforming Teaching’ (Bangs et al., 2010) and which I fleshed out in my article for the TES.

Many people in higher education, and in the education community as a whole, share equally fiercely the view that it is only through an effective policy on the future of the teaching profession that government can achieve its objective of a world class education system. How we get there is another matter. In ‘Re-inventing Schools’, we referred to teachers’ ‘self-evident weariness with imposition’ (p.189) and asked: “Why is it that no government has ever had a strategy for the teaching profession which has acknowledged the importance of teachers’ self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy?” My TES article argued for ideas such as:

- a national Professional Development Strategy which involved teachers choosing their CPD and receiving an annual funded entitlement for it
- a Scottish chartered teacher model which is based on professional development
- Masters programmes linked to an entitlement to a sabbatical for experienced teachers
- international ideas such as the Finnish model of university-run training schools where teachers as university employees are responsible both for the theory and practice and training

The full picture of Government intentions is not set out solely in the White Paper. Its accompanying paper, 'the Case for Change' (DfE, 2010) is as important, if not more so, than the White Paper itself. The argument is that its Government's reform proposals are based on evidence not ideology and that the education system in England will not become outstanding unless it learns from developments globally. Its avowed focus is on how some education systems narrow the gap between the achievements of young people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. Albeit that some of the evidence has been cherry picked and feels partial, it is the first time that I can remember a government setting out its evidence base for reform.

The Case for Change

There are two overarching influences within the White Paper: the first is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); the second is the global consultancy, McKinsey. Indeed, the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister in their Foreword argue that:

The first, and most important, lesson is that no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers.

This is one of the three principles in the McKinsey Report, 'How the World's Best Performing Education Systems Come Out on Top' (McKinsey, 2007). 'The Case for Change' also contains significant references to OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS). Based on the PISA reports, Finland, Canada, Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong are referred to as exemplar systems.

There is much else which is sourced and referenced including: the UK's relatively low graduation rates compared with other countries

(p.5); the characteristics of a potentially good teacher (p.7); and the relationship of 'high performing systems' to 'curriculum coherence'. Yet 'the Case for Change' is not above bending the evidence to make its case. One example of this is the approach to evidence cited in favour of expanding Teach First. Irrespective of the undoubted quality of Teach First, the two statements below can hardly be cited as evidence that Teach First students join because they believe the status of teaching is high, compared with other teachers. They are simply disparate statements bolted together.

While the majority of teachers rate the status of teaching as medium (47%) or low (43%), Teach First is now consistently rated as one of the top graduate recruiters.

It is a strong example of where the Government has strained to make the evidence fit the political narrative. In not making the point that many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are also top graduate recruiters and have received top ratings from OFSTED the inference is that initial teacher education (ITE) provision somehow fails to elevate the status of the teaching profession unlike Teach First. Yet the sections on professional development and school leadership fit comfortably the evidence on the most effective forms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), in particular, in relation to collaborative professional development and practice-based approaches (pages 10-13). Indeed 'the Case for Change' evidence is a mixture of 'strained' and 'comfortable' evidence. Its evidence for structural reform, for example strains to conflate the PISA report's conclusions that school autonomy in budget control, teaching appointments and the curriculum favour high achievement, with particular forms of school organisation promoted by the United States Government (charter schools) and the Westminster Government (free schools and academies). No analysis is included within the Department's evidence document of other types of school.

Perhaps the best way of interpreting ‘the Case for Change’ is to see it as a document of two halves. In some sections evidence and intention fit comfortably because they are not overshadowed by already stated policy intentions. In others, the evidence is strained to fit the policy. Nevertheless it is a serious and substantial document. For the first time, the Government has sought to make an international case for educational reform.

The Importance of Teaching

As the Faculty’s initial response says, there is nothing exceptional in the Government’s arguments for high degree levels of entry to ITE or its arguments for the main focus to be on classroom practice, or indeed for imaginative routes into teacher training, while maintaining very high quality (Younger, 2010). The use of ‘strained’ evidence is apparent in a spectacular way, when the White Paper ignores OFSTED’s confirmation that ITE courses delivered by higher education partnerships are more likely to be deemed outstanding than school-centred initial teacher training and says that too little teacher training ‘takes place on the job’. Again, as the initial Faculty response says, the introduction makes an unfortunate and an unnecessary contrast between Teach First and HEIs which recruit highly qualified graduates in tough and competitive environments. Nevertheless, the proposals to establish scholarships for capable students committed to entering teaching after graduation and incentives for ‘higher performing graduates’ offer real possibilities for HEIs. What is unfortunate is that the Government appears reluctant to consider that graduates who may have struggled to get degrees because of tough background circumstances may well have similar levels of empathy, intelligence and life knowledge to those claimed for armed forces leavers.

The detail in the White Paper on the proposed ‘national network of teaching schools’ is intriguing. As the Faculty’s initial response suggested, teaching schools could open up a very real opportunity for HEIs to deepen their relationship with existing schools and establish new relationships (Younger, 2010). HEIs could take on the management responsibilities of initial teacher education in partnership with headteachers and governing bodies. There is also a credible argument for universities to establish university training schools, as I proposed in my July TES article. Finnish training schools and the staff employed there are university employees whose job it is both to teach and mentor students, engaging them in the study of pedagogical, curriculum and child development.

One of the most interesting sections of the White Paper is contained within paragraphs 2.26-2.28. They identify key features of effective teacher professional development; features which were drawn from EPPI-Centre research reviews of collaborative CPD studies cited in the White Paper (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell and Evans, 2003). Three proposals emerge from this short section:

- the National Network of Teaching Schools, within which teachers can be designated ‘specialist leaders of education’;
- the possible extension of a Chartered London teacher model, which involves reward for teachers engaged in professional development, similar to the post-McCrone Agreement Chartered Teachers’ Scheme in Scotland;
- the possibility of introducing a competitive National Scholarship Scheme to support professional development, with an independent panel making the awards.

These suggestions have very real potential. Specialist leaders of education ‘provide a very real opportunity to expand the capacity for teacher leadership separate from managerial responsibilities. Such an approach mirrors the work on teacher leadership carried out by Leadership for Learning within the Faculty of Education in Cambridge. The Chartered Teachers Scheme in Scotland provides a recognition of teacher expertise which is very different from the individual financial incentives-based model within the upper pay scale in England. And could it be that the competitive National Scholarship Scheme could return one of the best aspects of the 2001-2003 National Professional Development Strategy – the Best Practice Research Scholarships?

All three ideas offer universities such as Cambridge an opportunity to provide the most effective form of professional development – collaborative professional development and a knowledge-base for teachers taking on specialist leadership positions.

More controversial is the Government’s proposal to ‘give headteachers greater freedoms to reward good performance and address poor performance’. There is no understanding within the White Paper of the distinction between voluntary peer observation, appraisal linked to feedback and performance management for accountability purposes. Peer observation is integral to collaborative professional development. My experience in the NUT with offering the Best Practice Research Scholarships was that teachers working together in pairs having had expert input, and evaluating their research at the end of their scholarships, not only led to very real embedded improvements in practice as the EPPI Reviews indicated, they also greatly enhanced teachers’ self-efficacy and commitment to stay on in teaching. The White Paper simply conflates peer observation, appraisal and performance

management which could seriously damage the potential for collaborative professional development initiatives and the necessary trust involved in peer coaching and mentoring.

This is compounded by the proposal to ‘remove the current duplication between the performance management and the capability procedures for managing poor performance’. If this proposal is introduced, teachers would be less inclined to be open about their perceived weaknesses in practice, as well as their strengths, because any form of classroom observation would have the potential for the initiation of capability procedures. Unless the Secretary of State thinks again and makes clear distinctions between the purposes of classroom observation, the negative backwash effect on the capacity of teachers to improve their practice and innovate will be substantial.

The section under ‘Teaching and Leadership’ focusing on freeing ‘headteachers and teachers from bureaucracy and red tape’ contains an intriguing paragraph, particularly for all those committed to ‘bottom-up’ school self-evaluation – particularly in relation to ground-breaking work carried out by John MacBeath (MacBeath, 1999). Paragraph 2.53 re-emphasises the Government’s commitment to remove ‘the expectation on every school to complete a centrally designed self-evaluation form’. Paragraph 2.53 continues by saying that: ‘We strongly support the view that good schools evaluate themselves rigorously’. The removal of the OFSTED-imposed School Evaluation Form, could lead to a revival and re-invigoration of innovative forms of self-evaluation which genuinely engage school communities in gaining valuable knowledge about how to go forward.

There is much within the White Paper which is outside my brief for this edition of Inform. Some proposals connect directly with teacher policy such as those on the Curriculum, Assessment and

Qualifications. Some proposals have value such as the intention to remove the over modularisation of post 16 examinations. Others are contradictory. The setting of new targets for examination results belie the Government's intentions to get rid of the target setting regime. A five subject curriculum, prescribed in detail, hardly confers new curricular freedoms. The net effect could lead to a weakening of children's entitlements to a balanced and broadly based curriculum. Indeed it is worth noting that an interesting aspect of the Secretary of State's proposals for a new knowledge-based core curriculum of five subjects is the role of Cambridge Assessment. Tim Oates' paper 'Could Do Better: using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England' (Oates, 2010) is quoted in support of 'subjects such as mathematics... arranged in an appropriate, age-related hierarchy' and of giving 'substantial time allocation to the fundamentals of subjects'. In contrast the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009) with its powerful and detailed recommendations for reforming the primary curriculum is not mentioned. It is clear that Cambridge Assessment has had a strong influence on the core curriculum proposals.

A strategy for the teaching profession?

The future of initial teacher education is not clear. Higher education institutions already have very close working relationships with a whole range of schools, not just with designated training schools. The question, then, of whether the reform of teacher education is a continuum, rather than a revolution, remains open. It is quite clear that the Coalition Government envisages a continuing and fundamental shift of power away from local authorities to headteachers, who will have the responsibility for establishing, not only training schools, but an increasingly complex structure of hubs and clusters to cover a whole range of activities.

What is not clear is whether the number of individual proposals for classroom teachers have the same weight and coherence as those for school leaders. One of the most striking sections within 'Re-inventing Schools, Reforming Teaching' was the interview with Judy Sebba, now at Sussex University and an ex-Department for Education Senior Adviser, responsible for research. Her concern was that, in her new role, she had to find ways of allocating funding to teachers who had become disenfranchised from professional development in their schools because they had fallen out with their headteachers. This concern has real resonance, particularly given the new powers the Government is giving to headteachers. This is not an anti-headteacher comment, but, with the removal of ring fenced CPD grants including dedicated funding for the National Strategies, the sole decision maker on CPD funding allocations is the headteacher. This is not a healthy balance. As we asked in the book, how might an equitable right or entitlement to CPD be secured? The White Paper doesn't seem to answer this question despite the fact that 'the Case for Change' emphasised the TALIS report conclusion that:

appraisal and feedback have a strong positive effect on teachers and that an effective school system should have an approach to appraisal and feedback which provides incentives to teachers, rewards good performance and provides development opportunities where needed. (OECD, 2009)

While the Government is to be congratulated for committing itself to the second round of TALIS, there is a consistent argument for it to have analysed more closely the first TALIS study and to have gone back to a much earlier and more profound study, the James Report of 1972 (HMSO, 1972) – which proposed a comprehensive and strategic approach to teacher learning.

I look forward to others initiating the debate on the White Paper's proposals on the new school system, pupil behaviour, accountability, school improvement and school funding. My main focus has been on the future of the teaching profession. In that respect, although there are some green shoot opportunities for teacher development, the Government could have turned its eyes away from structural reform and heeded more closely the aphorisms in the report it so widely praises - the McKinsey Report:

- the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers
- the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instructions
- high performance requires every child to succeed

Although such principles might seem self-evident, creating a coherent strategy for the teaching profession around them would have really placed the English education system on the front foot.

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Reinventing Schools, Reforming Teaching: From Political Visions to Classroom Reality by John Bangs, Maurice Galton and John MacBeath.

Reinventing Schools, Reforming Teaching considers the impact of educational policies on those who translate political priorities into the day-to-day work of schools and classrooms, illustrating how political decisions in education can be explained by the personal experiences, predilections and short-term needs of key decision makers. Based on interviews with leading proponents and critics of educational reform, which reveal the dynamics behind the creation of education policies, the book covers a wide range of themes.

Bangs, J., MacBeath, J., Galton, M. (2010) *Reinventing Schools-Reforming Teaching. From Political Visions to Classroom Reality*. Oxon: Routledge, 978-0-415-56134-1.

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