

Restoring the freedom to teach

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(Reprinted from **Education Politics**, December 2014, No 122)

'There's been too much change and political interference. After workload, this sentiment is perhaps the most common complaint I hear from teachers on my school visits. 'But of course you must change this and that and this' is how the conversation often proceeds.

Such is the paradox of education reform. And thanks to Michael Gove's four year 'reign of terror' it is more apt than ever. Overnight accountability changes; assessment criteria changed on a whim; grade boundaries shifted by diktat - this frenzied churn of 'initiative-itis' has seen the workload of the average primary and secondary classroom teacher increase by nine and six hours a week respectively. Perhaps even more than his wilful denigration of teachers' professionalism, this is why the former Education Secretary was so vilified. It explains why 40% of new teacher trainees leave the job within the first five years. And why too many experienced teachers leave the profession altogether. But far worse: it gets in the way of teachers excelling at their work and passing on their love of learning to our children.



Acknowledging this is the starting point for Labour's approach to the curriculum. Because unfortunately, whilst we all know that the new national curriculum is far from perfect, few policies contribute more to teacher burn-out than wholesale curriculum reform. A period of stability is hardly an exciting rallying cry but it is absolutely vital that the incoming government take account of the classroom realities. We know that assessment criteria have become absurdly reductive in the removal of the valuable practical components to so many GCSEs. We know that, notwithstanding the welcome move to 'Progress Eight', current performance measures retain the capacity to narrow the scope of schooling. And we know that many primary schools need proactive support in developing an alternative to levels. On all of these issues the Labour Party will keep a watching brief

and take the necessary action in government to support our principles of social justice and equal opportunity. But if the last four years have taught us nothing else it is that we must be cognisant of the impact political decisions have upon classroom morale and workload. Therefore, we must pursue our broader reform agenda at a pragmatic pace; through consensus not confrontation.

Our policy on AS and A levels is a perfect example of this contrast. Misguided policy-making; politically timed announcements; a pig-headed refusal to listen to the evidence; and an administrative incompetence bordering on negligence - the decoupling of A and AS levels combines everything we have come to expect from this government's approach to the curriculum. A London School of Economics report has found that decoupling will significantly narrow opportunity. This is a policy which is bad for access and bad for excellence. Universities value the AS Level as a good indication of future potential. Students value the examination as a good indication of their level. Schools value it as a spur to action for the more lackadaisical. Therefore, make no mistake: the next Labour government will pursue a swift reversal.

Yet this is a serious issue in the coming months too - young people are choosing their AS and A level options now. No matter that Labour's policy will actually widen their horizons - the Government should still be spelling out in detail the consequences of a Labour victory for the 2015/16 school year.

Ultimately all this comes as a consequence of deliberately timetabling curriculum reforms to take effect just four months after a general election. At every step Labour has pursued a non-partisan approach because we understand that the political calendar should not interrupt young people's efforts to secure their future happiness and prosperity. But so far the Government has singularly refused to listen to our requests for a pause - indicative of its wider, inconsiderate disdain for the classroom impact of its policies.

However, aside from direct curriculum changes Labour has announced a raft of policies which seek to spread opportunity and broaden young people's educational experience.

For example, we will take the first steps towards baccalaureate qualifications framework with a gold-standard 'Technical Baccalaureate' that, for perhaps the first time in our history, delivers

opportunity to young people who wish to pursue excellence in vocational education.

We will introduce a primary school wrap-around childcare guarantee, which increases opportunities for young people to access the breakfast clubs and after-school activities that widen horizons and cultivate character.

We will roll-out the last Labour Government's successful London Challenge programme across England, so that its spirit of collaboration and sharing resources becomes the national school improvement strategy.

And we will extend this collaborative impulse to private schools with a new Schools Partnership Standard which makes their business rates relief conditional upon sharing specialist teaching, curriculum and extra-curricular resources with local state schools.

Yet arguably our most important curriculum policy is the extension of the academy freedom from the national curriculum to all maintained schools.

Clearly, the National Curriculum must continue to shape standards and expectations. For this reason, we will make sure that delivery of a 'broad and balanced' curriculum becomes a key accountability criterion in the Ofsted framework. After all, if we have learnt nothing else from the scandal in Birmingham schools it is that a narrowly prescribed curriculum is far more open to abuse. What is more, where there is a clear and pressing need to guarantee important curriculum entitlements - as is the case with sex and relationship education - then we will use statutory powers to do so.

But there is no escaping the fact that Labour's freedoms policy is a challenge to those who see the National Curriculum as a 'to the letter' entitlement. However, I would argue that the two principles that motivate this policy - innovation and devolution - offer far richer rewards to the advancement of progressive educational ideals.

All around the world schools are using innovative curriculum approaches to prove there are no limits to what young people can achieve. Schools like High Tech High in San Diego, a school where 98% of a comprehensive intake graduate to college. Or School 21 - a school in a high-disadvantage area of Newham which recently received outstanding in every Ofsted category.

The Conservatives would like to pretend that the main driver for such innovation is structural reform. But what defines these schools' success is a progressive 21st century curriculum approach backed up by an innovative project-based pedagogy and world class teaching. The first principle behind the Free School programme has never been innovation or, for that matter, civic voluntarism. It was always the idea that aggressive, 'fly-or-fail' free market competition was

the most effective way of improving achievement. Quite apart from the enormous financial waste this approach entails, the evidence from Sweden and elsewhere is beginning to highlight the damage such dogma can wreak upon school standards. That is why the next Labour government would end the Free Schools programme.

Similarly, the freedoms offered through the Government's converter academy programme have proven largely chimerical, stymied by micro-management from a petty and overweening centre. This is a complete betrayal of the independence and professional autonomy, alongside a focus upon social justice and educational disadvantage, which were the principles behind Labour's original Sponsored Academy programme.

Yet we should not allow this distortion nor the Free Schools fiasco from inhibiting the progressive potential of bottom-up curriculum innovation. And this conversation should go beyond the debate about the National Curriculum. Because the truth is - as any good teacher knows - that learning in a vibrant classroom goes far beyond responding to programmes of study. No amount of national guidance can remove the need for pedagogical adaptation or any of the other tools of world class teaching. Developing a proper classroom-focused curriculum is an evolving, creative process - it should be school led and tailored by individual teachers in order to meet the learning requirements of individual children. Therefore, extending these freedoms to all maintained schools could help stimulate teachers' ability to achieve this as well as removing extremely unhelpful distinctions that have been mercilessly exploited to create divisions within our state schools system.

Bit by bit the Labour Party will chart a course away from the top-down, target-driven, exam-factory model of schooling which does nothing to nurture character, creativity and wellbeing and, as such, is so spectacularly ill-equipped for the demands of the 21st century. This spirit of creativity should filter into the ethos of our schools system too - but that requires giving teachers and leaders the powers to shape and adapt their own curriculum. As Eileen Wilkinson, Clement Attlee's first Education Minister said:

'It is important not to make plans that are too rigid. Schools must have freedom to experiment, and we need variety for the sake of freshness. We want laughter in the classroom, self-confidence growing every day, eager interest instead of bored uniformity.'

That quote perfectly encapsulates the motivation behind Labour's approach to the curriculum in 2015. But we must not forget the practical demand of taking teachers with us on this journey.

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