

Self Improving Primary Schools

Since 2010 the government has been following a policy of encouraging self improving schools. This is a welcome recognition that worthwhile change in education must always be rooted in those nearest to the children. The practitioners, teachers and parents, should own education policy and their own practice rather than merely following the direction provided for them by some external agency. However we must question whether current government policies and the statutory measures required of primary schools are an active encouragement of self improvement or, on the contrary, a positive deterrence.

The high stakes national assessment tests which schools must administer to children in the school years, one, two and six, will soon be accompanied by baseline assessment early in the admission year. The adverse impact upon curriculum, teaching and learning is well documented, as is the early organisation of segregated teaching groups such as sets and streams which facilitate coaching for tests. School leaders are well aware of the negative effects of such measures but are apprehensive about the impact upon their school and its work should the results not match national expectations. Surveys of practitioner opinion have clearly shown the awareness that organising and teaching to the test is contrary to sound educational principles yet the pressure is such that principles have to be set aside.

It is all too clear that the self improving schools policy is associated with the intended transfer of management responsibility from local education authorities to central government. The local authorities, regardless of party political control, have been denuded of funding over many years and as a consequence find it difficult, at times impossible, to provide support to the schools of the communities they serve, particularly the network of primary schools. Hundreds of schools are now managed from Whitehall and placing responsibility for self improvement with the schools themselves offers a much needed assurance of localism to balance the state centralisation of education. This situation, as too frequently in the past, is more rooted in secondary education with the schools competing for pupils and finance in a market forces environment than in the large number of local primary schools which are better served by a cooperative sharing of resources and expertise.

Ofsted, no longer a professionally independent arbiter of the quality of education, constitutes another instrument of state control. Inspectors protest that their judgements are based upon wider evidence than the mere review of test outcomes yet it is seldom that such data is overlooked and practitioners remain deeply sceptical. The government has long abandoned the principle that methods of teaching are decided by schools in the best interests of their pupils. Despite the reservations of a majority of teachers, by centralised diktat, synthetic phonics must be the predominant method of teaching beginning readers, first and fast, and Ofsted has to check that the instruction is obeyed.

The government's rhetoric regarding the ability of primary schools to choose and implement measures of improvement is nothing more than a confidence trick. Only the bravest and most determined of practitioners can attempt it with any prospect of success and even then they are forced to make many concessions to the demands made centrally. Improvement is seen entirely in the state's terms and the pressure placed upon teachers and parents is so

great that it denies the confidence and trust which are essential if professional initiatives are to be initiated.

The schools minister made the government's position crystal clear when he commented on the 2018 national test results --- "Sats were introduced in 1990 to hold schools to account. That's the purpose of them. It's that holding schools to account that helps drive up standards across the board". For government ministers the driving up of standards means increasing the scores achieved in national testing, everything else is of much less importance to them and current policies confirm this absolutely. Too many politicians have little concern about the true quality of primary education and they don't really care about schools self improving.