

In this concluding chapter we provide an overview of our central findings on changes in primary classroom practice over the last decade. We then go on to consider these findings in relation to current debates on teacher professionalism and policy makers' approaches to educational change.

### Classroom practice

The phrase “coming full circle” was used a total of 20 times in our interviews by 15 different teachers, despite the fact that it was only twice mentioned by an interviewer (in response to teachers talking about the cyclical nature of change). Similar phrases such as “coming full cycle” and “reinventing the wheel” were also used by teachers, suggesting that this was quite a common theme in teachers' perspectives. Most such responses were expressed in a cynical manner and were sometimes accompanied by explicit criticism of government policy:

*It means phenomenal extra work for staff and when you are just reinventing the wheel and you look at Excellence and enjoyment and you think “we've come in a full circle” and you think “is it time I retired?” (Headteacher, 408, Nov 2003)*

*The Excellence and enjoyment thing — it seems to me it's telling teachers to start putting back into teaching what they had taken off them in the first place. ... It's quite insulting that...the politicians will never put their hands up and say, “Well we were wrong, we overdid this”. They will say, “Look, you're not putting enough enjoyment and excellence in your lessons” and it's constant beating...whichever colour government, it is any government. (Science coordinator, 300, March 2004)*

The irony of the “full circle” perception of the primary strategy's *Excellence and enjoyment* (DfES, 2003a) was forcibly brought home to us in relation to curriculum planning by the gap of a decade between fieldwork visits to some of our schools. For example, there were schools where teachers in 1992-94 were attempting to build subject knowledge and skills from the newly introduced national curriculum into their pre-existing topic themes (eg Webb and Vulliamy, 1996, ch.3; Vulliamy *et al.*, 1997). On returning to these same schools in 2003-05, we found that some of them, having moved entirely to separate subject teaching in the late '90s, were trying to think of possible integrating topics whereby they could link together relevant parts of their separate subject teaching.

However, as argued in chapter 6, whilst a return to topics might superficially suggest a process of coming full circle, most teachers were at pains to argue that this was far from being the case. Instead, they suggested that any return to aspects of an integrated curriculum would be on the basis, not of the '80s topic-web approach, but on a foundation of incorporating relevant structured learning objectives from different subjects within a topic. This is in accord with the analysis from both our observations and the interview data — namely that the last five years or so have witnessed such extensive changes in KS2 classrooms that any notion of a wholesale return to earlier practices is out of the question. These changes relate to teaching approaches (such as the sharing of learning objectives with children and the use of more whole-class teaching), curricular organisation (such as the elimination of the integrated day)

and seating patterns (moves towards seating in rows), as well as to the greatly increased use of ICT, especially whiteboards, and of classroom assistants.

### Primary teacher professionalism

As suggested in chapter 1, the New Labour government is attempting to modernise teaching by promoting a “new professionalism”. The mechanisms for this transition are laid out in the policy document *Teachers: meeting the challenge of change* (DfEE, 1998b) and in a subsequent paper *Professionalism and trust: the future of teachers and teaching* (DfES, 2001). This new professionalism is based upon a discourse of instructional leadership, school-based accountability, new public management and the measurement of performance indicators in an attempt to raise quality in ways that have already been witnessed in other countries such as the US (Apple, 1996) and Australia (Smyth *et al.*, 2000). Many educationalists have looked critically at the effects of this government-imposed conception of teacher professionalism (eg Richards, 1999; Dadds, 2001; Hayes, 2002). It has been argued that the associated intensification of teachers’ work, together with increased prescription in both curriculum and pedagogy, is resulting in the deskilling of the teacher profession and a loss of professional autonomy. This in turn is having detrimental consequences on teacher morale, teacher retention and teacher recruitment.

Day (2000) has suggested that “teachers’ voices are an important and under-represented part of the macro debate which focuses on whether educational reforms in England and elsewhere are resulting in the ‘deprofessionalization’ or ‘technicization’ of teachers’ work or whether they result in ‘reprofessionalization’” (pp.110-111). With this in mind, one of the aims of our research was to give primacy to teachers’ perspectives on the New Labour reforms in order to supplement earlier research in the PACE project (Osborn *et al.*, 2000) on the impact of the Conservative government’s reforms on primary teacher professionalism in the early ‘90s.

A persistent theme of our interview data was how teachers viewed the core of their professionalism as their ability to motivate and develop children’s learning, and to boost their confidence and self-image. As one deputy head put it: “Teachers have a definite sense of being a professional and a caring professional because at the heart of it all is the child and doing the best for the child and moving that child on.” However, such a concern for the child exhibited tensions that reflected profound shifts in the discourses of teacher professionalism as a result of New Labour’s policy reforms. Thus, for example, a holistic child-centred concern to benefit children’s lives shifts in the “new professionalism” discourse to “making a difference” that is viewed more narrowly in terms of raising standards, measured by test results, of all children and closing the gap between high and low achievers (see, for example, Hopkins, 2003, p.60). Other examples of such discursive shifts in the meaning of key terms pertaining to the concept of teacher professionalism can be found in Locke *et al.* (2005).

Such a tension can be seen in teachers’ varied reactions to the imposition of a new prescribed curriculum. On the one hand, a common response was to

regret the loss of teachers' flexibility and creativity with, for example, a head commenting: "The reason why most people come into primary teaching is because they want to make a difference to children's lives and they are creative about the way they want to do it and I do think that most of the initiatives have stifled creativity." On the other hand, as illustrated in chapter 7, there was a very widespread perception that the introduction of a prescribed curriculum, backed by QCA-provided resources, had led to a more professional approach to teaching and to improvements in children's learning. The introduction of the government's primary strategy (DfES, 2003a) was viewed by many as a welcome return to a middle path between too much teacher freedom on the one hand and too much prescription on the other. It was seen as giving teachers the opportunity to take a more flexible approach and put back elements such as cross-curricular work and creative arts subjects that had been lost in the focus on the "effective" at the expense of the "affective" (McNess *et al.*, 2003); for one head this explicitly meant "allowing us our professionalism back!"

Contrary to the expressed fears of many educationalists (eg Davies and Edwards, 2001; Dadds, 2001; Hayes, 2002) that centralised prescription of pedagogy would result in "deprofessionalisation" and deskilling, this is not generally the way in which teachers perceived it. As illustrated in both chapters 2 and 7, teachers saw the strategies as contributing to their professionalism by increasing their effectiveness and giving them the confidence and awareness to explain precisely what they were doing and why. Interestingly, Silcock (2002) in his survey of members of the Association for the Study of Primary Education into the effects of legislated changes on teacher professionalism found that central prescription of literacy and numeracy was the item with the most conflicting responses, with academics in higher education being overwhelmingly negative and practitioners (teachers and LEA advisors) being very positive. He also found that practitioners' perspectives on professionalism were strongly filtered through the core values of putting the child first. This was by contrast with the academics from higher education in his sample who typically explained their views "by reference to abstract principle (the nature of teaching and professionalism, historical trends etc)" where "legislation is judged in a somewhat sceptical manner, with legislators blamed for a decline in teacher professionalism" (p.144).

Research suggests that secondary teachers' perspectives on the curriculum and pedagogic reforms are much more critical than those of primary teachers (Helsby and McCulloch, 1996). A key difference is that secondary teachers have a strong subject identity derived from their degree, and in postgraduate teacher training "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman, 1986) is welded to this to give an inter-related pedagogical identity. As argued by Locke (2001), this strong pre-existing body of professional knowledge "may well sit awkwardly or in conflict with the curriculum they are expected to teach" (p.8).

Primary teachers, on the other hand, are expected to teach a wide range of subjects. Research indicates that, especially after the introduction of a broad-

based national curriculum, they lacked confidence in their knowledge of and ability to teach many of the subjects embodied within the curriculum (Bennett *et al.*, 1994). Moreover, prior to the curriculum and pedagogy reforms, there was little attempt in teacher training to give specific guidance on primary teaching pedagogy. A consequence of this is that, as illustrated in chapter 7, many older teachers' reflections on changes in their teaching resonate with the experience of Strong, whom Earl *et al.* (2003, p.26) quote as an illustration of what has been called an era of "uninformed professionalism":

*I started teaching [in England] in 1972. There was no curriculum. You could do what you liked ... I hadn't the faintest idea of what I was doing but I went out there and did what I could. ... Nobody should have been expected to do what I was expected to do.*

Given this context, most of our interviewees thought that the curriculum and pedagogic guidance they had received had made them better teachers and improved their children's learning. Many also freely admitted that major deficiencies in their prior teaching had been remedied by such guidance.

As argued in chapter 4, the dramatic increase in whole-class teaching in recent years was a consequence not only of government prescription in the strategies but also of the increase in the use of ICT and particularly of interactive whiteboards. The government's large investment in ICT in primary schools has proved a major challenge for teachers and our evidence indicates widespread uptake of its use. However, when commenting on such changes in relation to teachers' perceptions of their professionalism, there was general agreement that, despite the difficulties some teachers are experiencing with such ICT innovations, the new skills required by them together with their potential for improving children's motivation and learning experiences, were contributing to an enhancement of teachers' professionalism.

In relation to assessment, we found a lot of evidence that teachers had developed more confidence and increased skills in how they assessed pupils. Teachers felt that the greater knowledge of individual children's attainment derived from more formal teacher assessment contributed to better planning and helped children's learning. However, such potential benefits were more than offset by teachers' very negative view of the impact of national testing and the associated performance tables. The latter were felt seriously to distort both the balance of the curriculum and the process of teaching, especially in Year 6 classes, and to cause many children considerable stress and anxiety. Teaching to the tests went against teachers' sense of professionalism. Nevertheless it was deemed necessary in order to prepare the children thoroughly and therefore reduce their stress and enable them to do as well as possible.

The emphasis upon testing and performance tables is related to the intensifying pressures for external accountability that have increasingly impacted on primary teachers' lives over the last decade. Our interview data suggest that there are several ways in which the surveillance culture of "low-trust" schooling (Troman, 2000) and consequent "audit explosion" (Jeffrey, 2002) impact negatively on teachers' conceptions of their professionalism in relation to

classroom practice. Teachers' energies are directed away from their core role of teaching children towards the escalating paperwork required to provide evidence of effective teaching to external bodies: policies and plans for Ofsted, analysis of target-setting for LEAs, a continual demand for written responses to national and LEA initiatives, and reports to parents and governors. The surveillance culture is also perceived by teachers as symptomatic of the low regard in which they are held by the government, the media and the public.

In addition to government reforms in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, the expansion in numbers and responsibilities of TAs as part of New Labour's workforce remodelling clearly has potential implications for teacher professionalism. The large increase in the number of TAs was strongly welcomed by almost all our interviewees. The reasons for this were not so much that it reduced teacher workload (planning for and sharing plans with TAs could in some cases increase teachers' workload), but that having an extra adult to help with group and individual work markedly improved the quality of teaching and learning. This accords with the findings of other research studies into the use of TAs in schools (eg Smith, P., *et al.*, 2004) and also with Ofsted's (2002b) evaluation of their role based on inspection evidence.

Brehony and Deem (2005) suggest that this aspect of workforce remodelling has similarities with the restructuring of the National Health Service workforce where "the periphery is now composed of healthcare assistants and 'associate professionals'", with such remodelling in schools further "enhancing the trend to transform teachers into managers of teams of support staff" (p.402). There is some suggestion of this in our research: one fast-track teacher we interviewed said that "teachers are going to become less and less of teachers and more and more of managers, but not managers of children". Despite this, class teachers did not generally view the increased use of TAs as in any way detracting from their teaching or their contact with children. However, as illustrated in chapter 5 and with only a few exceptions, teachers generally drew upon their conceptions of teacher professionalism to strongly resist the notion that TAs should teach whole classes to release PPA time.

In response to the New Labour government's agenda, notions of primary teacher professionalism are undergoing review and reconstruction by primary teachers (see also Woods and Jeffrey, 2002). Traditional hallmarks of a profession, such as autonomy, become severely constrained when teachers are increasingly accountable to mandatory change from the government. However, the view that such government reforms "instantly took autonomy away from teachers, together with the right to call oneself a 'professional' in terms of autonomous practice" (Bryan, 2004, p.142) was not one shared by the teachers in our sample. Of course it must be recognised that our sample did not include teachers who had left teaching: prior research for the York-Jyväskylä Teacher Professionalism project suggested this view was held by some teachers who had chosen, or had been forced, to leave the profession – see, for example, Webb *et al.*, 2004 and Webb, 2005.

### Policy makers' approaches to educational change

In our discussion of the introduction of the national curriculum, we used Doyle and Ponder's (1977-78) article on teachers' "practicality ethic" to illustrate how "teachers take on only those new ideas which are consonant with their existing practices" (Vulliamy and Webb, 1993, p.39) — in this case by using the "processes" rather than the "content" component of national curriculum guidance to preserve progressive teaching practices such as group work and investigative work. Similarly, Galton *et al.* (1999) use Doyle and Ponder's work to explain why a comparison of primary practice in 1996 with that two decades earlier revealed little change; instead, teachers had "bolted" the new curriculum onto existing practices (p.180). What an accumulation of research throughout the '90s demonstrated was that teachers' self-identities and educational ideologies are powerful mediators in terms of their interpretations of and responses to imposed changes. Allied to this was an argument that teachers' practices could not be changed by government diktat, except in a very superficial sense. Instead a sense of teacher ownership of the change was required, implying an acceptance of it within their prior values and educational ideologies before a more deep-seated change in their practices could ensue. Thus, Osborn *et al.* (1992) conclude, following the early stages of the PACE research:

*Educational change cannot be brought about simply by manipulating institutional structures or by issuing policy directives. To be successful it must involve teachers from the outset and take into account the real influences on teachers' professional motivation and practice. (p.150)*

Our own research for the York-Finnish Project concurs with this, suggesting that English teachers' responses to the pre-New Labour reforms of the '90s resulted either in a process of mediation and adaptation to preserve existing practices (Vulliamy *et al.*, 1997) or in a process of "change without commitment" (Webb and Vulliamy, 1999b). With the latter, external agendas were being met out of fear or a perceived necessity for the image of the school, but without teachers themselves wanting to change or believing that the changes represented an improvement. We argued that such change without commitment was likely to increase, given further measures at national and local level to prescribe, manipulate and police teachers' work. It could be viewed as a survival strategy at a time of intensification in teachers' work, especially at the whole-school level. Such a strategy was employed to reduce stress and to try to conserve time and personal resources for those aspects of teaching, such as building relationships with children, which were priorities for most teachers but were increasingly being eroded by time pressures.

The research reported here suggests that the New Labour reforms have ushered in a new era in terms of both policy implementation and teacher response, which in turn requires some reassessment of previously accepted analyses (including our own) of educational change. New Labour's approach to change is encapsulated in the "high challenge, high support" vision

described by Michael Barber (Barber, 2001, p.191), who directed the DfES's Standards and Effectiveness Unit before moving on to be Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. This vision is fuelled by a belief that public services need to be radically reformed in the context of the new low-tax economies associated with global economic pressures. They believe that, without such reforms, the continuation of support for such services by the public will be threatened and a consequent flight to private education will result in a further intensification of social and economic inequalities in access to schooling. The starting point for such a reform was a belief that "the education system will never be world class unless virtually all children learn to read, write and calculate to high standards before they leave primary school", and that "at the time of the 1997 election the national data showed how far we were from achieving this goal" (Barber, 2001, p.23). Consequently New Labour's first major educational policy was the introduction of the NLS and NNS, which have been described as the "most ambitious large-scale educational reform initiative in the world" (Earl *et al.*, 2003, p. 11).

As discussed in chapter 3, we are sceptical of the government's claim that the strategies have been responsible for a dramatic increase in literacy and numeracy standards in primary schools. However, whilst recognising that the impact of the strategies on test results is unknown (and in our view is likely to remain so, given the methodological challenges of assessing this), the evidence presented in this report demonstrates the profound impact of the strategies on teachers' classroom practices, not only in literacy and numeracy teaching but throughout the curriculum. Moreover, their implementation has led many teachers to reassess their values in relation to effective practice. Consequently we have witnessed far more changes in teaching approaches since the introduction of the strategies than in the previous two decades. That such changes should ensue despite the fact that, as argued in chapter 2, teachers strongly resented the strategies' implementation initially and felt they had absolutely no ownership of them, suggests the need for some modification to prior theorising on school change.

Barber (2001) argues that "all evidence suggests that successful reform requires a combination of top down and bottom up change" (p.37). However, he also suggests that the initial stages of such government-imposed top-down change might need to eschew the need for teacher ownership:

*Winning hearts and minds is not the best first step in any process of urgent change ... Sometimes it is necessary to mandate the change, implement it well, consciously challenge the prevailing culture and have the courage to sustain it until beliefs shift. The driving force at this critical juncture is leadership ... it is the vocation of leaders to take people where they have never been before and to show them a new world from which they do not want to return. (quoted in Mahony et al., 2004, p.452)*

Educationalists have generally been highly critical of such government control and the limitations on teacher autonomy that it implies. In the case of the strategies, critics have argued that such pedagogical prescription will result in

teachers becoming “little more than ‘operatives’ whose professional expertise is reduced to a command of the technical aspects of teaching and classroom management necessary to the pursuance of state-sanctioned standards” and that “the literacy and numeracy hours and the exemplar schemes of work could be seen as the pedagogical equivalent of painting by numbers” (Davies and Edwards, 2001, p.100).

As illustrated in chapter 2, the evidence suggests that teachers complained about having to follow a prescribed formula, even down to the timings of particular parts of lessons, in the early implementation of the strategies (especially of the NLS). However, we have shown how, over time, teachers not only modified their teaching approaches to the NLS and NNS but they also came to reassess the worth of aspects of the strategies they had initially implemented begrudgingly. This could be viewed as yet another example of teachers mediating policy change; for example, Woods *et al.* (2001) have suggested that teachers “have managed to appropriate the literacy hour as they have the national curriculum” (p.85). However, our evidence suggests that it is very different from previous such appropriations because it appears to have led many of our teachers to a change in what they think benefits children's learning. After initially being forced to change their practice, they have come to recognise the limitations of their prior commitment to activity-led, broad-based topics and some of the benefits of a more structured and focused approach to their teaching, where objectives are shared with their pupils.

Far from acting as “operatives”, the manner in which teachers adapted the strategies and then applied key lessons from them to their general teaching across the whole curriculum (see chapter 7) suggests the approach of a professional rather than that of a technician. Teachers themselves generally saw it that way, arguing that the enhanced skills they were gaining through the strategies and other innovations, such as ICT, were making them more professional rather than less so. At the same time, many argued that they were not being perceived by the general public as more professional. As one teacher put it: “I have to be far more professional [now] ... however, I don't feel that I am recognised and treated as a professional.” This, as Barber (2001) admits, is a direct consequence of the fact that “in order to promote radical change the government has to spell out a compelling critique of the present but, in doing so, too often portrays schools and teachers negatively” (p.37). This negative portrayal undermined teacher confidence. According to one teacher: “teachers' confidence levels have plummeted” even though “we do feel that we are doing a better job now”. This comment was made very early in our fieldwork (June 2003). Our subsequent observations and interviews suggested that, since then, teachers' confidence levels have continued to rise as they become more secure in their new teaching approaches.

## Conclusion

The decade between our first ATL study and its follow-up in 2003-05 has been an extremely eventful one for KS2 classroom practice in English primary schools. The New Labour government has embarked on radical changes intended to raise standards, especially in literacy and numeracy, and to embrace a new professionalism. This has involved both challenge, in the form of prescribed methods of teaching and the setting of ambitious targets, and support in the form of increased government resources for schools. The latter was very evident to us on returning to the 50 schools after a decade, since most of them had undergone extensive building programmes and showed evidence of greatly increased teaching resources, especially in relation to ICT.

We have found evidence of major changes in classroom practices and of a teaching profession whose confidence levels, whilst severely dented through the earlier stages of change, show signs of recovering. However, the prognosis for the future is a mixed one. On the one hand, as suggested in chapter 6, the primary strategy might enable teachers to blend the best of their previous approaches, including greater flexibility to preserve creative styles of teaching and learning, with the best aspects of newer approaches introduced in the NLS and NNS. On the other hand, if the pressures of testing and performance tables are maintained, together with the pressures of other external accountability audit mechanisms, these seem likely to continue to have detrimental consequences for the processes of teaching and learning, and for the well-being of teachers and their pupils.