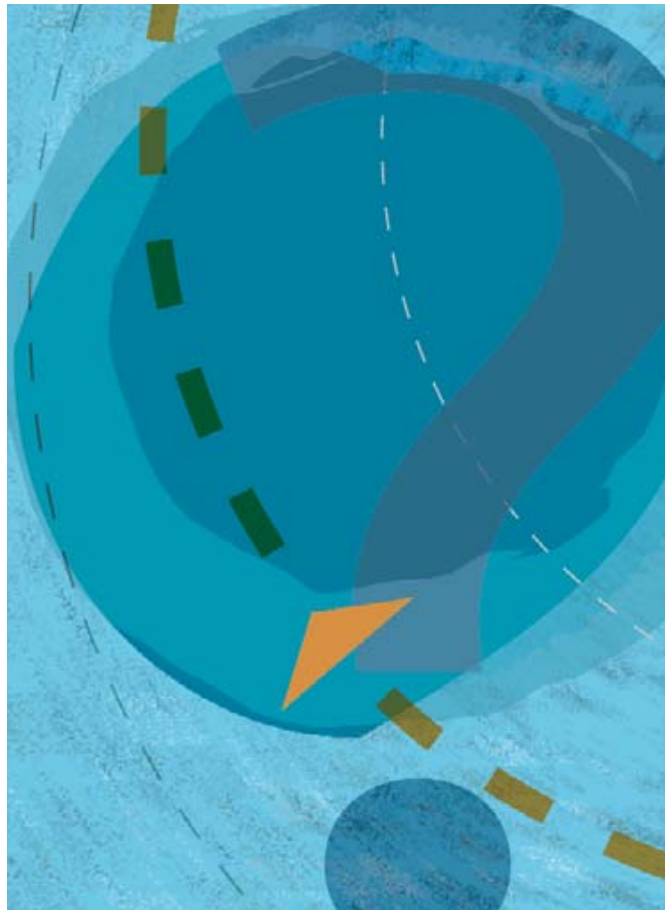


## Coming full circle?

The impact of New Labour's education policies  
on primary school teachers' work

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for the **Association of Teachers and Lecturers**



Report summary

This is a summary of a detailed and comprehensive 150-page report commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

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This report is the result of an ongoing (2003-06) research project commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) into the impact of the New Labour government's educational policies on primary school teachers' work.

The research addresses the following questions.

- What effects are the New Labour government's educational policies having on primary teachers' attitudes, values and experiences?
- What are primary school teachers' perceptions of the changes in their roles and responsibilities over the last decade?
- How do primary teachers respond to these changes and how do they impact on teacher self identity, notions of teacher professionalism, job satisfaction and school cultures?
- What formal and informal strategies are adopted by teachers, especially headteachers, individually and collaboratively to cope with, manage, harness and/or challenge the demands made of them?

This report focuses on the impact of government reforms on primary teachers' classroom practice at Key Stage 2 (KS2) and on teachers' perceptions of the ways in which the resulting changes affected their professionalism. It therefore concentrates particularly on the first two research questions.

The research incorporates a longitudinal dimension by replicating a previous ATL-funded research project carried out between 1992 and 1994 in 50 primary schools in England and Wales. The 1992-94 ATL study produced two research reports. The first *Eating the elephant bit by bit*, identified the impact of the Education Reform Act 1988 (ERA) and the introduction of the national curriculum on classroom practice. The second, *After the deluge*, examined the impact of the ERA on whole-school issues and the management of change.

In the research summarised in this report, the same qualitative research strategy based on condensed fieldwork was used as in the 1992-94 research. In its first phase (2003-05), this project involved day-long visits to 50 schools in 16 local education authorities (LEAs) throughout England (the term "LEA" is used throughout the report as opposed to "local authority" or "LA"). It was comprised of 188 tape-recorded in-depth interviews with primary teachers in these schools, supplemented by school documentation and classroom observations of 51 lessons. With two exceptions, the sample schools were the same as in the earlier study.

*We had the national literacy and numeracy strategies and so it was very set what objectives you need to cover in your year group. Whereas before literacy and numeracy, a lot of classes just worked through a text book and there seemed no sort of link .... That has completely gone now. The children can see the purpose of one lesson and the one before and the one coming next. (Year 5 teacher, Nov 2004)*

While teachers in the 50 schools made many criticisms of the national literacy strategy (NLS), despite some caveats the national numeracy strategy (NNS) received overwhelming support. It was regarded as a better strategy with more to offer pupils, teachers and schools.

Teachers identified various subject-specific benefits and limitations of the strategies. However, in general the strategies were viewed very positively because they promoted continuity of teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy across all English schools, and supplied ideas and resources for teachers. They were also regarded as providing a structure for lessons, with learning objectives that helped children to understand the purpose of their work and to work harder.

Despite their support for the strategies, teachers were highly critical of the government for imposing them “in such a way that ‘You don’t have to do it; it is an option but woe betide anybody who doesn’t!’”. Consequently, the strategies were viewed as an expression of the government’s lack of trust in the teaching profession — a public declaration that teachers lacked expertise in teaching basic subjects, which further lowered morale and reduced teacher self confidence. The pressure to comply with the strategies exerted through Ofsted inspections and LEAs was greatly resented.

Schools were adapting the strategies by:

- tailoring them to the needs of the children
- taking into account the strengths and limitations of the teaching staff
- abandoning aspects considered unnecessary or unsuccessful
- bringing back valued practices that were squeezed out by the strategies.

Not surprisingly given the criticisms, the NLS was subject to much more adaptation than the NNS. This took a variety of forms ranging from “modifications in small ways by different staff as they need to” to major changes in whole-school policy, such as no longer teaching a daily dedicated literacy hour and incorporating aspects of the NLS across the curriculum. The perceived freedom to make changes engendered a sense of “being back in control” that was crucial to the restoration of teachers’ confidence. However, the majority of schools weary of change opted to proceed slowly.

As a result of teaching methods promoted by the strategies, the literacy and numeracy lessons observed for this project were characterised by:

- the specification of learning objectives and the sharing of these with pupils
- the use of more whole-class teaching with introductory oral sessions and plenaries.

Teachers considered that these teaching methods, which were also being applied across the curriculum, had greatly improved the quality of their teaching.

*At the moment anything that we are trying to do at the top end of the school is dominated by the fact that this school is going to be doing something on which it will be judged.... It frightens me because it is a huge barrier to what we want to do and everything that we are doing with the curriculum I am getting the question back: "But that is the term that we do SATs revision, that is the term we do booster classes." ...come next October the file is going to land on your desk and if you are an E or D school it reflects upon the whole school. Now whether you like it or not ... that is where the staff are coming from, and now I want to try and change that culture because it doesn't actually preach good teaching; it just preaches good SATs results. (Headteacher, Feb 2004)*

An unremitting pressure was how headteachers described the impact of the government's national literacy and numeracy targets. This led to headteachers putting pressure on teachers to improve pupil attainment and, in turn, they described how this pressure was passed on to pupils. In response to complaints by headteachers about the adverse effects on schools of the unrealistic targets set for them by LEAs, ministers told schools in 2003 that they could set their own KS2 targets. However, the headteachers in our sample found that they were still expected to set targets to fit in with LEA predictions.

The teachers in our 50 schools felt "testing has gone too far", resulting in primary schools being "over tested, scrutinised and squeezed" with "no allowance for professional judgement". Preparation for the tests continued to distort the KS2 curriculum especially in Year 6 (Y6). Schools provided booster classes, made use of standardised tests and QCA optional tests for Years 3, 4 and 5, and offered various initiatives to support children's test preparation such as homework programmes and after-school SATs clubs.

Y6 teachers tried to achieve a balance between getting pupils to realise the importance of doing their best in the SATs but without making them over anxious. However, they found that many pupils attached considerable importance to test outcomes. While some confident, competitive and high-attaining pupils were regarded as finding the challenge of tests exhilarating, for many others, particularly lower achievers, the tests were demotivating, stressful and alienating. Teachers held an overwhelmingly negative view of SATs and would like to see them abolished. However, because headteachers considered that national tests were crucial to driving up standards, only eight headteachers were completely against them. All the headteachers were highly critical of performance tables and the technical problems associated with the value-added version of these.

The schools were collecting and analysing increasing amounts of assessment data, particularly performance data, aided by the development of school management information and communications (ICT) technology. Data analysis generally focused on the progress of individuals and groups of pupils, and strengths and weaknesses in the coverage of literacy and numeracy. However, issues were also raised about the differences in the quality of teaching between teachers. Increasingly the performance of teachers was being judged according to their ability to enable pupils to meet attainment targets.

*Children are excited by ICT and if they can use it within their learning...Especially some of our children who aren't particularly academic it will help them to succeed whereas if you put a book in front of them: "I can't do that". We have invested in a lot of software that will encourage them, like electronic books so instead of sitting with a book in literacy it is looking at the Smart Board and they are interacting with it. Quite a lot of our children that are lower achievers are so excited by the fact that they have got this technology in the classroom. They are engrossed before the lesson has even started whereas otherwise they may be demotivated.  
(Headteacher, June 2005)*

Across the 50 schools there was considerable diversity in existing and planned ICT provision. This appeared to be particularly dependent upon the availability of funding in addition to that made available for ICT by the government and headteachers' knowledge of, and expertise in, ICT.

Over the last decade there has been a dramatic increase first in the development of ICT suites in primary schools and second in the installation of interactive whiteboards in classrooms. Both of these developments promote whole-class participation in lessons and require the teacher to lead (directly or indirectly), manage and monitor children's learning in these lessons. This is in sharp contrast to the predominant situation in the original 1992-94 study where ICT use generally occurred when individual, pairs or small groups of children worked largely unsupported at one or two classroom computers, while the teacher taught and/or monitored the rest of the class engaged in often unrelated work.

Teachers in our sample used ICT to provide additional learning opportunities for children. The general view amongst headteachers was that "it just enhances what is already there and, used by a good practitioner, there are some absolutely amazing lessons". Further comments were that: "It is just another tool in people's repertoire", which "would not revolutionise teaching in schools" as "you are never, ever really going to find that it is going to take the place of the teacher".

Ongoing technical problems were a very frustrating aspect of ICT in the majority of schools. Generally teachers regarded technical support as inadequate and/or insufficiently responsive to school needs. This created considerable pressure, particularly for ICT coordinators, and generated extra work. ICT coordinators also experienced difficulties in boosting teacher confidence and competence in ICT and encouraging them to experiment. The increased personal and professional use of ICT by teachers appeared to be greatly aided and promoted where schools had been able to provide teachers with laptops.

The other major issue raised was e-safety, with increasing teacher awareness of how to teach children about the risks and alert parents to the possible dangers of the internet.

In a few schools pupils:

- exercised choice and decision making in their learning, such as through the use of digital cameras and PowerPoint presentations
- used the school intranet and the internet for independent learning within the school day
- pursued school-initiated interests at home and in after-school clubs, and shared these with peers in class the next day.

However, only very few schools and some individual teachers were exploring ICT development as a central feature in teaching and learning in ways that began to challenge existing school timetables, organisation and processes. Lack of teacher time and training, the national curriculum content to be covered, and the pressures exerted by target setting and tests in literacy and numeracy combined to discourage teachers from creating situations where pupils could exercise more choice over what and how they learn. Nevertheless, as revealed by our data, ICT is contributing to change in teachers' classroom practice.

*Last week she [the TA] was away and it was a shock. It was like having your arm chopped off. Right in the middle of a lesson you don't think and you look for reassurance from your support assistant. You question one another like a role play during the lesson. (Year 4/5 teacher, Dec 2003)*

The recent rapid expansion in the numbers and responsibilities of teaching assistants (TAs), particularly in response to the government's workforce remodelling agenda, has increased considerably the number of adults in the school community with whom both pupils and teachers can interact. It is now commonplace for primary teachers to share their classrooms for all or part of each day with one or more TAs, who contribute to whole-class teaching and work with individuals and groups. Teachers perceived the support that TAs gave pupils as promoting pupil's self esteem, motivation and achievement. The contribution of TAs was regarded by many teachers as crucial to their effective classroom management and teaching.

By the 2004 school visits most schools had put strategies in place to relieve teachers of the 24 administrative tasks (as required by the workload agreement). However, teachers often appeared not to take full advantage of these for a variety of reasons, including preferring to use any extra TA time to support children. The majority of teachers totally disagreed with the notion that TAs might take whole classes on a regular basis to provide planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time. In only 6 of the 50 schools were plans in place for TAs to provide PPA time. These plans were dependent on one or more TAs in those schools achieving higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) status.

The growth in the numbers and expertise of TAs has implications for teachers' work and professionalism. On the one hand, the work of TAs and teachers is viewed as becoming more interchangeable, with a few headteachers claiming their TAs are "treated like teachers" and "indistinguishable from teachers" when viewed in the classroom. On the other hand, the growing number of TAs in classrooms is demanding new skills of cooperation, delegation and mentoring from teachers, as well as giving them additional status as managers. The workforce remodelling agenda was viewed both as a threat to teacher professionalism and as a means to enhance it by opening up new possibilities.

*The strategies did focus people but it made them too compartmentalised. You knew what you had to do — you had to teach this, and this, and this, and you lost that flexibility and creativity. I think it's gone full circle. Creativity and flexibility are being valued now, and a lot of the constraints are being removed by the government because I think they've seen a lot was lost because of that. (Headteacher, June 2004)*

The breadth of the primary national strategy (PNS) resulted in its aims being viewed as “all intermingled”, “diffuse”, “wide-ranging” and “all encompassing”, and therefore open to a variety of interpretations as to its nature and priorities. However, it was seen first and foremost as heralding a “freeing-up” of the curriculum, which enabled teachers to exercise professional judgement and sanctioned them to depart from government and LEA recommendations. Consequently, the PNS appears to be playing an important role in boosting teacher confidence and self-belief.

Schools already involved in their own or LEA-wide curriculum and/or teaching and learning initiatives saw these as consistent with the recommendations of the PNS. The most popular initiatives involved:

- exploring alternative teaching approaches as a way of personalising learning
- experimentation with cross-curricular work which often took the form of variously labelled theme/project/topic days or weeks
- the blocking of some subjects to provide longer periods of time for in-depth work in the foundation subjects.

For headteachers there was an irresolvable tension between the government's drive for excellence through the standards agenda and the desire for schools to be creative and foster enjoyment. Headteachers also commonly cited the curriculum dominance of the core subjects and the lack of flexibility, confidence and ideas of teachers trained since the introduction of the strategies as further constraining the innovative and/or in-depth treatment of the foundation subjects.

*I think that what we must be careful not to lose is the creativity and the freedom of the old system. When I say that, I don't mean we should go back to... "oh it is a topic, what topic shall I have...!" I think what you have got to try and do is keep the rigour and the structure that these new things give, but also keep the best of what we had before. So there is a little bit of flexibility, and okay if it snows one day well then you make the most of it, or a happening that you need to cash in on, that you don't feel...I can't do that, I am supposed to be doing whatever it is that you are supposed to be doing. (SENCO, March 2004)*

A combination of factors, but especially the influence of the strategies, has led to widespread changes in primary classroom practice since the New Labour government came into power in 1997. These changes include:

- a move from an activity-based, topic-centred curriculum to an objectives-led, subject-centred one
- a dramatic increase in whole-class teaching at the beginning and end or throughout lessons
- lessons with instructional introductory and plenary sessions
- teachers maintaining much tighter control over the pace and direction of lessons than before
- a virtual eradication in our sample of certain practices, such as the integrated day and open-plan classrooms, which were often associated with the Plowden "progressive" era
- changes in classroom seating patterns with very much more use of pupils seated in rows rather than grouped around tables
- much greater use of ICT facilities to teach the whole class as well as smaller groups or individuals within it
- the dramatic increase in the use of TAs within the classroom.

Some of our interviewees, who had been teaching since the early '90s, compared current practice with that of a decade or more earlier in relation to the curriculum (both its content and organisation), teaching methods, and planning and recording. Generally the changes in curriculum and teaching methods were viewed positively with interviewees in many cases being highly critical of their previous practice. The increase in paperwork for accountability purposes in terms of planning and recording was, however, viewed very negatively.

Perhaps not surprisingly, recent studies show little evidence that the ambitious aims of the strategies to use "interactive whole-class teaching" to promote higher quality teacher-pupil dialogue and higher levels of pupils' thinking and understanding have been achieved. Nevertheless, as evidenced in this report, there have been extensive changes in classroom practice. In addition, our analysis of the impact of ICT in chapter 4, the use of TAs in chapter 5 and some of the lessons observed suggest that these, in combination with the strategies, may give rise to higher quality levels of teacher-pupil interaction.

*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....*  
(Science coordinator, March 2004)

The cyclical nature of change was a common theme in teachers' perspectives. The phrase "coming full circle" was used by 15 different teachers, while others used similar phrases such as "coming full cycle" and "reinventing the wheel". Most such responses were expressed in a cynical manner and were sometimes accompanied by explicit criticism of government policy.

Thus, for example, in 1992-94 many schools were attempting to build subject knowledge and skills from the newly introduced national curriculum into their pre-existing topic themes. In 2003-05, in these same schools that had moved entirely to separate subject teaching in the late '90s, teachers were trying to think of topics/themes which enabled relevant parts of their separate subject lessons to be linked. However, as argued in chapter 6, whilst a "return to topics" might superficially suggest the process of coming full circle, most teachers were at pains to argue this was far from being the case.

Contrary to the expressed fears of many educationalists that centralised prescription, particularly of teaching methods, would result in deprofessionalisation and deskilling, this is not generally the way teachers perceived it. The strategies were seen as contributing to teachers' professionalism by increasing their effectiveness and giving them the awareness and confidence to explain precisely what they were doing and why. In relation to their evaluation of the strategies, as with other aspects of government reform, practitioners' perspectives on professionalism were strongly filtered through their core value of putting the child first.

The research reported here suggests that the New Labour reforms have ushered in a new era both in terms of policy implementation and teacher response. In turn this requires some reassessment of previously accepted analyses (including our own) of educational change. Whilst recognising that the impact of the strategies on pupil achievement is highly contentious, the evidence presented in this report demonstrates that the strategies have had a profound impact on teachers' classroom practices, not only in literacy and numeracy teaching but across the curriculum. That such changes should ensue, despite the fact that teachers initially strongly resented the implementation of the strategies and felt they had absolutely no ownership of them, suggests the need for some modification to prior theorising on school change.

We have also found evidence of a teaching profession whose confidence levels, whilst severely dented through the earlier stages of implementing such changes, show signs of recovering. However, the prognosis for the future is a mixed one. On the one hand, the PNS could enable teachers to blend the best of their previous classroom practice, including greater flexibility and creative approaches to teaching and learning, with the best aspects of teaching methods introduced in the NLS and NNS. On the other hand, if the pressures of testing and league tables are maintained, together with the pressures of other external accountability audit mechanisms, then these are likely to continue to have a negative impact on the processes of teaching and learning, and the well-being of teachers and their pupils.

By Nansi Ellis,  
deputy head of  
policy at ATL

Government policies and strategies have had a significant impact over the past few years on the education workforce, the curriculum and its assessment, and the use of ICT in schools, as fully explored in this research. For ATL as a professional association and union, *Coming full circle?* also raises fundamental questions about the key issues teachers will grapple with in the future. What does it mean to be a professional, particularly when faced with an ever greater emphasis on accountability and continuing developments in curriculum and assessment?

For teachers in this study, children are at the core of their professionalism. What keeps them in teaching is their interest in developing children's learning, being able to boost children's confidence and self-image, and their ability to make a difference in children's lives. ATL believes that this professionalism combines care with intellectual and practical knowledge and skills. With it comes the responsibility to continue developing that knowledge, to reflect on and review practice, and to speak with authority on matters concerning the purposes and content of education.

How far have often conflicting government policies over the last decade impacted on teacher professionalism? The nature and pace of change, particularly since the election of a Labour government in 1997, has unnecessarily increased teacher workload, which they have found unhelpful in supporting children's learning. It has also prompted many teachers to leave their jobs. This research represents the views only of those teachers who have remained in the profession. By implication this means teachers who are managing, with varying levels of success, to balance their professionalism with the different demands made of them by successive government initiatives. The most significant of these initiatives in terms of the impact on primary teachers' working lives, their attitudes and values, are developing the workforce, raising standards and, latterly, encouraging creativity and innovation.

### Changing workforce

Changes to the workforce, as a result of the agreement on tackling workload and raising standards, have impacted on teachers' professionalism. At the time of the observations and interviews for this research, teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) were only just beginning to see the impact of these changes on their working lives. Many primary teachers had concerns about handing over tasks to TAs. For some this was because they felt such tasks were integral to the core of their own professionalism (putting up displays, for example, was seen as an important part of motivating and supporting children's learning). For others such reluctance stemmed from worries that their TAs' role would become administrative rather than them being learning support workers.

The views of some teachers in this study also reflect the national debate about whether enabling TAs to teach whole classes diminishes the professional role of teachers. This research does offer glimmers of hope that point to possible solutions to this dilemma. It will be interesting to see what has changed by the time of the final report in 2007. ATL believes that the changes to the workforce

can support an enhanced professionalism for teachers (as well as for TAs): teachers will have the in-depth knowledge of their children, the curriculum and the ways in which children learn; TAs will provide the support teachers need to continually develop and use that knowledge to the benefit of the children. There will be many ways in which schools develop their professional teams, and we are only just at the beginning of the process.

### **Raising standards**

The impact of two strands of the “raising standards” agenda is explored in this research: the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies from 1999, and the increased pressure from end of key stage tests and the use of data in performance tables. When it was first introduced, the literacy strategy was met with hostility by many teachers. They felt deskilled and deprofessionalised by the manufactured crisis over literacy standards and the subsequent prescription of both curriculum content and teaching practice, along with the perception that Ofsted would secure conformity. Teachers in this research speak of “quietly deviating” from the strategies — choosing to teach in their own way but without openly challenging the strategies. Of those who did what was required, many now question their conformity. These are not the actions of a confident profession.

However, many teachers in this research now feel the strategies have changed their practice for the better, across the curriculum as well as in literacy and numeracy. The strategies have led some to reflect critically on their previous practice. A number of teachers admit to being uncomfortable with this practice at the time, but many seemed unable to challenge or change that practice until forced to do so by the introduction of a national initiative. Professionalism implies constant reflection and updating of knowledge and practice: so has the introduction of the strategies prompted greater professionalism?

On the surface this would seem to vindicate the government’s decision to “mandate the change, implement it well, consciously challenge the prevailing culture and have the courage to sustain it until beliefs shift” (Michael Barber, quoted in chapter 8). However, ATL would argue that it is the role of the profession, rather than government, to decide in detail what is needed in schools. Reflection brought about by constant criticism and shaming is unlikely to generate confident practice in the long term. The challenge is to develop a confident, reflective profession which can offer constructive analysis of government policy as well as develop its own pedagogy.

Equally challenging for teachers’ professionalism is the increased use of test data to hold schools “accountable”. The government argues that this has led directly to an increase in standards; evidence quoted in this research suggests that it is actually very difficult to tell whether real improvements have been made. As a profession, teachers have to manage a huge and damaging conflict. Professionalism is based on teachers’ ability to develop children’s learning and boost their confidence. High-stakes testing diminishes the opportunities for teachers to develop the whole child, narrows the curriculum and, for many children (particularly the lower achievers), it decreases their

confidence. Teachers must decide how best to manage this situation. In this research many felt they had to teach to the test, against their professional judgement, in order to minimise the stress children felt on taking the tests. The outcome is a compromised professionalism.

For government, the tests and subsequent performance tables are necessary to provide information for parents and to support and challenge schools to raise their children's attainment. It also gives government the ammunition to intervene, whether at school or local authority level or nationally by making detailed changes to curriculum and pedagogy. This is something we are seeing now, with level 4 English test data being used to justify the renewal of the literacy and numeracy frameworks and, in particular, teaching using phonics. A direct consequence of this is an increasing focus on national curriculum levels and sub-levels, to the cost of the intellectual, social, physical and emotional needs of individual children across the whole curriculum.

### **What of the future?**

This research offers fascinating insights into the impact of reform on teachers' practice, attitudes and values. It gives hope that teachers' confidence is recovering from the battering it has received over the past decade. For some teachers, the primary national strategy has offered greater opportunity to exercise professional judgement and to make decisions about the organisation and teaching of the curriculum. But even this is often described in terms of "being given permission" to teach in ways that teachers believe best supports their children's learning and well-being. It is also usually dependent on the continued achievement of "good" results in the tests at the end of Key Stage 2. It is hard to be creative, to develop and use professional knowledge and to innovate in the light of continued external pressure.

ATL believes that we need to reclaim the professional ground that we have lost. We believe it is vital that professional development is in the hands of the profession, rather than at the whim of each successive government initiative: this will enable teachers to be critical consumers of national strategies.

Curriculum too should be more firmly in the grasp of teachers. A slim national skills framework would allow for broad entitlement; local design by schools and networks of teachers would give a better fit with what children really need and want to learn; and greater use of assessment for learning should lead to a reduction in national testing. We must also be clearer about accountability mechanisms, ensuring that teachers are accountable to those who really matter – the children and their parents, society and the profession – and for the things that really matter: children's learning, development and well-being. ATL will continue to influence the national agenda through research reports like this one because we believe that a strong profession is the only way forward if we are to make a real and lasting difference to children's lives.