

2005

POSITION STATEMENT

New Professionalism

'[Workforce reform] will usher in a new professionalism for teachers, in which career progression and financial rewards will go to those who are making the biggest contributions to improving pupil attainment, those who are continually developing their own expertise, and those who help to develop expertise in other teachers...' (Five Year Strategy, p66).

This statement explores the universal qualities of teacher professionalism which ATL upholds and relates them to contractual conditions and workplace practices which would encourage them.

Observers of the teaching profession are prone to misuse the term 'crisis', about teacher shortages or the retirement bulge for example. However, ATL considers the term to be appropriate for the results of the attack on professionalism in the recent past. Professionals use their skills and knowledge to exercise judgement in dealing with their clients, but important judgements about curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy have been removed from teachers. Recently qualified teachers have been trained to implement the decisions of others. If there is no rebalancing, the ability to make judgements will be lost and system performance will suffer in the long term.

What is teacher professionalism?

Teaching is an intellectual profession, based on a high degree of general and systematised knowledge. This includes an in-depth knowledge of:

1. learning: how pupils learn, potential obstacles to learning, pre-conditions and dispositions to learning; how learning develops; and
2. curriculum content: knowledge of subjects and the relationships between them, understanding of wider content such as the development of thinking skills, problem solving, questioning and group working, and a knowledge of how pupils' understanding of particular content grows and develops.

The teaching profession is also practical, and has a wide range of practices and methods.

Teaching has a basis in care and responsibility for pupils' learning, leading to the need

for knowledge and understanding of particular pupils as individuals, their interests, needs and potential obstacles to learning, knowledge developed through assessment and through relationships with pupils, families, communities and other professionals.

The teaching profession needs knowledge about the complex and compelling forces that influence daily living in a changing world, including the political, economic, technological, social and environmental, in order to know what pupils need to learn both in the present and for the future.

Finally, teachers have the ability to adapt teaching practices and methods to particular pupils, drawing on their theoretical understanding of learning, their knowledge of curriculum content and their knowledge of what pupils need. This professional knowledge and understanding is not static: it changes and develops over time. Some of the change happens externally to the profession: knowledge of how the brain works or developments in subject knowledge; changes in political, social and cultural attitudes affect the way that subjects are taught, or ways that children are perceived. Professionalism therefore implies a responsibility to the continued development of practical knowledge through reflection and interaction, to review the nature and effectiveness of practice, and to continue to increase understanding of the purposes and content of education, individually and collectively.

Like all professional employees, teachers must balance professional values against their responsibilities to the organisations in which they work. Like all public servants, teachers must balance their proper autonomy against the proper powers of government. In a context of increasing involvement of parents and the wider community, the profession has a responsibility to demystify professional work and to develop relationships of trust with all concerned. Building on teachers' knowledge and skills, the profession has a responsibility to further debate about policy and practice, to speak with authority on issues of social justice and the role of education. This does not take place in isolation, but needs the support of both employers and professional communities at school level and at wider local and national levels.

In short, ATL judges the current balance between professional autonomy and prescription by government and managers to be inappropriate.

The Government's agenda

The Government deserves credit for recognising the inadequacy of current arrangements for teachers to be learners, which was well set out in the report by the TTA to the Secretary of State in January 2005. There is widespread agreement that substantial improvements in the supply of, demand for, and quality control of CPD are necessary to develop a learning culture in staff rooms. It is to be hoped that the Government will target resources to enable CPD to become a central feature of every teacher's work.

Two elements in the Government's rationale are worth noting. It recognises the overwhelming evidence that, to the extent that educational success is due to the system rather than external factors, the individual classroom is the key site, and achieving the best possible practice from every classroom practitioner is the key aim.

Secondly, the Government is approaching this aim through heavily managerialist institutions, with formal mechanisms of inspection, assessment and appraisal, measuring performance and setting targets, and offering rewards for those who improve and sanctions for those who do not. The successful professional in this context is one who works efficiently and effectively in meeting standards, for both teachers and pupils, which are set by others.

ATL's critique

Government policy has attempted to standardise practice, showing a lack of trust in the profession and a denial of complexity. It conceptualises CPD as a management tool to ensure good classroom practice, and is seeking to embed it within the management tool kit, including performance management, pay progression and contract. Items of training are to be imposed on teachers according only to immediate corporate needs.

ATL rejects this concept, and adopts a longer-term perspective in support of a different attitude. In the long run, a model of good practice involving central recognition followed by local imposition is untenable. Teaching has to be a learning profession, but also an innovating profession, and the Government's role should be to recognise and optimise the spread of good practice arising from classrooms. Local communities of teachers must be equipped to reflect on their practice, and to try out new ways of improving learning. Managerialism in general is a barrier to reflection, and a managerialist organisation of CPD will prevent it. While the Government and the school should each have a say in the individual teacher's further learning, particularly if they are funding it, the individual teacher should have a major say. Some observation of and discussion about others' lessons is undoubtedly valuable; so may be a further degree, perhaps more indirectly. Further study or research produces opportunity for review and reflection which strengthens the individual and the community of teachers.

ATL also rejects the Government's identification of CPD as the only aspect of professionalism which requires development. Review and reflection may be pointless in an environment where the teacher is or feels powerless to innovate, where decisions and changes are always imposed from above. The national bank of expertise will decline unless changes are made to restore proper autonomy. ATL fully accepts the need for proper accountability of public servants, but this requires radical rationalisation and rebalancing against the need for professional autonomy.

ATL's agenda

In order to enable and support classroom practitioners' autonomy and professional capacity, changes need to be made to ITT, to the sites and nature of curriculum development, and to the excessive and overlapping systems of teacher accountability. This is an ambitious, long-term agenda for ATL.

The Government has identified CPD as a priority for attention, and ATL will contribute to this agenda. Schools can become learning communities for staff as well as pupils only through a commitment shared by all, including leadership, and this cannot be imposed by regulation. However, the necessary sustained programme of change may require support from changes in regulations and contracts, not least in order to secure equity across schools.

The present contract has some bearing on CPD and evidence of its contribution to professionalism is not encouraging. Participation in professional development is already a general contractual requirement and a threshold standard. The five non-contact days are generally thought (though not contractually required) to be for CPD. None of these appear to have had a significant effect, and the TTA is committed to reviewing the effectiveness of the five days.

ATL agrees with the TTA that these days are generally an inefficient use of teacher time and seeks their replacement by an obligation to take part in CPD, without any increase in the number of days of pupil contact. This must be complemented by an obligation on the employer to provide CPD opportunities,

which should make clear that teachers' CPD plans require co-determination. They must be part of new arrangements to reprioritise CPD within working time, so that a minimum amount of CPD time per year can be guaranteed. ATL seeks a pattern of provision which enables teachers to plan a variety of activities, perhaps in an annual cycle, both on and off-site, combining both immediate needs and long-term personal development. Co-determination requires that CPD funds are under the control partly of the school and partly of each teacher. Teachers must also be entitled to some release from teaching to enable activity such as classroom observation.

The Government also seeks to link pay progression and career paths more closely to participation in CPD. ATL accepts that this is worth exploring in principle, but rejects any attempt to introduce such a link before opportunities for all teachers are available in practice, when the TTA strategy has been implemented and resources are in schools.

Such levers may be necessary but are likely to be insufficient to ensure good practice in all schools; ATL believes it will be necessary to employ existing regulatory mechanisms. In particular, Ofsted inspections should comment prominently on the quality of the school's CPD strategy.

ATL's vision

It is worth repeating that ATL rejects a concept of New Professionalism which is limited to teachers being required to undertake development which relates to short-term aims as directed by the school or, less still, by the Government. In the context of workforce reform, teachers are the lead professionals who should be equipped and empowered to lead a continuing debate within their schools about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

The Government's acceptance that central imposition is not a sustainable strategy leads inexorably to such a position, with the caveat that teacher autonomy must be mediated by accountability to a range of interests. However, movement towards this objective requires change on many fronts, not least an explicit abandonment by the Government of its outmoded managerialist model of schools as organisations.

The Government must intensify activity in support of more distributed leadership within schools, a greater commitment to staff development, and the creation of a culture of innovation which must go together with the generalisation of good practice and the elimination of bad practice. It must recognise that, however important it is for trainee teachers to be able to recognise standards and levels, it is equally important for developing teachers to engage with academic disciplines such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology, and politics of education.

Individual teachers will wish, and should be permitted, to engage in this way to varying extents. ATL asserts, however, that the collective intellectual power of the teaching force should be recognised as a major national asset and utilised to create a more vibrant education system, one which is more attractive and therefore more successful for learners.

If you would like further information or to comment on this briefing paper please do so by contacting ATL on policybriefings@atl.org.uk.

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