



The quality of teachers

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The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers." This soundbite from last autumn's McKinsey report, *How the World's Best-performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, looks like a truism.

Yet if it were that obvious, one of the world's most prestigious consultancy firms would not feel the need to make a song and dance about it. And more governments might have built their policies around this idea, rather than focusing their investment in so many other directions.

Research shows that structures, for instance, and even leadership and smaller classes are less important than having the best teachers. "Variations in teacher quality completely dominate any effect of reduced class size," says McKinsey.

The report also quotes a policy-maker from New Zealand: "It was naïve to assume that classroom quality would improve just because we changed our structure." Policy-makers over here, still obsessed with academies and specialist schools, have yet to catch up with this advance in thinking.

Another implication is that attempts to override the effects of teachers – by imposing tightly-controlled "strategies" setting out in detail what they should do in the classroom rather than helping them obtain the tools with which to build their own pedagogy – are not the answer either.

Or are they? Some people take a different view of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies.

McKinsey's key point, and its corollary, "The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction", made an impression on Sir Jim Rose, the former chief primary HMI who is now conducting a review of the primary curriculum for Ed Balls.

He referred to it several times when I interviewed him for *The Sunday Times*. "We had ten years of the national curriculum with very little progress in terms of standards of reading, writing and maths," he said. "Then we had the national strategies coming in and making a significant difference."

"What clearly is coming through is what the McKinsey and other reports

are saying: that we need to focus on the quality of teaching, and help teachers, particularly in primary schools, because of the range they have to cover, to make the best of the human and material resources they've got."

So how effective is the training teachers are getting? According to one of the latest sets of reports published by the other Primary Review (led by Robin Alexander and encompassing, as its masthead says, "children, their world, their education"), Sir Jim is in agreement with fellow HMIs about the quality of teacher training and professional development. These research surveys, commissioned by the review to examine "a profession in transition", report that "on the basis of its inspections, Ofsted records greatly improved standards of initial teacher education, especially in relation to government priorities, and talks of 'the best trained generation of teachers ever'."

Squeezed out

However, other studies find that vital aspects of the primary teacher's work, such as non-core subjects, have been squeezed out, as has fundamental debate. CPD has concentrated on the requirements of the strategies "to the detriment of the learning and career development needs of individual teachers".

The report on teacher education, from Manchester and Liverpool John Moores Universities, highlights positive developments such as partnership, leadership training and the accrediting of teachers' professional learning by the GTC's Teacher Learning Academy.

But tipping the scales the other way are the "lack of consistency and contradictory ideological forces" behind different initiatives. Worse, "The degree of regulation, bureaucratisation and accountability, and the linking of performance indicators to resourcing, have engendered a 'technical rationalist' approach to education outcomes and processes that has tended to restrict the nature of professional engagement and create a 'culture of compliance' in both students and staff."

The report on "The Professional Environment" from Manchester

Metropolitan University is more optimistic. The researchers give teachers – even NQTs and students – more credit for being able to think and act for themselves. "On balance, we find that the claimed de-professionalisation of teachers is an over-simplification."

Yes, traditional professional values "have been in considerable tension with more recent prescriptions" and this has contributed to teacher stress. But words such as "trust", "creativity" and "self-esteem" are creeping back into the discourse, along with a recognition of children's own part in their education.

"Teachers will continue to identify with their own sense of what is ethically and educationally appropriate for their pupils."

Recent research into early professional learning suggests that young teachers "are not as amenable as assumed to prior scripting of curriculum and pedagogy". They argue that "Teachers will continue to identify with their own sense of what is ethically and educationally appropriate for their pupils."

They want teachers to be involved in the development and evaluation of policy and say that research, policy and practice should be "linked more systematically and enduringly to deep issues concerning learning and motivation, rather than tied to the evaluation of ephemeral initiatives in a naïve kind of 'what works?' rationale".

Finally, there's the question of the distinct identity of primary education. The Manchester/John Moores report comments that national leadership programmes have developed as cross-phase initiatives, with little specific provision for primary heads. "The question remains as to whether primary leadership has developed a robust conceptual base in its own right."

I suspect that, like NQTs, heads are not all that amenable to scripting from above, and will continue to identify with their own sense of what is right for their schools.