Education policy created without politics: six possible professional responses

Anti-political behaviour by politicians creates a distance between policy-makers and those for whom the policies are intended. It turns teachers into instructors who are under instruction to implement received policy. It requires performance management of teachers so that targets can be hit and, as a direct consequence, the behaviour management of children so that they conform. Since the days of Kenneth Baker the required professional role for teachers has been reactive and responsive: creativity confined. Anti-politics avoids the difficult and, for impatient politicians, tedious process of consensually arriving at values that can lead to policy. Instead it gives us policy out of power. Genuine politics is slow cooking. Power is microwaving.

Without more and better politics we are at the mercy of those with power. When unwanted policies are imposed upon those without power there are six possible responses: reluctantly acquiescing; avoiding awkward knowledge; rolling up sleeves to make policy into something better; seeking fulfilment elsewhere; protesting and attempting to change the minds of policy-makers; and converting to the current official orthodoxy.

I want to look at this in more detail. Lets go back for a while to the introduction of the National Curriculum and its Assessment Orders in the late 1980s: a time when the school education system was subject to a huge shock.

Reluctantly acquiescing

In the late eighties and early nineties I worked in a team that trained schoolteachers in the National Curriculum, particularly on the assessment side. Before that I had been working on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies, trying to switch on children who had switched off. It was exciting to work alongside schoolteachers prepared not only to experiment but also to involve children in designing and carrying out new ways of learning. This was not a case of using children as guinea pigs. It was about jointly making sense of learning in different ways.

There was not much enthusiasm for the policy being introduced by Kenneth Baker. A lot of professional autonomy was being removed. The teacher unions, however, were preoccupied with the issues around financial devolution, as were headteachers and governors. Then there was appraisal and the beginning of an inspection regime that became dedicated to finding out not what was right but what was wrong. The later creation of the National College for School Leadership heightened the profile of headteachers, first as managers but increasingly as leaders; and yet the increased importance given to league tables also heightened their sense of being under threat.

What I believe was lost in all of this was recognition that professional educators should be creatively concerned with the development of learning and its assessment. Decision-making about the curriculum and assessment

was taken out of the hands of teachers. What was happening was akin to teachers becoming alienated from both government and from their own professional values. Later there were so many educational initiatives, especially under New Labour, that schoolteachers became conditioned to respond.

Today professional educators must not only suppress expression of their expertise and values by adopting techniques that have taken the fancy of a here-today-gone-tomorrow secretary of state but they must also work in schools operated by people with some very unusual beliefs about life, the universe and everything. Revealing reluctance to an inspector or a boss is, however, unwise. Tell an inspector that synthetic phonics is but one of many ways to encourage children to read and it will do you no good. Tell the head of a sponsored academy or a so-called free school that they are participating in an anti-democratic fracturing of society and your career prospects will dive. You are supposed to believe in what they claim to believe.

Avoiding awkward knowledge

My colleagues and I encountered some headteachers in the late 1980s wilfully avoiding acquiring the knowledge that they needed in order to do their job as it was coming to be defined. I remember teachers from one school bringing their concern to me that their headteacher was ignoring the National Curriculum. They were worried that they would not be ready when it hit them, especially in the form of tests. I explained that I could not simply walk into the school to carry out some training: I had to be invited by the head. Eventually, over a pleasant cup of coffee in the head's office, talking about this and that, I mentioned the National Curriculum. 'Oh', said the head, 'we have received none of those documents you talk about'. And there they all were on a shelf behind the head's desk. There was, as I remember it, a lot of 'If I don't look at what I don't like then it can't hurt me', a professional equivalent of hiding under the blanket.

There was another form of deliberate avoidance of knowledge. As a member of my local union executive in the run up to full implementation of the National Curriculum and its accompanying Assessment Orders it seemed to me that there was a distinct lack of interest in this aspect of professionalism. Terms and conditions of service were the subject of much discussion but what should be taught and how and what should be assessed and how were topics to be avoided. You might, I suppose, expect trade unions to be like that because, unlike some other countries, the UK tends not to bring unions into the process of making decisions jointly with what we tend to call the management. Even when relations are at their most cordial the interests of unions and management are usually seen as separate, even opposite. In the case of education, however, I have always felt that this separateness has helped to prevent proper professional involvement in making decisions about the business of teaching, learning and assessment.

These are only recollections but it seems to me that I am still encountering people who quite simply do not want to hear anything politically or

professionally unpleasant. We are, I fear, a politically disengaged country. In terms of education this is no less than professional suicide.

Rolling up sleeves to make policy better

Professional pride and the need to keep a job make this the favoured response. I recall a burst of creative energy in the late 80s as we strove to transform policy into something that retained deeper educational values. My motto at the time was ‘do what you have to do while protecting and promoting what you want to do’. To that end I worked on blending records of achievement with GCSE and the National Curriculum, believing that in the process we could enhance learning. At first I believed that, although the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) had been abolished by Kenneth Baker, removing the means of researching reliable expectations of levels of performance by children, over time we might be able to use the levels of the National Curriculum to discover some norms. Unfortunately Baker’s successor, Kenneth Clarke, imposed his own norms without bothering to undertake any research and we have suffered ever since. The new head of Ofsted is not the only one to misunderstand averages. Clarke, having told teachers where to find the average, complained that some children were below it.

One of the words that often crops up in response to policy is ‘collaboration’. As the 80s became the 90s I came to liken myself more and more to a conscientious policeman in occupied France. At first I decide to stay at my post in order to mitigate the worst evils of the Nazi invasion. But after a few years I notice that little kids in the street are throwing stones at me and shouting ‘collaborator’. Surely, to collaborate is a good thing? Or perhaps not. In whose interests are you working when you collaborate?

Seeking fulfilment elsewhere

Maybe this ought to be called leaving the field to the enemy. Or is that unfair? Early retirement with the ability to take your enhanced pension early is not available these days but my impression is that a combination of National Curriculum, the associated Assessment Orders and an inspection regime led by someone who seemed determined to find fault resulted in many teachers choosing to get out in the early 90s.

At the same time LEAs were having to reorganise the services that they offered to take account of the marketisation of education and the attempt to transform schools and colleges into small business enterprises. This led to a wholesale shedding of authority staff who were, in many cases, glad to go. Many of them set up their own small business enterprises selling to schools what they used to get for free.

I was one of those that left. Visiting former colleagues afterwards I had to try to keep the smile off my face. They looked to be under so much pressure while I told myself that I was leaving to paint on a much larger canvass.

Actually, once I began working at a university I was. Had I stayed the professional frustration for me would have been unendurable.

Today I see teachers who for years have been regarded as enthusiastic and competent who are being driven out because of, yet again, the effects of policy. To look good for the inspectors desired results have to be achieved so that is where the effort goes: grade Ds, for example, must be turned into grade Cs. When these teachers joined up it was not simply to concentrate upon one slice of children. The problem is compounded when inspectors criticise teachers for neglecting the other children in order to get the results that the inspectors demand. The job is rather like trying to stop three leaks in a hosepipe with only two hands.

My experience tells me that teachers begin to lose energy just when their experience is beginning to pay off. It is frustrating to see teachers becoming worn out at this stage while often taking on more responsibility. I think that we have not been good at managing this. It would often be better, I think, if we could maximise the benefits of a teacher's experience and expertise by lightening the workload as they come towards the end of their working life. But one thing is certain: verbal abuse of teachers by politicians and their servants, adverse changes to pay and conditions, confusing structural changes to the system, disregard of evidence that does not support policy and a constant flow of half-baked ideas do not help to keep good teachers in their jobs.

Protesting and attempting to change the minds of the policy makers

Please note that I did not use the word 'revolt'. We are simply so bad at revolt that governments intending to introduce wholesale harmful education policies do not need to worry about teachers overturning busses or hurling Molotov Cocktails from the barricades.

The Liverpool Association of Secondary Heads (LASH) was, in those days, the nearest we came to a collection of enthusiasts for blood sports in education. LEA advisors coming into a meeting of LASH poorly prepared to announce bad news could expect a mauling. Explaining what National Curriculum assessment required them to do was, however, not a problem. They wanted accurate details setting out what was required. Perhaps they and their colleagues throughout the country ought to have gone to the barricades. It might have prevented the descent of education into what became a competition to be the best box ticker. I am afraid that the teaching profession, responding to the priorities of its unions, limits its protests to pay and conditions of service. Bad policy-making with regard to curriculum and assessment generates no more than moans. And yet curriculum and assessment are the main business and purpose of the profession.

As for changing the minds of the policy makers. I have written elsewhere about going with colleagues to see Charles Clarke to persuade him to change his perceptions. It worked. He did change his views. Not only that, he asked for more meetings. But he was a mere secretary of state. We had not taken

account of the way that Blair did government. Policy-making was confined to Blair's sofa and Clarke was not a soferite. Like us he was only regarded as an implementer and replaced soon after by Ruth Kelly who cancelled all scheduled meetings. Thus ended my best chance of changing the minds of policy makers. I believe that for professionals to affect policy they have to gain access at the highest effective level. Under Blair that meant either him or Gordon. Blair told us that education was his only priority. He suffered, however, from that well-known disease of politicians: guruitis. Show some politicians a guru, especially one that can tap into their prejudices, and the gullibility that rests (or should that be lies) within them turns snake oil into a policy quicker than you can say *surely we ought to critically examine evidence from more than a single perspective and also involve the professionals in devising policy that they will be expected to implement*.

Of course, there is another way that ought to work. £250,000 could get you into Cameron's flat for a chat. Oops, forgot. The Conservative Party does not do things like that.

Converting to the current orthodoxy

Political religions proselytise. They provide comfort for the soul by banishing doubt and providing certainty. Faith overcomes questions. Proselytising policy makers range from emollient persuaders such as Kenneth Baker drawing educators into his new religion by use of words such as 'entitlement' to the more forthright Gove who expects instant born-again converts to his religion. Prior to Baker the notion of an entitlement curriculum was emerging from teachers, advisors, inspectors, parents and children working together. After Baker everyone was *entitled* to what he said was good for them. Nevertheless, he took a lot of trouble to establish his religion. Gove is not such a patient man. Convert to his religion immediately or have your head chopped off.

If you cut out criticality, narrow your perspective, have a tendency to enjoy being told what to do this could be the response for you. You may have to accept that words such as *de*form are now expressed as *re*form; or accept that mathematics has been altered to allow everyone to be simultaneously above average or be punished; and instead of perceiving professional educational words as part of a means of communication see them instead as part of a liturgy for the most recent educational religion invented by the gods gazing down on us.

It is possible that in your career you will have so often been required to adopt new religions that you have become what people working in prisons call a recidivist: someone who feels unsafe when out of gaol. Being born again so many times in the course of professional life prepares you for educational nirvana: one day all suffering will cease: doubt will drop away because you will have been absorbed by the gods.

Followers of the latest educational religion must love Big Brother, even when he tells them to forget what they had been worshipping and adopt an entirely new set of beliefs complete with a new liturgy. 'I shall always comply' is now the motto of true believers. The further up the religious hierarchy they go the stronger become their beliefs. Or do you think that I am again being unfair?

A question

If the new boss of Ofsted claims to be able to tell if a school is a good one within half an hour of visiting it how long does it take the average teacher to tell if a new boss of Ofsted is going to be any good? Or, for that matter, a secretary of state!

29th March 2012 (just as the General Teaching Council for England closes)