

Policies for primary school teachers



Introduction

This essay discusses the question, “ What do you consider to be an effective primary teacher?”. With reference to recent research, government initiatives and your own experience, the essay explores this question, based on my own educational principles and the ways in which these will underpin your professional practice in the future.

The essay begins by reviewing the Government policies and initiatives that are relevant to the research question, discussing, in particular, the document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) and the subsequent Primary Strategy framework for primary education. The essay then moves on to discuss the aims of these policies and initiatives and the implications these have had for schools and teachers. The assessment framework is discussed, and how this impacts on teacher effectiveness is also noted. The essay then moves on to looking at the qualities of effective teachers, and effective teaching in a primary setting, and concludes that some of the facets of Government policies and initiatives – such as continual assessments - run counter to my ethos of effective teaching and actually serve as little other than distractions from pure teaching time, through all the administration such assessments bring and the amount of time this takes away from lesson planning, for example.

In terms of Government policy towards primary education, in 2003, the Government launched the policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) which set out a vision for the future of primary education built, formally, on the striving for higher

standards through the formulation of a rich and varied curriculum which is aimed at developing children in a number of ways. As explained by the DfCSF (2008), the key to making this vision a reality lies in the need to empower primary school children to take control of their own learning, to be innovative and to develop their own character. The DfCSF (2008) also noted that the aims of the policy *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) should also be achieved through schools being able to set their own targets, based on challenging but realistic targets for the progress of each individual child, with LEA targets being set after this.

In addition, the policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) encourages schools to network to learn from each other and to develop good practice, in partnership with parents in order to help children as far as possible and to forge links between schools and communities (DfCSF, 2008). The policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) was intended as an enabler, with leadership in schools being strengthened in terms of professional development of teachers towards the whole curriculum, and in terms of helping schools themselves design broad curriculum that links different areas of the curriculum and which thus provides children with as wide as possible a range of learning experiences (DfCSF, 2008).

The policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) argues that the best primary schools are those that offer a broad and rich curriculum, and that, based on this it is fundamental that schools develop their own distinctive character through taking ownership of the curriculum, by being creative and innovative, using tests,

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targets and tables to help every child to develop his or her potential (DfES, 2003). Essentially, the policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) urged the promotion of excellence in primary teaching through building on the success of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, using the new Primary Strategies to extend this success in to other areas of the curriculum, including in foreign languages, sport and creativity, amongst other areas, measuring the success of this curriculum through assessments (DfES, 2003).

There are many ways in which assessment activities can take place in the classroom, including monitoring normal classwork activities, using specific assessment tests designed by the teacher, designating assessment tasks as part of normal classwork, providing assessment tasks as part of homework assignments, and others, which are the domain of higher educational levels than the foundation stage, such as the use of standardized National Curriculum tests and/or formal examinations (Kyriacou, 1999; p. 107).

Kyriacou (1999; p. 107-109) details each of these assessment protocols, showing, for example, how, although monitoring classroom activity is a part of the normal routine of a teacher, the monitoring, when it becomes investigative and active can become a form of assessment (Kyriacou, 1999; p. 107; Kyriacou, 1997). In this way, the monitoring can inform teaching practice, through leading to suggestions for improvements in how learning is delivered, based on observations of areas in which the children are failing to learn as quickly or as thoroughly compared to other areas, for example. In this way, monitoring and assessment can be a route through which teaching can be improved and teachers can become more effective.

In terms of how the assessment is actually made (i. e., the actual process of assessment), evidence is collected through an ongoing process, via the teachers knowledge of the child, information from other contributors who are in regular contact with the child, anecdotes about significant moments in the child's development, and focused assessments, based on observation where observation is understood to mean “ the practice of watching and listening to a child as they engage in an activity and demonstrate specific knowledge, skills and understanding” (NAA, 2007). As pointed out by Kyriacou (1999; p. 106), it is imperative that an adequate record of the child's achievements, and their assessment, is kept, and that portfolios of children's work are kept in order to exemplify the standards that are being sought, and so that teachers can use these records as a benchmark to build upon, through which improvements to teaching practice can be made and teacher effectiveness be improved.

Teachers thus need to be competent in many areas in order to ensure that the assessment process goes smoothly for all concerned and that the assessment process is something that can be useful for teachers, in terms of improving teaching practices. The need for teachers to be competent in the assessment of children is reflected in the fact that the DfEE (2000) list of standards for teachers lists the ability to assess and record each pupils progress systematically as a competency (Kyriacou, 1999; p. 106). In addition, it is fundamental that assessment judgements are agreed amongst all concerned, so that all those involved can make the best, fullest, use of the information.

The Primary Strategies outlined in the policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) thus built on the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies to lead to the development of the Primary Curriculum, with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies being embedded in the *Primary Strategy* (under the framework of the Primary Framework for literacy and mathematics that was launched in October 2006) (DfCSF, 2008). This new framework builds on the learning that has taken place since the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were launched in 2003, providing new structures and new impetus to the vision embodied in the policy document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003), extending, as it does, the support given only to literacy and to numeracy to other subjects (DfCSF, 2008). The overall ethos of the new Primary Strategy framework is that excellent education is an education that is tailored to children's specific needs, allowing them to engage with the educational process and giving them the start they need to be able to succeed in the context of secondary education (DfCSF, 2008).

In terms of the future education of primary children, and how assessments at the primary level affect children's future educational development, it is well documented that the level of educational attainment of a child (as assessed through Key Stage 1 assessments) cannot – alone – be used as an indicator of how well a particular teacher or school has performed; it is the *relative* progress that needs to be considered in terms of making an assessment of how children's future educational prospects are affected by the assessment process (Kyriacou, 1999; p. 106). Ways to do this include taking baseline measurements of achievement and comparing these with achievement

following a certain time period of education, or taking value-added measurements (Kyriacou, 1999; p. 106).

In terms of tracking how children progress beyond the primary level, the relationship between Key Stage 1 assessments and attainment in terms of National Curriculum levels needs to be explored (AAIA, 2007). As discussed by AAIA (2007), however, Key Stage 1 attainments cannot be directly related to National Curriculum levels and any such attempts would result in spurious information (NAA, 2006). It is clear, however, that the higher the child's assessment at Key Stage 1, the more likely it is that the child would attain high levels following the National Curriculum tests (AAIA, 2007).

Cohen *et al.* (2004) provides information on how to plan and organise classes, and shows how the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has set out principles for early years education (QCA, 1999; 2000; 2001), on the basis that, “ effective education requires both a relevant curriculum and practitioners who understand and are able to implement the curriculum requirements...building on what children already know and can do, encouraging a positive attitude and a disposition to learn and to protect against early failure”. As the QCA (1999, 2000, 2001) point out, early years education should be carefully structured, providing different starting points, depending on what the child can already do, should have relevant and appropriate content, matching the different levels of children's needs and should provide planned and purposeful activities which provide opportunities for teaching both indoors and outdoors, with teachers who are able to observe and respond appropriately to the children under their care. This is on the basis that “ parents are children's first and most enduring educators”

(QCA, 2000, p. 9), and that teachers provide a series of stepping stones through foundation stages, through Early Learning Goals, through primary level, which articulates with the National Curriculum which all children from age five are legally bound to follow (Cohen *et al.*, 2004; Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2000).

Cohen *et al.* (2004) show how key aspects of effective learning at the primary level are active, integrated, socially constructive, cognitively constructive and linguistically rich learning, beginning where the individual learner is at themselves, in terms of their learning process, so that the individual child is the agent of their learning, empowering the children to enable their own learning by casting learning as problem-solving (Morrison, 2000; Cohen *et al.*, 2004). As Morrison (2000; p. 122) states, “ the intention (of learning) is to extend play, to empower students and to enable them to take responsibility for their own, active and autonomous, learning and to develop in all aspects of their learning”. This is conducted, generally, through four key elements: classroom arrangements (with such things as centres of interest), daily schedules of plan-do-review sessions, key curricular and learning experiences and content and assessments through observation, recording and sharing, using authentic assessment and portfolios (Cohen *et al.*, 2004).

By following such suggestions for enabling learning at the primary level, *continuity* and *progression* are ensured . *Continuity* is generally defined, and understood, as ensuring that the overall aims, values and beliefs that give direction to, and put boundaries around, the scheme of work are consistent, regardless of who is teaching or answering later questions (Fabian and

Dunlop, 2002). *Progression* is defined, and understood, generally, as the process through which the schools planned activities gradually extend pupils' thinking, their exploration of values and attitudes, enrich language, knowledge and strategies through increasingly demanding inputs and challenging explorations, matched to pupils chronological age, readiness and circumstance (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). Through ensuring continuity and progression, children can be enabled to achieve the goals they want to achieve, within the frameworks that are set them.

My personal teaching ethos

This section takes one or two of my principles to explain how I intend to be an effective primary teacher, using examples from your my school experiences. In essence, I concur with Cohen *et al.* (2004) that, “ effective education requires both a relevant curriculum and practitioners who understand and are able to implement the curriculum requirements... building on what children already know and can do, encouraging a positive attitude and a disposition to learn and to protect against early failure” and I agree with the overall stated ethos of the new Primary Strategy framework is that excellent education is an education that is tailored to children’s specific needs, allowing them to engage with the educational process and giving them the start they need to be able to succeed in the context of secondary education (DfCSF, 2008).

Taylor and Hayes (2001) provide a discussion as to how education *should* be delivered, leading me to arrive at several conclusions as to how I should organize my time as a teacher in order to provide the most effective teaching possible to my pupils. I agree with the aims of the Primary Strategy

as set out in the policy document, *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003), which encourages schools and teachers to network to learn from each other and to develop good practice, in partnership with parents in order to help children as far as possible and to forge links between schools and communities (DfCSF, 2008).

The dictates of the assessment processes and the Curriculum mean I have to teach within these boundaries, but this does not mean that lessons have to be rigid and that assessments and tests and Curriculum have to be frightening terms to primary age pupils. One of my responsibilities as an effective teacher is to prepare students, as well as possible, for the assessments and to teach the Curriculum in such a manner that the children's sense of wonder is upheld (see Allen and Ainley, 2007) and that children's awareness of themselves as part of a whole and as spiritual beings is also encouraged (Eaude, 2005). My aim as a primary teacher is to foster a sense of enjoyment in the learning process and, through this, to foster a love of learning that will continue well beyond the primary level, encouraging success at the secondary level and forging a lifelong love of learning in each individual pupil, based on a sense of wonder at the world, its contents and its processes.

I, personally, agree with Cohen *et al.* (2004), who show how key aspects of effective learning at the primary level are active, integrated, socially constructive, cognitively constructive and linguistically rich learning, beginning where the individual learner is at themselves, in terms of their learning process, so that the individual child is the agent of their learning, empowering the children to enable their own learning by casting learning as

problem-solving (Morrison, 2000; Cohen *et al.*, 2004). It is my aim as a teacher, wishing to be an effective teacher, to foster the empowerment of children, through developing a sense of the wonder of learning and empowering the children to direct their own learning, within the context of the Curriculum, so that children feel they are capable of learning and are capable of achieving the standards they set themselves.

The Success of New Labour's Policy Towards Primary Education

Tymms (2004) look at how successful the changes to primary education have been, following the introduction of the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies and finds that, whilst the introduction of these Strategies contributed to a rise in standards, independent tests of children's attainment have shown that this rise in standards is not as widespread nor as high as claimed and that, as such, an independent body should be set up to monitor standards over time, with the purpose of testing how Government planning for education is actually being received on the ground, as it were. A recent Ofsted report (Ofsted, 2003) also shows that some of the aims of the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategy were not achieved (with weak subject knowledge being a common failure of schools), suggesting the Government's approach to primary education needs to be looked at further.

Allen and Ainley (2007) back this suggestion, through their analysis of education in the UK, presented in their book *Education make you fick, innit?* Allen and Ainley argue that as institutionalized learning has become more common-place in the UK, through schools and work-based training programmes, possibilities have been foreclosed for emancipating minds,

something that is increasingly being applied to primary level education, through the introduction of the Primary Strategy, for example, and the assessment-based curriculum this embodies, which, argue Allen and Ainley (2007) forces teachers to concentrate more on training children in the Curriculum for the purpose of attaining high scores on the assessments than on actually instilling a sense of wonder in learning. Allen and Ainley (2007) argue that this process is killing the sense of wonder in children, and that, even for primary school children, education, the process of going to school, has become little more than a daily grind, rather than a joyous process the children are happy to undertake because they enjoy the process and because the process can bring them knowledge and enjoyment.

This essay has discussed the question, “ What do you consider to be an effective primary teacher?”. With reference to recent research, government initiatives and your own experience, the essay has explored this question, based on my own educational principles and the ways in which these will underpin your professional practice in the future. The essay began by reviewing the Government policies and initiatives that are relevant to the research question, discussing, in particular, the document *Excellence and Enjoyment – A Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003) and the subsequent Primary Strategy framework for primary education. The essay then moved on to discuss the aims of these policies and initiatives and the implications these have had for schools and teachers. The assessment framework was then discussed, and how this impacts on teacher effectiveness was also noted. The essay then moved on to looking at the qualities of effective teachers, and effective teaching in a primary setting, and concluded that

some of the facets of Government policies and initiatives – such as continual assessments - run counter to my ethos of effective teaching and actually serve as little other than distractions from pure teaching time, through all the administration such assessments bring and the amount of time this takes away from lesson planning, for example.

The main conclusion to the essay is that effective teaching at the primary level should serve to instill a sense of the wonder of learning and should open children's minds to the possibilities that learning, and the learning process, encompasses. I converge with Allen and Ainley (2007) that the current trend towards assessments, more assessments and yet more assessments is not healthy for children, because it causes stress and can initiate a sense of failure in children who do not achieve high scores on these assessments and also because managing these assessments takes time away from teaching, through all the administration that the tests generate. The argument that these tests do little than to confirm that the education policies the Government is espousing are correct seems valid, and it is, as has been seen, in any case questionable that the standards suggested by the Government, in the Primary Strategy are actually leading to rises in standards (see Tymms, 2004).

That the overall stated ethos of the new Primary Strategy framework is that an excellent education is an education that is tailored to children's specific needs, allowing them to engage with the educational process and giving them the start they need to be able to succeed in the context of secondary education (DfCSF, 2008) is thus a good basis to begin, as an effective teacher, but, in order to avoid boredom in the education process, and

psychological problems, due to the huge amount of testing and assessment primary children are subject to, effective teaching not only needs to teach the Curriculum and prepare children for the battery of tests and assessments they will be subjected to, but also needs to foster the empowerment of children, through developing a sense of the wonder of learning and empowering the children to direct their own learning, within the context of the Curriculum, so that children feel they are capable of learning and are capable of achieving the standards they set themselves.

Effective teachers are thus not only bound by the dictates of Government policy and teaching research which suggests *how* teachers should teach, but they are, in my opinion, also bound by a responsibility to children, to instill in children a sense of the wonder of learning. In my opinion, and something I will endeavour to achieve in my teaching practice, this sense of wonder can be best achieved through empowering children to realise their potential and to realise they can achieve their goals, through fostering a love of learning. These qualities not only make for an effective teacher but also an inspiring teacher, who will inspire their pupils to want to learn.

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