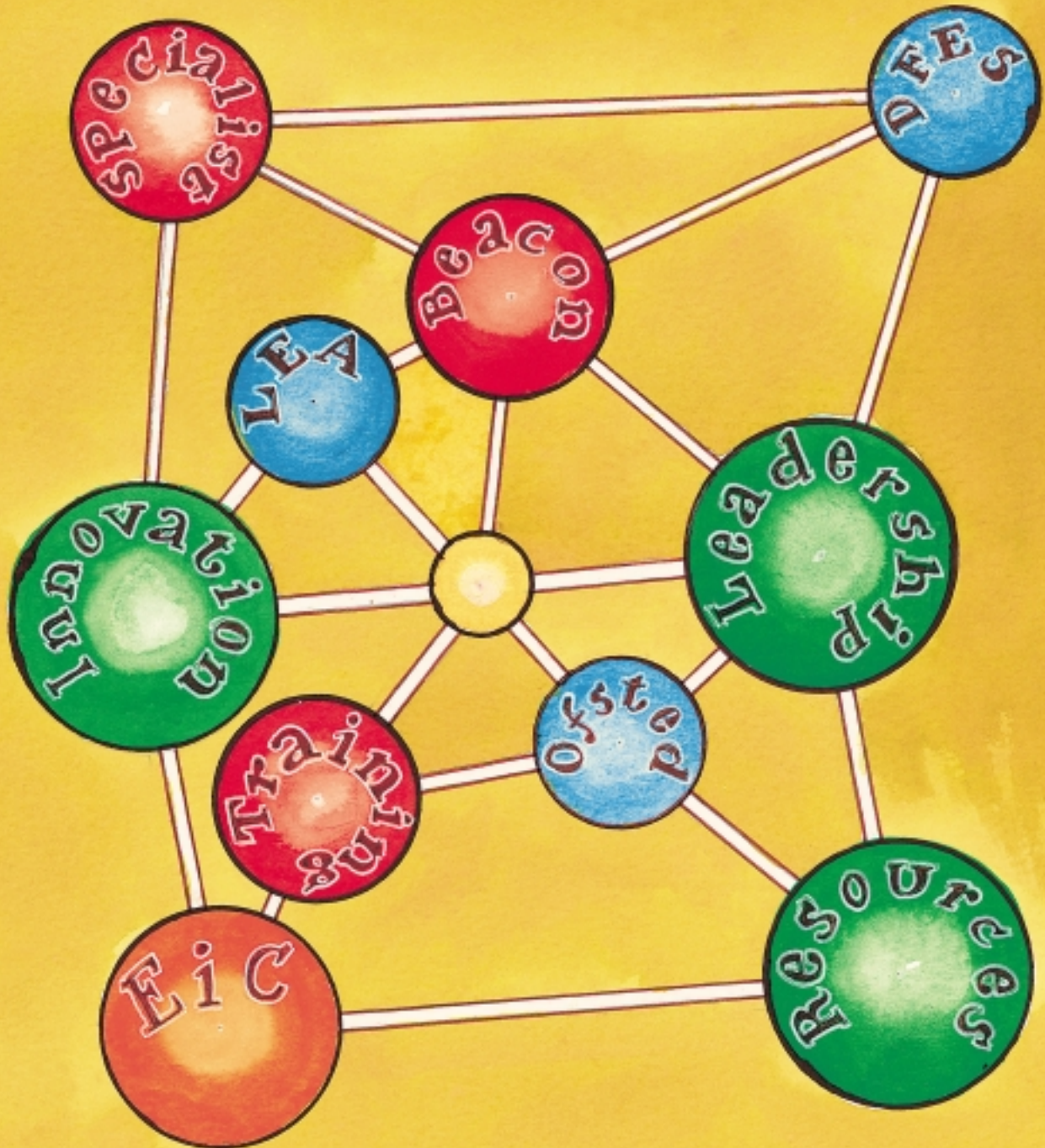


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The last 15 years of policy influence on our education system has created a chronic problem in the short-sightedness of the goals our schools currently adopt, and an acute problem in terms of staffing. Both of these reflect the style of policy which has been adopted by successive policy-makers and the underlying stance which this reflects. A change is needed if schools are to have a future which is characterised by vitality for all their members.

Since 1986, when Margaret Thatcher demolished the post-war parliamentary consensus on education, policy-makers in the UK have taken increased interest in domestic matters such as education, health and so on. They have turned to these areas to maintain their claims of potency in the face of increased recognition that they have little impact on international economics.

Under both Conservative and New Labour administrations, the number of education acts, administrative circulars, government letters to headteachers and the like have increased enormously to become a daily occurrence. But what has been the underlying message of all this, and what impact can be discerned?

The basic message of policy has been an attempt to improve quality of teaching by remote control. This attempt has required the centralised generation of lists: the National Curriculum as a set of lists, teacher competences as a set of lists, a curriculum for training teachers as another set of lists.

It also required the invention of agencies to ensure that there is compliance to the lists: both the Office for Standards in Education and the Teacher Training Agency explicitly use the term compliance to describe part of their work.

Under the rhetoric of 'improving standards' the focus on schools has become how their pupils perform in a range of tests, each of which again reflects the curriculum lists. Pupil performance, teacher performance, and school performance are unquestioned expressions nowadays.

Government plays an additional role of providing pressure to perform. As Tony Blair described it in February 2001: 'We're putting the teaching profession under a lot of pressure, and we're doing it for a simple reason: there are a lot of people putting us under pressure'. So at all levels of the system, people pass on pressure and people pass on targets.

It is important to identify two underlying elements of all this, since they characterise aspects of the policy-maker's stance. First, the 'one-size-fits-all' nature

Will policy-makers *always* fail teachers?

CHRIS WATKINS

of the interventions: approaches which can be prescribed in all situations are popular with policy-makers since complexity is difficult to embody into regulation and legislation.

Second, the short-term nature of the action, relating to parliamentary cycles or the need to maintain impressions of action: quick fixes abound and are promulgated without reflection or examination of their counter-productive consequences.

On both these elements the stance of policy-makers differs from that of teachers, who are daily beset by high complexity in their specific situation, and the longer-term, connected nature of their interventions.

The effects of this style of policy are now increasingly discernible and are of real concern. These effects derive from the style of policy, not merely the fact that the policy may be misaligned (for example through embodying the idea that the trouble with education is a people problem not a system problem, and through embodying a solution which ignores the possibility that *teacher-centred* schooling has reached the upper limits of performance).

The effects on the system at large include those well-known when applying pressure to human systems: measures which are only partial indicators of performance become adopted as goals in themselves; getting good GCSEs become conflated with getting a good education (at a time when job advertisements give decreased attention to qualifications).

The effect on schools is to make them more strategic places: tactics to maximise one's showing in the performance tables abound; pupils are valued more or less in these terms; senior managers spend their time government-gazing and ensuring that

they have positioned themselves well in relation to the next initiative.

The effect on teachers is to reduce their sense of agency as professionals. Increased prescription and targetting of the style we have seen leads to a routinising of work (which is a characteristic of less successful schools). Teaching is now more like working in someone else's factory.

Two successive headlines of the weekly *Times Educational Supplement* summarised recent evidence: *Damning verdict on performance pay* and *Young staff flee factory schools*.

At the time I trained as a teacher, those who said that teachers were the agents of the state were branded as loony lefties: now it is taken for granted. Through this process teachers' professional voice is quieted: they are asked to commit ventriloquy.

The effect on teaching and learning is marked and again has been documented over decades and in other countries. Good teaching can't be engineered into existence, but an engineering approach to schooling can crowd out good teaching.

Ask teachers of ten-year olds to engage in an effective learning project and you will hear 'We can't — we're preparing for SATs'. Now there is no logical reason why the development of more tests for pupils should necessarily lead to teachers 'teaching to the test'. But the evidence is that they do, and a key ingredient in creating this effect is the issue of responsibility.

If you say to teachers that they are responsible for the pupils' results, they become more controlling, which is of course ironic, because so much research has suggested that the less controlling the teacher, the more likely it is that the students will perform well.

So the powerful ingredient is carried in

that much-used word ‘accountability’ (which presently means blame) and the new element in teachers’ occupational anxieties is the fear of being punished in public. In too many schools a non-learning protectionism has grown up, and teachers do not really take the risks which characterise versatile and vital learning.

For these reasons in particular I suggest that policy-makers are failing teachers. The current climate significantly underestimates the achievements of teachers.

Teacher-pupil relations become more distant: teachers regard students the way that policy-makers regard them – that is, as incapable of deciding or of discussing or of designing learning. In a climate of distance and pressure, teachers’ tolerance is reduced and pupil exclusion from schools rises — this phenomenon is known to be independent from pupil behaviour and more a reflection of policy at school and other levels.

The effect on pupils is that they too feel that the curriculum speaks less to them personally, their lives and their needs; they know they are being judged as contributors to the school’s reputation.

Now I do not list the above effects as a grisly catalogue or a complete description of life currently in schools, but more as a set of effects for which there is a range of

evidence, and to say that it is a larger irony that this should be happening to schools at the outset of the 21st century. Factory schools focusing on compliance outcomes do not sit well alongside knowledge-generating companies dealing with unknowns.

It may turn out that the current style of policy will be judged to have contributed to an already very difficult problem in dealing with school systems — their intractability in the face of change. It is becoming clearer that those schools which do best on all measures currently are those which are fiercely independent and prepared to work against the grain of the present culture. Such schools may remain a minority, but we need many more of them.

I do not think it easy for policy-makers to adopt a different stance. Many aspects of their jobs create the very constraints which inhibit their perspectives. It was interesting to note how little influence the large number of teachers in the first New Labour administration had on the style of policy, which many commentators and teachers found difficult to differentiate from the style of the previous

administration. But I do think it is necessary for a change in emphasis to occur. Policy-makers need to grapple more with what has been regarded as intangible: the workings of a school as a community, the contribution it makes to local life and to the personal-social lives of pupils. Crucially they need to develop and broadcast a discourse which *values learning*, and is prepared to do this independently of the sort of ‘performance outcomes’ with which we are currently saddled, reflections of a 20th century machine view of schools.

Building strong communities of learners without resorting to marketing ploys is the job which policy-makers need to support teachers in achieving. This requires a better understanding of learning communities and their important social processes, together with a valuing of teachers as lead learners.

The role of politicians must become one more likely to inspire public and professional confidence. Given current levels of antipathy (as opposed to apathy) towards the political process, this may not prove easy yet carries a significant prize.

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