Changing the system and listening to the professionals

In this polemical article Fiona Carnie argues that there is a crisis within the teaching profession which calls for radical changes in professional development and teacher education. She suggests that a significant shift of emphasis is needed whereby the collaborative voices of teachers are heard.

Pressure in the system

The growing crisis in the teaching profession in England is well-documented. A report from the House of Commons Education Committee (2017), published earlier this year, acknowledged the shortage of teachers in a number of subjects and geographical areas, the difficulty in recruiting new teachers and the problems caused by the continuing exodus both of older teachers taking early retirement and younger teachers. Around 30% of new teachers leave the profession within five years of qualifying. The government is consistently failing to meet its recruitment and retention targets and this is putting increasing pressure on schools.
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Responding to a survey called Why Teach, 76% of teachers cited high workload as the most common reason for considering leaving the profession (Menzies, 2015). Also, in her submission to the House of Commons Education Committee, Alison Peacock, Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching (op cit 2017), claimed that “workload is inextricably linked to the accountability agenda”.

This view is endorsed by numerous academics, school leaders and teachers across the country who have, for years, been claiming that the testing and accountability framework has put schools in a stranglehold, exerting too much pressure on staff and students alike. There are few signs however that the Government is listening to these voices. As recently as 2016, the Times Educational Supplement reported that changes to primary assessment were “chaotic” and causing upheaval within the sector and that these changes had not been endorsed by the profession (Ward, 2016).

Control versus freedom

The overarching problem is that education is so tightly managed and controlled by central government that teachers have limited freedom to act in what they believe to be the best interests of their students. The mantra from policy makers is that the academisation agenda has freed schools and given them greater autonomy. But with all maintained schools being subject to the strict inspection regime conducted by Ofsted, there is little room for manoeuvre. Not only does it create a heavy administrative burden for teachers, it also leaves school leaders and teachers powerless to introduce new approaches unless they are guaranteed to deliver the outcomes that Ofsted is looking for, namely the narrow academic achievements prioritised by the government. In spite of the best efforts of the vast majority of school staff, this overbearing control has, all too often, reduced learning and teaching to a joyless act of information delivery, undermining the role of the teacher in the process.

Narrow teacher training

The problems are not unconnected with the increasingly fractured teacher training framework in England. There are many routes into teaching nowadays, but most are too short to equip new teachers with the knowledge, skills and understanding of child development that are required for such a complex job. By contrast, teacher education in a number of other European countries such as Finland, Holland, Denmark and Germany – all of which outperformed England in the 2015 PISA tests (OECD, 2015) - is much lengthier and more comprehensive. In these countries, teacher education courses are generally four or five years long and cover important areas such as child development, educational theory and different pedagogical approaches as well as giving trainee teachers extensive practical experience with opportunities to reflect on what they have learned during their placements. Contrast this with the hurried ten months that many trainees experience in England.

The House of Commons Committee was also advised that practising teachers in England receive very little professional development compared to those in other European countries. Staff training is often of poor quality and is not personalised to meet individual teachers’ needs. The end result is that our teachers feel less well prepared than their counterparts elsewhere which in turn leads them to struggle more with their work.

Professional development and professionalism

In his report for the OECD on Building a High Quality Teaching Profession: Lessons from around the World, Education Director, Andreas Schleicher (Schleicher, 2011)) draws attention to the importance of high quality teacher recruitment and initial teacher education in order to build a profession that is able to respond to changing demands. He also points to the need for well-tailored professional development programmes for practising teachers as well as opportunities for collaborative learning so that teachers can share good practice and learn from each other. His report posits that teachers must be properly prepared so that they can play a central and positive role in bringing about educational change. As London primary school teacher, Jane Manzone commented in her article in Schools Week on Factory-farmed Teachers (2016):
“We need to grow our teachers slowly and support them as they develop. A young teacher must still answer the very important questions: What is education for? What kind of teacher am I? Such questions are of vital importance.”

It would appear though that the government does not trust teachers with the education of the next generation. Why else would an entire workforce be de-professionalised in the way that has progressively occurred over the past three decades, since the introduction of the National Curriculum and the SATS? Howard Stevenson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Nottingham University makes the connection with the neo-liberal, privatisation agenda and in a chapter written with Alison Gilliland of the Irish National Teachers’ organisation entitled The Teachers’ Voice: Teacher Unions at the Heart of a new Democratic Professionalism (Stevenson and Gilliland, 2016) argues that:

“A key feature of the market-driven Global Education Reform Movement is its intent to break-up and fragment, as a deliberate attempt to undermine the influence of professional interests within public education systems.”

The systematic de-skilling of the profession in England has had other consequences and may have contributed to a reduction in respect for teachers. In their submission to the House of Commons Education Committee, academics from the Institute of Education (op cit 2017) wrote:

“ultimately, the status accorded to teaching is an important factor in attracting and retaining high calibre candidates. According to the OECD, 35% of teachers in England feel their profession is valued by society, compared with 66% in Korea and 60% in Finland.”

If there is to be any hope of transforming the life chances of children and of reducing social inequalities we need a teaching workforce that is confident, well-trained and trusted rather than demoralised, overburdened and under-prepared. Whilst Schleicher (2011) argues for a collaborative model of reform in which teachers play a key part, successive Secretaries of State at the
Department for Education have chosen the opposite path: a top-down model that is conceived and imposed from the centre.

The need for an alternative approach

In Wales, where education is currently undergoing an in-depth review to rewrite the curriculum and overhaul assessment procedures, the Welsh Government has recently commissioned a review of its progress from the OECD (OECD, 2017). In its report, researchers commented that “in the future Wales will need a different type of teaching professional; one who has significantly more responsibility and understands the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ ”.

In Scotland, with the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (2010), (Scotland’s skills-based curriculum), there has been a move away from a top-down model of change to an approach which sees teachers as playing a central role. They are encouraged to be reflective practitioners who can share and develop ideas within their schools. A new National Improvement Framework introduced in 2016 cited teacher professionalism as one of the key drivers of improvement (Scottish Government, 2016).

The question for all who are concerned with education in England – and one that is frequently articulated is: How can the tide be turned so that teachers here feel valued and gain the support that they need to be the best that they can? This is where teacher voice comes in.

Collaborative discussion

A good start might be to create opportunities for discussion and collaboration within schools to mitigate the professional isolation that many staff feel. Not just opportunities to talk about their work, but opportunities to discuss the values, vision and direction of their school in order to develop a shared sense of purpose. Time needs to be set aside for this as happens, for example, in Finland.

Many teachers went into teaching with high ideals. This motivation can be kept alive by encouraging ongoing reflection about school policies and the ways in which these facilitate the positive development of the school. For too long the majority of teachers have been excluded from such debate as it has been the preserve of school leaders and governors. Surely as some of the key stakeholders in a school they need to
have a greater sense of ownership over their working environment and practices. Whilst most schools have teacher representation on their governing bodies, their position is rarely one that is given much weight. This needs to change.

American studies find that when teachers are engaged in school decisions and collaborate with school leaders and with each other, school climate improves (Singh, 2012). This promotes a better learning environment for students, which raises student achievement, and a better working environment for teachers, which reduces teacher turnover. Schools, therefore, have everything to gain from developing a more reflective and a more participative ethos. According to researcher, Richard Ingersoll (2003), data from the Schools and Staffing Survey administered by the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics shows that as teacher control over “social decisions” (such as student discipline and teacher professional development policies) increases, the amount of conflict between students and staff, among teachers, and between teachers and the principal all decrease.

Teachers as agents of change

This resonates with research from Gert Biesta (Biesta, Priestly and Robinson, 2012) at the University of Stirling carried out as part of an ESRC project on Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change. Biesta points to the importance of relationships in the building of a collaborative culture which enables teachers to take responsibility and develop a sense of agency in their work. Studies he conducted in schools in Scotland which have introduced the Curriculum for Excellence, indicate the value of less hierarchical school management structures to enable teachers “to address the complexities encountered in their implementation of a new curriculum”. In Scotland, education policy supports teachers to become agents of change and so it is instructive to look at the factors that make this possible.

Some of the messages that can be taken from these reports and studies are that teachers need to be valued, adequately trained, given time to do their work properly and time to collaborate with others. Listening to what teachers have to say, interrogating them about their professional lives, their day to day experience in the classroom and the support they need to address the challenges they face would be a good starting point to address the crisis in the profession. It is not a tokenistic, phoney form of consultation that is required but a genuine dialogue at all levels. At national level policy makers have everything to gain from listening to those on the ground and reflecting what they find in education decision making. Teachers are at the heart of our school system and are thus key stakeholders to be consulted in the development of policies which they play such an integral part in delivering.

Flipping the system

In Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up Stevenson and Gilliland (2016) see the teaching
profession as uniquely positioned to influence and “flip” the education system. This can only be achieved, they argue:

“If teachers organise collectively. Teacher unions therefore, as the independent and democratic organisations that represent teachers’ collective voice, are not only at the heart of a new democratic professionalism, but must be central to both making the case for it and mobilising teachers to achieve it.”

The democratic professionalism that they talk about to refers to activity in three areas, namely:

- shaping conditions for learning and teaching;
- developing and enacting policy;
- enhancing pedagogical knowledge and professional learning.

Whilst it is clear that at national level, government needs to listen seriously to teachers, it is time too for a cultural shift at school level so that teachers have a voice in school decision making and are genuine partners in the development of school policy as a whole.

As Professor Geoff Whitty, former Director of the Institute of Education in London and now Professor for Equity in Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia argues (Whitty, 2008)), it is important:

“to demystify professional work and forge alliances between teachers and excluded constituencies of students, parents and members of the wider community with a view to building a more democratic education system and ultimately a more open society.”

The time has certainly come for teachers, who are the experts on the ground, to work alongside other stakeholders and make their voices heard. For the sake of our children, it can’t happen a moment too soon.

Fiona Carnie is an educationalist and writer and is an Adviser to the European Forum for Freedom in Education. Her book, Rebuilding our Schools from the Bottom Up, is published by Routledge in December. The above piece is an edited extract from this book.


Further information
Education Scotland – How good is our school? https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk2hgos.aspx

