



The self-improving education system: the opportunities and challenges

A briefing from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy

Introduction

The education white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere*¹ published in March 2016 accelerated core policy themes which have characterised Conservative education policy. Whilst there is now a new Secretary of State, who will bring her own priorities and themes to the Department for Education (DfE), it is unlikely that the themes in the white paper will be abandoned. Therefore, the debate about the content of the white paper is still valid and important. In fact, as the DfE regroups under new leadership and the Government's education policy framework is refreshed, this is an important moment to refresh the debate about the central principles and core proposals driving education system reform.

This briefing draws on discussion at a roundtable event held in Parliament organised by the National Literacy Trust as part of the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy (APPG on Literacy) on 23 May 2016. The National Literacy Trust holds the secretariat of the APPG on Literacy. Participants included members from House of Commons and House of Lords, school leaders, MATs, academics and an official from Ofsted. A full list of participants can be found on the back page.

The discussion largely focused on system reform (a key policy theme since 2010) and the potential impact on the education sector and areas that struggle with low literacy. Participants were also mindful throughout the discussion of the teachers and children that the system is designed to serve.

Summary and context

Conservative education policy has set out a vision for a self-improving school system with increased autonomy, freedom and professionalism where a network of schools deliver sustainable gains in pupil achievement by integrating innovation, research and best practice. The Government's ambition is that all young people have access to the best possible education regardless of where they live, yet the education white paper identifies geographical variation in educational attainment highlighting the obstacles that exist.

Recent reforms are outlining the architecture of this new system with a strong internal logic, e.g. academies to increase freedoms and removal of levels to promote professionalism. However, the success of the 'self-improving system' depends on many factors being in place and barriers will need to be overcome. It is likely that the greatest challenges will be in areas of disadvantage with weaker existing structures and with less access to school improvement services and outstanding schools able to provide school to school support. The risk is that this could increase inequality in the system and widen the attainment gap between

disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Schools and teachers also need courage and confidence to seize the opportunities of the new system. Whether adjusting to life without levels, changes to assessment or new exam specifications, teachers are absorbing a lot of change, as well as an increased responsibility for SENDⁱⁱ. Schools and teachers need to be supported with informed confidence about the system changes and the scrutiny that is applied to them in order to free them up to realise the ambition.

In this briefing we consider three key policy themes which if successfully implemented will help increase the effectiveness of a self-improving education system.

Driving school improvement and increasing collaboration between schools

The self-improving system encourages collaboration between schools and participants agreed that this was a strong concept which runs through recent policy reforms and the white paper. It also encourages strategic thinking and shared priorities across different phases of the school system. For example, in Stoke-on-Trent, Carl Ward explained that they have a literacy strategy that runs through all the schools within the City Learning Trust from 3 to 19-years-old. This provides a form of continuity and aids transition, reducing the risk of pupils with low literacy falling behind as they move through school.

The issue of who is best-placed to drive school improvement within a cluster of schools was discussed in some detail. The white paper outlines that teaching schools will be central to driving school improvement. However, participants felt that there are some drawbacks of this model. Carl Ward felt that teaching schools can create a contract culture focused on outcomes, affecting the long term sustainability of school improvement. He suggested that a 'Teaching MAT' would be more effective where the best schools take the lead and drive school improvement within a collaborative and long-term structure.

Frances Child also warned of caution in putting the load for school improvement on a particular school, since this can add fragility to the system. She explained that there are examples of teaching schools who have built up impressive portfolios of Continued Professional Development (CPD) and local networks but have then then be gone into Special Measures or Requires Improvementⁱⁱⁱ, since they had lost focus on their core purpose of delivering a good education to their pupils.

There was also some discussion around where to look to for best practice and whether those schools rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted (which involves rigorous checks and quality assurance and is a prerequisite of becoming a teaching school) were necessarily in the best position to advise schools in very different demographics and with different challenges. Geoff Barton explained that we want teachers who have been teaching for 5 or more years to pass those skills on to younger teachers. This happens in many schools but the system doesn't drive it. Analysis by Education Datalab last year showed that only two of the 563 teaching schools are in areas that serve the 25% most deprived populations.^{iv} When it comes to best-practice in teaching literacy, for example, we would learn most by looking at schools who are performing well despite significant challenges, e.g. those with about 80% Pupil Premium pupils, rated 'Good' with good progress made by pupils.

Encouraging innovation and using research evidence in literacy teaching

Equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about classroom practice is key to increasing professional confidence and enabling teachers to take advantage of the greater freedom the system offers.

Professor Debra Myhill kicked off discussion on this topic and welcomed the emphasis on teaching as a research-informed profession. However, she went on to explain that we have yet to understand fully what this means and there is a need to make teachers research literate. One of the best ways to do this is by schools getting involved in research directly. She also highlighted that the Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit is a very good resource to support teachers to use evidence-based practice, but teachers need to know how to look at it critically and how to apply it to their own context. When teachers do this, research evidence and innovation will come together to inform teachers' thinking and practice.

Debra also highlighted that research findings on the teaching of literacy are not consistent, which requires confident and informed judgments from teachers. There is a lot of research on early literacy and reading but much less on writing. Given that children's enjoyment of writing lags behind reading,^v there is more to do in this area to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to make choices about their practice.

Even where there is a good body of research evidence, such as around the importance of early language development, sharing best practice across schools about interventions which support children with delayed language will be crucial in a self-improving system.

Peter Henderson from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) explained that getting evidence to teachers was a challenge since there was not a clear national system or process for disseminating the information. As a result, the EEF is looking to build on local expertise and networks and, where necessary, create their own dissemination and scale up processes. For example, the EEF's North-East primary literacy campaign will engage Local Authorities, school groups and educational charities to provide evidence-informed training and support to schools. The EEF has also appointed a group of Research Schools in each of the nine regions of England who will be responsible for disseminating and engaging schools with evidence in that region. Peter added that the changing educational context within which they are operating provides challenges for their research trials since good research requires stability.

Geoff Barton highlighted the discrepancy between the Key Stage 2 (KS2) literacy requirements of the National Curriculum and those of Key Stage 3 (KS3). This can cause transition issues, particularly for disadvantaged pupils with weaker literacy skills, since a KS3 teacher is less likely to make literacy skills explicit within their teaching to make up for the lack of cultural baggage of knowledge. This is even more of an issue with spoken language, critical to literacy development. The current curriculum reforms have removed the previous detailed programme of study for speaking and listening, leaving school staff without the guidance needed to support and monitor these vital skills in children across both primary and secondary phases.

Frances Child explained that Initial Teacher Training (ITT) aims to make new teachers research literate but suggested that there was potential to take this a step further by creating an all masters level profession of

three years leading to teachers being research generating. This would build knowledge in and structure to the system by ensuring that, for at least three years, teachers are plugged into research activity.

Sarah Hubbard explained that Ofsted is looking at how to harness the knowledge and expertise within the Ofsted workforce. The majority of inspectors are now serving practitioners, working alongside HMI. The workforce is developing through the sharing of best practice and the development of networks of subject experts made up of serving practitioners. She explained that inspectors need to find best practice, and Ofsted has a role in validating this and feeding it back into the sector. Ofsted is looking to develop how they disseminate information, moving away from longer reports to the sharing of shorter case studies by making better use of digital technologies.

Changes to QTS and ITT

The white paper includes plans to replace the current QTS with a more challenging accreditation based on a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom, with the best headteachers being responsible for accrediting new entrants to the profession. Frances Child cautioned the shift towards school-led provision rather than the development of school/HEI partnership provision, since this risks losing expertise in HEI departments which generates research and also risks detracting schools from their core purpose of educating their children. There was also a question raised over whether QTS awarded by different head teachers in different regions could lead to inconsistency in the system and whether it was in the long-term interests of developing highly skilled educators.

Debra Myhill explained that we need to avoid the unintended consequence of increased devolution to schools. By removing responsibility from HEIs, it could devalue the profession by making it appear less skilled and less academic. There is also a risk that people clone the performance of people they work with, rather than developing teachers with critical thinking and a commitment to ongoing professional development.

Frances also emphasised that there was an opportunity to make a clear statement about wanting highly educated educators by offering a masters level qualification rather than a just practitioner's certificate, thereby raising the status of the profession. In other countries, such as Finland, teaching is a high-status profession with a competitive application process. In England, there are six main routes into teaching with multiple types of accreditation. This might help address the teacher recruitment crisis, the scale of which is not fully acknowledged in the white paper.

Whilst the Government is taking some positive steps in terms of recruitment, there is no silver bullet and elevating the status of the profession was seen as a key ingredient by all participants. Opinion about the impact of financial incentives was divided. Some school leaders had seen an increase in applicants when applying financial incentives and others had seen no effect on recruitment. The recent report from the National Audit Office called for further analysis of impact^{vi}. The concept of the College of Teaching as an independent teacher-led and teacher-run body focussed on the sharing of exciting and innovative practice was welcomed. The College of Teaching could play a key role in recognising the importance of continuing professional development for teachers around literacy and spoken language throughout their careers.

However, there is still more to do in communicating the vision for the College to the heart of the profession.

Issues for further discussion

Capacity of the system to deliver school improvement

In the absence of a local authority-led school improvement service, there is a need to ensure that this capacity is replaced across the country. There were some concerns expressed about whether teaching schools were universally best-placed to lead on school improvement. Putting the load for school improvement on a particular school in an area also risks adding fragility to the system. It could lead to conflict between a school's core purpose to provide a high quality education for its pupils and that to provide high quality CPD opportunities for local schools. It is also likely that areas with strong existing school improvement networks will get stronger, whilst those with weaker networks will take time to build a school improvement capacity. This could increase the educational divide and we need to ensure systems are in place to prevent this from happening.

Geographical variation and potential impact on educational disadvantage

The white paper maps attainment across the country, as well as access to academy chains and teaching schools, highlighting a key problem. In many areas of disadvantage, there is a supply problem, with less access to academy chains and teaching schools. As every area faces very different challenges, it is important to ensure that the school system understands the local context and school improvement is responsive to the specific needs of the local community. This could present a challenge when looking to academy chains to create capacity when it does not currently exist. The issue of gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers and between different regions and Local Authorities has been a real focus for Ofsted and the subject of speeches made by HMCI. We need to ensure that the system is best designed to narrow the attainment gap between different groups and geographical areas.

Building professional confidence to encourage innovation and evidence-based teaching

We need to ensure that schools leaders and teachers are empowered to take advantage of the new freedoms of the system. Whilst there is a lot of emphasis on evidence-based practice, we have yet to understand fully what this means. Teachers need to be research literate to interpret the research in their subject area and use this to make confident and informed judgments. Research findings on the teaching of literacy, for example, are not consistent, making accurate interpretation particularly challenging. Debra Myhill noted that it is important to recognise that educational research, including literacy research, is cumulative, with studies building on each other, and that robust evidence comes from a body of research on the same topic not one study, regardless of its research design.

Maximising the opportunity to raise the profile of the profession

The College of Teaching is a positive step in raising the profile of the profession through the creation of an independent teacher-led and teacher-run body focussed on the sharing of exciting and innovative practice. The revisions to ITT and QTS contained within the white paper provide an opportunity to simplify the routes into teaching and consider elevating the status of the profession by offering a masters level qualification rather than a just practitioner's certificate. It would make a clear statement about wanting highly educated educators and would move practitioners from being research literacy to research generating.

Building channels to spread best practice

The sharing of evidence-based practice is a key challenge, since there is not a clear system or process for disseminating the information. As the school improvement landscape becomes more autonomous and fragmented, it is essential that best practice is disseminated as widely as possible. It is necessary to learn from Ofsted's work in this area, as well as the Education Endowment Foundation's work in the North-East, to see how this might be built on and replicated across the country. There is a role for national organisations such as the National Literacy Trust, the Communication Trust and I CAN in working with academy chains, the College of Teaching and local school improvement providers to ensure up to date and accessible knowledge around children's language and literacy.

Roundtable participants

Stephen McPartland, Conservative MP for Stevenage, Chair of the Literacy APPG

Stephen Twigg, Labour MP for Liverpool West Derby, Chair of the International Development Select Committee, Co-Chair of the Literacy APPG*

Baroness Kay Andrews

Geoff Barton, Headteacher, King Edward VI School, Bury St Edmunds

Frances Child, Vice Principal, University of Birmingham School and Director of School-Led Initial Teacher Education, School of Education, Birmingham University

Sarah Hubbard, Ofsted, National Lead for English (primary and secondary stage)*

Professor Debra Myhill, Pro-Vice-Chancellor: College of Social Sciences and International Studies, Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter

Carl Ward, Chief Executive, City Learning Trust

Dawn Elliott, Head of Partnership Tax, KPMG, Governor, The City Academy

Jonathan Douglas, Director, National Literacy Trust

Bob Reitemeier, Chief Executive, ICAN

Rowena Bermingham, Postgraduate Fellow, Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology

Thomas Martell, Education Endowment Foundation

Peter Henderson, Education Endowment Foundation

* Unable to attend on 23 May, so attended meeting with Stephen McPartland and National Literacy Trust representatives on 16 May to discuss key themes.

About the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy

The All-Party Parliamentary Literacy Group launched in November 2011 to ensure parliamentary knowledge and support for the latest research, policy and best practice in the field of literacy. It is co-chaired by Stephen McPartland MP and Stephen Twigg MP, with Lord Knight and Lord Tope as officers. The National Literacy Trust runs the secretariat of the Group.

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About the National Literacy Trust

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. The charity runs projects in the poorest communities, campaigns to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents, and supports schools to transform their literacy teaching. www.literacytrust.org.uk

ⁱ Department for Education (2016) Educational Excellence Everywhere. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508447/Educational_Excellence_Everywhere.pdf.

ⁱⁱ ATL, SEND survey. Available at: <http://www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/debate/recent-surveys.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ Examples of teaching schools that have gone into Special Measures or Requires Improvement: Cramlington Learning Village, Northumberland: <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/137457>

John Cabot Federation: http://www.cabotlearningfederation.net/files/4714/6856/8827/Ofsted_July_2016.PDF

Bishop Challoner Catholic College in Birmingham: <http://fluencycontent-schoolwebsite.netdna-ssl.com/FileCluster/BishopChalloner/Mainfolder/Documents/Ofsted/Bishop-Challoner-Catholic-College-10017504-PDF-Final.pdf>

^{iv} McGauran, A. (2015) Only two teaching schools are in poorest areas. Available at: <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/only-two-teaching-schools-are-in-poorest-areas/>

^v Clark, C. (2015) Children's and Young People's Writing in 2014. Available at: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0002/7989/Children_s_and_Young_People_s_Writing_2014.pdf

^{vi} National Audit Office (2016) Training new teachers. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Training-new-teachers.pdf>