Managing change – The relationship between education and politics

In October Estelle Morris gave a keynote speech at the Inaugural IEE Conference to practitioners and policy makers. Here, she summarises her views

TOO OFTEN WE UNDERESTIMATE the importance of partnerships between different parts of our education system. There are a wide range of different skills, but everyone who plays a part is committed to doing the best they can for the next generation. This extends to politicians as well. They are frequently thought to be the cause of problems and although, like all other parts of the education system, they make errors and misjudgements, they are no less motivated to do well than anyone else. The relationship between education and politics is important; they are players in the same game and the two are interdependent. However, the debate between politics and education is often destructive rather than constructive, and displays a misunderstanding of the contribution each can make.

Politics and education in the past
Historically, the relationship between politics and education has worked well. Politicians offer a vision of the sort of society they want, and education has been one of the major means of achieving it. When the vision of politicians and society (or at least those who had the vote) was to have wealth concentrated in the hands of a small number of people and a social structure that didn’t change, the education system delivered that. Only the children of the rich and powerful received a formal education. When the vision of society needed more highly educated people, the school system was changed to deliver it. Then, when formal education for girls was introduced, the curriculum still reflected the role society expected of women. Perhaps the biggest change to the education system was in the years after the Second World War, with the need to rebuild industry and society and advances in technology. For the first time, the economy needed a significant number of well-educated people, and society wanted a country of greater opportunity. The 1944 Education Act and the tripartite system that followed were designed to deliver that.

Politics and education today
Now, we face the need for even greater change. We need even more highly skilled people so we can compete in a global economy, and we understand better the social consequences for individuals and society when children are failed at school. Across the political spectrum there is a view that we need an education system that has universal high standards and is inclusive, and the public have far higher expectations than used to be the case.

However, politics has always been better at gate keeping than gate opening. It is well practised at building education systems that allow a few to reach the top, but it is much less sure of the levers it needs to use to deliver high standards for all. Yet there seems to be emerging agreement across the political parties as to what those levers might be.

Political levers
Despite political differences, all political parties have used four key levers, to different degrees, to bring about the changes they want. The challenge is that although each lever can point to success, each also has disadvantages in the way it affects education.

Structural change takes the focus away from teaching and learning. It is too frequently used as a lever for change. Structural change is unlikely to bring about progress in the time frame that politicians want, so the temptation is to continually amend or change structures.

Choice and the market. We need choice and competition. We need people to have a voice
within the system and a market is a good way of providing that. However, a market supports success because it allows some to fail, which isn't acceptable in a system that needs to deliver success for everyone.

**Accountability mechanisms** have served us well, but there is a problem in that we risk valuing the things we can measure and undervaluing the things we can't. Creativity, inspiration, good citizenship, and working well together are all difficult to measure and teachers, parents, and pupils sometimes feel they are not valued.

**Pedagogy** is a powerful lever for change but at the moment there isn’t a structure to support it. There is no evidence base of what works; the relationship between research and education is not as strong as it should be.

Although these levers are different to those available to teachers, both make an essential contribution to raising standards in the classroom. It is essential that the discussions between politicians and teachers recognise this. If teachers oppose a particular part of the accountability system they are thought, by politicians, to be against accountability measures themselves. This means that professional debate about the details of how we hold schools accountable doesn’t take place. Too often debate concentrates on misunderstandings rather than substance.

**Taking pedagogy forwards**

Potentially, the most important of the political levers is pedagogy, but the relationship between education and politics on pedagogy needs addressing. Although in the past politicians have sought to influence things outside the classroom (eg, admissions or resources), over the past 30 years there has been a significant change, with political policies being directed inside classrooms (eg, the National Curriculum, testing, and more recently the numeracy and literacy strategies).

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However, politicians have assumed that it is they who can make the decisions about pedagogy, and have done so. There is an argument that pedagogy has fallen on the wrong side of the divide between education and politics. We now have policies from government on setting in classrooms, on synthetic phonics, on how much homework children should do, on how children should sit in a classroom, and on how we should use computers. These are education policies that have become political policies.

Of my four levers the three that have been used the longest – structural change, the market, and accountability – cannot by themselves create good teachers, or turn average teachers into excellent ones. The fourth lever of pedagogical change is essential if we are to achieve those ambitions. On this more than anything there needs to be a proper and professional discussion between politicians and others in education.

We need to debate who does what in exercising this lever of pedagogical change. We need to both acknowledge the importance of pedagogy and together build a structure in which all teachers can learn from improved pedagogy.

**What we know**

- Education and politics are interdependent, but the debate between them is often unhelpful.
- There are four key levers available to politicians to bring about educational change.
- Pedagogy is potentially the most important lever, but we need an improved structure to support it.
- The relationship between politicians and researchers, and between schools and researchers, must be improved.

We need a strategy of realising the power of pedagogy in all schools, and I would suggest the following:

- Improve the relationship between politicians and education researchers. Research is the great unformed part of education, largely untouched by the reforms of the last 30 years. Too often, politicians don’t use the best research to inform policy making. Equally, researchers need to reflect on the education changes and the needs of schools and policy makers. They must take responsibility for making sure that their work contributes to the standards agenda.
- Government should look at how public money is spent on education research and make sure that this valuable resource is providing value for money.
- Government can help by providing a structure that brings schools and educational researchers closer together. Government can help build links between teachers and researchers.
- Teachers need to know the quality of the research they read. A form of “kite mark” would help them to do this.
- Effective ways of disseminating research to teachers must be established, and teachers need the time and opportunity to study it, reflect on it, and support in implementing and evaluating it. Education has a good record of delivering what society asks of it, but the enormity of the demands now means that we need a better way of framing the discussions between practitioners, researchers, and politicians.

- See Estelle Morris’s speech in full online at [www.york.ac.uk/iee](http://www.york.ac.uk/iee)