

Primary basics Geoff Barton

Politicians are always keen for us to clamber into the sandpit with the big boys of the educational world. "We are still some way off from being world class," said our Prime Minister-in-waiting last week as he surveyed standards in Mathematics. "It is unacceptable that we still have 150,000 children leaving primary school who aren't numerate."

Mr Brown's solution? A rejuvenated Mathematics strategy called – naturally - Every Child Counts. He has promised to find £35 million to ensure that by 2010 more than 300,000 at-risk pupils a year benefit from one-to-one tuition in Maths, with 30 to 40 hours a year for those with greatest need. An army of Maths mentors – some of them university students – will be deployed to raise standards.

Whilst teacher unions have given this a cautious welcome – it's always hard to argue that giving money to schools is a bad idea – it is also predictable that our first reaction in schools is one of suspicion. We inevitably wonder whether this is money that has already been announced and stashed away in the darker recesses of our existing budgets, or whether it's genuinely new funding?

It's also worth pausing before we jump onto the merry-go-round of doom-mongering. Despite our apparent inbuilt instinct to rubbish our own education system at every opportunity, the statistics for the past ten years speak well of the Government's achievements. We might not yet be stepping out with the international high-fliers of Scandinavia and the Far East, but in the basics we are doing considerably better than we were 10 years ago.

The percentage of pupils getting level 4 in the KS2 tests has risen from around 55% to around 75%, whilst in reading and writing the trend has been consistently upward. In writing at KS2, for example, we have moved from 53% of pupils achieving level 4+ in 1997 to 67% in 2006.

The problem is that it still isn't good enough. Gaining level 4 or higher at KS2 and level 5 or higher at KS3 is a significant predictor of being able to gain a clutch of good GCSE grades aged 16. And against that international benchmark we are about as successful as Scotch, our recent Eurovision underachiever.

Which is why the Government gets rightly twitchy when progress in national tests appears to falter.

So if we agree on the symptoms, the question is whether Gordon Brown's prescription is the right one. Is a phalanx of mentors and catch-up classes the best approach?

Experience tells us that when focus determinedly on the things that matter with targeted resources in support, then we can make an impact. The National Strategy's attention to writing demonstrates it. It also shows the importance of well-trained teachers who can teach with confidence and skill.

The danger of Gordon Brown's approach is that it's another bolt-on measure. Rather than freeing up the primary curriculum to inject some creativity and space for inspiration, plus a strong focus on getting the basics of reading, writing and Mathematics secured, we run the risk of another distracting wacky wheeze.

It's not that it's a bad idea. We know that children often learn most effectively from people nearer to them in age. But it can only be part of a solution.

Then of course there's the wider cultural issue too. It's all very well comparing our educational performance with countries whose expectations and aspirations are very different from our own. When Education Secretary Alan Johnson asked one primary teacher what he needed to raise standards, his reply was simple: "A class full of Vietnamese children".

It may be that one of the most important educational acts our new Prime Minister could do is constantly to remind parents and carers of their essential role in helping their children to get the basics right – a generation of parents who regularly talk, read, listen and do Maths with their children.

If Britain's going to make it into the international first class lounge, then it will take the involvement of all of us – both within and beyond the school gates.

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