

Short-termism

Geoff Barton

Who would be a politician these days?

You can't mutter a spontaneous sotto voce comment during a conference speech without someone saying they eavesdropped what you really said.

You can't rip your shirt off on holiday without the media speculating about whether you shave your chest or where you buy your swimming trunks. You can't even enjoy a relaxing game of mid-afternoon croquet without someone from the paparazzi sticking their long-range lens in.

Politicians are by definition locked in a world of short-termism that is at odds with life in school. Theirs is a career that's punctuated by the recurrent risk of rejection: losing your seat at the next election is likely to focus your mind on quick-fix successes, underpinned by a spin culture that weaves a candyfloss ball of good news out of any initiative.

We do some of this ourselves. Watch any headteacher take over a school and you'll usually see a succession of quick hits – a clampdown on uniform, a new look to the school newsletter, hasty refurbishment of public parts of the school. These are designed to signal that we have

arrived, that the place is under new management. It also establishes our credentials for effecting change at a deeper level. “If we can get students looking smarter and arriving on time at lessons,” so the unspoken argument runs, “then we can start to tackle the deeper aspects of the culture”.

And that’s the key word here – culture. Because whether it’s in a school or an old yoghurt pot, cultures take time to grow. And time is what politicians so often deny us.

As Tony Blair finishes his last Labour Conference as leader, few will doubt that his impact on education has been remarkable and hugely beneficial. We’re unlikely ever to see such sustained levels of investment again, such commitment to renewing the once-dilapidated state of school buildings.

He delivered the now common-sense notion that teachers should spend as much of their time as possible in planning, teaching and assessing, rather than queuing at the photocopier and doing endless cover for absent colleagues. We’ve seen a much-needed recognition that standards of numeracy and literacy – the building blocks of a humane education – had been allowed to fester scandalously for 50 years and had to be addressed.

But the politicians' lust for short-term fixes has also blighted our progress. The league table obsession undoubtedly prevents all but the boldest schools from genuinely innovating, from risking taking some of our students out of a narrow straight-jacket curriculum and giving them a different diet of learning.

There's the nutty idea of Ofsted giving a special measures school a twelve month ultimatum to improve or face closure. Surely no one - apart from Lenny Henry - still believes that a failing school can be genuinely turned around on such a timescale.

There were the teaching and learning responsibilities. Everyone agreed that the old management allowance system was creaking and in need of renewal. But who exactly hit on the wacky wheeze of insisting it was done in a matter of months, reducing all but the most robust of schools to a debilitating hothouse of angst and unhappiness?

There was the quick fix ban on junk food, announced before the implications could be discussed and before schools could take time to educate their pupils about the changes. Thus we see misguided South Yorkshire mothers becoming the volunteer delivery team of an alternative

meals-on-wheels service, stuffing bags of chips through railings into the clutching hands of pupils who the school hasn't had time to win over.

There's the mad cap U-turn on modern languages. No sooner had youngsters been set free to choose whether they wished to continue their studies than schools minister Jacqui Smith was rustling up targets to try to rein back in the freefall desertion of the subjects by students.

It's not that schools don't want change. I suspect, in fact, that we want to embrace deeper, more significant changes that will enable genuine transformation of schooling into something relevant for the 30% of our pupils for whom much of school life can be deeply demotivating. But you don't create sustained transformation through quick fixes.

Most parents would trust us on this. I suspect they'd like our attention to be fixed on constantly improving the quality of their children's learning and welfare. Instead they note our distracted gaze, bracing ourselves to respond to the next volley of short-term ideas that's just been lobbed out of Westminster.

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