

The Wales Education Lecture

2007

*Is our education policy
based on research?*

Baroness Estelle Morris

Text to accompany a lecture given to the General Teaching Council for Wales



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General Teaching Council for Wales



The General Teaching Council for Wales

The General Teaching Council for Wales is the statutory, self-regulating professional body for teachers in Wales. It seeks to raise the status of teaching by maintaining and promoting the highest standards of professional practice and conduct in the interests of teachers, pupils and the general public.

The principal aims of the Council are:

- to contribute to improving the standards of teaching and the quality of learning, and
- to maintain and improve standards of professional conduct amongst teachers, in the interests of the public.

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On 1 October 2007, the Wales Education Lecture was delivered by Baroness Estelle Morris at the National Museum in Cardiff.



Baroness Estelle Morris

A former teacher, Estelle Morris became an MP in 1992 and worked her way up to the post of opposition spokesperson on Education and Employment, before becoming Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Schools Standards, and Secretary of State for Education and Skills. She famously resigned her post as Education Secretary in 2002, having made a commitment to the then Conservative Shadow Education Secretary to resign if the literacy and numeracy targets were not met. She then became Minister for the Arts in 2003, before stepping down from the government and as a Member of Parliament in the 2005 general election. Estelle Morris was raised to the peerage as Baroness Morris of Yardley in 2005.

Baroness Morris is currently President of the National Children's Bureau, a charitable organisation acting as an umbrella body for organisations working with children and young people in England & Northern Ireland.



Is our education policy based on research?

Thank you very much for inviting me to give the Annual Lecture for the General Teaching Council for Wales. It's an excellent opportunity to share ideas and I do congratulate you on establishing the event.

One of the questions I've often been asked since I stepped down from being a Minister is whether Government uses evidence to inform its decisions. In fact the question is more likely to be put the other way around – why don't politicians look at the evidence before they make decisions!

Politicians do, of course, look at evidence but it's more complex than that. It's probably fair to say, though, that education isn't a service that has a track record of changing in the light of evidence and circumstances. The classroom of the eighteenth century looks remarkably similar to the classroom of the middle of the last century. One teacher in one room with a group of children, all of a similar age, learning very similar subjects. It's difficult to see there, evidence of radical response to two centuries of change.





The same can't be said though, for example, in the health service. A hospital would most definitely reflect the developments in technology and research that had taken place in two hundred years. The public expect constant change in the health service. Interestingly we very often cite change as something that distracts from progress in education. The culture between the two is different.

We have though made huge progress in recent decades and there is no doubt that the quality of teaching and the standards in our schools are now higher than they have ever been. But how decisions that affect education are taken is one of the things we ought to look at if we are to improve further.

I say this because of three things.

First, more needs to be asked of the education system than ever before. It is more urgent than ever that we solve some of the problems that have plagued our education system for generations – the social class divide, a good quality vocational curriculum, engaging all students and keeping them in education beyond the school leaving age. Second, science has taught us more about how people learn and how this should be informing teaching and learning and third, the relationship between those who make strategic decisions at both the national and



local level and those who work in schools has changed and will no doubt continue to do so.

Some people say that the answer to education policy-making is to take politics and ideology out of it. I wouldn't subscribe to that view. Education is about more than the here and now. It is about the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another, but it is also about the type of society we want to be.

When girls were taught different subjects to boys it was rooted in the adult roles we expected of both. When we didn't educate the poor it reflected our views on social mobility.

You can't take politicians or politics out of decision-making in education. It is one of the most important levers they have to create the type of society they have promised their electorate. And many of the issues and the decisions they need to take will be based on ideology.

The political left's support for comprehensive education is a reflection of the priority they give to social justice; the right's defence of selection and private education is a reflection of the importance they give to individual freedom.



But ideology isn't the only thing that influences politicians. Their decisions are inevitably affected by finance and affordability. Evidence might show that class sizes of twenty are better than thirty but there is a cost to it.

It isn't wrong either that politicians make decisions responding to pressure from the public. It is public pressure that has helped secure the funding for more nursery and child care places. It was public opinion that brought about the recent changes in student support. It is pressure



from parents to choose a school for their child that has put choice at the centre of secondary school reform in England.

And of course politicians do make decisions based on evidence as well. The literacy strategy and numeracy strategy were very much evidence-based, as is much of the work that is going on in Children's Centres and early years education.

Evidence though is sometimes contradictory and it can be used selectively. The very same piece of research can be used by both the left and the right to justify their position! It depends on what you want to achieve. Evidence that shows bright children do better in grammar schools can be used by the right to prove their point of view but that same evidence may very well show that children overall do worse in a selective system. The political left will use that to justify their position.

Sometimes evidence seems to go in the face of common sense and politicians usually back common sense! The evidence that pupils learn more effectively in mixed ability classes as opposed to setting by ability is very mixed. Yet common sense says that it is easier to teach children in a group if they are of a similar ability.

There has though been a change in the relationship between politicians and education in the last two or three decades.



In the years following the end of the Second World War, education was just as important to the political agenda as it is now but the activity and focus of politicians stopped at the school gate. The arguments were about ideology and structure. Whether it was the raising of the school leaving age, comprehensive education, charitable status for public schools, the expansion of higher education, the quality of vocational work or the pay of teachers, they were issues which could only be decided outside schools. What happened beyond the school sign, inside the school and the classroom was thought to be beyond the influence of the politician.

This changed with the introduction of the national curriculum, national assessments and Ofsted. The political debate changed. Politicians were discussing - and - deciding as what should be taught and individual school performance became an issue of local debate.

A decade ago, with the election of the Labour government, the debate moved on again. The literacy and numeracy strategies were not just about what was taught but how it was taught. This wasn't an ideological policy but an education programme put forward by politicians.

The missives that have come from Government in the last few years have continued this trend. They have been about teaching styles, how to keep discipline, how to group children, how often to contact



parents, how frequently a Local Authority can go into a school, how many hours sport a child should do each week, how to deal with the underperformance of boys.

The government's area of activity is different now; and that is right.

I take the view that it is change in the classroom; developments in teaching and learning; how we organise the shape of the school day and the school term; how we bring together the teaching of skills and the





learning of knowledge, how we link with the home that will drive the improvements in education. If politicians put higher standards for more children at the top of what they would want to achieve, they are bound to get involved in decisions that affect what happens in the classroom.

But this shift should make us think. These decisions do need to be based on evidence and not ideology. They will impact on teachers' professional freedom and autonomy and it will need a different political culture as well.

Too often at the moment, we don't have that political culture. Politicians feel very vulnerable to the media charge of 'u-turns' if they change their minds, yet if decisions are based on the most up-to-date and the most rigorous evidence it will mean that politicians change their minds.

Interestingly in health the culture seems to be different. We accept that we should be pushing forward our knowledge and we should be constantly seeking evidence which may mean we will change the things we do. There has been a national debate on the triple vaccine. We discuss priorities for health funding. We are constantly being given new information about food or diet based on the latest research. It might be sometimes frustrating that it contradicts earlier advice but we debate the evidence without seeing them as political u-turns. And the evidence leads to politically-led policies like screening programmes or the flu vaccination programme.



In health it seems easier to accept that research will push forward the barriers of what we know and that this will influence and affect policy. If political decisions in education are going to continue to be about teaching and learning they must become more evidence-based and we must have a political culture that accommodates that.

Decisions about education and particularly teaching and learning though are still mainly made in schools. This needs to be evidence-based as well.

Less than a generation ago, there was little opportunity for teachers to use evidence in what they did. There was no expectation that teachers would watch each other teach or share best practice and there was little opportunity for them to do so. Initial teacher education wasn't rigorous and there was no clear career and qualification structure.

Appraisal wasn't widespread and we had no national inspection system. There was no-one whose job it was to evaluate teaching and to let the rest of the profession know what was working. And for the teacher who did want to know what the research said there was no single place where they could go to find out.

Things have changed. They have improved and it's these changes that have played a large part in improving standards.



Teachers are better trained and there is a qualification framework. We have become much better in our education system at ‘spreading good practice,’ creating partnerships and structures that allow teachers to learn from each other. Teachers are better at learning to do what succeeds elsewhere rather than re-inventing the wheel.

But this by itself isn’t going to be enough. The talent and skill which will be needed more and more is that of doing things in completely different ways, solving problems that have not been solved before.

Just as the discovery of DNA and the genome project is changing the way those in medicine can treat their patients, what we are learning about how the brain works could change the way we teach. The work that many teachers are doing in their own classrooms in trying new ways to organise the curriculum and new approaches to teaching their pupils is also research. Many teachers now look internationally to find good practice. They link with schools in other continents and learn from each other. That is research as well.

We need an education system that will make sure all our schools and teachers have access to the latest research findings.

We are in a good position to make this happen. We have over 100 University Schools of Education and countless other top-quality



organisations carrying out education research. We spend over £70 million on research each year and much of it is world class.

But too often the links between teachers and practitioners are not sufficiently strong. Education researchers are part of the education system. They are not in a separate world from schools and teachers. Their research serves no real purpose unless the best of it changes what happens in schools.

If both government and teachers are to use the evidence there are some things that will need to change.

Teachers will need to know what evidence there is, which of it can be trusted and where and how to find it.

Teachers need the time to update their subject knowledge.

Teachers will need to be researchers themselves, constantly evaluating their own practice and progress.

All academic researchers need close contacts with schools, in the way many of them do already, and it should be possible for teachers and schools to commission research if they feel there is a gap in what they need to know.



Seven years ago we embarked on a journey to reform the teaching workforce so we could allow all who work in schools to use their skills to best effect and they could have the support they needed to do their jobs. I believe those changes are some of the most important that have happened in recent years. But perhaps we need to make sure that the education research community is also involved in those reforms and their skills and knowledge can have greater impact in the work to raise standards.

We do need to think carefully about how we make decisions that impact on the standards of education and the life chances we can offer our children. We should be an education system that bases what we do on the latest and best evidence available but to make that happen we will need to change the structure of the relationship between research and practitioners and decision makers. The gain could be the next big jump in the quality of education we are able to deliver.