

There's still a case to be made for central planning



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A RADIO sketch in the 70s featured Blackbeard the pirate. His ship is under attack. "Right me' hearties...we are down to ten men. The main sail is broken. The ship is on fire. Midshipman Billy has had his leg blown off. Me beard is on fire and worst of all we are sinking. What should we do?"

"We need a plan!" comes the answer.

In the early 1990s, long before the 'discovery' of systems leadership, emotionally intelligent leadership or self evaluation, came 'planning'.

The education planning approach at that time was part of a long line of management development going right back to the First World War. In the 1880s and 90s, Frederick W. Taylor believed it was management's task to design jobs properly and provide incentives to motivate workers to achieve higher productivity.

About the same time, in France, Jules Henri Fayol concluded that management needed five basic administrative functions (planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling).

Meanwhile in Germany, Max Weber focused on organisational structure, dividing organisations into hierarchies with clear lines of authority and control.

In the 1990s, we tended to ignore the views of the Harvard professor Elton Mayo who proposed that managers should become more 'people oriented and that participation in social groups and 'group pressure' as opposed to organisational structure or demands from management would improve productivity. The concept of the 'servant-leader', which calls for leaders to place the priorities and needs of their followers before their own or that of the organisation, would not be proposed as a management approach by Peter Greenleaf until 2002.

As a 'modern' 90s headteacher I entered into planning in a big way. We even produced our own book, 'How to Write a School Development Plan', which was published by Heinemann in 1994. For a time it was one of Heinemann's most popular educational books, selling well abroad, including Japan. My senior staff even participated at a book signing in Waterstones bookshop.



> "I have a cunning plan," said Baldrick, to no good effect

At this time I became heavily involved in working with the DfES in the development and piloting of Education Development Planning. Our mantra was: 'By failing to plan we are planning to fail.'

Prior to 1998, there was no systematic attempt at a national level to drive up education standards through central planning. The first attempts to do that were the National Literacy Strategy followed by the National Numeracy Strategy. Then came the Key Stage 3 Strategy (for 11 to 14 year olds) and the Early Years Foundation Stage. These developments culminated in the remit of the National Strategies.

The National Strategies between 1997 and 2011 involved a host of programmes for example:

- Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)
- Communication, Language and Literacy Programme
- Core subject pedagogy and subject knowledge
- Every Child Programme for the lowest attaining 5% of children in primary schools
- National Challenge Programme support for schools below floor targets
- School Improvement Partner Programme
- Behaviour and Attendance Programme
- Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Programme
- Inclusion Development Programme
- Achievement for All Programme

The National Strategies were delivered by a national team of experts and a regional delivery team that worked with and supported local

authorities in providing training and support to schools and settings. Local authorities (LAs) in turn were funded to employ some 2,000 consultants to help to deliver the National Strategies' training locally.

John Lennon, in the song Beautiful Boy, said 'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making plans'. Have no doubt we were busy!

In 2011, the Department for Children Schools and Families, described the National Strategies as 'one of the most ambitious management programmes in education' and that it had paid major dividends.

So if they were so successful why did they end? It was argued that the National Strategies' programme was always intended to be a fixed-term intervention to achieve accelerated improvement in standards. Of course, there was always the cost.

It was argued that the time was right for central government to step back from much of the central provision and initiatives and to consolidate resources and decision-making at school level, allowing schools to determine their own needs and to commission appropriate support. 'The system is now ready to move towards more collaborative practice between teachers within and across schools.' Perhaps we were applying the thinking of Elton Mayo and Peter Greenleaf?

Or it could be that we had absorbed the messages of Blackadder screened during the 1980s and 90s. Baldrick, the stupid servant, famously promoted the 'cunning plan', thought up to deal with a problem or crisis and usually ridiculed scathingly by Blackadder for their implausibility. However, Blackadder frequently resorts to using these plans when the situation becomes desperate.

The one saving grace with the Blackadder approach is at least the plan came upwards into the organisation. Fair enough, it was invented by an idiot. However, the principle that the 'customer' should be involved in the design and redesign of development of plans was now seen as critical.

I once followed the reception sign in a Durham Hotel, which led me outside to the river. When I mentioned this to one of the cleaners she told me that she had known for months that the sign was pointing the wrong way. "But the bosses never ask us so why should we tell them?" The voice of the customer or receiver of the plans was not heard.

Of course, there are those who would do away with central planning altogether and leave education to the influences of the 'market'. In the 1990s, we thought that would never happen. We were wrong.

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