

# The teachers unions' guild system must be abolished, not strengthened, Mr Clegg

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In a jab at Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg is said to soon be requiring that all free schools and academies hire teachers with officially approved teacher qualifications. Mr Clegg shouldn't be blamed for aiming to make sure that all English pupils have access to good educators. And surely, teachers who have undergone officially approved training must be better than those who haven't? It sounds so right. But it's not. In fact, it's utterly and completely wrong.

Few dispute that good teachers are crucial for pupil performance, both in the short and in the long run. At the same time, better-educated pupils commit fewer crimes, and contribute more to economic growth, so good educators are clearly also crucial for producing positive spill-over effects that benefit society at large. This means that the public does indeed have an interest in ensuring a good teacher force.

Yet after decades of research we have little understanding of what makes educators effective. Observable characteristics, including teacher qualifications, generally have no or very small effects. This is a remarkably consistent finding in most rigorous studies worldwide. If there's anything research in the economics of education has disproved, it's the theory that teachers with specific qualifications perform better than those without. Most people might also find this intuitive since practically everybody has probably experienced good unqualified teachers and bad qualified ones (and vice versa).

But doesn't this mean that a mandate requiring all educators to undergo officially approved training at the very least wouldn't do any harm? Well, no it doesn't. Since such a mandate ensures that many perfectly good educators – perhaps better than those holding teacher qualifications – can't enter the market, we would instead perpetuate a system that does nothing to improve the overall teacher pool. This is not in the best interest of children.

Should anybody be able to become a teacher then? Not necessarily. There is some evidence that teacher subject knowledge impacts performance positively. But there are many ways to gain subject knowledge, which is probably best determined by diagnostic assessments rather than via crude measures such as degree qualifications. Indeed, an English study from 2012 found no impact at all of degree qualifications on pupil achievement. At the same time, the impact of subject knowledge should not be exaggerated. Most of the variance in teacher effectiveness remains unexplained. For this reason, the diagnostic assessments should only be used to weed out the worst apples.

Once this process is completed, the only viable policy is to leave it to headteachers to decide whom they want as teachers. This is how private companies operate, in education and in other sectors. And

who would accept that all manufacturing workers would need specific union-approved qualifications before companies can employ them?

Because of the lack of knowledge regarding what makes educators effective, the government should clearly step out of the way here. Regulation should always be carefully assessed before implementation, even if it can be shown that it could be helpful. This is because there are many unintended consequences that must be taken into consideration. But when there is so little evidence that a regulation would do any good at all, politicians should simply keep their hands off.

Unsurprisingly, unions and others have cried foul, rhetorically asking whether doctors should not be required to undergo medical training either. This comparison is entirely invalid. In medicine, there is a best-practice approach based on rigorous research that has found out what is and what isn't appropriate treatment. This doesn't exist in education. We simply don't know exactly what type of teaching will generate the best outcomes for kids. What we do know is that forcing all teachers to have qualifications doesn't help.

Forcing all academies and free schools to hire educators with officially approved teacher qualifications is therefore a nonsensical policy, at least if we're interested in increasing pupil performance. Instead, it would further enforce teachers unions' monopoly, strengthening the guild system they have been able to acquire through the political process. It's good for unionised teachers – who will face less competition from other educators – but bad for kids.

The right policy is therefore not to reverse the freedom of academies and free schools to embark on their own quests to find good teachers, but rather to extend that freedom to all publicly funded schools. If the Liberal Democrats truly want to improve the English education system, nothing less than a U-turn would be expected. Hitherto thou shalt come, Mr Clegg, but no further.

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