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Geoff Whitty

ABSTRACT

This article assesses the period following the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and reflects on the main continuities and discontinuities in policy emphases since that Act. It begins by outlining education policy under the Conservatives from 1979. In this, it shows how the Conservative's simultaneous pursuit of marketization and centralization in education, nowhere more so than through the ERA, provides a key illustration of Neave's (1988) 'evaluative state'. In then considering the record of New Labour on education, the article identifies three central strands of policy: first, targeted attempts to tackle disadvantage and, second, an emphasis on school improvement, both of which focus on schools themselves rather than the context in which they operate, and, third, the notion that school diversity and parental choice will lead to higher standards for all. This discussion is used to show the significant continuities between Conservative and New Labour policies in terms of the drive for an essentially market-based education system. In discussing the tensions that have arisen through New Labour's attempts to address disadvantage within a market-based policy framework, the article closes by commenting on the extent to which a new direction in education policy is emerging under Gordon Brown's premiership.

KEYWORDS *centralization, education policy, education reform act, marketization, new labour*

Introduction

During the 1970s there was growing antipathy in England towards the 'swollen state' of the immediate postwar years, largely for economic reasons concerning the level of public expenditure. But this became coupled under the 1979 Thatcher government with a market choice critique of public sector management. In the case of education this focused increasingly on the role of the so-called 'educational establishment'—principally left-leaning teaching unions, inspectors and teacher trainers—who seemed to favour what the Conservatives saw as highly questionable 'progressive' or 'child-centred' approaches to teaching. Also implicated were the Local Education Authorities (LEAs), whose

central role in the allocation of school places was seen as stifling the need for schools to innovate or to respond efficiently, if at all, to parental concerns (Shleifer, 1998). Taken together, the Conservatives argued, 'progressive' teaching methods and state allocation of places had brought a dull uniformity to the system and a levelling down of standards.

Accordingly, throughout its time in office, the Conservative government acted to increase the power of the 'consumer' and reduce that of the 'producers'. It did so through the introduction of greater parental choice over the school their children would attend and increased differentiation of the types of schools they could choose from, in part by blurring the boundaries between state and private sector providers. This was coupled with per capita funding and the devolution of many LEA responsibilities, including funding decisions, to schools so that they could respond to the market.

However, while the Conservatives were enthusiastic about making schools more receptive to parents' wishes, they were unwilling to relinquish control over the outcomes that schools should achieve. In this, Conservative education policy provides a clear illustration of the tendency for liberal democracies to develop along the lines of the 'strong state' and the 'free economy' (Gamble, 1988) and the associated shift in the way the public sector is co-ordinated and controlled by government, to what can be characterized as 'steering at a distance'. While processes of devolution appear to offer organizations greater autonomy, the state retains overall strategic control by setting the outputs that providers need to achieve and publishing details of their performance against them (Neave, 1988; Whitty et al., 1998). These indicators arguably influence the priorities of service users, who in turn reinforce the pressure on providers to work to them (Adnett and Davies, 2003). Examples of such central steering mechanisms under the Conservatives included the establishment of a standard 'National Curriculum' and system of assessment for all schools and the introduction of a new and more intensive approach to school inspection.

Although spearheaded by the Conservative administration from 1979, and reinforced particularly by the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and 1992 Education (Schools) Act, the New Labour government has taken these elements of competition and central control much further. In particular, it has continued to open-up aspects of state education delivery to the private sector, while introducing more elaborate target-setting and monitoring. Under New Labour, though, these policies were initially framed explicitly in terms of furthering social justice through a modernized public sector. Yet its third term in office has revealed mixed evidence regarding the outcomes of its policies in this respect. While New Labour is now beginning to build on its more targeted efforts to tackle disadvantage by focusing additional resources on pupils who need greater support, this is within the context of broader policies on school improvement, diversification of schools and parental choice that have been based on a misrecognition of the impact of structural factors on learning and on the operation of the education market. As a result, there has been at best only a

very modest reduction in the attainment gap between pupils from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds under New Labour.

In this assessment of the period following the ERA, I reflect on the main continuities and discontinuities in policy emphases since that Act. After outlining the key features of the ERA and its contiguous policies of marketization and centralization, I turn to the record of New Labour. In doing so, I consider in more detail the tensions that have resulted from New Labour's commitment to tackling disadvantage within the broader policy context established by the ERA. In closing I comment on recent developments under Gordon Brown's premiership and the extent to which a new direction in education policy is emerging.

Education Policy under the Conservatives 1979–1997

Marketization

As indicated in the opening section, marketization within education encompasses a combination of parental choice and school autonomy, together with a greater or lesser degree of public accountability and government regulation. The lack of a conventional cash nexus and the strength of government intervention distinguish the resulting 'quasi-market' from the idealized view of a 'free' market (see Levacic, 1995), though few contemporary markets in any field are actually free from government regulation or, indeed, subsidy.

As a first step in establishing a more marketized education system, one of the earliest pieces of legislation passed by the Conservative government in 1979 cancelled the obligation on LEAs to pursue the existing policy on comprehensive schools, the LEA-run, mixed-ability secondary schools phased in to replace the post-war tripartite system of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. A year later, the 1980 Education Act made it easier for parents to choose between LEA-maintained schools. To assist parents in selecting a school, LEAs were now required to provide parents with information about their schools, including examination results. The Act also introduced the Assisted Places Scheme, which provided public funding to enable academically-able children from poor homes to attend the country's elite academically selective independent schools.¹ As well as providing financial and ideological support for the independent sector, the scheme had the effect of 'creaming-off' academically-able pupils from state schools (Edwards et al., 1989; Haydn, 2004).

The first real reductions in the financial autonomy of LEAs came in 1984, when the government began to earmark funds for particular initiatives. In turn, under the 1986 Education Act, LEA representation on school governing bodies was eroded to make way for the increased influence of parents and local businesses. This period also saw the creation of City Technology Colleges (CTCs), a new form of state-funded secondary school for the inner-city, with a curriculum emphasis on science and technology, and which sat entirely outside the influence of LEAs. The plan was for these schools to be run by independent

trusts, with capital funding coming from the private sector and the state providing recurrent funding. In practice, however, few business sponsors came forward, the government covered virtually all funding and the number of CTCs remained small (Whitty et al., 1993).

The next education Act passed by the Conservatives, the ERA, represented the most comprehensive legislation on education since 1944, and included a number of policies that made a much more decisive step towards marketization. It gave state schools the opportunity to 'opt out' of their LEAs and run themselves as grant-maintained schools with direct funding from central government. For those schools that chose to remain with their LEA, Local Management of Schools (LMS) meant that they would nevertheless take greater control over their own budgets and day-to-day management. Across all schools, at least 85 per cent of LEAs' school budget was now handed down to schools. Equally significantly, 80 per cent of that devolved budget would be determined directly by the number and ages of a school's pupils.

This per capita funding was coupled with open enrolment and the right for all families to express a preference for any school, even (as clarified by the Greenwich judgement) one outside their Local Authority. Some radical Conservatives characterized this as moving towards a 'virtual voucher' system (Sexton, 1987). Even following the introduction of greater parental choice in 1980, school intakes had often remained limited by LEAs to levels lower than capacity or to particular catchment areas so that other schools could remain open. Open enrolment removed these limits on intake and allowed popular schools to attract as many students as possible, at least up to their physical capacity. Consequently, schools could no longer rely on a given intake and had to attract sufficient numbers themselves to remain viable. The market choice argument was that schools which failed to attract pupils should not be 'buttressed' but closed. In practice, existing rules on admission, such as prioritizing sibling enrolment and those living closest to the school, were retained once schools were over-subscribed. This obviously weakened the market in education that the ERA was meant to achieve, but per capita funding and open enrolment were still significant developments in terms of embedding a change of ideology in education policy.

Following the ERA, the 1992 White Paper (DfE, 1992) and subsequent legislation diverted even more money away from LEAs into schools and encouraged more schools to seek grant maintained status. It also encouraged new types of specialist schools (first for technology and languages and later for some other subjects) within the state sector. These schools received additional funding to support their area of specialization and were permitted to select up to 10 per cent of their pupils by aptitude. In addition, related legislation made it possible for some private schools to opt in to grant maintained status. If it had not lost power to New Labour in 1997, it is likely that the Conservative government would have taken these policies on diversity and choice further, including by establishing more academically-selective grammar schools.

Centralization

In the meantime, central government had increased its own powers in a number of significant ways. The extent of government control led one commentator to characterize the 'marketization' outlined above as a merely superficial and symbolic movement towards consumer sovereignty (McKenzie, 1995). Certainly, as well as 'stepping-up' the process of marketization, the ERA was substantive and symbolic in centralising power. This included granting 451 new powers directly to the Secretary of State. The most notable example of centralization under the Conservatives was, of course, the introduction of the National Curriculum and its associated national system of assessment.

Between 1944 and 1988, aside from a legal requirement that schools should teach religious education, the main external control on the state school curriculum came from public examinations at age 16+ and 18+. These were set by examination boards with strong links to universities, LEAs and teacher unions (Whitty, 1992). The National Curriculum restored direct state intervention. The new curriculum specified programmes of study and attainment targets for three 'core' subjects, English, mathematics and science (plus Welsh in Wales), and seven other 'foundation' subjects. This was intended to ensure that all students aged 5–16 followed a 'broad and balanced' curriculum. The curriculum was to be assessed by a complex system of national testing for pupils at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. As I pointed out at the time, these policies were not all necessarily in conflict with marketization. For example, some Conservatives regarded it as necessary to use curriculum control to expunge the debilitating effects of welfarism on education in preparation for a more fully marketized approach in the future, though the irony of prescribing the study of Adam Smith seemed to be lost on them (see Whitty, 1989). More generally, standardizing the curriculum in this way was partly geared towards establishing performance criteria with which to facilitate school accountability and consumer choice: with all schools delivering the same curriculum, the assessments generated important data on school performance, which came to be published in various performance tables. But the introduction of the National Curriculum was also about reinforcing particular 'traditional British values'—values that might not be fostered if the curriculum itself was left to market forces (Hillgate Group, 1987).

The implementation of the National Curriculum was a key site for another feature of centralization under the Conservatives—the establishment of 'quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations' (quangos), today known as Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). In contrast to the postwar emphasis on partnership (albeit an unequal one) between central government, local government and the teaching profession, these organizations now represent an important means through which central government can exert a greater influence over the education system. The National Curriculum and related testing was initially overseen by two government-appointed bodies, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the School Examinations and

Assessment Council (SEAC), which were later merged and subsequently subsumed into the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Another example is the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), established in 1994, which was responsible for overseeing the recruitment and training of teachers (see Mahony and Hextall, 1996). The TTA continued in this role until September 2005, when it became the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and took on a significantly expanded remit covering continuing professional development for both teachers and school support staff.

Central government also exerted considerable control over the work of schools and teachers through the mechanism of inspection. The 1990s saw a significant expansion of school inspections in England and Wales as well as radical changes to the procedures for inspections. Prior to the 1992 Education (Schools) Act, inspections were the responsibility of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) and LEA inspectorate teams. The Act transferred the conduct of most inspections to independent inspection teams, the work of which would be co-ordinated by a new non-ministerial department of state, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Ofsted's programme of inspections at this point was substantial—as Wilcox and Gray (1996: 2) observed, '... it is doubtful if a more ambitious programme of school-by-school evaluation and review has ever been mounted anywhere in the world'. All schools received regular inspections of considerable length and intensity, the results of which were published.

As a consequence of these developments, by the time the Conservatives lost power to New Labour in 1997 the traditional distribution of roles and relationships within the 'triangular partnership' of central government, LEA and school/teacher had been significantly reformed, with far-reaching changes to the structure (school diversity, devolved funding) and content (National Curriculum and testing) of schooling. As I now go on to discuss, the continuities in policy under New Labour have been more marked than any divergence.

New Labour and the Attempt to Balance Choice and Equity

Although the approach to public sector management that emerged during the 1980s was initially conceived as a temporary response to economic downturn, it has since become a major policy thrust and one that is by no means restricted to England. Choice and competition, devolution and performativity, and centralization and prescription now represent global trends in education policy rather than New Labour aberrations (Whitty et al., 1998; Ball, 2001). Nevertheless, their acceptance by New Labour represented a significant move away from the party's traditional ideology. The particular underlying philosophy that New Labour adopted and its subsequent policy choices in education—and perhaps most importantly its attempts to 'spin' these policies in different ways than the Conservatives—constituted repeated efforts to bridge this ideological divide.

In broad terms, New Labour's education policy has been rooted in the government's commitment to the 'Third Way'—though explicit use of that term has

now all but disappeared. The particular version of the Third Way promoted by New Labour and Tony Blair personally stressed the importance of 'what works' and the need for a pragmatic approach. The Third Way was seen not as a matter of splitting the difference between right and left, neo-liberal capitalism and social democracy, but rather as a creative partnership between the two (Lawton, 2005). At the same time, the government specifically acknowledged concerns about the negative equity effects of quasi-markets and pledged a commitment to the pursuit of social justice (Blair, 1998). In the words of Michael Barber in 1997, then one of the government's closest advisers on education policy, this represented an attempt by the government to link a new recognition of diversity with Labour's traditional concern with equality (Barber, 1997: 175).

Nevertheless, even with the substantial increases in funding eventually brought about by New Labour, many on the left, including most members of the old educational establishment, regarded the apparent contradictions in New Labour's proposed approach as insurmountable. How could social justice and inclusion be achieved while encouraging market ideas that necessarily involve having losers as well as winners? (see Haydn, 2004). Asking whether New Labour policy should be seen as 'First, Second or Third Way?', many concluded that, whatever the potential of Third Way politics, in practice New Labour had not delivered a substantially new education policy (Power and Whitty, 1999). Indeed, it seems to have gone further down the market route, and much further down the privatization route, than the Conservatives ever achieved, as well increasing central steering of the system through such initiatives as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (see also Tomlinson, 2001). The effect of this has been to limit the impact of the more progressive aspects of New Labour rhetoric that were initially intended to differentiate the 'new' policies from those of the previous government.

Targeted Attempts to Tackle Disadvantage

'High quality education for the many rather than excellence for the few' was the party's promising slogan immediately following the 1997 election. This was symbolized in the first instance through the 1997 Education (Schools) Act by the abolition of the Conservative's Assisted Places Scheme and the diversion of the freed resources to the state sector to reduce class sizes in infant schools. This was presented as a socially redistributive measure, though in retrospect it does not appear to have had quite that effect.²

Other initiatives focussed on raising educational attainment in areas of particularly intense social exclusion through the allocation of additional resources. Launched in 1998, Education Action Zones (EAZs) involved the distribution of a £750,000 grant among a cluster of under-performing schools. Participating schools were also given greater freedoms over rates of pay for teachers to help them attract the best staff, and allowed to change the focus of

their provision, whether to spend more time on literacy and numeracy or adopt a stronger vocational element. A year later there was a new 'Excellence in Cities' (EiC) initiative, which sought to tackle underachievement in all the major urban areas of England, and most EAZs were eventually subsumed into this. EiC contained six other policy strands: the Gifted and Talented programme, Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units, City Learning Centres, and specialist schools and beacon schools in EiC areas—whereby these 'high performing' schools were encouraged to serve a developmental role among schools in their locality. A further emphasis in such programmes on multi-agency working can also be seen in more recent national developments—for example, in extended schools, with their 'out of hours' provision for pupils and provision for community learning.

Another example of targeted provision is 'London Challenge', initially a five-year partnership between government, schools and boroughs to raise standards in London's secondary school system. Provision has included pan-London resources and programmes available to all schools, individualized support for the most disadvantaged pupils and intensive work with five London boroughs and with key schools within them. Provision was extended in 2006 to include work with primary schools and in relation to pupils' progression to further and higher education. There has been additional continuing professional development for teachers through the Chartered London Teacher scheme and for head teachers through the London Leadership Strategy.

Evaluation findings on EAZs have generally been disappointing (Power et al., 2004). Those for EiC suggest that the initiative and the facilities and approaches it helped to establish have made some contribution to tackling educational under-achievement (Kendall et al., 2005). But they also indicate the limitations of the initiative in terms of raising attainment and improving skills and attitudes across all pupils, especially among the most disadvantaged (see also Machin et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, the recent evaluation of the full service extended schools pilot found that that, despite the challenges, such provision has had some positive outcomes for poorer families by providing stability and improving their children's engagement in learning. Encouragingly, its final report indicated that the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, based on eligibility for Free School Meals, was narrower in these schools than in others (Cummings et al., 2007). London Challenge too appears to have had some success, both in reducing the number of 'failing' schools and increasing the relative achievement of disadvantaged children within them. For example, the percentage of pupils receiving Free School Meals obtaining 5 GCSEs³ at grades A*–C in 'Key to Success' schools⁴ rose by 13.1 points between 2003 and 2006 compared to only 12.3 points for those not receiving Free School Meals (information provided by DfES, see also Ofsted [2006]).

What is significant is that these gains, though small, have been identified from initiatives that, to some extent at least, run counter to the marketization

of recent policies. London Challenge recognizes the particular challenges facing schools in the capital, while one of the key features of extended schools is multi-agency co-operation. As such, these initiatives recognize the importance of structural and cultural influences on educational performance to a greater extent than the dominant market model. Oddly, New Labour has long seemed to recognize the importance of wider structural and cultural factors in its broader policies, especially in the Sure Start initiative and around the children's agenda,⁵ but it has not always applied such insights to its understanding of the differential performance in schools. Instead, too many of New Labour's school policies have been founded '... on the belief that quality differences between schools are primarily the responsibility of schools themselves and can therefore be tackled by initiatives at the school level' (Thrupp and Lupton, 2006: 315). This is clearly demonstrated by the government's focus on 'standards, not structures'.

Standards, not Structures

On its assumption of office in 1997 New Labour committed itself to an 'unrelenting' focus on raising educational standards through a system of 'high challenge and high support' (DfEE, 1997). This school improvement approach—based around the 'exemplary school discourse' and the idea that all schools can replicate the example of the best (Thrupp and Lupton, 2006)—has included the setting of ambitious standards for pupil attainment and clear targets for schools to reach, as well as research on best practice and related professional development opportunities for teachers. A particularly important component has been the principle of government intervention in inverse proportion to a school's success.

Much of the focus on educational standards has concerned the push to raise levels of literacy and numeracy—first in primary schools and later in secondary schools. In one sense, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and associated testing introduced in 1998 were just one element of a long process of curriculum reform stretching back to the introduction of the National Curriculum. But they were also qualitatively different, both in their immediate impact on teachers' work, and through the pace of change they ushered in (Moss, 2004). The levers of monitoring and target-setting have been such that they have allowed the government to manage the strategies more closely than was possible with earlier initiatives (Moss, 2002). As improvements in pupil attainment reached a plateau, the government modified the strategies to focus on aspects that might most directly deliver on its targets. This involved identifying particular areas of the strategies to prioritize (e.g. phonics) and/or particular cohorts that seemed to require further support (e.g. boys or those falling behind in younger year groups). In 2003, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were subsumed into broader Primary and Secondary Strategies, which also encompassed a national approach to the

improvement of behaviour and attendance, thereby extending this level of central intervention.

'Successful' schools—those that perform well against government targets and in school inspections—are rewarded with new freedoms. From 2003, and reminiscent of earlier neo-liberal thinking on education markets, this included the opportunity for the best schools to expand their pupil numbers. In contrast, 'failing' schools are subjected to tough measures and targeted support. Not surprisingly, there is a high correlation between the results of Ofsted inspections and schools' indicators of pupil disadvantage (Gorard, 2005), with the majority of schools in 'special measures' or facing closure located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. This provides a stark illustration of the systematic effects of social class on children's attainment (Grace, 1984; Plewis and Goldstein, 1998), which New Labour has consistently understated.

Important here is the research showing that with the same input children from advantaged homes tend to progress at a faster rate than those from disadvantaged backgrounds. On this basis, Mortimore and Whitty (1997) warned that if all schools performed as well as the best schools, the stratification of achievement by social class would become even starker. And, indeed, data released by the government itself in 2005 seemed to show the deficiencies of its approach in this respect (Kelly, 2005). They showed that, while all primary school pupils achieved higher standards in English and mathematics in 2004 than in 1998, those from higher income families had made more progress than disadvantaged pupils—resulting in a persistent attainment gap between these two groups of pupils (Kelly, 2005).

These findings have at last prompted action on the part of the government, and there is now a greater focus on disadvantaged pupils themselves, rather than just on schools in disadvantaged areas. The 2005 schools White Paper (DfES, 2005), for example, emphasized the tailoring of education around the needs of each child, including catch-up provision for those who need it. This includes the expansion of the 'Reading Recovery' programme, which offers one-to-one support for children who have fallen behind with their reading in the early years.

These kinds of interventions may or may not have a significant impact on the social class achievement gap in the future. As recently as 2006, then Education Minister, Ruth Kelly, announced that new research would show that '... if anything, there has been a slight closing of the [attainment] gap at age 14 and 16' (Kelly, 2006: 1). Kelly was later criticized for her failure to make available the research that supported this claim (Education and Skills Committee, 2006). But to have achieved only a very modest closing of the gap after three terms in office still reflects poorly on the record of a government that pledged a commitment to social justice. That it took so long to change the policy, despite the warnings it received as early as 1997, also calls into question the extent of its commitment to evidence-based policy (Whitty, 2006).

Diversity and Choice

Alongside its 'high challenge, high support' approach to school improvement, the New Labour government has always favoured the 'modernization' of the comprehensive system through the differentiation of schools. It has increasingly placed an emphasis on the supposed link between school diversity and higher standards for all. This is something that was made clear by Tony Blair in a 2006 speech, where he commented:

At first we put a lot of faith in centrally driven improvements in performance and undoubtedly without that we would never have got some of the immediate uplift in results. But over time I shifted from saying "it's standards, not structures" to realising that school structures could affect standards. (Blair, 2006, see also Evans et al., 2005)

Accordingly, the amount of differentiation among schools has increased under New Labour. But the key ingredient for linking differentiation to standards and excellence has remained choice—as illustrated by the 2005 schools White Paper:

School improvement has been helped not only by the reforms introduced since 1997, but also by published data and inspection reports, and the ability of many parents to vote with their feet by finding a better state school. There are those who argue that there is no demand for choice; but this ignores the reality that the vast majority of parents want a real choice of excellent schools. (DfES, 2005: 8)

In a clear break with its Old Labour past, New Labour retained the academically selective grammar schools that had survived the policy of comprehensivization in the 1960s and 1970s—though in this context the justification was choice for localities rather than individual parents, some of whom were explicitly excluded from choice by the ability of their offspring. As with the aforementioned 1997 legislation to cut class sizes in infant schools, electoral logic seems to have been significant here.

There was also a degree of political expediency in the early decision to maintain something of the Conservative distinction between Local Authority- and grant-maintained status, albeit under the new titles of 'community' and 'foundation' schools, and with somewhat different characteristics across the different categories of school. In addition, New Labour also retained the existing City Technology Colleges and greatly increased the number of specialist schools, which, as before, have a curriculum specialism and are required to raise sponsorship from local businesses, charities and other private sector organizations in return for preferential funding. Some of these schools are permitted to select a proportion of their pupils by aptitude.

There has also been encouragement of more voluntary-aided/faith schools, particularly by Tony Blair when he was Prime Minister. Most controversially,

to the existing diversity of provision were added (City) Academies and, most recently, trust schools. As a result, the government moved on from mere political expediency to adopt as a mantra the idea that diversity plus choice produces excellence. Under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, which followed the 2005 schools White Paper (DfES, 2005), it appointed a Schools Commissioner to act as a 'champion' of increased diversity and choice.

Even so, the evidence to support the case that diversity and choice are the key to higher standards for all remains weak and highly contested by many education professionals and researchers. Jesson's work on the performance of specialist schools in relation to government targets compared to other comprehensive schools is often cited in support of the government's case (Jesson and Crossley, 2006). When she was Education Minister, Estelle Morris (2001) stated that specialist schools 'are only modern comprehensive schools', implying that they had no special advantages. But at least until they recently became the majority of secondary schools, the extra resources and the cachet of the specialist school label clearly differentiated them from what Tony Blair's official spokesman, Alastair Campbell, termed 'bog-standard' comprehensive schools (Campbell, 2007). This may well have affected their recruitment and performance (Whitty, 2004; Mangan et al., 2007). Similar concerns apply to foundation and faith/voluntary-aided schools, whose standing among parents has benefited from the strong performance of some schools in these 'categories'.

Thus, while the apparently superior performance of specialist and faith schools has added impetus to the policy of differentiation (Penlington, 2001; Jesson and Crossley, 2006, 2007), the fact that this performance may be partly due to the nature of their pupil intakes does not seem to have been fully acknowledged. Yet the data on the proportions of children on Free School Meals in different types of school is telling in this respect (Braswell, 2005; Sutton Trust, 2006). That these schools typically have relatively high proportions of middle-class pupils and correspondingly low proportions of disadvantaged pupils generates a 'virtuous circle' of strong performance against government attainment targets and popularity among more affluent families. The danger of the diversity and choice agenda, then, is the creation of a 'multi-tier' system of secondary schools based on the sorts of children who attend them (Riddell, 2003).

The Academies are likely to be a particularly interesting category of school in this respect. The main aim behind these schools is to increase diversity and choice and thereby raise standards across Academies' local areas, which are typically deprived areas (NAO, 2007). Indeed, Academies are often, though by no means always, introduced to replace 'failing' schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils. In making these schools more popular, Academies could, in theory, have the effect of reducing pupil segregation in their area (see Gorard, 2005). And despite opposition to them by the traditional left, particularly on the grounds of the motives of their sponsors (Ball, 2007), the

government presents this new type of school as serving its social inclusion and social justice agendas. The question is whether they will actually fulfil that mission over time. As Gorard (2005: 317) comments:

[Independent schools, City Technology Colleges, voluntary-aided, voluntary-controlled, specialist, foundation, charter and Welsh-medium schools] . . . all . . . take less than their 'fair share' of disadvantaged students as assessed in terms of their locale, and irrespective of their actual mechanism of allocating school places, they tend to diverge more and more from their neighbouring comprehensives in this regard over time. Clearly, the Academies should be different from this because they will start with considerably more than their fair share of disadvantaged students. . . . However, it is still of interest to see whether they follow the pattern of reducing their share of disadvantaged students once their admissions are not linked to those of the LEA.

Yet, it might be argued that, if the improving performance of Academies recently identified by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2007) and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC, 2007) is real and partly attributable to changes in social mix, then that is a positive rather than a negative development. As Margaret Maden puts it (2001: 336), successful schools tend to have 'a "critical mass" of more engaged, broadly "pro-school" children to start with'. Unfortunately, the research carried out so far does not provide us with the sort of detailed analyses which would allow us to judge exactly what is actually happening in this respect in Academies and, equally importantly, in neighbouring schools.

Overall, the evidence on the positive impact of diversity and choice is not sufficiently robust to justify New Labour's strong commitment to this approach. A recent well-balanced assessment of the evidence concluded that ' . . . whatever performance advantages it offers [and they did show some], further expansion of market mechanisms . . . may come at the cost of increased social polarization' (Gibbons et al., 2006).

The extent to which recent policies have or have not increased social segregation is also contested in the literature (Gorard et al., 2003; Jenkins et al., 2006). Whether or not the position has become worse as a result of these policies, there is no doubt that advantaged schools and advantaged parents have been able to seek each other out. A major issue is the effect of some but not all schools being their own admissions authorities. For example, Tough and Brooks (2007) have found that voluntary-aided faith schools that are their own admissions authorities are 10 times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than such schools where the Local Authority is the admissions authority. The figure for non-faith schools that are their own admissions authorities is six times more unrepresentative (see also IPPR, 2005). This was an area of concern for the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee in its review of the 2005 schools White Paper, and its report to government prompted some significant concessions on admissions policy, mainly around the status of the admissions code (DfES, 2006a; Education and Skills Committee, 2006).

The new code prohibits schools from giving priority to children on the basis of their interests or knowledge, and this is to be combined with existing plans for free school transport to open up choice to less advantaged families and 'choice advisers' to assist these families in negotiating their child's transition to secondary school (DfES, 2005). This is a welcome, if belated, recognition of the impact of structural and cultural factors on the capacity of different groups to exercise choice meaningfully in a diverse system of schooling. But it will take these provisions many years to begin to address more covert forms of selection and the way in which middle class parents learn to decipher the 'real' admissions criteria, as revealed in research by Gewirtz et al. (1995) and by Reay and Ball (1998).

At the same time, the linking of diversity and choice through market mechanisms serves to undermine one potential means of preventing diversity becoming a hierarchy—which is for all schools in an area to work together in the interests of optimum provision for all pupils (Whitty, 2004). Tim Brighouse's espousal of 'collegiates' in Birmingham and London (Wilby, 2007a) and the government's wider support, at least in rhetorical terms, for 'hard' and 'soft' federations and multi-school trusts seem to recognize this. But it is questionable whether genuine, long-term and productive collegiality among schools can be easily established where schools are on different legal and budgetary footings, have very different pupil intakes and have their results reported separately (Adnett and Davies, 2003).

Continuing Challenges for Education Policy

As I have shown, there has been a strong continuity in education policy across Conservative and New Labour governments since the late-1970s. This has established a clear trend towards the decentralization of services within a framework of increasingly detailed target-setting and monitoring by central government. There has also been striking growth in private sector involvement within the public education system.

While the Third Way has not delivered any significant changes in the overall direction of policy, the New Labour government has more recently paid greater attention to the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. There is some evidence that some of its subsequent efforts to target resources on particular schools and individual pupils may be working in this respect. But significant questions remain as to the impact that can be achieved over the long term by targeting resources in this way in the context of a marketized education system. As such, there is still much to be done if the legacy of New Labour's record on education is to differentiate it from that of its predecessors.

Certainly, some commentators regard New Labour's approach to tackling disadvantage as doomed to failure as long as it is pursued in the context of a market-based approach. As a result, many opponents of current New Labour policies have united around the call for good schools in all areas, for all children

(e.g. Education Alliance, 2006). Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that a good school in every locality is very much harder to achieve in some areas than others (Lupton, 2005; Thrupp and Lupton, 2006). So, while diversity and choice may not be the way of reaching the desired goal, neighbourhood schools may not be the answer either. Wider structural influences mean that the performance of schools is significantly affected by the sorts of children who attend them and a critical mass of children from more aspirational backgrounds does make a difference in raising a school's overall attainment (Maden, 2003). Ironically, this seems to have been recognized more by the Old Labour pioneers of comprehensive education, and their clumsy attempts to manipulate catchment areas for comprehensive schools, than by the New Labour advocates of diversity and choice.

However, there is little doubt that one successful aspect of the Conservative agenda was to re-educate people into a new sense of appropriate public policy. To this extent, electoral logic explains at least some of New Labour's apparent failures. Not only was Old Labour welfarism equally unsuccessful in tackling the problems of inequality in and through education, a simple return to it would be politically unthinkable.

This means the extent to which parental choice can be constrained without losing public confidence becomes crucial. It is understandable that New Labour has felt that its policies have to speak particularly to the middle class and aspiring middle-class voters who constitute the 'swing' vote that decides modern elections—notably in non-proportional electoral systems. Unfortunately, New Labour has so far been unable to find a way of working around this electoral logic while limiting the opportunities for unjustified and unjustifiable middle-class advantage that has long characterized the English education system.

If a climate of public opinion that supports policies to balance school intakes is now to be created, the implications of pupil segregation across schools must be better understood. This need not even centre exclusively on the social costs of a highly segregated schooling system—rather, on the way in which central intervention to balance admissions could reduce what is at stake for individual middle-class families when selecting which secondary schools to apply to (Thrupp, 1999). The controversy surrounding the recent decision by one Local Authority to run admissions lotteries illustrates the strength of feeling among families on this issue (e.g. Laville and Smithers, 2007).

Towards a Change of Direction?

I have argued that government action to promote more balanced pupil intakes across schools in terms of socio-economic background and ability would make an important contribution to social justice. It could also be expected to contribute to social cohesion, an issue that is fast moving up the political agenda (DfES, 2006b; Education and Skills Select Committee, 2007; Equalities Review Group,

2007). The retirement of Tony Blair as Prime Minister may offer an opportunity to revisit these neglected goals.

There have been signs that the Brown government that took office in June 2007 may be willing to bring social justice issues further up the agenda—with some talk of an ‘egalitarian project’ even being heard in the Brown camp (Wilby, 2007b). As Fiona Millar has pointed out, ‘the words “diversity” and “choice”, the mantras of education policy through the Thatcher, Major and Blair years’ did not even feature in the first Commons statement by Ed Balls, Brown’s first Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Balls, 2007a ; Millar, 2007). Furthermore, that same Minister’s first major speech outside parliament indicated that the children’s agenda would be as important as the standards agenda in his newly-created Department and highlighted the important links between them (Balls, 2007b). In particular, the new government has also signalled a greater role for Local Authorities in the planning of new Academies and indicated that such schools should be seen as part of their local family of schools rather than lying outside them.

This change of focus may not be simply rhetorical in that it is backed up by the Public Service Agreement delivery targets for the Department for Children, Schools and Families, almost half of which relate to narrowing the gap in educational achievement between pupils from different backgrounds (Baker, 2007). However, it remains to be seen how far a stronger social justice agenda can be reconciled with the electoral logic that so influenced the policies of the Blair government. As Peter Wilby (2007b) has put it, ‘a Brown government will need courage and ingenuity to reconcile egalitarian ambitions with political realities’.

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Notes

1. Though ostensibly targeted at working class children ill-served by inner-city comprehensives, early take-up of the scheme was actually dominated by middle-class families who otherwise might have sent their children to good suburban comprehensives, but whose income was low enough to qualify for the scheme (Edwards et al., 1989).
2. Most classes over 30 were in marginal suburban constituencies, not in inner-city areas where classes were already below that level, suggesting the policy was driven at least in part by the findings of election opinion polling (see Whitty, 2006).
3. The GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is taken by secondary school students at the age of 16 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (in Scotland, the equivalent is the Standard Grade).
4. The Keys to Success programme aims to raise standards in some of the most challenging London schools and break the link between deprivation and underachievement. Schools in the programme include low performers and other schools causing concern. The working list of around 70 schools is continually updated and refined. The schools are supported by a London Challenge adviser, who is responsible for all Keys to Success schools in that borough. A bespoke solution is

provided for each school, drawing on established models as well as a short-term support such as targeted intervention for pupils approaching their GCSE examinations.

5. Running since 1999, Sure Start is a government programme that brings together early years education, childcare, health and family support. It is based on the notion that providing integrated services in these areas along with support with employment, all through dedicated centres, are key factors in determining good outcomes for pre-school children and their parents. This is in terms of improving health and emotional development for young children and enabling them to flourish in school, as well as supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment. More generally, the children's agenda has sought to encourage multi-agency working across the public sector in the interests of children.

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