

# **EDUCATION REFORM AND EDUCATION POLITICS IN ENGLAND: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

Geoff Whitty  
Institute of Education

*Paper given at a Seminar with the theme 'Education at the Crossroads: Education Reform and Education Politics in Japan and England', organised by the Japan Foundation at the Institute of Education on 24 October 2000. The speakers were Professor Hidenori Fujita, Dean of the Graduate School of Education, University of Tokyo, and Professor Geoff Whitty, Director of the Institute.*

This paper begins with a brief outline of the programme of education reforms undertaken by the Thatcher and Major governments in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s, focusing in particular on those that apply to the compulsory phase of education, and then outlines the changes that have been made to it under New Labour. It then attempts to make some sense of these developments from the perspective of a sociologist of education policy.

## **THE CONSERVATIVE AGENDA**

State education in England since the Second World War developed within a framework established by the 1944 Education Act, which introduced a national system of primary, secondary and further education. Although there was a thriving private sector, which contained some of the leading schools in the country, 93% of 5–16-year-olds were being educated in state schools, most of which were maintained by democratically elected local education authorities (LEAs) and most of which were, by the 1970s, non-selective comprehensive schools, at least in name. During this period, there was considerable consensus on education policy among the educational establishment in central and local government and the teaching profession. Indeed, Julian Le Grand (1997) suggests that there was a so-called 'golden age of teacher control' from 1944 to the mid-1970s, in which parents of children in state schools were expected to trust the professionals and accept that teachers knew what was best for their children. The state did not seem to want to intervene, even though effectively it paid teachers' salaries.

However, a view emerged during the 1970s that teachers had abused their *de facto* autonomy to the detriment of their pupils and society. Public choice theorists argued that the behaviour of public servants and professionals could be better understood if they were assumed to be largely self-interested. Many professional groups and particularly the 'liberal educational establishment' of the 'swollen state' of postwar social democracy came to be regarded as ill-adapted to the needs of the late 20th century. From the 1970s onwards, Governments increasingly felt that teachers needed to be subjected to the rigours of the market and/or greater control and surveillance on the part of the state.

After the Conservative victory at the 1979 election, the Thatcher and later the Major governments set about trying to break the LEA monopoly of schooling, which they regarded as having been captured by the educational establishment, who had brought a dull uniformity to the system and a levelling down of standards. Some of the

Conservative measures were designed to make the educational establishment more accountable to the market by devolving power to parents and schools, while others sought accountability through state regulation by central government departments and their agencies.

**Table 1: Accountability through the Market**

- **Assisted Places Scheme**, 1980 Education Act
- **Reformed Governing Bodies**, 1986 Education Act
- **City Technology Colleges (CTCs)**, 1988 Education Reform Act
- **Grant Maintained Schools**, 1988 Education Reform Act
- **Local Management of Schools (LMS)**, 1988 Education Reform Act .
- **Open Enrolment**, 1980 Education Act & 1988 Education Reform Act
- **Specialist Schools**, 1993 Education Act
- **New Grammar Schools**, Proposed in 1996 White Paper

These policies were designed to increase diversity and choice in the system, something that the then Prime Minister John Major said had come from 'trusting headteachers...and governing bodies to run their schools and in trusting parents to make the right choice for their children' (*The Times*, 24 August 1995, p. 5).

Even so, Conservative central governments had meanwhile increased their own powers in a number of significant ways (see Table 2). Indeed, Janet McKenzie (1993) has argued that British governments have 'actually increased their claims to knowledge and authority over the education system whilst promoting a theoretical and superficial movement towards consumer sovereignty' (p.17).

**Table 2: Accountability through the State**

- **National Curriculum**, 1988 Education Reform Act
- **National Curriculum Council**, 1988 Education Reform Act
- **National Assessment**, 1988 Education Reform Act
- **School Examinations and Assessment Council**,  
1988 Education Reform Act
- **Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)**,  
1992 Education Act
- **School Curriculum and Assessment Authority**,  
1993 Education Act
- **Funding Agency for Schools**, 1993 Education Act
- **Teacher Training Agency**, 1994 Education Act
- **Qualifications and Curriculum Agency**, 1997

Taken together, these two sets of policies created what we have come to term 'quasi-markets' in education services. These 'quasi-markets' entail 'a separation of purchaser from provider and an element of user choice between providers' (Levacic, 1995,

p.167), together with a high degree of government regulation, policed through systems of quality standards, assessment, inspection and funding. Prime Minister Major looked forward to the day 'when all publicly funded schools would be run as free self-governing schools' without any interference from local education authorities. However, he lost the 1997 election to Tony Blair.

### **THE NEW LABOUR 'ALTERNATIVE'**

At the rhetorical level, the New Labour government that was elected in 1997 put some distance between itself and its Conservative predecessors. It announced its commitment to 'high quality education for the many rather than excellence for the few'. This was symbolised in the abolition of the Conservatives' Assisted Places Scheme, which had provided a scholarship ladder for bright children from poor families to go into elite private schools, and the transfer of those resources into the state system to reduce the size of classes in infant schools.

More generally, the new government seemed to respond to concerns about the negative equity effects of quasi-markets by moving beyond the 'ruthless free-for-all' of the neo-liberals. However, rather than revisiting the 'stifling statism' of 'Old Labour', the Blair government has claimed to be developing its so-called 'Third Way' policies on the basis of 'what works' rather than being driven by any one ideological approach. For example, its Education Action Zones in areas of multiple disadvantage entail both a reassertion of collective responsibility for educational provision and a readiness to consider the active involvement of private (even 'for profit') companies in its delivery. The new language is that of 'partnership': partnership between schools, partnership between schools and parents, partnership between schools and their LEAs, and partnership between public and private sectors. But all of this is in the context of an ever tighter regulatory regime of standards and stiff targets for schools, pupils and teachers.

**Table 3: New Labour Policies**

- Abolition of Assisted Places Scheme
- Reduction of class sizes in KS1
- Extension of Specialist Schools policy
- Community, Voluntary and Foundation Schools
- Standards and Effectiveness, especially in literacy and numeracy
- Revised National Curriculum to include Citizenship
- Education Action Zones/Excellence in Cities
- Performance Management/Performance-Related Pay
- General Teaching Council

Labour, in the words of Michael Barber (1997, p.175), one of the government's closest advisers, seeks to 'link its traditional concern with equality with a new recognition of diversity'. In its proposals for performance management alongside a General Teaching Council, it also seeks to combine new public management

techniques with greater respect for the professionalism of teachers, albeit a 'modernised' professionalism.

In many ways, New Labour's so-called 'Third Way' looks remarkably similar in practice to the Conservative's quasi-markets, with a strong emphasis on school autonomy and parental choice, backed by central government accountability mechanisms. The balance between the elements has changed, with an extension of the powers of central government over 'failing' schools and failing LEAs, and greater use of private sector contractors in the public sector, but 'successful' schools are increasingly being given their head. Overall, the central thrust of New Labour policies is certainly closer to that of the Conservative agenda than it is to Labour's *traditional* approach. Meanwhile, the Conservative Party's policies for the future imply some adjustments in the balance between market and state accountability, but no fundamental change of direction, though there are some on the *extreme* Right who are arguing for complete deregulation and wholesale privatisation of the system.

It looks to me as if *quasi*-markets are here to stay whichever government is in power. The fact that some variation of quasi-markets is favoured by both major political parties suggests that this combination of accountability to the market, on the one hand, together with greater accountability to the state, on the other, may not be as confused and contradictory as is often claimed by its critics on both the Right and the Left. Rather, these two aspects of education policy may reflect a broader tendency for liberal democracies to develop along the lines of what Gamble (1988) has called the 'strong state' and the 'free economy' with the extension of the free economy into education and welfare provision.

## **ACCOUNTING FOR REFORM**

It is interesting to note that some of the key points about developments in Japan identified in Professor Fujita's contribution to this seminar have also been among the dominant trends in England - for example, the undermining of professional control, at least in its traditional sense, and the shift from a community-based system to a market-oriented one involving increased school choice. Even after the changes introduced by New Labour, these are key trends here as well, even if they are mediated here and in Japan by different histories and different cultures.

In a recent book translated into Japanese (Whitty et al., 1998), I examined policies of school autonomy and parental choice in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Sweden, as well as England. I have also noted elsewhere (Gordon and Whitty, 1997) that marketisation and privatisation policies have become popular in countries with as different histories as Chile and China, and similar changes have been taking place in many other parts of the world. Although these developments are sometimes described as 'privatisation', and in some cases *do* include elements of privatisation, marketisation - or rather quasi-marketisation - is a better metaphor for what has been happening in relation to education in most countries. However, even if most mass education systems have not been privatised in the strictly *economic* sense, there is more evidence of 'privatisation' in the *ideological* sense of transferring decisions that might formerly have been made by the state and its professional employees to the private decision-making sphere of individuals and their families (Whitty and Power, 2000).

So there is clearly something going on in education policy that is bigger than local fashion, even if, as Andy Green (1996) rightly reminds us the more extreme versions of neo-liberalism have not penetrated all the education systems of continental Western Europe or East Asia. Nevertheless, there are broad trends towards greater diversity, flexibility and choice in most parts of the world, despite considerable local differences of emphasis and a few exceptions.

As we suggested in the book and in a paper I gave in Japan last year (Whitty, 1999), a range of explanations can be invoked to account for these similarities. One form of explanation is that ideas developed in one context have been copied in another. Neo-liberal policies have sometimes been actively fostered by international organisations. There is also evidence to suggest that when education policy-makers formulate reforms they look to other countries for inspiration and justification. But while policy-borrowing has clearly been a factor in the move towards choice within devolved systems of schooling, it only begs more questions about what gives these particular policies such widespread appeal to different countries and different political parties at this time.

**Table 4: Some possible explanations**

- Policy borrowing
- Post-Fordism/Post-Modernity
- Neo-Fordism/High Modernity
- Responses to globalisation
- Changing modes of state regulation

Some sociologists point to a correspondence between the establishment of differentiated markets in welfare and the wider shift in the economy away from Fordism towards a post-Fordist mode of accumulation (Jessop et al., 1987, p.109). Stephen Ball (1990), for example, has claimed to see in new forms of schooling a move away from the 'Fordist' school towards a 'post-Fordist' one - the educational equivalent of flexible specialisation driven by the imperatives of differentiated consumption replacing the old assembly-line world of mass production. Jane Kenway (1993) goes further and regards the rapid rise of the market form in education as something much more significant than post-Fordism; she therefore terms it a 'postmodern' phenomenon, associated with processes of globalisation accentuating the nexus between the global and the local at the expense of the national. Part of the appeal of the recent education reforms may also lie in their declared intention to encourage the growth of different types of school, responsive to needs of particular communities and interest groups. They may seem to connect to the aspirations of groups who found little to identify with in the 'grand narratives' associated with modernist national or class-based schooling. In this sense, support for schools run on a variety of principles (or local narratives) could reflect a broader shift from the assumptions of modernity to those of postmodernity.

However, interesting as they are, there are various problems with these 'new times' theses. They are not only 'notoriously vague', they also tend to exaggerate the extent to which we have moved to a new regime of accumulation. Neo-Fordism may, in fact,

be a more appropriate term than Post-Fordism (Allen, 1992), while Giddens' concept of 'high (or late) modernity' probably captures the combination of change and continuity rather better than that of 'postmodernity' (Giddens, 1991). Indeed, new cultural forms and more flexible modes of capital accumulation may be shifts in surface appearance, rather than signs of the emergence of some entirely new post-capitalist society (Harvey 1989).

More modernist explanations see the new arrangements for managing education and other public services as new ways of tackling the problems of accumulation in an increasingly competitive global market and tackling problems of legitimation at home in a situation where the traditional 'welfare state' is no longer deemed viable (Dale, 1989). For example, Manfred Weiss (1993) in Germany suggests that policies of school autonomy and parent empowerment leave conflict to be dealt with at lower levels of the system, with the higher administrative structures of the state appearing uninvolved, and therefore, above reproach. They thus provide an effective strategy for 'shifting the blame'.

Something I have found particularly helpful in understanding how the state remains strong while appearing to devolve power to individuals and autonomous institutions competing in the market is Guy Neave's (1988) account of the shift from the 'bureaucratic state' to the 'evaluative state'. This entails 'a rationalisation and wholesale redistribution of functions between centre and periphery such that the centre maintains overall strategic control through fewer, but more precise, policy levers, contained in overall "mission statements", the setting of system goals and the operationalisation of criteria relating to "output quality"' (p.11). Rather than leading to a withering away of the state, the state withdraws 'from the murky plain of overwhelming detail, the better to take refuge in the clear and commanding heights of strategic "profiling"' (p.12). Education is increasingly framed as a commodity, so that the market becomes the ascendant metaphor and there is a clear permeation of business values and vocabulary into educational discourse (Marginson, 1993).

Simon Marginson (1993) claims that this emphasis on economic objectives entails a distancing of education from social and cultural domains. In practice, though, the criteria of evaluation employed are not only those of economic rationalism, but also those of cultural preferences, particularly the case where neo-conservative forces are strong and there is a perceived threat to national identity and hegemonic values - either from globalisation or from supposed 'enemies within'. Central regulation of the curriculum and assessment is then not only geared towards standardising performance criteria in order to facilitate professional accountability and consumer choice within the education market-place, it may also be about trying to maintain or create national identities. For example, the formulation of the English National Curriculum reflected demands that schools concentrate on British history, British geography and 'classic' English literature (Hillgate Group, 1987). In Japan, controversies surrounding the national flag and national song in schools may provide parallels.

Thus, although some theories of globalisation hold that the national state is becoming less important, at the present time there is rather little to support postmodernist predictions of the demise of the role of the state in education, at least in relation to the compulsory phase of provision. Even if we concede that there has been a reduction in

the profile of the nation state as an international entity, there is little to suggest that it has yet conceded its grip on areas of internal regulation. Thus, globalisation does not negate the national state, but does require it to respond.

## **DILEMMAS FOR THE FUTURE**

So does research on the impact of the reforms in England suggest that we have found the answers? Unfortunately, the research we have to date from the English situation suggests that the reforms here have only generated new problems. While the ratcheting up of standards through the National Curriculum and constant testing have certainly produced better examination results overall, it has also led to greater polarisation of performance between the best schools and the worst. And, in England, *academic* stratification is always closely linked to *social* stratification. The balance of evidence so far suggests that, rather than producing horizontal diversity, the operation of quasi-markets in many areas has exacerbated hierarchy by allowing advantaged schools and advantaged parents to seek each other out in a progressive segmentation of the market. There are also signs that the narrow focus of the testing and inspection regimes in England has tended to stifle creativity on the part of both pupils and teachers, which in turn has put some of our most talented students off teaching as a career.

Some of these issues have implications well beyond education. It is clear that recent reforms have generated some tensions - between the state and the market, the national and the global, and between the overt and the hidden curricula of schooling. For example, the emphasis on competition and choice in the reforms has brought with it an associated 'hidden curriculum' of marketisation. Old values of community, co-operation, individual need and equal worth, which arguably underlay public systems of comprehensive education (Ball, 1994), are being replaced by values that celebrate individualism, competition, performativity and differentiation.

In some cases, the messages of the market and the preferences of governments complement each other. However, in other instances market forces may contradict, even undermine, the 'old-fashioned' values and sense of nationhood that governments ostensibly seek to foster. While this potential subversiveness of the market may be contained through strong regulatory measures on the part of nation states, national agendas may be increasingly compromised by the growing presence of multi-national corporate interests in the classroom.

So, when looking at it in these terms, the reforms may not be nearly as coherent as I suggested earlier. There may be conflicting messages coming from the overt and the hidden curricula. While, at the level of direct transmissions, students are meant to be taught the neo-conservative values of the cultural restorationists (Ball, 1990), the context in which they are taught may undermine these canons. The content of the lessons may emphasise heritage and tradition, but the form of their transmission is becoming increasingly commodified within the new education marketplace. In the terms used by my late colleague, Basil Bernstein (1997), a de-centered market pedagogy fosters 'new' *global* subjects, while a prospective neo-conservative pedagogy seeks to reconstruct 'old' *national* subjects. Thus, there may be a renewed emphasis in the overt curriculum on

'imagined communities' of the past at the same time as real collectivities are being fragmented and atomised in a culture of individual and institutional competition.

Let me now sum up. It seems to me that the current wave of reforms marks a response by nation states to a range of conflicting pressures and demands by which they are beleaguered - both from within and without. In this situation, it is likely that market solutions can provide only a temporary reprieve and this is why the policies have to be constantly readjusted in the other direction, as with New Labour's attempts at positive discrimination and community development in Education Action Zones and its introduction of citizenship into the National Curriculum. Andy Green (1996) argues that even the current degree of responsibility taken by national governments for public education may not be enough 'as the social atomisation induced by global market penetration becomes increasingly dysfunctional'. He says that, with the decline of socially integrating institutions and the consequent atrophy of collective social ties, 'education may soon again be called upon to stitch together the fraying social fabric' (p. 59). So, while the demise of some forms of national solidarity may be long overdue, the general atrophy of collective ties must surely be cause for concern.

The issue facing us is how can education best help reconstruct the social fabric and new conceptions of citizenship - and who shall influence its design? In my view, any shift away from a commitment to common schooling to an espousal of diversity and choice requires much stronger safeguards even than those introduced by New Labour in England if social solidarity is not to be threatened. This must surely be a warning for other countries not to go too far in the direction of the English reforms.

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