FORUM, Volume 48, Number 1, 2006 **doi:10.2304/forum.2006.48.1.23**

What Works: real research or a cherry picker's paradise?

SHEILA DAINTON

ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to consider the evidence base for some of the proposals in the Education White Paper, *Higher Standards: better schools for all*. In particular, the article challenges the assertion by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills that the White Paper is based on knowledge of 'what works'. Using the issue of 'parent power' as an example, the main argument of the article is that many of the proposals in the White Paper are based on assertion and either ignore or contradict existing evidence. Drawing on evidence submitted to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's inquiry into the White Paper, the article offers a critique of aspects of the White Paper and argues that in considering how best to raise standards in schools, policy making could be better informed by utilising the knowledge and experience of professional practitioners.

'Our proposals will help all parents and all pupils, based on our knowledge of what works.' So said Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, in an article written for the *Guardian* as debate intensified over her Schools' White Paper, *Higher Standards – better schools for all* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005a). Ms Kelly went on to claim that the acid test of the proposed reforms is how they help the poorest 'kids' (*sic*) and the weakest schools (*Education Guardian*, 29 November 2005).

One might assume from this statement that the Government has reliable knowledge of 'what works' in raising standards of achievement in schools – and in particular for the poorest 'kids', and that underpinning the proposals in the White Paper is some semblance of a sound evidence base. Well, is there?

Of course the White Paper is not an academic document, nor does it pretend to be. It was written for a different audience. But given the authority and confidence with which it was promoted by the Government, it would be reasonable to expect signposts to relevant research somewhere close to hand. An obvious place would be in the unpublished but widely circulated DfES briefing pack that accompanied the White Paper (DfES, 2005b). Written by and for civil servants, the 70-page pack contains detailed notes and carefully worded

rebuttals to some of the more obvious and not-so-obvious questions that might arise. Not surprisingly, on occasion, the unwitting defendant of the White Paper is instructed to provide more information only 'if pressed'. Distinctly lacking is the body of research evidence to be deployed in defence of the document.

Instead, the White Paper is based largely on assertion, not evidence. It is shot through with rhetoric, liberally peppered with selective quotations, dotted with cameos from individual schools, and glued together with a handful of snapshots from one or two specially commissioned case studies that are not necessarily replicable. All in all, it is a cherry-picker's paradise. As many commentators have pointed out, the White Paper is also badly drafted. Some have damned it with faint praise; others have been less kind. Author and journalist Richard Heller, for example, has described it as 'an appalling piece of writing, turgid, preachy, cliché-driven and littered with avoidable errors of English or style', and made merry with its mixed metaphors (2006). The Schools' White Paper would certainly be an embarrassment to the fast disappearing breed of old-style Whitehall mandarins whose attention to detail and skilful crafting of elegant prose was second to none.

Parents Want …

It is said that when Ruth Kelly first became Secretary of State in December 2004, she let it be widely know that she had two main policy priorities: school dinners and parents. Both have popular appeal; both make a 'good story'. With the help of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver and large numbers of hardworking dinner ladies, school dinners certainly hit the headlines. But now that the fuss has died down, we have no way of knowing whether all the media hype and ministerial promises resulted in any real and lasting difference to what children eat at school. What we do know is that the demonisation of school dinners led to a decrease in take-up in some local authorities – with corresponding redundancies.

The Minister also made clear her intention to stand by the Prime Minister's commitment to woo back those middle-class parents who had deserted the state system and opted for the independent sector. Underlying the White Paper and implicit in the subtitle ('more choice for parents and pupils') is an assertion that its proposals represent what parents want: more choice, more power, more say in the day-to-day running of schools and more influence over the education system as a whole. This might well be true of some of the parents some of the time, but *which* parents has never been defined.

Is it safe to build a public education system around the reforming zeal of a Prime Minister (whose days are numbered) promoting untested assumptions and assertions about the majority view of parents? The answer is obvious – or at least it is to most of us.

Some parents may well be eager to become involved in matters of school governance, although there is a dearth of parent governors in many areas. Some may wish to have greater freedoms to set up and run their own schools. Many

(but not necessarily all) may wish to have the time and the opportunity to become more involved with their child's schooling. Others might well want involvement via a parent teacher association or a parent council. Still others will always choose to buy their way out of the state sector, no matter how good the provision, in order to sustain an elite and retain its primacy in the social pecking order. At the other end of the scale, for those struggling against the odds, getting through from one day to the next, with their child arriving at school on time, safe, sound, breakfasted and in one piece will remain a major daily success. For them, more involvement may represent a penalty, not a promise.

Different parents want and expect different things from the school system. To talk about 'parents' as a single group is to deny the fact that parents – and their children – reflect an increasingly fractured and heterogeneous society. As Martin Johnson has pointed out, it is the job of schools to promote social cohesion, binding together the diverse groups in British society, not helping to tear them apart (*The Independent*, 1 December 2005).

But there is more to it than that. With all the media hype and political froth about 'parent power', chapter 2 of the White Paper, 'A School System Shaped by Parents', provides a poor mandate for eager parents seeking to wield more power and influence over the education system. The summary page of this chapter gives eight ways in which the Government will create 'a school system shaped by parents'. (And in passing, note the irony: the Government is to create a system shaped by parents.) It is worth looking briefly at these and asking how, in practical terms, any one of the proposals will give parents more power to shape the school system.

The Government promises to:

- enable every school to become a self-governing trust school;
- continue to promote academies;
- create a new Office of the Schools Commissioner to promote the development of trusts and trust schools;
- enable parents to demand new schools and new provision;
- encourage existing schools to expand and federate, and make it easier for independent schools to enter the state system;
- create new vocational provision for 14-19 year-olds;
- give the weakest schools a year to improve or face closure, with a stronger role for local authorities in tackling failure;
- boost the autonomy and performance of all schools, with less bureaucracy and lighter-touch inspection (p. 23).

Empowering parents to demand new schools may sound promising to some. But as commentators have been quick to point out, and as several parent-led groups already know to their cost, giving parents the right to ask for a new primary or secondary school is no guarantee they will get one. It is difficult to see how promoting trust schools, academies and federations, creating new provision for 14-19 year-olds, boosting school autonomy, or giving local authorities a

stronger role in tackling failure help to improve ways in which parents can influence the shape of the school system.

Built as it is on rhetoric rather than evidence, the Government's appeal to greater 'parent power' soon backfired. With headlines like 'Class War' (*The Times*, 25 October 2005), 'Parents in Charge of Schools Will Opt for Social Selection' (*The Guardian*, 26 October 2005), 'Blair Only Cares about Pushy Middle-Classes' and 'Blair Placates Middle England' (*Times Educational Supplement [TES]*, 28 October 2005), 'Middle-Class Mum Will Not Be Beaten' (*TES*, 4 November 2005), pundits were quick to spot that more diversity, greater choice and more freedom for schools to construct their own admissions policies would give greater power to articulate, middle-class parents: those with the loudest voices and sharpest elbows.

Close reading of the White Paper immediately revealed that parent councils, trumpeted as a major new initiative for boosting parent power, were merely a way of evading the embarrassing fact that parents would have fewer rights on the governing bodies of the new trust schools. Groups with a strong parent interest that have submitted evidence to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's inquiry into the White Paper (for example, the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations [NCPTA], the Campaign for State Education and Human Scale Education) argued forcibly that the guiding principle for relationships between parents and schools should be one of partnership rather than power. As the NCPTA concludes, increasing parental *authority* is no guarantee of higher standards of achievement or greater parental involvement:

> The NCPTA is concerned about the balance of what is being proposed in the White Paper and feels it goes too far towards an ethos of parental power as opposed to a vision of parents and teachers working in effective partnership … The term 'parental power' has been used extensively by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills and is implied within the text of the White Paper … Parent power and parental involvement are not synonymous. It has not been proven that any increase in the *authority* of parents over the education system will result in an increase in the effectiveness of the partnership between parents and teachers and hence an increase in attainment. Nor is there any proven link between parental *authority* over the education system and the expansion of parental involvement (specifically a wider range of parents becoming directly involved in their children's education). (House of Commons, 2006, Volume II, Evidence 97, paragraph 5.3, emphasis added)

Parents Driving Improvement?

Moving on to chapter 5 of the White Paper, 'Parents Driving Improvement', we learn that the only genuinely new proposals are that schools are required to give parents termly information (which many do anyway) and that parents will now have a right to complain to the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) where they have concerns which the schools is failing to address, but only after exhausting local procedures. The other 'new' measures, such as providing information to parents when their child starts school and expecting schools to use home–school agreements, merely reflect existing practice. Tagged on to the end of this chapter, almost as an afterthought, is a reminder that schools will be encouraged to involve pupil-led school councils in decision making (p. 70). How this might help parents drive improvement is unclear, and there is no mention of who might mediate when pupil and parent councils are at loggerheads, as well they might be, over issues such as school uniform or behaviour policies, or what happens when both are ignored by the governing body.

The final sting in the tail for 'parent power' is to be found in chapter 7 of the White Paper. This chapter, which deals with school discipline, has been widely welcomed by the majority of commentators, and not just the teacher unions. Teachers now have a 'clear and unambiguous' legal right to discipline pupils, including the use of restraint. Parenting Orders will be extended, so that schools can use them to make parents take responsibility for their children's bad behaviour in school. Precisely how parents can be expected to do this is unclear; and are we left to assume that parents also take responsibility for children's 'good' behaviour, or is that something for which schools will be credited? But the harshest proposal of all is that 'parents will be expected to take responsibility for excluded pupils in the first five days of an exclusion, by ensuring that their children are supervised doing schoolwork, with fines for parents if excluded pupils are found in a public place during school hours' (p. 82). With all the talk of parent power and helping the poorest 'kids', this new proposal punishes the very parents who are least able to care for their children and who are most in need of support.

Where is the Evidence?

So where in the midst of these proposals about increasing 'parent power' is there tried and tested evidence of 'what works'? In his submission to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's inquiry, citing a report commissioned by the consumers' organisation *Which?*, Ron Glatter points out that there is no explanation of how parents' views have influenced the proposals, and there is evidence that the proposals do not square with what parents say they are looking for. He goes on to say that we have little understanding of how parents react to a complex environment of school diversity (House of Commons, 2006, Evidence 179).

There is no mention of the review by Charles Desforges (2003), commissioned by the DfES, about the impact of parental involvement and support on pupil achievement, and its most important finding:

> parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. (p. 5)

There is also no mention of the DfES-commissioned study on competition, choice and pupil attainment in the primary sector, submitted to the DfES in October 2005, which concludes that, on balance, 'choice and competition does not seem to be generally effective in raising standards in the school context' (Gibbons et al, 2005) Nor is there mention of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), funded in part by the DfES, which has consistently shown that countries with more divided school systems perform distinctly less well, in terms both of overall standards and the spread of attainment, than those which are based on a more integrated and comprehensive approach (OECD, 2004).

In fact, there is no mention of volumes of other research, much of it funded by the DfES, that flies in the face of many of the proposals in the White Paper. On the contrary, we have gone back to a form of labelling children and young people which pre-dates the 'mentals' and the 'manuals' of R.A. Butler's 1944 Education Act. We are told in paragraph 1.28 of the Introduction to the document that children come in three distinct categories: 'gifted and talented, struggling or *just* average' (emphasis added). Whoever wrote this should be identified and called to account. Chapter 4 on personalised learning reminds us that children can be 'stretched' and 'extended' to reach their potential, and that those who have 'fallen behind' will be provided with 'effective support for catch-up'. Human Scale Education noted in its response to the Select Committee that:

> This limited view of ability and potential will serve only to reinforce underachievement and result in precisely the kind of educational failure the Government is trying to eradicate. (House of Commons, 2006, Evidence 201)

It also promises a bleak future for the 'just average' children, who are neither stretched nor supported.

Drawing on national and international research to question the interpretation of 'ability' that is embodied in the White Paper, David Gillborn also pointed out that, if left unchecked, the proposals would worsen the inequality of opportunity endured by Black students. In particular, he said:

> the plans to extend the use of 'setting by ability' and enhance 'gifted and talented' provision threaten further to institutionalise the race inequalities that have scarred the system for decades. (House of Commons, 2006, Evidence 187)

Giving evidence to the Education and Skills Committee, the Secretary of State attempted to counteract the suggestion that an increase in the number of admissions authorities increases social segregation. Citing a research project being undertaken by the DfES, she said in an earlier speech that preliminary conclusions of the research showed that 'there is no correlation whatsoever between the number of own-admission authorities and social segregation' (House of Commons, 2006, Volume 1, para. 121). When asked if the Committee could see the evidence that she was referring to, she replied:

> Certainly when it is finished. It is quite a difficult thing to do … it builds on some other research that is in the public domain that we do not feel is very robust actually and we want to take it to the next stage. As soon as it is finished we can do that. (House of Commons, 2006, Volume 1, para. 122)

The Committee's stern response is worth quoting in full:

> *It is unhelpful for the Secretary of State to cite evidence from an unfinished research project in support of one of the Government's proposals without being prepared to make the detail of that evidence available to us.* Neither we nor anyone else outside the DfES have any idea what this evidence actually shows. Indeed, to judge from the Secretary of State's comments about the amount of work still being done on the project by the Department, she herself cannot have complete certainty about what the final outcome will be. Without sight of the research, the Secretary of State cannot hope to persuade us that the segregating effect of an increase in admissions authorities noted by other researchers does not exist. (House of Commons, 2006, Volume 1, para. 123, emphasis as in original)

So much for evidence of 'what works'.

And what of parents? Only two or three months ago we were told that parents were 'at the heart of the proposals' and 'driving reform'. Should we be surprised that in the Secretary of State's informal six-page letter to Barry Sheerman, chair of the Education and Skills Committee's inquiry into the White Paper (Kelly, 2006), parents barely get a mention? Perhaps the DfES will have found something more to say by the time the formal response is submitted.

A Classic Case of Third-Termitis

Not surprisingly, there is very little substance to Ruth Kelly's sweeping claim that the proposed reforms can be supported by evidence of 'what works'. As Ron Glatter pointed out in his submission to the Select Committee (House of Commons, 2006), what little evidence we have on, for example, specialist schools and academies is far too slender to justify their national roll out. What we have is a classic case of Third-Termitis: a Government short on ideas, fast running out of steam yet obstinately determined to continue making its mark by

seeking to impose large-scale structural change on the basis of little more than an overdose of reforming zeal and a bit of a hunch.

If we are to run a national education system on the basis of hunches about what works, would it not better that those hunches were at very least informed by the knowledge, experience and practical understanding of those who actually work in schools? Inevitably, their concerns are more likely to focus on children, schools and communities than on large-scale systems and structures.

In considering the White Paper, two of many well-researched contributions to the debate spring to mind. The first, written by policy-adviser-cum-teaching-assistant Peter Hyman the day before the White Paper was published, focuses on ways of making the teaching and learning experience more rewarding and successful. These include more teachers, smaller classes, greater flexibility, smaller schools, a modern, flexible curriculum and better opportunities for networking, research and development (*Guardian*, 24 October 2005). Three months later, the widely respected head teacher of Phoenix High School, William Atkinson, put forward the idea of a modern-day Marshall Plan, centred on the needs of the children and, where possible, their local community. Key to the plan are a number of interrelated elements, including a high-quality, stable teaching body, smaller classes, continuous professional development for teachers, an extensive range of extra-curricular activities and stronger links with the wider community (*Education Guardian*, 17 January 2006).

Of course we cannot go back to the days of nineteenth-century Royal Commissions, some of which conducted inquiries for several years before deciding that nothing need be done. Life moves too quickly. But it is a very sad day when sensible, informed and intelligent debate about the future of the education system is forced to take second place to political highwire acts (with only the Opposition as a safety net) fuelled by an over-size ego and the pressing need to leave a legacy – no matter what.

All in all, the White Paper offers little or no evidence of 'what works' in education, in the form of conclusions supported by reliable data. It does offer a great deal of evidence for 'what works' for the small band of market-driven ideologues who wrote it.

References

Desforges, C. (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: a literature report. DfES Research Report 433*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005a) *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: more choice for parents and pupils*. London: The Stationery Office.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005b) *Schools White Paper: Briefing Pack* (unpublished).

Gibbons, S., Machin, S. & Silva, O. (2005) *Competition, Choice and Pupil Achievement. Executive Summary*. London: Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics.

Heller, R. (2006) Ill-written, Ill-argued, Ill-thought: the Education White Paper. http://www.richardheller.co.uk/ (accessed 15 January 2006).

House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) *The Schools White Paper. Higher Standards, Better Schools for All. First Report of Session 2005-06, Volumes I & II.* London: The Stationery Office.

Kelly, R. (2006) Letter to Barry Sheerman MP, Chairman of the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 6 February.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2004) *First results from PISA 2003*, Executive Summary. Paris: OECD.

Which? (2005) *Which Choice? Education.* London: Which?

SHEILA DAINTON, a former higher education administrator and primary teacher, was for many years Education Policy Adviser for the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. *Correspondence:* Sheila Dainton, 3 Reservoir Cottages, Reservoir Lane, Petersfield GU32 2HY, United Kingdom (sheila.dainton@ntlworld.com).