
Another Day, Another White Paper

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ABSTRACT This article argues that the proposals in the 2005 White Paper can be largely explained by a New Labour emphasis on 'meritocracy' merging with a right-wing belief in education as a means of creating an hierarchical society.

So yet another White Paper on education from a New Labour government committed to ceaseless reform of the education system – heralding around the fortieth Education Act since 1980. Schools and local authorities have scarcely digested the 217 clauses and 22 schedules of the July 2002 Education Act, and the 124 clauses and 19 schedules of the April 2005 Act before the lawyers are busy again. This White Paper appears to be even more of a dog's breakfast than others – or, as our late loved colleague Ted Wragg remarked, the bits at the other end of the dog might be a more appropriate description. As with much reform and legislation, the White Paper is built on the assumption that the problems and failures within education can be solved by removing control of education from those who know and work in the system. It may be worth briefly pointing out yet again the positive and negative effects of education policy over the past half century, positive effects having largely been achieved by those working in schools, colleges, universities and local government.

We need to remember that it was only in the later twentieth century that the goal of educating the whole population rather than elites began to be slowly realised. A full primary and four years of secondary education for all was achieved by 1944, but it was 1973 before a five-year secondary education for all was promised. Even this promise was watered down twenty-five years later when it was decided that 'disaffected' working-class children could be shunted off into low-level vocational courses in further education colleges after three years' secondary schooling.[1] As a society we have never come to terms with educating a working class and we cling to privilege by birth, wealth, selection, payment, patronage, nepotism and other strategies. From the 1960s an expanding occupational structure and an expansion of opportunities, especially through comprehensive schools, led to more young people acquiring credentials and qualifications, and an increase in social mobility for many children of manual workers. As three-quarters of jobs were classed as manual in 1960, this

was inevitable. Now we have an expanded middle class, keen to retain educational privilege and keep their children from any downward social mobility. The whole notion of social mobility and a deserving meritocracy, which New Labour is wedded to, is highly problematic. The notion of escape from poor schools in poor areas, endorsed by the White Paper, is morally dubious. What about those left behind? Whatever happened to any belief in an egalitarian society, with a redistribution of resources, good social housing and good local schools, with all jobs decently paid and equally valued, and more social justice all round?

Positive Aspects

On the positive side, the later twentieth century was a period of steadily rising educational achievement. Halsey pointed out in 2000 [2] that in 1939 the majority of Britons were 'elementary schooled proletarians' who, by the end of the century, had graduate children following professional careers. In 1939, 88% of young people had left school by age 14. By 2000, 92% (nearly 9 million) attended state-maintained schools and colleges through to 16 or 18, with 98% of four year-olds in education and a welcome focus on early childhood education. Over 74% were in education or training to 19, still a lower number than most other European countries, but 5 million adults and young people were engaged in learning in further education colleges, 55% of them women. Nearly 2 million people were in higher education, over half of these being women and 13% from ethnic minorities. The success of comprehensive education could be measured by steadily rising achievements in public examinations. In 1962, the supposed golden age of grammar schools, 16% obtained five General Certificate of Education O level passes. In 2004, 55% passed the equivalent five passes in the General Certificate of Secondary Education. The Advanced level exams, designed originally for less than 10% of the school population, were achieved in two or more subjects by 37% by 2001. In 1970 47% of young people left school without any qualification. By 2001 fewer than 10% did so. In the early 1960s some 8% of 18 year-olds went into higher education; now over 40% move on to this level, with a government target of 50%. The enhanced achievements of girls has been remarkable, the education of disabled young people and those with learning difficulties is now taken seriously, and some minority groups are achieving well. Social class remains a major determinant of qualifications and higher education levels, but there has been a welcome decline in deference and the belief that among lower socio-economic groups 'education is not for the likes of us'.

But by the 1970s, just as the idea of a common educational experience in equally resourced schools was beginning to take shape, developed nation states, notably the USA and United Kingdom, began to evolve into competitive market states and post-welfare societies.[3] Individuals were to be 'empowered to take responsibility for their own futures', a comment made by President Clinton in 1994. Human capital theory was rediscovered and the notion of a common

good and communities which cared about other people was gradually disappearing. Public services provided by the state were to be reduced, with more privatisation, and more business and charitable involvement. The United Kingdom was to become 'economically competitive' in a global economy by raising standards in education, and all young people were to 'learn to compete'.^[4] Education was to be narrowed to an economic function, and governments, using a language of freeing up institutions, were effectively neutralising schools, local authorities, colleges and universities as democratic institutions. The idea that a decent, free, universal education was a democratic right and a common good was disappearing, to be replaced by a pre-1940 belief that a good education was a prize to be competitively sought, in what in some areas was becoming a mad, disturbing scramble where a language of 'choice' covered a reality of increasing selection by schools.

Negative Aspects

A long-term view of negative consequences must give pride of place to an obsession with selection and the segregation of children into different schools or different curricula in schools. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century this obsession continued to be based on spurious notions of ability and aptitude, which usually mirrored the social class structure. The Conservatives worked through the second half of the twentieth century to reintroduce selective mechanisms, which led to the reproduction of a hierarchical society, and this has been taken onwards by New Labour since 1997. A major hypocrisy perpetuated by the current government is that selection is a minor affair and that there will be 'no return to selection'. There continues to be selection by an 11+ examination in 36 local education authorities, selection by faith schools, selection by aptitude and by a whole set of overt and covert strategies by schools and some parents.^[5] The application of market principles has brought about this extraordinary, complex system of selection, including the selection out of disaffected 14 year-olds into low-level 'vocational' courses, and the elaborate hierarchy of schools. New Labour, in a seamless continuation of Tory policies, continues to denigrate education as failing, and to deprofessionalise teachers who have found themselves reduced to the technician status of delivering a pre-prepared curriculum and policed by an unpopular inspectorate. There is an unshakeable belief that market policies, parental 'choice', competition, testing, targets, league tables, central control of teachers, their training, and curriculum, control of funding and large injections of private cash and influence is the only way to improve education.

Behind the White Paper

For some years educational reform was openly intended to retain the loyalty of middle-class parents. In the 2005 White Paper the rhetoric has changed. It is now about giving working-class children some of the advantages enjoyed by

the middle class. The advantages do not include providing that famously missing 'good local school in every area' which most parents assert they would prefer, but the chance to be bussed or banded out of disadvantaged areas, to an expanding oversubscribed school. The White Paper is full of repetitions and contradictions, with the authors apparently not remembering what they legislated for last year or last week, and there are some stunning contradictions. Paragraph 9-3 asserts that 'we will support local authorities in commissioning a new school system at the heart of their local communities' but there are to be no more community schools [6], and paragraph 9-7 tells local authorities that they have a duty to promote choice and diversity, to get children out of their local community. Change to school structures 'will be owned and driven by parents' but the proposed school trusts are to have fewer elected parents. The White Paper envisages that parents' role is increasingly to act as vigilantes and complainants, and parents are treated as a homogeneous group, with no recognition of social class and other interests. Despite notions of regeneration of communities, there is no recognition that parents do not necessarily act in the whole community interest. There is also a good deal of hypocrisy over the creation of academies. – the latest flagship prime ministerial policy. The assertion that results in academies are rising at three times the national average is nonsensical, given that the first three of these expensively resourced schools opened only in 2002. It is unsurprising that a Conservative Shadow Education Secretary could write after the 2005 April Education Act that the policies were the latest instance of New Labour 'mouthing Tory slogans but not offering schools the full independence a conservative government would grant'. The policies of the two main political parties on education are now almost identical.

The White Paper proposals can partly be explained by a convergence of New Labour beliefs in a meritocracy, in which the 'deserving' will be given chances to rise above their circumstances, and right wing beliefs in education as a mechanism for the development of a hierarchical society, in which a differentiated school and higher education system creates a stratified workforce. The selection of the 'able' for a superior education and well-paid employment dominates education policy. While this is nothing new in the history of English education, it is also a consequence of belief in the market state. Market states must maximise opportunities by encouraging competition between individuals and promote those with merit, but also threaten penalties – poor education and low-level jobs or unemployment for those deemed without merit. Market states encourage meritocracies where 'ruthless assessment' [7] is the norm, and 'choices' are in fact strategies in a competitive marketplace. Market states are not places where mutual assistance thrives and are largely indifferent to social justice. Those who believe that the proposals in the White Paper will enhance social justice are deluding themselves.

Notes

- [1] House of Commons Education and Employment Committee (1998) *Disaffected Children*. London: HMSO.
- [2] A.H. Halsey (2000) Introduction, *Social Trends*, 30.
- [3] See S. Tomlinson (2005) *Education in a Post-Welfare Society*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- [4] Department for Education and Employment (1996) *Learning to Compete: education and training 14-19*. cmd 3486. London: HMSO.
- [5] See T. Edwards & S. Tomlinson (2002) *Selection Isn't Working: diversity, standards and inequality in secondary education*. London: Catalyst.
- [6] The Education Bill published in February 2006 allowed local education authorities to seek the approval of the Secretary of State for Education to establish a community school.
- [7] P. Bobbitt (2002) *The Shield of Achilles*. London: Allen Lane.

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