FORUM
Volume 50, Number 1, 2008
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Reforming Teachers and Uncompromising 'Standards': implications for social justice in schools

ROSALYN GEORGE & JOHN CLAY

ABSTRACT As a major consumer of public funds education has become one of the most highly surveilled and accountable professions in the United Kingdom. In this article the authors chart the changes and reforms to teacher training and in particular the impact of the 'standards' agenda on the teaching profession. They analyse the impact that the Teacher Development Agency (formally the Teacher Training Agency) and the *Every Child Matters* agenda has had on the promotion of an agenda for social justice and equality in schools.

The Context

During the past two decades and more, the focus given to the education system in general but particularly to schooling by successive governments in Britain has been unremitting, relentless and in the final analysis, non-progressive. The claimed post-war consensus that existed right to the end of the seventies was abruptly ruptured by the introduction of the 1980 Education Act. This was designed primarily to reverse the comprehensive schools movement which was seen as an egalitarian project that stifled competition and entrepreneurialism. The responsibility for the United Kingdom's slide downwards in the world economic league from its loftier position in the pre-war years was deemed to be caused by the lack of competitiveness of business and industry. Furthermore, the poor performance of British industry was blamed on the failure of the education system for not producing a suitably trained workforce and thus the system as a whole became the scapegoat. Poor teaching (Whitty, 2002) was deemed to be the reason for this crisis and teacher training institutions were held responsible for inculcating generations of teachers with 'woolly ideas' about equality at the

expense of training teachers to teach the basic skills and to impart a fixed and immutable body of knowledge that was considered a part of the nation's cultural heritage.

Successive conservative administrations over eighteen years successfully created a climate of opinion that has enabled the public education system to be restructured and repositioned to meet the perceived economic needs of the country. The 1980 Education Act introduced the 'Assisted Places Scheme' for pupils to transfer from state schools to the private sector on a subsidised basis; to a sector that was already paying less than its fair share of taxation through being granted charitable status. This was a direct shift of resources from the public to the private sector under the banner of 'parental choice'. The fact that this choice was largely limited to the already privileged middle and upper classes did not go unnoticed. The shift in resources; the requirement for schools to publish their examination results; the right given to parents to appeal against the allocated school and the right to send pupils across Local Authority boundaries changed parents from local tax payers with a stake in their community schools to that of consumers with a right to shop around for an education that had become a commodity. This change to public education that catered for 93% of the school population was greatly accelerated by the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act that allowed the few remaining grammar schools and schools with falling rolls to opt out of LEA control. The incentives to 'break free' from LEAs were considerable since it allowed these 'opted out', Grant Maintained schools to receive greatly enhanced funding directly from central government and administered via a non elected quango. The 1988 Act included proposals for open enrolment so that popular schools could increase their intakes and thus gain greater funds that gave these schools a further edge when competing with the less popular schools. The publication of raw school examination results that started with the 1980 Act eventually resulted in a national league table of all secondary schools being published annually. Unsurprisingly when the only indicator of performance measured was examination results the top three hundred or so schools that consistently performed well were those in the long established private sector and the increasingly more selective schools in the Grant Maintained sector that had benefited from the massive shift of resources over that period of time. The creation of City Technology Colleges with the grudging help of private finance from industry was also an attempt to diversify the provision of schooling and an attempt to further weaken the ability of democratically accountable LEAs from rationalising school provision and planning strategically for the medium and long term. The combined effects of the 1980 and 1988 Education Acts resulted in establishing the framework for education to be traded on the market as another commodity.

Business as Usual

The election of a Labour Government in 1997 and the passing of new legislation brought to an end the most destructive aspects of the previous administration's policy. The Assisted Places Scheme was abolished and Grant Maintained Schools were returned to the LEA fold. Nevertheless, in many other respects no attempt has been made to dismantle the disciplinary mechanism of the market. Every sector of the education system, from schools to colleges and universities have been shaped and 'reformed' to the strictures of the market under the ubiquitous banner of 'choice', 'quality', 'standards' and 'efficiency'. In terms of organisation, each school or institution within the education sector has adopted a style of management that is 'top-down' and hierarchical; a form of Taylorist management that has long been discarded by 'knowledge-based' organisations. This new but old style of management has nevertheless cloaked itself with the language of the market and this phenomenon of using jargon to conceal the realities and consequences as it affects people was coined 'obscuranto', by Frank Delaney, a BBC Radio presenter – denoting a language which stands in opposition to the term Esperanto that was designed as a language to transcend cultural and national barriers. Along with the jargon of the market the predominant buzzword over the past decade has been the term 'globalisation'. In the education policy arena according to Cole:

> 'Globalisation' has become one of the orthodoxies of the 1990s … used ideologically to mystify the populace as a whole and to stifle action by the left in particular … in order to continue the Thatcherite project in Education.' (Cole, 1998, pp. 315-316)

'Globalisation' is deemed to be an inevitable consequence of progress and that in order to be key players in the new world order we must embrace globalisation uncritically and schools and other sites of educational provision must retool and refocus on producing a skilled workforce to sustain and operate successfully within a unfettered market economy. In this blueprint for modernisation, the principle of a publicly funded education system accountable to the community it serves through locally elected representatives has been eroded even further. This 'democratic deficit' would appear to be of little concern to the current Government. In fact the organisation and pursuance of an education system to meet purely economic goals:

> could well improve the international competitiveness of a nation state and its economic prosperity, but there are other effects which many, in the West at least, would see as heavy prices to be paid – an increased centralisation with a consequent decrease in individual autonomy, an increase in a culture of purely rational-technical professionals and the dangers of a move towards an increasingly illiberal society. If individual choice is seen as an expensive luxury, it may well be sacrificed to national policy when the need arises' (Bottery, 1999, p. 116).

The argument that increasing the skills base will somehow increase employability and employment which in turn will create wealth that can then 'trickle down' to benefit those lower down the economic ladder would seem fanciful. In the aftermath of the closure of two hi-tech firms in the North of England, Frank Coffield wrote:

> All the North's 16-year-olds could have obtained five As in the GCSE exams, all its teachers could have MEds in school improvement, and all its directors and professors of education could have PhDs in robotic technology and still Siemens and Fujitsu would have closed....the debate must move beyond the simplistic notion that raising standards in education will of itself create economic prosperity for all. Raising skill levels is not the key to the promised land; it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for such success...over-concentration on raising skill levels puts the onus on education and takes the pressure of industry.
> (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 18 September, 1998).

However, in the fleshing out of the 'Third Way' policy on education the role of the market is not unduly emphasised but instead, the emphasis is put on the fostering of private/public partnership. The rhetoric of private/public 'partnership' conceals the true extent of the privatisation of public provision. In the aftermath of Kings Manor School in Guildford being hander over to the private sector, lock, stock Beckett reminded us in the early days of New Labour that:

> David Blunkett, the former council leader who once believed that local schools should be responsible to elected local authorities, is turning into the most centralising and most private sector friendly education secretary we have known.
> (*New Statesman*, 15 January 1999, p. 9)

Interestingly, in another area of public policy, this same politician as Home Secretary has on a number of occasions and particularly on radio interviews questioned the desirability of using the concept of 'institutional racism' and argued that its continued use was unhelpful in taking forward the debate on how citizenship in Britain needed to be defined. Given that his predecessor as Home Secretary Jack Straw had been instrumental in commissioning the Macpherson Report and accepting all seventy of its recommendations it is somewhat galling that there was such a *volte face*. Given such oscillations in social policy, all subsequent changes that have taken place since then have to be regarded with a degree of caution, for example, the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda.

Changing Contexts: the formation of the new teaching workforce

It is important to say that whilst many of the changes outlined in this article were instigated by previous Tory administrations, the changes have not only been upheld by New Labour but more tightly prescribed than ever before.

The training of teachers within this political context has involved, firstly, establishing a diversity of routes into teaching. Secondly, created partnerships between institutions of teacher training and schools with schools given a leading role in the training and thirdly, establishing the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in 1994 (now the Teacher Development Agency (TDA), to oversee not only, the funding and management of teacher training but also to direct research funding that would cement the imposed 'partnership' structures between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and schools through the commissioning of tightly specified classroom based research. The funding for initial teacher education is formulated to advantage those institutions that are prepared to adhere strictly to the training model constructed and an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspection framework is then employed as the sole mechanism to ensure compliance.

The result of such measures is that staff in University Departments of Education and in partnership schools have become highly scrutinised and surveilled, subject to radical yet untested reforms imposed by central government on not only the curriculum of both schools and teacher training but also on ways of transacting the process of teaching and learning. The pressure to conform to a model of 'good' practice as conceived from the centre has now become hegemonic.

The reforms introduced in 1997 by the current government through the TTA (now TDA) established a National Curriculum for Initial Teacher Training which shifted the focus away from competencies to concentration on ''standards'' which are to be realized within the context of classrooms. These 'standards' which relate to skills of practice and school based performance are centrally prescribed and marginalise professional knowledge and understanding which does not relate directly to classroom practice. Furthermore these 'standards' conflict with the once accepted view that 'reflective' teachers are critical to effective practice. Interestingly in the early 1990's the documentation emanating from the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) supported the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' and critical thinking in teacher training. Reynolds & Salters (1998) quote circular 4/93 as an example, which states that:

> newly qualified teachers were expected to have acquired the 'necessary foundation to develop vision , imagination and critical awareness in educating their pupils' (DFEE, 1993, p. 16). This gave a fairly wide framework for critical reflection indicating that it had an important role to play in successful practice.

The 'standards' have been revised a number of times in the past ten years and since September 2007, we have a ladder of Professional Standards for Teachers that sets out the 'standards' that a teacher has to meet at each rung of their career. This sits within a wider framework of occupational and professional standards that will apply to the whole school workforce. It begins with the occupational standards for classroom/teaching assistants and then moves on to the professional standards for higher level teaching assistants through to the professional standards for teachers and finally standards for school leadership.

The leading role given to schools in initial training and even more importantly induction, can consequently lead to a situation where existing models of representation and practice within the workforce are either intentionally or otherwise reproduced. This has unsurprisingly, led to an unchanging composition in the make-up of the teaching workforce at different levels. This is best exemplified by the following example; there is a tension developing within the system whereby the Teacher Development Agency sets out annual targets for recruitment to ensure that the future teaching workforce is diverse and more representative of British society. Annual targets are duly set for increasing the representation of males especially in the primary sector and for more entrants to the profession from minority ethnic backgrounds. These intentions however laudable result in the same handful of ITT institutions recruiting significant number of minority ethnic trainees that largely feed into the workforce of schools that are sited in urban areas in a handful of cities. Indeed the Commision for Racial Equality (CRE) (2007) point to the fact that there are more black African students at London Metropolitan University than at the whole of the Russell group put together. In addition, there is no firm evidence to support the widely held belief that this recruitment initiative will result in a significant increase in minority ethnic representation at middle management levels in schools and an increased representation amongst the elite Advanced Skills Teacher. Furthermore these new 'standards' are broad and quite generic to ensure that a range of occupations can be reconfigured and aligned within a new Children's Services workforce that is intended to deliver the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda.

Social Justice and Inclusion

It would appear on the surface that the revised Professional Standards for Teachers framework has addressed the concerns raised by many educationalists about the neglect of issues around social justice. In 1998 Mahony & Hextall strongly criticized the then TTA for remaining silent on this issue. They state:

> Conceptions of what constitutes the 'effective teacher' and what counts as career progression are being reshaped by the TTA. Teachers' responsibilities in relation to social justice have been evacuated as the 'true purposes of schooling' and the need for 'effective teachers' have been redefined. The teaching profession is being increasingly differentiated in ways which may disadvantage

> particular groups of children and teachers...[so] that the process of occupational restructuring upon which the TTA has embarked might carry important social justice implications for individual teachers, for the teaching profession as a whole, and for the social and ideological contextualization of education.

Indeed the new professional standards for attaining Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) are now populated with references to cultural, linguistic, social, religious and ethnic diversity. However, laudable these declarations maybe, the change in practice in schools that will result in better outcomes for all, can only be realised if the mechanisms for ensuring compliance through Ofsted are not only robust, but also generate high levels of confidence and trust by all concerned.

The CRE's final report (2007)'A lot done, a lot to do: our vision for an integrated Britain' heavily criticised Ofsted for its previous inaction in inspecting schools for promoting racial equality. In *Evaluating Educational Inclusion: guidance for inspectors and schools* (Ofsted 2000), it states clearly that the most effective schools are ones that do not take educational inclusion for granted. Instead, they constantly monitor and evaluate the progress each pupil makes, identifying pupils who may be missing out, difficult to engage, or feeling some way apart from what the school seeks to provide. They take practical steps – in the classroom and beyond – to meet pupil's needs effectively and promote tolerance and understanding in a diverse society (p. 4). This duty it appears is disregarded in most inspections as evidenced the CRE (2007) report which recommends that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) should:

Hold OfSTED to account on their reluctance to include within inspections an assessment of how well schools are meeting their responsibilities under the duty to promote race equality.

The report also made specific recommendations that they should:

> Carry out regular thematic inspections on equality and integration issues
> - Avoid making token comments on racial equality within schools when carrying out inspections
> - When looking at things such as attainment, behaviour management and the curriculum, inspectors need to raise any concerns about how they affect ethnic minority pupils
> - Give inspectors adequate race and diversity training to equip them to assess schools properly

Alongside the standards the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda has also been rolled-out across the country. This agenda begins to consider the five outcomes for individuals between the ages of 0-19. The five outcomes are:

> 1. Being Healthy 2. Being Safe 3.Enjoy & Achieve 4. Making a Positive Contribution, and, 5. Achieving Economic Well-being.

These outcomes which are very broad will have to cut across particularisms, entrenched practices and vested interests if they are to be realised to benefit every child and young person to realise their potential. The ECM agenda accepts that individuals have complex identities and that any provision or intervention proposed, planned, agreed and implemented needs to be holistic. There is an assumption with this joined-up approach to the ECM agenda that a reduction in inequality, a greater level of equity and a consequential improvement in the life chances of all individuals will follow.

However, there is still considerable uncertainty about whether ECM is intended to meet the needs of the most needy, deprived and disenfranchised children and young people or whether the agenda is a broad umbrella or 'manifesto' for *all.* This tension needs to be firstly recognised and acknowledged for if the agenda is to be inclusive and dynamic, then the knowledge, skills and understandings that underpin the professional standards must have a golden strand or thread of equity and fairness woven throughout the entire framework.

Conclusion

We have argued elsewhere that issues of equality and inclusion need to underpin the very foundations of the kind of society that we live in; how we relate to each other at the local, national and international level. Within this broader context, it is generally accepted that education and schooling has a pivotal role in preparing future citizens to embrace the richness and potentialities of diversity and difference (Clay & George, 2007). It is our view that teachers can contribute to the development of an equitable and socially just society. However the continued preoccupation with a narrow set of 'standards' that negatively impacts on both teacher recruitment and representation alongside teacher pedagogy will fail to contribute to the development of an equitable and socially just society. It is vital therefore, that we educate future teachers to see the connections between schooling, education and the wider society.

References

Beckett, F. (1999) Privatisation Threatens More Schools, *New Statesman,* 15 November.

Bottery, M. (1999) *Teachers and the State: towards a directed profession.* London: Routledge.

Clay, J. & George, R. (2007) Equality and Diversity, in V. Ellis (Ed.) *Learning and Teaching in Secondary Schools.* Exeter: Learning Matters.

Coffield, F. (1998) Life Learners Prepare for Radical Shift, *The Times Educational Supplement.*

Cole, M., Hill, D., McLaren, P. & Rikowski, G. (1998) *Red Chalk : on schooling , capitalism and politics.* Northampton: Institute for Education Policy Studies. http://www.ieps.org.uk.cwc.net/redchalk.pdf

CRE (2007) *A Lot Done, a Lot to Do: our vision for an integrated Britain.* London: Commission for Racial Equality.

Ofsted (2000) *Evaluating Educational Inclusion: guidance for inspectors and schools,* London: Ofsted.

Mahony, P. & Hextall, I. (1998) Social Justice and the Reconstruction of Teaching, *Journal of Education Policy*, 13(4), 545-558. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0268093980130407

Reynolds, M. & Salters, M. (1998) The Reflective Teacher and The Teacher Training Agency, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 22(2), 193-200. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877980220208

Rosie, A. & Fuller, M. (1997) Social Theory, Rationalization, and School-based Teacher Education, in J. Calderhead & S.B. Shorrock (Eds) *Understanding Teacher Education: case studies in the professional development of beginning teachers.* London: Falmer Press.

TTA (1997) *Consultation on the Training Curriculum and Standards for New Teachers.* London: TTA.

Whitty, G. (1998) New Labour, Education and Social Justice, *Socialist Teacher*, 65, Spring.

Whitty, G. (2002) *Making Sense of Education Policy.* London: Sage.

ROSALYN GEORGE was formerly a primary/middle school teacher in London. She then became an advisory teacher for equal opportunities, also in London, before moving into Teacher Education. She currently coordinates the PhD programme at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research and publications are all focussed around issues of equality and social justice. *Correspondence*: Rosalyn George, Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, United Kingdom (r.george@gold.ac.uk).

JOHN CLAY is currently a senior policy advisor to the General Teaching Council. Prior to this, he taught in both middle and secondary schools in South London. He then moved into Teacher Education at Brighton University before taking up a position as Senior Inspector for Ethnic Minority Achievement in the London Borough of Greenwich. He has written and published widely in the field of education policy and social justice. *Correspondence*: John Clay, General Teaching Council for England, Whittington House, 19-30 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7EA, United Kingdom (jac462000@yahoo.co.uk).