

SYMPOSIUM

Reflections on the 1988 Education Reform Act

ABSTRACT For this 50th anniversary edition, *FORUM* invited a group of readers, many of whom were teaching 20 years ago, to reflect on the implications of the 1988 Education Reform Act from a personal viewpoint. The resulting symposium brings together a rich, unique and often candid collection of thoughts and reflections written from a wide variety of perspectives.

Sledgehammers and Nuts

ROS BAYLEY

As I approach my 60th birthday I am struck by what at first seems an insignificant truth. However, reflecting for a moment, I realise that it may be far more significant than I had first thought. To put you in the picture: my teaching career has been rather like a sandwich – two slices of bread with the 1988 Education Reform Act as the filling. This means I have worked as a teacher and educator for more or less equal amounts of time before and after that memorable Act that so profoundly affected everyone in education.

As I reflect, numerous thoughts flood in. For the first 20 years of my career I drove to school with unbridled enthusiasm and a car-load of all manner of exciting stimuli which I hoped would motivate and inspire my pupils. I loved my job. I loved the kids, and I revelled in the process of honing the craft of teaching by working alongside reflective and experienced mentors. I worked with great colleagues. We saw it as no hardship to spend our evenings together discussing our next exciting project. The children flourished and I flourished too. In fact, I was so deliriously happy that it never occurred to me that not all schools offered the same advantages as the two in which I had been fortunate enough to work.

It was not until I began to go into other schools in an advisory role that a different reality struck me. I quickly began to realise that, in a system with little

structure and accountability, things were a little bit of a lottery for some children. During those years I saw some dubious practice and I soon realised that something needed to be done. It's just a pity that the government of the day took a sledgehammer to crack a nut and that successive governments have followed suit.

Centrally-controlled attempts to improve the practice of an uninspired and unmotivated minority have left many excellent teachers in a stranglehold of fear and bogged down by endless paperwork. And as if this wasn't enough, the problem has been compounded with endless targets and tests to the point where, in their struggle for survival, many schools and numerous – but by no means all – teachers allowed targets and tests to take precedence over genuine learning.

In such a situation, qualities like creativity, courage and resilience are at a premium. Professional confidence and a sense of rebellion can also come in handy – and praise be that many teachers have these qualities in abundance.

Twenty years on I still work in an advisory role. My heart soars when I see teachers who refuse to be crushed by the myriad of initiatives of the last two decades. Like I used to, they drive to school with enormous enthusiasm, eager to support children's learning in exciting and stimulating ways. Their classrooms are vibrant and exciting learning communities in which children flourish as they did in my classroom. But it's much tougher for them than it was for me.

Would I have had their courage? I'd like to think so ...

ROS BAYLEY is a freelance educational consultant and trainer specialising in personal, social and emotional development, literacy and creativity. She also works as a storyteller and a writer. She has written a wide range of resource materials for teachers and still enjoys working in the classroom. *Correspondence:* Ros Bayley, Baden House, 32 Westbourne Road, Walsall WS4 2JD, United Kingdom (ros@rosbayley.com).

No Such Thing as Society?

TONY BRESLIN

Entering teaching with a degree in management sciences and a postgraduate certificate in education in integrated humanities might have been an unusual move at any time. The launch of the National Curriculum, the emergence of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the introduction of what rapidly became 'league' tables and the shifts towards localised management, differentiated (rather than 'comprehensive') schooling and parental choice entrenched existing status hierarchies and ensured that any entrant to the profession in September 1988 would face some interesting challenges.

But for those, such as myself, the Education Reform Act ensured that the challenges would be greater still. Why?

- I was joining a profession that was about to be asked to deliver a national curriculum in which neither of my entry qualifications figured – or were ever likely to.
- My entry qualifications did not, in any case, constitute ‘subjects’, never mind school subjects, in the understood sense of the term.
- The subject I had discovered through these qualifications, sociology, did not figure in the National Curriculum so there was no obvious career trajectory for this particular probationary teacher.

In some senses, for secondary teachers of mainstream subjects, the National Curriculum was the least important of the innovations to emerge from the Act. With notable exceptions, school curricula had long tended to the conservative. For the social curriculum, though, the effect was dramatic: the absence of the social sciences from the new National Curriculum had a series of consequences. Three points are especially pertinent:

- Many teachers of the social sciences moved into further education where, at the time, salaries and conditions of employment were comparatively more attractive than in the school sector.
- Many of those who remained in schools supplemented the teaching of a few periods of A-level or a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) option group in sociology, economics or politics with an involvement in the emergent post-Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) vocational curriculum.
- As the new curriculum settled into place, entering teaching without a National Curriculum subject at the heart of one’s qualifications became increasingly difficult. The supply line that had produced many a curriculum progressive and the occasional staff room radical shuddered to a halt and has only recently re-opened with the elevation of citizenship to National Curriculum status.

This withdrawal of the social science perspective is galling not least because sociological, political and economic analysis is precisely the scrutiny that the market-driven post-1988 years have both needed and lacked. While publishing examination results is still contentious, some good has flowed from the more recent emergence of ‘value-added’ analysis. Likewise, few would now argue against some kind of inspection system and some degree of curriculum consistency across schools.

However, the failure to understand the educational micro-economies of local communities is, at least in part, attributable to the absence of social sciences perspectives in our school communities since the 1988 Act.

Perhaps one of the unseen benefits of welcoming Citizenship into today’s National Curriculum is that these voices might re-emerge. If they do, we will be

better able to analyse the consequences of markets in education, of inter-school competition, of the contest between approaches that focus on attainment and inclusion respectively. And, equipped with something of what C. Wright Mills famously called 'the sociological imagination', we will be better empowered as a profession, as policy makers and as educators.

TONY BRESLIN is chief executive at the Citizenship Foundation and a former chair of the Association for the Teaching of the Social Sciences. A qualified Ofsted inspector and former GCSE chief examiner, he has worked as a local authority adviser and has held teaching and management posts in Haringey and Hertfordshire. *Correspondence:* Dr Tony Breslin, Citizenship Foundation, 63 Gee Street, London EC1V 3RS, United Kingdom (tony.breslin@citizenshipfoundation.org.uk).

The Teachers Who Couldn't Spell

SHEILA DAINTON

Linda's funeral was a couple of months ago. She was 56 and had finally lost her four-year struggle with cancer. Never one to make a fuss, she had asked for a low-key affair with everyone welcome back to her house.

And so we found ourselves together again. Twenty or so former Haringey primary teachers, all of a certain age, gathered in a house in Hackney, raising a glass to Linda and remembering our quiet, capable and unassuming colleague whose classroom was a haven of purposeful calm where children learnt well.

Strange that we found ourselves together after all that time: Liz, the erstwhile deputy head, now a park ranger on Hampstead Heath; Paula, the former maths adviser, is doing a bit of supply teaching here and there ('these days you don't teach, you just deliver stuff and tick boxes – you'd hate it' she said); Sylvia, the environmental studies enthusiast and guardian of the school fish tank, now managing a community gardening project in south London; Dave, the music teacher, who apologises for escaping to a prep school ('got fed up with the recorder group being relegated to the stock cupboard – at least they take music seriously in independent schools'); Andrew, the former head, who had just resigned as a SATs (Standard Assessment Tasks) marker after this year's fiasco; Renée, the much-loved classroom assistant, now running a successful B & B in Walton-on-the-Naze.

All but three of my former colleagues had left teaching. Some had taken early retirement, others escaped to pastures new. Why? Because teaching post-Education Reform Act had changed to such an extent that it was no longer the profession they had committed themselves to – and they were not prepared to become 'mere technicians' or to be professionally compromised by the Government's heavy-handed agenda.

Inevitably, conversations drifted towards remembering the times when ... Twilight sessions at the local teachers' centre exploring the versatility of yoghurt pots and the wonders of Fletcher maths; the morning in October 1985 when, not knowing quite what to expect, many of us made our way back to work in Tottenham following a night of horrific violence when a police officer had been stabbed to death on the Broadwater Farm estate; evenings and weekends spent planning a new topic or burning the midnight oil helping to draft this or that local authority curriculum document; a proliferation of courses on equalities and multiculturalism. And that memorable day when larger-than-life Nathan complained that Demetri had shouted 'half the F word' in the playground – 'he didn't say "off" Miss'.

Wary that nostalgia can play funny tricks, talk turned to the Government's plans for a teachers' MA. We were, after all, the generation of trendy teachers who knew nothing about grammar and who cared even less; the teachers who couldn't spell.

The odd thing is that of the 20 or so of us mingling in Linda's front room on that sunny but sad May afternoon, one had a doctorate, two had MPhils and 11 had MAs, six of which were gained in the days when local authorities were far-sighted enough to offer sabbaticals. And this was before 1988 and the Act to end all Acts.

Trendy teachers? It makes you think, doesn't it.

SHEILA DAINTON worked in primary and higher education before becoming education policy adviser for the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, a post she held for 17 years. *Correspondence:* Sheila Dainton, 3 Reservoir Cottages, Reservoir Lane, Petersfield GU32 2HY, United Kingdom (sheila.dainton@ntlworld.com).

The Best of Both Worlds?

JOHN DUNFORD

The Education Reform Act – referred to as GERBIL, the Great Education Reform Bill, as it went through Parliament – came to be known better as ERA or, for a large number of teachers, the Early Retirement Act, in subsequent years. Such was its effect on the working lives of teachers struggling with the huge pile of National Curriculum programmes of study spawned by the Act and the National Curriculum Council (NCC) charged with its introduction.

Then there was SEAC, the School Examinations and Assessment Council, under the Conservative peer, Lord Griffiths of Fforestfach. Later we came to know SEAC as the acronym for the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, which dealt with mad cow disease. The educational SEAC was

thought by many to be causing as much brain damage to children as the medical SEAC was preventing.

Yet the National Curriculum was necessary. The curriculum was too varied and there was no guarantee of what children would have studied. For children moving schools, it was particularly difficult.

But where a curriculum framework would have brought sufficient order into this situation, the level of detail prescribed in the programmes of study was mind-blowing for both teachers and pupils. And, without proper coordination by NCC, the sum total of the programmes took up about 120 per cent of the school week. Everywhere, curriculum quarts had to be squeezed into timetable pint pots.

Of even greater longer term damage, the over-prescription of the curriculum and the style of the national testing regime deprofessionalised teachers and they have not fully recovered 20 years later.

Although local management of schools (LMS) produced the curious division of employment responsibilities between local authorities and governing bodies that has since given so much honest income to lawyers, it brought a welcome relief to heads from the poor centralised service provided by most local authorities. The financial autonomy was welcome, but the management flexibility was what really counted. Again, the Government went too far, building on Keith Joseph's market-based policies and creating grant-maintained schools that caused divisions between local schools that have not, in some areas, been repaired to this day.

The invention of the 'standard number' was designed to prevent local authorities circumventing open enrolment by reducing a school's admission number, thus adding considerably to the competitive environment in which schools were being forced to work.

Now that grant-maintained schools have been replaced by foundation schools, city technology colleges by academies and almost all secondary schools have a specialism, the argument that a system based on 'diversity within' is better than one based on 'diversity between' has been lost irrevocably. Only now are we moving from the culture of competition under which ERA was introduced to a culture of collaboration under which schools are expected to work together. About time too.

It is instructive to compare the autonomy of schools in England, Wales and Scotland. The Celtic education systems are still very much driven by local authorities, and the amount of autonomy given to heads and governing bodies is much less than in England. For all its disadvantages though, I know of few English heads that want to move north or west across the border and lose their financial and management freedom. Now that they can exercise that within a framework of local partnerships, they may just have the best of both worlds. But it has been a long and costly journey for the system in England.

JOHN DUNFORD is general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders. *Correspondence:* Dr John Dunford, Association of School and

College Leaders, 130 Regent Road, Leicester LE1 7PG, United Kingdom
(john.dunford@ascl.org.uk).

Getting Things Right for Children

NANSI ELLIS

In 1988 I was halfway through my primary BEd. Two years of topic webs, active learning and optional science experiments (and visits to places of worship – I was a Religious Education [RE] specialist). Then, two years of ‘the pros and cons of a national curriculum’, confusion in school staff rooms, and questions of truth and belief. I believed that learning is part of good living – and should be for everyone.

I was accompanied to my first teaching job by *those* folders. My local education authority, wishing to corner the market in assessment tools, issued us with A3 grids of attainment targets and a requirement to mark whether pupils had mastered the topic, had understood some aspects if it or were just physically present. I questioned whether assessment was about more than pretty patterns.

From rural Wales to teaching Year 6 in London, just in time for the Key Stage 2 test boycotts. And still those folders. I was lucky to be living with a science teacher who could help me with those topics I hadn’t even covered at O-level. And lucky too to be an RE specialist, encouraging children to explore and question beliefs and how those impact on their lives. I was questioning whether entitlement should really mean that all children experience the same curriculum diet.

A spell as a supply teacher saw me working with practice tests, and joining in staff room discussions about marking. So it was perhaps an odd step to join the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), supporting the data collection process. We believed the tests could have a positive impact, supporting teachers to teach what matters. But I was questioning whether testing should have such a powerful influence on learning.

With the excitement and promise of a New Labour government, I moved to the ‘under fives’ team in the newly-formed Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). A welcome opportunity to work with knowledgeable and passionate experts who believe that children are powerful learners, and that assessment – really knowing the child – is at the heart of successful teaching. And I began to ask how these beliefs can continue to have influence in a centrally-controlled system.

And so to the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, a union whose members believe that getting things right for children and getting things right for teachers are two sides of the same coin; where what we do is underpinned by a belief in teachers as knowledgeable professionals who should be leading change to policy and practice.

Now I have a child of my own. My theories are challenged by an assertive, loving two-year-old whose every day is full of learning; who goes from playfully exploring who he is and what he can do in the world to expressing inarticulate and passionate frustration at his boundaries.

And I look at the education system he will join: where broad and balanced has become 'the basics' and political whim; where entitlement has become expectation, learning is reduced to progression, and assessment to measuring performance. And I question: are there enough passionate, knowledgeable experts left to make a difference for my child and for all our children? I have to believe that there are: there's so much more to be done.

NANSI ELLIS joined the Association of Teachers and Lecturers as primary education adviser. She is now ATL's head of education policy and research. She has taught in primary schools in England and Wales and managed the early years team at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. *Correspondence:* Nansi Ellis, Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 7 Northumberland Street, London WC2N 5RD, United Kingdom (nellis@atl.org.uk).

'Getting It Wrong' is Unthinkable

ANTONY LISHAK

If life has taught me anything it's that you never get it right first time. Sadly, I am starting to realise that you never get it right last time either. What is really important is the time and space to learn from enough mistakes to begin to approach a level of competence you can live with.

I reckon it took me about five years to develop from being a naïve idealist into a primary school teacher worthy of the name. By then I had blundered about sufficiently to feel ready to take on responsibilities beyond the classroom. Thanks to the support and generosity of experienced colleagues I had found my feet. But this was 1988 and the ground was about to get very slippery.

I've heard it said that Margaret Thatcher and Kenneth Baker cobbled together the bones of the 1988 Education Reform Act on the back of an envelope at a Tory Party Conference – I'd say it was more likely to have been a postage stamp. The Act heralded the end of experiential learning and the start of the fear-of-failure virus that has infected all levels of education ever since. From then on there has been less and less room for debate – teachers have spent 20 years being told what to teach and how to teach it.

It was a time of firsts for me. Emily, our first child, was born and *Coming Round*, my first novel, was published. I was now an author, a parent and a teacher – all areas of endeavour where getting it wrong was unavoidable. But what makes teaching different is that it has become practically impossible to admit to fallibility. The fact that there are now about 40 titles with my name on

the cover does not make the act of writing any easier. I expect to struggle with sentence and plot structure – there’s no other way of doing it. Similarly, the fact that I now have three children with my surname does not mean that parenting has become a smooth, predictable, conflict-free breeze. But our results-obsessed education system has created a world where it is now no longer important for you or your pupils to know what they are doing; what’s important is that you both *look* like you know what you’re doing.

I now travel the country as a writer and teacher encouraging children to see themselves as authors. I strive to get them to throw off the shackles of the literacy strategy, urging them to find their own voice on paper. Frequently, I am heartened by enthusiastic teachers who confess, after one of my sessions, to being as inspired to go and write as their pupils are. But I am haunted by the memory of a SATs-burdened Year 6 teacher who, when leading the creative writing activity I had set, told her class: ‘we have 45 minutes to complete this task – please ensure you only write down words you are sure you can spell’.

The legacy of 1988? A generation of unthinking children, for whom ‘getting it wrong’ is unthinkable.

ANTONY LISHAK is a children’s author and former primary teacher who visits schools performing his work, leading writing workshops and in-service education and training sessions, and generally inspiring children to see themselves as authors (www.antonylishak.com). *Correspondence:* Antony Lishak, 38 Wentworth Road, Barnet EN5 4NT, United Kingdom (antony@harpo.demon.co.uk).

Pendulums and Light Bulbs

MAGGIE McLEAN

Which civil servant was it, I wonder, who decided that English was yellow, maths blue, history purple, music pink, design and technology green and science orange? As for information and communications technology (ICT), interestingly, it barely featured back in 1988.

Remember the ring-binders that arrived in trolley-loads with their pretty colours and tightly-prescribed programmes of study? At the time we were bedazzled by the colours and bemused by the new-fangled language of ‘levels of attainment’ and ‘key stages’. And why did they start at Year 1, we asked ourselves? Whatever happened to Reception?

The abrupt end of the freedom to decide what to teach was accompanied by the new liberation of local management of schools. The Budget! No more wheedling phone calls to the local education authority premises officer in pursuit of a light bulb or a chair. Instead, scary amounts of money to allocate and prioritise and a vast increase in junk mail offering exciting ways to spend it.

Salaries, gas bills, grounds maintenance, rates (in and out), above-and-below-the-line-costs: all this to manage on my somewhat flaky maths O-level. It has been wonderful to have the financial freedom to improve the schools at which I have been head teacher: new toilets here, a performing arts studio there, new windows, new staff, choosing carpets and colours. And real changing rooms!

ERA has had other consequences. For example, we toyed with the idea of 'opting out' and going grant maintained, but felt we would be betraying our local authority. For primary teachers, the introduction of national tests at seven, 11 and 14 are remembered mostly for the first Key Stage 1 SATs in which seven year-olds were required to design hats in order to be assessed for their prowess in design and technology. That, and of course the soaking wet floors resulting from the now infamous 'floating and sinking' science test. Utter madness!

Has ERA raised standards? A national curriculum, in some form, was a necessity to ensure fairness and equality. Much has been good, but many basic building blocks of learning got lost and are only now making a comeback under the guise of 'deep learning' projects.

Back in 1988, information technology in primary schools often consisted of one solitary BBC computer on which the children played 'Granny's Garden'. Now that 'communication' has been added, ICT has opened up the world, but I'm not sure it has deepened children's learning. There is a danger that what appears to be learning is, in fact, entertainment and children are, too often, being occupied and not challenged to think things through for themselves.

Twenty years on and a staff discussion about backing paper for classroom displays prompted a suggestion that each board could be delineated with a border in the relevant national curriculum colour. Far too cluttered we thought, and settled for black.

As with all educational initiatives, the pendulum swings. Just as the 2003 Department for Education and Skills document, *Excellence and Enjoyment*, gave us back some curriculum freedom, 'managed service contracts' now feature strongly in Building Schools for the Future programmes. Watch out for that one. It'll be back to light bulbs before we know where we are.

MAGGIE McLEAN has taught in primary and secondary schools, and was deputy head of a hospital school. Over the past 20 years she has been head teacher of three primary schools. She is now in her portfolio phase of consultancy, theology and tending her vegetable plot. *Correspondence:* Maggie McClean, 10 Lower Hagg, Dean Brook Road, Thongsbridge, Holmfirth HD7 2UD, United Kingdom (maggie@haggend.co.uk).

All Change!

MELIAN MANSFIELD

Prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) I had been teaching for more than 20 years with breaks while I had my five children. The National Curriculum – a key feature of ERA – was a good idea. The basics were of course always taught but beyond that the curriculum varied from school to school and teacher to teacher, particularly in primary schools.

ERA provided an entitlement for every child: a broad and balanced curriculum covering all aspects of children's development, social, physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional, although many schools already did this and did it well. Even though there was now a continuum which every child would follow, teachers no longer had the same freedom to determine how and what they taught. For teachers, the enjoyment and professional work had been in discussing and determining exactly this. The national tests curbed teachers' creativity even further and encouraged teaching to the test. This was exacerbated by the introduction of the national literacy and numeracy strategies.

I attended the training which was provided and was shocked at how it was presented – as if teachers knew nothing and had nothing to offer. Little time was given for discussion, and the training was the same across the country. But by this time I had left teaching and enjoyed working with two schools and one local authority on behaviour issues, evaluating mentoring schemes, training governors and campaigning.

I have been in many schools and worked with different local authorities and always enjoy what I do, but am so glad I am no longer teaching in school. I often challenge governors and teachers to debate what is happening but many are frightened to do so. The pressure is now so great that one teacher I interviewed told me she could not discuss a serious issue a child had brought to her because she had to 'get on with the literacy hour'. Another was in a state of panic when he discovered that the computers were not working in the school so he did not know what to teach that day.

Performance management and the Office for Standards in Education have further constrained what teachers can do. There is little, if any, emphasis in initial training on child development, how children learn, working with parents or understanding and providing for children with special needs. In primary schools, up to 70 per cent of the time is spent on the core subjects; no longer is there a broad and balanced curriculum.

Changes over the last 20 years have been huge. The most recent and indeed the most concerning is the introduction of academies at enormous cost, and with no evidence that they will work. Is it right that we hand over our schools to unelected individuals, many with dubious backgrounds, who do not have to comply with education law?

The costs of endless change have also been great, with teachers leaving the profession through ill health or overwork and children suffering from stress, fearful of making mistakes and not able to work independently or creatively. At

the same time, increases in funding and the sheer dedication of teachers mean that many schools can still provide great experiences for children.

MELIAN MANSFIELD taught maths and modern foreign languages in secondary schools for over 20 years. She has also taught on an early years degree course. She is Chair of the Campaign for State Education (CASE) and the Early Childhood Forum and is a governor trainer. *Correspondence:* Melian Mansfield, 57 Weston Park, London N8 9SY, United Kingdom (melian.mansfield@btinternet.com).

**A Testing Time:
a personal breach of the Official Secrets Act?**

COLIN RICHARDS

In 1987 I was working in Elizabeth House, then home to Her Majesty's Inspectorate and the Department of Education and Science, as HM Staff Inspector (Curriculum) – a grandiose sounding title for someone who was really the dogsbody working for a chief inspector who actually had to deal at first hand with ministers and their political advisers.

We got used to receiving urgent requests for advice as the Education Reform Bill was being drafted and as the daunting, wide-ranging consequences began to dawn on the civil servants with whom we worked. We gave what advice we could – based on our interpretation of the available inspection evidence. I suspect that very often we were thought to be unnecessarily obstructive – providing inconvenient inspection evidence which, in the eyes of civil servants, complicated, rather than simplified, matters.

One day, into my office came my worried chief inspector – he must have been worried because he came to see me rather than my being summoned to see him, as civil service protocol demanded. Professor Brian Griffiths, head of Mrs Thatcher's policy unit, had requested some very sensitive and urgent advice from HM Inspectorate. The Prime Minister was minded to introduce national pencil-and-paper testing and Brian Griffiths had been summoned to provide evidence of its effects. Hence his request to my chief inspector.

But how could we provide the necessary inspection evidence? HMI had some evidence of the effects of local education authority (LEA) testing and of testing carried out by individual schools but such testing was not on a national scale. Should we look abroad? No, that experience would not have been relevant. But what then, given that there had been no national testing in England this century?

This century ...? That gave me the chance for the most inspired piece of advice I ever offered. 'Wait', I said; 'leave it to me' ... and off I scurried to the deepest depths of Elizabeth House.

An hour or two later I came back triumphant – with some of the most cogent, beautifully written criticisms of the effects of a narrow national testing system. I can still recall some of the prose: ‘The idea of payment by results was just the idea to be caught up by the ordinary opinion of this country and to find favour with it. But the question is whether it really suits the interests of schools and of their instruction.’ Of the effects of payment by results the comment was that: ‘The mode of teaching in the schools has certainly fallen off in intelligence, spirit and inventiveness ... Scholars and teachers have their thoughts directed straight upon the examination, which will bring such important benefit to the school if it goes well, and such important loss if it goes ill.’

They were the reports of Matthew Arnold, HMI, written in the 1860s but with contemporary resonance over a hundred years later. We sent this carefully researched, beautifully expressed and wholly relevant inspection evidence to Brian Griffiths. I heard nothing thereafter about its reception. But some time later national testing *was* introduced and there was no Matthew Arnold at hand to document its deleterious effects in such a graphic, memorable way.

COLIN RICHARDS is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cumbria. He stayed on as an HMI in the Office for Standards in Education until 1996 when he left following a public disagreement with the Chief Inspector of the day whom he accused of ignoring inspection evidence when making his pronouncements. *Correspondence:* Colin Richards, 1 Bobbin Mill, Spark Bridge, Cumbria LA12 8BS, United Kingdom (colin@sparkbridge.freeserve.co.uk).

A Whole New Vocabulary

FLEUR YOUNG

The thing about significant reforms is that it is usually only in retrospect that most of us realise quite how significant they really were. Built on the twin pillars of increased central direction and consumer choice, for me, the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) was no exception.

Enactment came in the same year that one of my three children was born so, in all honesty, I paid only scant attention to its legislative passage and potential impact. It was later, when my eldest was about to start school, that I realised something quite radical had happened. Suddenly, the talk among the parents at the pre-school was of which primary would give our little geniuses the best chance of getting into the best secondary schools and then on to the best universities. I was dismayed. Now it seemed I had to go looking for a primary school in the same way as I looked for the best value on my groceries. Living in an urban area, I felt as overwhelmed by the range on offer as a friend had on her first visit to Sainsbury’s after several years in Africa.

But 'choice' had become the new buzz word and the rules of the market place applied to exercising it. Meanwhile, there was a whole new language to learn – all about the National Curriculum, key stages, levels of attainment, national assessment, 'SATS' and 'league tables'. Fortunately, I was befriended by a teacher who taught me the basic grammar, if not the full vocabulary.

With this twin-track approach, the 'good' schools would thrive and raise standards and the poor would improve or go to the wall. The Act also reduced the role of the local authority although, regrettably, not enough to enable national restructuring of the school year.

So, did the strategy work? Well, if you believe the media at GCSE and A-level results time you wouldn't think so; and even the Government has gone on record recently saying 638 schools 'have to do better, or else!'

As time went on, the National Curriculum was recognised as too restrictive, so added to it, piecemeal, came additional pupil entitlements (hours of culture, food, sport, etc.) But the new accountabilities ERA drew into the system were generally a force for good and standards have indeed risen during the last 20 years whatever the *Daily Mail* and its ilk like to report. Sadly, though, they have been over-used and over-extended.

There is far too much assessment and accountability in the system, applicable now even to part-time childminders who are overwhelmed by the bureaucracy involved – the wonderful childminder my children went to has given up. I have also been saddened to see real achievements made by schools in very challenging circumstances completely undermined by a clumsy Office for Standards in Education report or lazy government press release. The balance has tipped too far; accountability has become a straitjacket.

As for 'parental choice', I believe its major contribution has been to fragment local communities. In the small village on the borders of Cornwall and Devon where I now live, each morning I count six or seven different school uniforms headed off towards various cars and buses ... meanwhile the local primary school, within walking distance, declines.

FLEUR YOUNG worked for a number of years as an education policy officer in local government, several of them with the Independent Commission on the Organisation of the School Year trying to persuade local authorities to implement its recommendations. She now works with a charity in the non-formal education sector on the European Youth in Action programme. *Correspondence:* Fleur Young, Woodside Cottage, St Andrews Place, Cawsand, Torpoint PL10 1PD, United Kingdom (fleur.young@hotmail.co.uk).