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The Politics of Blocking Equality Reforms in Education: a study of organised interests in England, 1965-2010

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ABSTRACT This article investigates how vested interests, particularly the teacher unions, responded to the British Labour government's school reforms designed to increase educational equality. Two significant reforms introduced to this end were Circular 10/65 on comprehensive education and the Learning and Skills Act of 2000 on the City Academies. The circular was intended to put an end to the selective, tripartite school system, and the City Academies were new schools aimed specifically at improving educational standards for low-performing children in socially deprived areas. The teacher unions, particularly the National Union of Teachers (NUT), fought against these reforms. Their objection to the reforms is all the more perplexing considering the fact that the NUT has expressed staunch support for equalising the school system and providing special measures for poor children. The investigation, which utilises political science theories on organised interests in education, education policy research, and primary source materials amassed from the NUT archives, analyses why the teacher unions' objection contradicts their efforts to block educational inequality.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate how organised interests, particularly the teacher unions, respond to major changes that the British government seeks to bring about in education. Typically, education scholars pay attention to the teacher unions' opposition to Conservative governments' market-oriented reforms in education (Carter, 2004; Stevenson & Carter, 2009; Stevenson, 2013, 2015; Stevenson & Mercer, 2015). The teacher unions, especially the largest union, the National Union for Teachers (NUT), have strongly objected to the Conservatives' accountability and choice reforms introduced since 1979. Accountability drew attention to teacher performance, provided meticulous

evaluations, generated pressure for improvement, linked pay to performance, and removed low-performing teachers from the classrooms – all of which, to the unions, represented threatening departures from the traditional system in which performance was never seriously evaluated and jobs were secure. School choice and competition were perhaps even more threatening to the unions. Parents were allowed to reject the schools controlled by the local authority in favour of the growing number of new options. Consequently, the local authority schools lost children and funding, and union members lost jobs. As a result of these reforms, teacher unions organised strikes, protests, lawsuits, delay tactics and other forms of disruption.

It is perhaps unsurprising that scholars focus on market-oriented reforms, since they address the most fervent conflicts between government and the teacher unions in recent history. However, this one-sided focus overlooks the fact that the teacher unions also attempted to oppose reforms introduced by the Labour Party. No scholarly literature has cast light on this fact. The issue – which this article seeks to investigate – is that the teacher unions, spearheaded by the NUT, fought some of the greatest efforts by Labour to increase equality in the British school system. Arguably, the two most significant reforms enacted to this end were the Circular 10/65 on comprehensive education and the Learning and Skills Act of 2000, which introduced the City Academies. The circular was intended to put an end to the selective, tripartite school system, and the City Academies (changed to Academies in 2002) were new schools aimed specifically at improving low-performing children's educational standards in socially deprived areas. Together, these two reforms intended to integrate the divided school system into a single structure which included (nearly) all children, especially low-achieving children from poor areas, in order to promote educational equality (Power & Whitty, 1999; McCulloch, 2016).

Why did the teacher unions fight against these reforms designed to raise equality within the English school system? Their objection to the reforms is all the more perplexing considering the fact that the NUT has expressed staunch support for equalising the school system and providing special measures for poor kids (see www.teacher.org). The NUT – although independent from political parties – has a relatively strong and long-standing left-wing bloc of activists and leaders, and is the most militant in orientation of all the teaching unions (Seifert, 1987; Redman & Snape, 2006). It seeks alliances with left-leaning trade unions (e.g. Trade Union Congress [TUC]), interest organisations (e.g. Anti-Academy Alliance) and Labour politicians in influencing education reform.

The argument is that Labour's reforms – just like the Conservatives' accountability reforms described above – contained threats to the unions' self-interests. The unions protect themselves when faced with perceived threatening reforms by any governing party that seeks to introduce them. Teacher unions are rooted in educational institutions, benefit from them and therefore have strong incentives to oppose change in order to protect their interests. Labour's reforms aimed at enhancing educational equality serve as illustrative examples to

substantiate this argument. Probing into the teacher unions' fight against these reforms, while they officially claimed to support equality, helps us to better understand how teacher unions in general behave in relation to public policy.

Research on organised interests in education in England is almost non-existent. Even though the importance of organised interests is widely acknowledged in British politics today, scholarly literature on education policy generally reserves scant space for teacher unions (and other educational interests). Whereas the previous generation of political scientists and education policy analysts agreed that groups offered an important lens through which to view the workings of a nation's political system (Manzer, 1970; Coates, 1972; Salter & Tapper, 1981; Lawn, 1985), scholars today are much more likely to see the role of organised interests as marginal in the education policy domain. One exception to this is Howard Stevenson (2007, 2013, 2015; Stevenson & Carter, 2009, Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015; Stevenson & Mercer, 2015), who pays specific attention to the teacher unions in England. Being a former union activist, Stevenson tends to view teacher unions as 'social movements' that make 'progressive' change in education, and that promote 'social partnership' between government and the teacher unions as an ideal model of governance. This literature tends to be biased towards teacher unions and encourages teachers to become union activists. Scholars have not taken it upon themselves to study the teacher unions from the standpoint of political power, even though the unions remain a powerful force in education politics.

This article analyses the teacher unions, especially the NUT, in their attempts to block education equality reforms – namely, the comprehensive schools and the City Academies. The investigation, which utilises political science theories on organised interests in education, education policy research, and primary source materials amassed from the NUT archives, addresses how the teacher unions responded to policies aimed at promoting educational equality during the Labour governments of 1964-1970, 1974-1976 and 1997-2010. Furthermore, previous research is evaluated in light of the new findings presented in this article, and directions for future research are discussed.

The Theory of Vested Interests in Education

All organised groups have *vested* interests. And they pursue these through various strategies and tactics to impact policy outcomes. The interests are accrued by the institutions that the organised groups represent and therefore vary, but the groups are similar in that they seek to advance and protect these. When interest groups have a stake in a policy that will greatly affect them, they will behave in a way that will either support or defy this for the sake of their special interests. Organised interests therefore have strong incentives to get involved in politics to expand and protect interests related to 'their' institutions. What is distinctive about organised interests is that they arise from the very institutions they seek to benefit from, and thus, in their interest, either pursue institutional change if this is deemed to be highly beneficial (and if it involves

limited risks) or oppose reforms which are perceived to contain threats to their interests. In the politics that surround governmental institutions, vested interests are likely to be key players. If the institutions are of any size and consequence, the interest groups associated with them are likely to have valuable stakes in those institutions and to invest heavily in the requisites of political power (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Moe, 2015).

This applies across the board to education systems. They, too, automatically generate vested interests. As employees of education systems, they have strong incentives to get organised, mobilise resources and exercise power in the politics of education in order to protect and advance their job-related interests. The teacher unions are the result (Moe, 2011, 2015). Teacher unions employ a range of strategies and tactics to benefit from and protect against government reforms, such as pressuring for new agendas and spending, and thus for an expansion of 'their' institutions. But, especially in an era of intense reform, it may also mean – and almost always does mean – opposing reforms that threaten 'their' institutions and benefits. The teacher unions push their agendas through various alliances and channels, both formally and informally, to Parliament and government, political parties, the education departments, local governments, schools and parent groups, etc. In addition, they organise strikes, protests, petitions and large-scale campaigns to influence public opinion and set agendas. (For an extended review of teacher unions' interests and power, see Moe & Wiborg, 2017.)

Teacher unions are not the only vested interest important to this study. There is also the local authority lobby which adds its own set of special interests and agendas to the reform process. Like the teacher unions, the local authorities also seek to secure jobs, income, power and so on, but most notably they pursue autonomy. The freer they are from the constraints of central government, the more they can exercise control and allocate resources as they see fit. Also, the local authorities must please a constituency of voters and respond to pressures that may include demands for effective school reforms.

By moving from the theory on vested interests in education to the concrete empirics, we will analyse how the teacher unions have used their power to oppose reformist efforts to bring about change in education in the form of enhancing educational equality in the British school system.

The Teacher Unions' Campaign to Block Comprehensive Education

The Labour Party, in government from 1964 to 1970, initiated a reform of the school system which would end selection at the age of 11 and create a comprehensive system of education for nearly all children regardless of socio-economic background.[1] The Department of Education was instructed to flesh out Labour's policy, and on 12 July 1965 it issued the 11-page long Circular 10/65. The circular requested local education authorities to submit to the Secretary of State for Education, Tony Crosland, plans for a reorganisation of

the selective secondary school system along comprehensive lines. It outlined six possible schemes and authorities were given a year to submit their plans (McCulloch, 2016).

The so-called iron triangle, or 'social partnership', between the Department of Education, local authorities and the teacher unions was an ideology of cooperation which dominated at the time (Pattison, 1980; Barber, 1992). The director of the Department of Education, Michael Steward – a former teacher – collaborated closely with the local authority associations. as he did with the teacher unions.[2] An important means for these organised interests to influence the department was through the elaborate system of committees and advisory councils which formed the education sub-government. This gave interests a strong platform from which to exercise their power. The basic lines of policy for comprehensive education were worked out early on in Steward's period of office (McCulloch, 2016, p. 229), but organised interests became quickly involved to help flesh it out. The draft circular was put forward to a range of teacher unions, local authority associations and other educational interests in the early months of 1965.

The local authority associations were granted a strong negotiation position due to the secretary of the local government group, the Association of Education Committees, Sir William Alexander, who had considerable influence within the department (Pattison, 1980, p. 70). The autonomy of the local authorities in education had already been secured by the government's decision not to bring in compulsory legislation on comprehensive education. The government reasoned that it would not make decisions that conflicted with the 'spirit that informs the existing partnership' [3] (Dean, 1998, p. 84; McCulloch, 2016, p. 225). This gave the local authorities great influence in determining the extent of their autonomy in implementing the circular. They demanded that the circular should 'request' not 'require' local authorities to reform secondary education along comprehensive lines. Moreover, the lobby desired several models of reorganisation to choose from in order to better 'fit' different local circumstances. These demands were accepted by the department and included in the circular. The circular thus allowed the local authorities to decide, almost entirely on their own, how they wished to integrate their school systems (Dean, 1998, pp. 83-84).[4]

The teacher unions, whose teachers had adapted to their role within the tripartite school system, rejected the circular's plan for comprehensive education. Their interests were tied to 'their' school type, whether it be grammar schools, secondary modern schools or technical schools, since they had extracted benefits from these in the form of salaries, career prospects, redeployment and so on. A comprehensive school system in which 'their' school type became integrated would risk the abolishment of privileges secured over many years of collective bargaining.[5] The Joint Four Secondary Associations (representing the grammar schools) thus put forward strong reservations concerning comprehensive education. Their members were often at the forefront of local campaigns against proposals to reorganise secondary education.[6] 'A

great deal of educational harm could be done', warned E.R. Taylor, the president of one of the Joint Four, the Headmasters' Association, 'if teachers were expected to abandon their devotion to a *particular type of school, or a particular type of pupil*' (Taylor, 1965; my italics).

The NUT, which received more attention from the department than the other unions due to its greater size, did not approve the circular's plan either (Manzer, 1970; Coates, 1972; Dean, 1998, p. 82). The uncommitted position the NUT took on the reorganisation was caused by the circular's perceived threats to its institutional benefits, which in turn reflected the competitive nature of British teacher unionism. The NUT had become increasingly successful in poaching members from the secondary modern schools. These members, who in 1960 accounted for a quarter of the total NUT membership, wanted to maintain their 'own' schools, arguing that it was only a matter of time before they would reach parity with the grammar schools and the technical schools in terms of esteem. Moreover, the small but disproportionately influential grammar school membership (6 per cent of members) campaigned for the preservation of grammar schools (Coates, 1972, p. 3). The NUT opposed the prospect of a uniform system, and therefore argued in favour of maintaining the existing divided system. Much still needed to be done in order to implement the 1944 Act, it claimed.

Upon the publication of the circular, the NUT demanded money for the reorganisation and recognition of teachers' rights. The editorial in the NUT's members' magazine, *The School Master*, entitled 'Now We Need the Money' (16 July 1965), raised the 'gigantic question-mark [that] hovers over the entire circular ... to ... provide money for the job'. The NUT demanded consultation, stability and comprehensive school experiments rather than a national roll-out of the circular scheme.[7] In other words, the NUT opposed a change in the status quo and demanded that, if change was inevitable, it must be delayed by carrying out local experiments. The NUT's fingerprint was on section 29 of the circular, which stipulated that local authorities must protect the pay and status of teachers affected by reorganisation.

The NUT tentatively endorsed comprehensive education when presenting its evidence on primary schools to the Central Advisory Committee for Education, and this was subsequently confirmed by the resolution of the Annual Conference in 1964. This apparent change of heart was partly caused by MP Crosland – a former teacher long associated with the NUT – who in his address on the circular to the conference appeared to have persuaded the union of the importance of 'collaborative enterprise' in politics (Manzer, 1970, p. 20). More importantly, the implementation of the circular appeared to go ahead even under a Conservative government. The Conservative spokesman for education, Sir Edward Boyle [8], a supporter of comprehensive schooling, stated at a Conservative party conference that he would not withdraw the circular in the event that he became Secretary of State for Education (Manzer, 1970, p. 20; Crook 1993, p. 54; McCulloch, 2016, p. 243). The ostensible absence of a party conflict meant that reorganisation of secondary education could no longer

be stopped in its tracks and would likely go ahead regardless of which party was in power. The NUT's response to this situation was to: (1) seek benefits from the impending reorganisation; and (2) delay its development. To these ends, the union sought control over the implementation process by demanding full consultation with local union branches over the reorganisation, and by further demanding that sufficient resources be given to the new schools.

The Slow Development of Comprehensive Education

The power of organised interests in influencing the circular resulted in a diluted compromise. The different patterns of comprehensive organisation laid down in the circular gave organised interests the freedom to phase out selective education without much disruption to the old system. Local education authorities – depending on political leadership and union penetration – either refused to convert their schools into comprehensives, or did so in piecemeal fashion, relying on persistent delaying tactics to hold up change. The teacher unions' powerbase was concentrated at a local level, given that local authorities have been responsible for the planning and provision of education since 1944. A common tactic was to re-label the old secondary modern schools as 'lower schools' and grammar schools as 'upper schools' and to turn junior schools or small secondary schools into 'middle schools' to feed directly into the upper schools. While this model phased out selective education to satisfy government policy, it ensured that the schools were kept largely intact so as to minimise interference with the old system (Crook, 2013, p. 370).

Once the development of comprehensive schools as single institutions took off, it resulted in a replication of the old, divided system. For example, grammar school procedures relating to teaching, overall curricula, and exams were transferred wholesale and without serious modifications into comprehensive schools (Simon, 1992; Benn & Chitty, 1997). As such, the structures of the divided system, including teacher categories and salary differentials, were recreated within the comprehensive schools, thereby fortifying the lines of defence of the existing structures, and so too of the status quo. Over the years, these divisive structures were to soften up in many schools, but a nationwide system of comprehensive schools was never developed in England, precisely because of the deeply entrenched vested interests that curbed or slowed down reorganisation.

Scholarship on Circular 10/65

The relatively large amount of scholarly research on Circular 10/65 (Benn & Simon, 1972; Rubinstein & Simon, 1973; Simon 1992; Crook, 1993, 2002, 2013; Benn & Chitty, 1997; Chitty, 2014; McCulloch, 2016) focuses primarily on the Labour government's policy on comprehensive education and its subsequent implementation. The literature largely ignores the politics within the Department of Education where the development of the circular actually took

place. The department is crucial to focus on because it was in this bureaucracy that policy became 'real' and organised interests – in this case, the local authority lobby and the teacher unions, of which the NUT was the most significant – determined what got achieved. Although some of the literature on the governance of education is clearly aware of the importance of interests (especially Pattison, 1980; McCulloch, 2016), it places a heavy emphasis on central government, leaving out government administration at both departmental and local authority levels. Pattison (1980) had already complained about this in 1980, but subsequent literature has not followed through on his insight. The consequence of this sole focus on government is that the slow and uneven development of comprehensive education gets ascribed to this one factor alone. Notable scholars (Crook, 1993, 2013; Chitty, 2014; Ball, 2008) claim that the Labour government lacked the commitment to end selection at eleven plus, evidenced by the fact that it only issued a circular, not an act, which requested, rather than required, local education authorities to reorganise secondary education. In the words of Ball (2008, p. 71), 'there was no national planning for the replacement of grammar and secondary modern schools with comprehensives, no set of articulated principles and little evidence of political will for thoroughgoing change'.

This 'government failure' explanation is problematic. The Labour government was acting within the confines of the administrative style of British government at the time. The government refrained from centralising control and prescribing educational content in detail, and entrusted the implementation of policies to nominated bodies (in this case, the local education authorities [LEAs]). Secondary education, for instance, was not under the direct control of the department. The LEAs, in conjunction with teacher union branches, could develop educational provision that suited their local circumstances within broadly defined parameters. In the words of McCulloch (2016, p. 236), 'the autonomy of the LEAs and teachers was widely viewed as being sacrosanct, to the extent that it was generally agreed that reforms should not be imposed on them'. Such devolution limited the degree of control that central government could assume even when Labour won the 1966 general election, giving the party a vast majority (Coates, 1972, p. 7; Budge, 2008, p. 45). The implementation process was fractured with opposition even in Labour-controlled LEAs that had endorsed comprehensive education. The slow and patchy development of comprehensive education in England lies in the capacity of organised interests to hinder or shape its progress in line with their own interests.

A strand within the above-mentioned scholarship claims that the NUT was an active force in promoting comprehensive education. Stevenson (2015, p. 605; Stevenson & Carter, 2009, p. 317), who is particularly responsible for propagating this stance, claims that the NUT is 'politically progressive' and that it 'took a lead in the campaigns for comprehensive education'. This study has demonstrated that such a view can be questioned. For instance, not a single editorial in the NUT's member magazine, *The School Master* (which ran from

1960 to 1970), was devoted to the issue of comprehensive education until the launch of the circular in July 1965, when the union demanded money.[9] However, it is true that the NUT fought determinedly in defence of comprehensive education *after* its development became inevitable and once it was well under way (Barber, 1992, p. 39; Simon, 1992, p. 285). The NUT simply changed its tune and tactics in response to changes that it perceived in education. The support for comprehensive education became evident especially after 1979 when the Conservative government sought to bring about new changes in education. Having now had more than ten years to strengthen its interests (through collective bargaining in the Burnham committee) in relation to the increasingly institutionalised comprehensive schools [10], the NUT was now at the forefront of protecting them.

New Labour, City Academies and Union Resistance (1997-2010)

In 1997 the Labour Party returned to government after 18 years of Conservative rule. Tony Blair expressed commitment to the target of increasing equality in education, focusing on reducing child poverty through a new educational programme: the City Academies [11] (Power & Whitty, 1999). The aim of the City Academies was to offer a radical fresh start for students in areas of high deprivation and historically low achievement (Chitty, 2014). The policy was explicitly developed as a measure to narrow the attainment gap between schools with advantaged and disadvantaged intakes. Labour planned 200 (a figure later raised to 400) City Academies, backed by generous capital investments. The schools were allowed to opt out of local authority control and receive financial support from private sponsors in addition to funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Unlike the previous Labour government, which had involved organised interests in policy-making, New Labour bypassed organised interests in its development of the City Academy reform. The position of organised interests in the political system had radically changed. The previous Conservative governments during the period of 1979 to 1997 had brought an end to the corporate style of policy-making, including the 'social partnership model' in education, and a new policy style was developed in its place. Consultation with interest groups continued under Margaret Thatcher (despite antipathy towards interest politics), but the Conservatives systematically changed the underlying basis of the consultations. Instead of consulting vested interests early on during the policy-making process as practised previously under Labour, the consultations now often took place only after extensive policy preparation. By the mid-1980s, the balance of power had shifted decidedly in favour of the government in terms of setting agendas and initiating policy change (Richardson, 2000). The local authority lobby and organised interests in education lost control of policy-framing and agenda-setting and now had to *react* to agendas set by others.

Since becoming leader of the Labour party in 1994, Tony Blair sought to weaken the links with the unions. He undermined relations with the trade unions, particularly by withdrawing support for nationalisation and lowering the unions' block vote at the annual conference from 70 per cent to 50 per cent.[12] Tony Blair told the TUC conference that the unions would have no more influence than employers over the Labour government's policy agenda, promising to 'govern for the whole nation, not vested interests within it' (quoted in Glyn & Wood, 2001, p. 61). This view was extended to the teacher unions, which were excluded from taking part in policy-making during the Labour government of 1997-2010.

Policy decisions under the Labour government thus remained central, as it neither made a return to a decentralised education system nor reinstituted the 'social partnership model'. Furthermore, the DfES did not involve the teacher unions in its policy work. However, Labour did, on occasion, seek consultation with the teaching profession, but this was through non-union bodies such as the Teacher Training Agency (later the Training and Development Agency for Schools) and the newly formed National College for School Leadership and General Teaching Council (Stevenson & Carter, 2009, p. 321). Still, this was a far cry from the pre-Thatcherite practice of putting reform proposals through a process of consultation with vested interests.

In contrast to the Conservatives, the Labour government did not seek to undermine the local authorities, but instead developed greater cohesion between central and local government in policy implementation. The government required LEAs to set targets for their own improvement and to draw up education plans with guidance from the newly established Standards and Effectiveness Unit in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), which set national strategies for literacy and numeracy. On the basis of these strategies, schools were in turn required to set targets for raising standards. The levers of monitoring and target-setting allowed the government to manage the strategies more closely than had been possible under earlier government initiatives. During the Labour government, the DfEE intervened directly with the heads in the LEAs and in the management of schools in order to improve standards and eliminate poor teaching. This interventionist approach was combined with an effort to involve business more directly in education activities in their localities, mainly through the newly created City Academies in areas of poor educational performance.

The NUT's Fight against City Academies Seeking Social Mobility for Their Kids

The NUT rejected the City Academies outright. The academies, the NUT proclaimed, 'have a damaging impact on children, teachers and the whole community' (www.teachers.org.uk). The general secretary of the NUT, Steve Sinnott, stated: 'I have absolutely no doubt that if the Government does press ahead with this programme, we will launch a strong campaign in opposition to

the academy programme' (quoted in Garner, 2004). So it did. In its campaign, the NUT diverted the issue of equality for poor children into the issue of money. It adopted a slippery-slope argument that the academies would open the door for privatisation of highly valuable state assets. The NUT said that the 'Academies on the scale proposed by the government have the effect of transferring billions of pounds worth of publicly funded assets in the form of building and land into the hands of private sponsors' (www.teachers.org.uk).

The sponsors were thus subject to intense criticism from the NUT for being unsuitable for providing education. The union cherry-picked examples of sponsors whom it deemed particularly inappropriate to run schools – for instance, car salesmen, evangelical Christians, manufacturers of sausages, and so on (www.teachers.org.uk). In its quest to fend off academies, the NUT lobbied local authorities, parent groups and other education interests. It lobbied sponsors who were planning to establish academies or principals at academies that already existed. It sought to build strong union representation within the academies, involving as many staff as possible.

While fighting against the establishment of academies or penetrating those it had failed to prevent, the NUT reiterated its campaign for the maintenance of the old comprehensive schools. Forging alliances with the TUC and the Anti-Academies Alliance, the NUT argued that comprehensive schools and new school types should remain or be put under local authority control (*The Teacher*, January/February 1998).

The crux of the matter is that public money is taken away from the maintained sector to a semi-privatised sector. The NUT, rooted in the public school system, fights to maintain the comprehensive schools and their public funding. Teacher unions perceived the City Academies as diverting public resources to private interests and thus as a threat to their job-related interests. Even when City Academies were proved to enhance educational equality, the NUT continued to oppose them. Curtis et al (2008) demonstrated that the privately sponsored inner-city academies have consistently taught a proportion of students eligible for free school meals that is between two and three times higher than the national average for non-academies (29 per cent for academies and 12.8 per cent for all other schools). This finding was never acknowledged by the NUT in its members' magazine, *The Teacher* (published between 1997 and 2010), which continued to focus on the funding aspect of the academies.

Research on New Labour's School Reforms

Policy research on New Labour's school reforms mainly discusses the extent to which New Labour, in its Third Way manifestation, was a continuation of the previous Conservative governments' policies (Chitty & Dunford, 1999; Power & Whitty, 1999; Glyn & Wood, 2001; West & Pennell, 2002; Reay, 2008; Ball & Exley, 2010). For instance, Diane Reay (2008, p. 639) concluded that 'beneath the rhetoric, Blair's legacy has been one of consolidating and re-enforcing [*sic*] previous Conservative policies'. Inevitably, this body of research

is focused on the issue of the marketisation of education rather than on the intention of the reforms to assist children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the New Labour reforms are studied as the product of diverse groups of politicians and policy-makers, who had mustered a wide alliance by moving towards the centre ground in politics. Collective capacity had thus been acquired to push through reforms based largely on previous governments' reform work. For example, Ball and Exley (2010) assume that policy change generally takes place only when the relevant 'policy network' agreed that it was necessary and when consensus existed on the direction of change. There has been no effort by these scholars to study and understand the organised interests that opposed New Labour and that regularly weakened, distorted or sidetracked change. Organised interests are not considered an analytical unit, and therefore little attention is paid to the force of their resistance and opposition, which ultimately hinders change in education. As demonstrated here, the teacher unions, despite having lost power at the central government level, remained strong players at the local level, pursuing agendas that often clashed with the Labour reformers' intentions.

Concluding Remarks

The comprehensive education and city academy reforms signified some of the greatest efforts instituted by Labour governments in tackling inequality in English education. This study has demonstrated that organised interests are important in understanding what was achieved through these reforms. Labours' initiative to introduce comprehensive education in the 1960s was opposed by the teacher unions, including the NUT, which held on to the former tripartite system. There was a relatively high degree of consensus surrounding the tripartite system because the teacher unions relied heavily on particular teacher groupings from each of these school types. The special interests of the unions were deeply rooted in the different school types. The consensus broke down due to government intervention, but comprehensive schools were extremely slow to develop precisely because the fortified vested interests within education were able to oppose, alter or delay the introduction of these new schools. The teacher unions had considerable power through the sub-government system, which operated the 'social partner' system. This system, which emerged in the interwar period and consolidated itself during the preparation of the 1944 Education Act, was in full operation, albeit with signs of crisis, until it finally collapsed in 1979. This allowed the teacher unions along with other interests, especially the local authority lobby, to shape Circular 10/65. The result was a diluted piece of legislation, which allowed the very same interests to build up their resistance during the implementation process.

It can thus be concluded that the initial resistance of the teacher unions to a national system of comprehensive schools was a key factor in the absence of a radical transformation. Once the comprehensive school reform became inevitable and was well under way, the NUT started to support it. The NUT's

special interests became increasingly attached to these new schools as they slowly progressed (and as the old school types disappeared). After 1979, when the Conservative government announced major changes to the education system, the NUT now fought strongly in favour of the comprehensive schools. When New Labour came to power in 1998 and subsequently announced the City Academy programme, the NUT disapproved of this initiative even after it was proved to increase educational equality. Whereas the teacher unions had previously been integrated into the political system, they were now outsider lobbyists, reacting to policies developed by government. The NUT became increasingly grounded in a conflict model of labour relations, based on what the former general secretary to the NUT, Christine Blower, refers to as a 'fundamentally antagonistic relationship' between teachers and the state (Redman & Snape, 2006; Stevenson, 2015, p. 621). The change in representation had reduced its power in the state bureaucracy, but it continued with enduring force to protect its interests through new strategies, especially at the local level. Forging alliances with campaigns and coalitions with left-leaning public sector unions and labour unions (e.g. the TUC), parent groups, etc., the NUT battled against City Academies in the inner cities. The NUT focused its campaign against academies on the funding aspect, which it viewed as creeping privatisation. The union objected to public funding being taken away from 'its' schools and injected into a new semi-privatised programme.

The NUT, representing large numbers of teachers [13], has vested interests in ensuring that 'its' institutions – the local authority-controlled comprehensive schools – continue to attract money, programmes and support. When unions have vested interests in a given institutional system, they will tend to see transformative change involving major alterations in public programmes as disruptive to the sources of their benefits. Real change threatens a future in which their benefits are reduced or eliminated or in which there is considerable uncertainty about what their benefits will be. Teacher unions will therefore tend to oppose efforts to bring about major reform, even when these are designed to increase educational equality. Teacher unions benefit from the status quo, and thus are disinclined to seek radical changes to the established order. They generally prefer to keep what they have rather than face the risk of change and of losing the guarantee of existing benefits (Moe & Wiborg, 2017).

The unions' interest is to secure public money to run schools controlled by local authorities, ensure job security, increase teacher employment (and remove non-qualified teachers), increase wages and benefits, reduce job-related uncertainties, and so on. These do not equate to the interests of children or to increased life chances. Indeed, the unions often come into dispute with these other interests although they support them in public campaigns. This conflict is of course not what the teacher unions intend, but it is inevitable because of the contradictory nature of these interests. The two education reforms of the modern era – comprehensive education and the City Academies – were grand attempts to transform the divided structure of the British education system along egalitarian lines. They were opposed by the teacher unions, whose own

interests took precedence over those of giving children the prospect of increased life chances as a result of a more equal school system.

Notes

[1] The education system, introduced with the 1944 Education Act, consisted of three school types, grammar schools, secondary modern schools and technical schools, to which pupils at the age of 11 were allocated on the basis of entry exams and intelligence tests. The structure that merged subsequently was in reality a bipartite system as the technical schools, focusing on vocational subjects, failed to take off. Less than 4 per cent of the secondary age group was enrolled in these (Chitty, 2014, p. 25).

[2] The latter situation was not appreciated by all in the Labour Party. Richard Crossman, who was the Labour spokesman on education before the 1964 general education, feared that Steward and his junior minister, Reg Prentice, were likely to form too close a relationship with the NUT leadership and fall into the trap of allowing entrenched interests to dictate policy (Dean, 1998, p. 68).

[3] Hence the circular was to offer non-statutory guidance rather than legal sanction.

[4] In terms of catchment areas, the local authority lobby also got what it wanted as the minister was reluctant to deal too strongly with catchment areas, fearing a backlash from the local authorities. The circular stated: 'The Secretary of State therefore urges authorities to ensure, when determining catchment areas, that schools are as socially and intellectually comprehensive as is practicable' (Dean, 1998, p. 87).

[5] In replying to the minister's announcement in 1951 that proposals involving exclusively comprehensive education would not be approved at the Ministry, the NUT announced it regretted that educational policy should be subject to party politics and pointed out that the pattern was already fixed in many cases one way or the other. It concluded that so much remained to be done to implement the 1944 Act that building on it should make good gaps in the system, not facilitate reorganisation.

[6] Comprehensive schools were established in different part of the country prior to the circular.

[7] The NUT stated that 'we have always stood for considerable and varied experimentation in the organisation of secondary education, and we are satisfied that the comprehensive school is one of the forms that such experimentation might take' (Manzer, 1970, p. 20). During experimentation with comprehensive schools, the NUT demanded that unions should be involved. The NUT demanded that the 'experiment' should be conducted under reasonable conditions, and in particular that local teachers' associations should be adequately consulted prior to reorganisation, that local teachers should be fully protected, and that the experimentation should not be deemed irrelevant by a failure to provide sufficient resources to it.

[8] Boyle was Minister of Education (1962-1964) under the previous Conservative government.

[9] For the period from 1960 to 1965.

[10] In 1981, after 16 years of restructuring, 83 per cent of children were educated in a comprehensive school.

[11] In addition to City Academies, New Labour also introduced Education Action Zones and abolished the Assisted Places Scheme as well as tightening the School Admissions Code to enhance equality.

[12] In April 1995 the party leadership succeeded in ditching Labour's symbolic commitment to nationalisation after voting in favour of Clause 4 from the party's constitution.

[13] In 2014, the NUT had 378,208 members.

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