

**A 'pivotal moment'? Education policy in England,
2005**

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Equity and excellence

At the 2005 Labour Party conference, Tony Blair famously declared that:

Every time I’ve ever introduced a reform in Government, I wish in retrospect I had gone further.

(Blair, 2005d)

Political commentators seem to have agreed that, in his third and final term, Blair wants to make the sorts of fundamental and irreversible changes that he believes Margaret Thatcher was able to make, and that the public services are his chosen arena for his reforming zeal. It is no surprise, therefore, that education has been a target for further reform, nor that, commenting on this autumn’s schools white paper, which embodies many of his radical ambitions, Blair described its introduction as a ‘pivotal moment for education’ (Blair, 2005b).

The analogy with the Thatcher governments is illuminating. By common account, the Thatcher reform agenda took time to gather pace because of the Prime Minister’s initially weak political position. It was, for instance, not until 1988 that any major reform of the education service took place. However, the first Blair government hit the ground running, in terms of education at least, with a major white paper appearing shortly after the 1997 election and a relentless succession of white and green papers, guidance documents and centrally-driven initiatives ever since.

By 2005, the direction of New Labour education policy was abundantly clear. Drawing on a human capital theory of economic development, the principal role of education was seen as being to develop the skill and knowledge levels of the workforce so that the country could compete in globalised economic markets (Wolf, 2002). This demanded the highest possible levels of educational achievement, and these were to be obtained by pursuing policies previously associated with Conservative administrations – the pursuit of ‘standards’, the reform of educational structures and practices in the interests of ‘effectiveness’, the continuing marketisation of the education system and the creation of a culture of performativity (Phillips & Harper-Jones, 2003: 126). At the same time – and perhaps in distinction to previous administrations – education was also expected to play its part in tackling ‘social exclusion’ (Blair, 1997, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) by ensuring, amongst other things, that everyone - and not just the highest attainers or those from the most advantaged backgrounds - was equipped to compete in an ever-more-demanding labour market. Crucially, neo-liberal policies for excellence and more socially-democratic policies for equity were not seen as standing in contradiction to one another, but as constituting two sides of the same coin (Brehony & Deem, 2003). Rather than making fundamental choices between these two agendas, therefore, the trick for New Labour governments was to find specific policy initiatives which would enable these two agendas to be pursued simultaneously. What were needed, therefore, were specific policy initiatives which could pursue both of these agendas simultaneously.

Given the well-established nature of this approach and the length of time New Labour had already spent reforming the education system, it is tempting to ask what could be left to do in 2005. Why should this year more than any other constitute a ‘pivotal moment’ – and, if it did, why had previous reforms failed to achieve the desired results? Blair’s answer to these questions seems to be that his government’s previous reforms had simply been too timid – in which case, 2005 constitutes a ‘pivotal moment’ calling for rededicated purpose and renewed effort. However, we want to suggest that some more fundamental processes are at work here and that some more fundamental tensions in New Labour education policy have begun to make themselves felt. In this sense, 2005 may constitute a ‘pivotal moment’ of quite a different kind.

Learning what works – and finding what doesn’t

Urging the benefits of the schools white paper, Tony Blair declared that:

... successive reforms since the War have not always delivered all that they aimed to deliver.

What is different this time is that we have learned what works.

(Blair, 2005c)

The notion of ‘what works’ is, of course, central to New Labour policy making, not least in education (Brehony, 2005). It stems from the conviction that practical and politically-achievable policy solutions can be found to what have hitherto been regarded as intractable social problems. In education, one of the most fundamental of these problems is an association between social background and educational achievement that has proved stubbornly resistant to all previous policy interventions. It is, of course, vital both to the human capital model of economic development and to

the attempt to overcome social exclusion that this link be broken. Education has to provide a means whereby people from disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve highly and make themselves competitive in the labour market, thus breaking the cycle of disadvantage whilst providing the economy with skilled labour. It is equally vital for the economic project that advances for people living in disadvantage should not be bought at the expense of their more advantaged peers and, indeed, that they should be part of an overall effort to raise educational achievement. As the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Ruth Kelly, speaking in July of this year, put it:

That is why I see my department as the department for life chances. And that is why I see it as my job to boost social mobility...Our task is to make sure that for everyone involved in learning excellence and equity become and remain reality.

(Kelly, 2005)

However, the commitment to ‘what works’ requires more than warm words about the principles on which policy should be based. It also demands evidence about what is and is not working – evidence which new Labour governments have secured in education by setting up increasingly sophisticated monitoring systems at school, local authority and national level. Unfortunately, by 2005, the evidence from these systems was beginning to suggest that the task of squaring this equity-and-excellence circle was proving more difficult than the Government might previously have imagined. Kelly was speaking in response to evidence that social mobility in England might if anything be declining rather than increasing (Blanden et al., 2005). Worse still, her own Department’s review of performance data suggested that the link between social

background and educational achievement was proving almost as stubbornly resistant to New Labour policy as to previous policy interventions (DfES, 2005c). Specifically, although schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were making some progress, it was less evident that they were closing the gap on their more advantaged counterparts, nor that it was the most disadvantaged pupils in those schools who were producing the improved results.

Nor was this the only troubling evidence about the limited effects of Government policy to appear in 2005. One of the great achievements of the first New Labour Government was the apparently rapid rise in primary pupils' attainments. However, this rise was treated with some scepticism by both researchers and secondary school teachers, who suspected that it was accounted for by a good deal of instrumental 'teaching to the test' and/or by some more-or-less dubious features of the national testing system. In particular, a paper submitted to the Statistics Commission by Peter Tymms (2004) argued that the rise was largely illusory and called for the Commission to examine the facts of the matter. In the event, the Commission concluded that:

... it has been established that (a) the improvement in KS2 test scores between 1995 and 2000 substantially overstates the improvement in standards in English primary schools over that period, but (b) there was nevertheless some rise in standards.

(Statistics Commission, 2005: par. 9)

A similar issue arose in respect of secondary school performance. The gains at secondary level were always more modest than those in the primary phase, but by 2005 it was obvious that even these gains had been made at least in part by schools'

‘playing the examination game’. In addition to the high levels of coaching and mentoring which had become commonplace for pupils on the borderline of target levels of achievement (typically, five A*-C grades at GCSE), many schools who felt that their performance levels made them vulnerable had apparently sought out what they believed to be easier ways for pupils to meet targets. In particular, they had directed their pupils towards GNVQ awards which tended to be more vocationally-oriented and applied than traditional GCSEs and which in any case counted as the equivalent of four GCSEs. It thus became possible for pupils to hit the five GCSE target by taking one GNVQ and one GCSE (perhaps in a ‘non-academic’ subject), or, indeed, to amass a large number of GCSE equivalent passes by taking a much smaller number of GNVQs. These practices, of course, meant that pupils might be less likely to take GCSEs in the core subjects of English and Maths, with the implication that the progress (however dubious) made by the introduction of literacy and numeracy strategies in the primary phase was not being built on by secondary schools. Indeed, although 55.7% of pupils were gaining five A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent, only 41% included English and Maths amongst their achievements. Likewise, although the five GCSE equivalent measure showed many schools to be ‘improving’ since 2001, only 17% of these were still shown to have improved when performance was measured in terms of the five GCSE measure *including* English and Maths. (TES 21.10.05)

There were similar problems in other areas of performance. Despite successive initiatives, truancy figures showed a record rise of nearly 10% to their highest recorded level. (Garner, R, 22.09.05, Independent, *A tough nut to crack – Why Blair is failing at his main subject*). There were similar issues in respect of admissions both to

schools and to higher education. The choice and diversity agenda inherited from previous Conservative governments but accelerated by New Labour meant that families could, in principle, exercise some degree of choice over the schools to which they sent their children, and thereby could make school provision contestible as a means of driving up overall quality. However, it became clear during the year that many families – some 70,000 in all - simply did not get their first choice schools. Although the problem was particularly acute in London, even outside of the capital only 85% of families were offered their first choice. (Baker, M. 21.10.05, TES, *Which is the fairest path of all?*)

At the same time, it was also increasingly clear that choice processes were creating local hierarchies of schools and that the apparent success of some schools depended on having a place in the hierarchy which enabled them to fill their places with higher-attaining pupils from more resourceful families. The Sutton Trust, for example, reported that only 3% of pupils in the secondary schools with the highest levels of performance at GCSE were eligible for free school meals (Sutton Trust, 2005). The further finding that the postcode neighbourhoods in which these schools were located had eligibility rates of around 12% confirmed the suspicions of many that forms of overt, covert or unwitting selection were being practised by schools that were in a position to do so. Likewise, there were indications that the apparent success of some academies was due not to their capacity to ‘benefit the poorest families in the poorest parts of Britain’, as the Prime Minister claimed, but to precisely the opposite of this. A report in *The Guardian* (Taylor, 2005) confirmed Blair’s claim that recruitment to city academies was buoyant. However, it suggested that two thirds of them were recruiting fewer - in some cases, far fewer - pupils who were entitled to free school

meals than had the 'failing' schools which they replaced. Given that city academies were proposed by Government as a way of revitalising schooling in the poorest areas of towns and cities, this finding raised the question of whether some of them at least were not simply drawing in pupils from other, less disadvantaged areas or retaining local families who might otherwise have gone to nearby schools with more favourable reputations.

In terms of university admissions, the widening participation agenda advanced vigorously by New Labour governments was enjoying mixed fortunes. To be sure, there was evidence that more students from poor family backgrounds were gaining places at prestigious universities (Sutton Trust, *State School Admissions to our Leading Universities. An update to the missing 3000*, March 2005). At the same time, however, the percentage of state school recruits to universities fell for the first time and the drop out rate amongst first year students increased (Garner, R. 22.09.05, Independent, *Education Education Education: a triple blow for the Government*). There were similar mixed results for other key planks of the government's strategy simultaneously to deliver equity and excellence. The evaluation of Sure Start, the family support programme aimed amongst other things at ensuring young children from disadvantaged backgrounds would be best placed to take advantage of their schooling, was asked to report interim findings. As yet, however, it was unable to find any evidence that the £3bn investment was producing anything but the most modest improvements in outcomes, and that these tended to be associated with the less disadvantaged amongst its intended beneficiaries (NESS, 2005).

The Government response

It is important not to over-state the negative nature of the feedback which Government received in 2005 on the impacts of its education policy. Much of that feedback – like the primary attainment analysis cited above – reported *some* progress for *some* parts of the education system on *some* indicators. To this extent, the evidence continued to suggest that incremental improvement was possible. Had the New Labour education project been less ambitious, then this incremental improvement might well have been cause for quiet satisfaction. However, squaring the circle of equity and excellence requires something more. Whatever else the evidence indicated, it did not suggest that New Labour policy was bringing about the sort of profound transformation that would be needed to break the established link between background and achievement. Clearly, something significantly different was called for. As the Prime Minister himself put it:

That is why I am so restless for change, not because I do not recognise the huge progress that we have made as a country in the last 8 years - I do - not because I want to pick another fight for the sake of it, I have enough of them already, but because whilst there remain schools, not some, hundreds of them, where fewer than half of the children get the results they need at 16, when for all the progress there are still 17,000 children that leave school every year without any qualifications, whilst that remains I cannot rest, I will not, until we do all in our power to root out and change that failure.

(Blair, 2005a)

Ruth Kelly, reviewing the evidence on social mobility and on the background-achievement link in primary schools, took a similar stance:

We've made real progress since 1997. And we should be very very proud of it. But I am clear that we cannot stop here. Reform remains incomplete if we are to achieve the education system that our people deserve. So there is no better time than now to ask searching questions about the next steps towards a socially just society, a society where background is no barrier to success and social mobility is a reality. Over the next four or five years and beyond, we have to find the courage to keep on asking the difficult questions.

(Kelly, 2005)

The rededication to reform by both Kelly and Blair was abundantly clear. What was much less clear, we suggest, was the direction that reform should take. On the one hand, policy-makers might interpret the negative feedback they were receiving as an indication of the necessary to 'go further' in a direction of travel already mapped out – the direction of standards and marketisation relentlessly pursued since 1997. On the other hand, they might decide that 'going further' had to mean, in practice, travelling in a different direction. The former decision would imply that the 'what works' agenda was still the right one to pursue and that it was still possible to find the right levers to pull in order to square the excellence-equity circle. The latter decision might imply something different – that what was needed was not simply some practical strategies, but a more fundamental rethink of how the contradiction between equity and excellence arise in the first place and about what sort of education system might be needed to bring about its reconciliation.

Our contention is that much of education policy-making in 2005 can be understood as a contest between these positions. We do not wish to suggest that the contest was

open, nor that its participants were necessarily fully aware what it was that they were engaged in. nonetheless, it is, we suggest, the reality of this contest and the uncertain nature of its outcome that makes 2005 a ‘pivotal moment’.

Steady as we go?

Many of the year’s policy developments can be read as an attempt to pursue the existing direction of travel. Many of them, for instance, had been outlined in the previous year’s *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004), which ensured some continuity of policy-making between the second and third New Labour terms. Likewise, although a new Education Act was passed, its provisions were largely about tidying up the existing system and making it function more efficiently. Hence, it paved the way for the shorter, sharper school inspections, more predictable and manageable three-year school budgets, and school profiles, shorter documents to replace the annual governors’ report and parents’ meeting.

Other reforms, too, simply intensified existing policy approaches. The continued ‘scholarisation’ of the early years was a case in point. In November, the Government introduced a Childcare Bill (2005) which, amongst other things, would require every registered nursery and childminder to follow a new Early Years Foundation Stage comprising guidance on learning and development from birth to five. The proposal to regulate early learning and development in this way produced a predictable outcry in the press and from early years specialists (Ward, 2005), but in fact it represents an extension of two existing strands of policy. The Government had been making efforts for some time to create a more extensive, coherent and accessible pattern of childcare to release parents for paid work. It had also long sought to regulate and ‘improve’

children's early learning and developmental experiences – for instance, through the Sure Start initiative and through the Foundation Stage in educational settings – as a means of equipping children with the necessary tools for tackling the school curriculum proper. The 'curriculum for toddlers', therefore, constituted an attempt to find another lever to pull to achieve well-established ends in a context where existing policies were proving less than totally effective.

At the other end of the age range, a series of developments around 14-19 education, FE college provision and vocational training can be read as more of the same. The Tomlinson review of 14-19 curriculum in the previous year (Tomlinson, 2004) invited the Government to undertake a radical overhaul of a phase of education which had become a rather ramshackle mixture of traditional 'academic' qualifications and a plethora of more vocationally-oriented pathways, with provision divided between schools, sixth form colleges, FE colleges and others. Tomlinson advocated a single diploma to incorporate both vocational and academic pathways, a reduction in the amount of assessment required of students, and a reorientation towards more imaginative and integrated modes of assessment.

It was clear as soon as Tomlinson was published that the Government was unhappy with radical proposals which might threaten the traditional pathways to 'academic' excellence, even if retaining these meant perpetuating the academic-vocational divide which has bedevilled secondary and post-secondary education in England for generations – and even if this in turn meant consigning large numbers of learners to pathways widely perceived to be second-rate. Nonetheless, in February, the Government launched its White Paper on 14-19 education and skills (HM

Government, 2005a), followed shortly by a Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005e) focused on learning in and around the workplace and later in the year by the publication of the Foster review of FE colleges (Foster, 2005) and the Learning and Skills Council's funding plan (LSC, 2005).

The rhetoric surrounding these developments was one of fundamental change. The 14-19 White Paper, for instance, articulated a radical ambition:

...to transform secondary and postsecondary education so that all young people achieve and continue in learning until at least the age of 18.

(HM Government, 2005a: 4

The avowed aim was to create a system of post-14 provision which is vocationally-oriented, where employers have a greater say in shaping provision to their needs (for instance, through 'National Skills Academies'), which offers a coherent ladder of provision and awards up which learners can progress, and which offers incentives and support for learners who are in danger of becoming stuck at the bottom of that ladder. Insofar as this marks a vocationalisation of post-14 provision, it is, of course, entirely in line with the underlying economic orientation of Government education policy. The creation of coherent, vocationally-oriented pathways is likely to deliver all learners into the labour marketplace with more economically-useful and saleable skills – not least those most at risk of social exclusion who may have given up on academic pathways and might otherwise disengage from education entirely.

At the same time, the 14-19 White Paper opted for the preservation of GCSEs and A levels in much their current form, "as cornerstones of the new system" (HM Government, 2005a: 6), thus stopping some way short of the radical reforms proposed

by Tomlinson. This can, of course, be read as an exercise in *realpolitik* – a concern about media reaction if ‘gold standard’ exams were abolished, covered by a rhetoric of transformation. However, it can also be read as a continuing commitment to the proposition that policies for excellence can be pursued in parallel with policies for equity, and that hard choices between fundamentally different agendas are unnecessary.

New directions?

However, not all policy developments in 2005 can be read as ‘more of the same’. As the inadequacies of current approaches became more apparent, alternative policy directions began to emerge, either through entirely new initiatives or through the acceleration of existing trends.

One policy area in which this was true was over the question of school autonomy. In 1997, New Labour inherited a school system in which the power of local education authorities had been considerably weakened and schools were encouraged to pursue their own institutional interests in an increasingly autonomous manner. This increase in autonomy was essential for the efficient working of a market in schooling and for holding individual schools to account for the standards of achievement they were able to generate. At first, therefore, New Labour seemed content for schools to act with a high degree of independence both of their LEAs and of each other, exercising control through national accountability frameworks and through centrally-devised programmes and strategies.

However, the model of autonomous, competitive schools creates a highly fragmented system which is inefficient in terms of sharing expertise and resource, engendering and disseminating local innovation, or creating units for the delivery of area-based services. Accordingly, in recent years, Government sponsored a range of initiatives aimed at promoting inter-institutional collaboration - for instance in Excellence in Cities partnerships and Excellence Clusters, in the Leadership Incentives Grants initiative, the requirement on specialist colleges to share their expertise with other schools and the invitation to special schools to develop collaborative relationships with their mainstream counterparts (DfES, 2003d) and the Networked Learning Communities sponsored by the National College for School Leadership. In 2005, this trend was given further impetus by the launch of Education Improvement Partnerships (EIPs). The EIP prospectus (DfES, 2005a) articulated the rationale for partnership in the following terms:

The Government attaches great importance to learning from effective partnership working. High quality collaboration is a key complement to the working of strong autonomous institutions. Confident schools want to collaborate with others in their community to drive a shared agenda for improving standards, to share resources and good practice, to ensure high quality provision for all young people and to underpin community cohesion.

(DfES, 2005a: Foreword)

Of course, all of this may have been no more than an attempt to ameliorate some of the perverse consequences of the 1997 system without embarking on any radically new policy direction. However, in the context of a 'new localism' (Aspden & Birch, 2005) across much government policy, the change may be more fundamental than

this. The prospectus, for instance, outlined a model of the location of EIPs in the policy arena which places them at the centre of interactions between ‘national priorities’, ‘local authority strategy’, ‘local community needs’ and ‘schools leading reform’ (DfES, 2005a): Foreword). This is significant in the shifting of partnerships to centre stage and in the introduction of ‘local community needs’ as a factor shaping provision. Both are very different from the linear and hierarchical command structure which had been developed in education since 1988, and from the attempts by the first New Labour Government to standardise practice through the National Strategies.

It is no coincidence that part of the rationale for EIPs was that they would be better able than individual schools to respond to the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003a). Here too, we see a recently-emerged strategy given further impetus by a new development in 2005 – this time, aspects of the Childcare Bill dealing with school provision, and the launch of an extended schools prospectus (DfES, 2005b). *Every Child Matters* was, of course, concerned with the development of integrated child and family services, working to generate shared outcomes. In its original form, the emphasis was very much on the reconfiguration of services at local authority level, with a few exemplary ‘full service extended schools’ (DfES, 2003b, 2003c) becoming heavily involved in areas of disadvantage. What is significant about the 2005 developments is that they envisaged the involvement of *all* schools to differing extents in delivering child, family and community services. This is very different from the deliberately narrow focus on driving up standards of attainment which was promoted as the sole concern of schools during the first New Labour term – though, with typical ambiguity, DfES is ensuring that the National Remodelling Team, which is playing a large part in the roll out of extended schooling, is busily reassuring

teachers that the initiative is about ‘removing barriers to learning’ and ‘raising pupil achievement’, and that teachers will ‘remain focused on their core areas of professional expertise’ (NRT, 2005).

Ambiguities such as this are important to bear in mind. There has been no wholesale recantation in 2005 and new directions are emerging tentatively, if at all. Nonetheless, the models of collaboratively-minded schools (and colleges, post-16), working with each other and with a range of other providers to deliver a wide range of services to children, families and communities, is something that would have been inconceivable in 1997 or, for that matter, in 2001.

The Schools White Paper – tipping point or impasse?

Of all the developments in 2005, the one that has attracted most political and public attention has been the publication of the Schools White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (HM Government, 2005b). Here, above all, we see the tensions in Government strategy between an intensification of existing policy directions and the tentative emerge of new directions.

The main proposals of the White Paper are by now well known: the creation of self-governing ‘trust schools’ involving external partners; the establishment of parent councils to monitor parents’ interests in these schools and, if necessary, trigger the replacement of the school’s leadership; the further extension of the academies programme alongside trust schools; the provision of better information for parents in choosing schools and of extended free transport for children from poorer families; support for parents to set up their own schools; an increased emphasis on one-to-one

tuition and on setting and streaming; the requirement for a competition to determine the providers of new schools or replacements for failing schools; the easing of restrictions on the expansion of ‘successful’ schools; and the reformulation of the local authority’s role as commissioner of provision and champion for parents.

Equally significant is the rationale for change offered by Tony Blair and Ruth Kelly in their respective foreords to the White Paper. For Blair, the history of education in England since the Second World War is one of parents – not least, middle class parents – driving successive reforms of the system so that it more nearly meets their needs. Just as comprehensive schools overcame some of the problems of the tripartite system, so further improvements have been brought about by the New Labour reforms that have ‘re-energised’ the comprehensive system. In particular, he argues:

Parent choice can be a powerful driver of school standards.

(HM Government, 2005b : 3)

However,

While parents can express a choice of school, there are not yet enough good schools in urban areas; such restrictions are greatest for poor and middle class families who cannot afford to opt for private education or to live next to a good school, if they are dissatisfied with what the state offers.

(HM Government, 2005b: 4)

This is, of course, a very conservative (with both a large and a small ‘c’) rationale, insofar as it picks up the ‘choice and diversity’ approach developed by the Conservative Government in the 1980s and 1990s (DfE, 1992), and pursued by New Labour governments since 1997. To this extent, the White Paper’s proposals for a

diversification of school type, an increased role for parental choice and a reduction in the direct management responsibilities of local authorities is nothing new. The trust schools themselves are simply a further development in the long line of quasi-independent schools that began with the City Technology Colleges of the 1980s. Significantly, both opponents and proponents of the White Paper have presented it in these terms. Estelle Morris, former Secretary of State for Education, but nonetheless dubious about the White Paper's approach, commented that:

...I'm not sure it's as radical as it was trailed...the extra freedoms that will make schools "self-governing, independent state schools" are not that obvious on first reading. The remaining powers of LEA's have been exaggerated so their further demise is less significant than might be expected...I can't see much parent power, I'm pleased to say.

(White, 2005)

Likewise, Will Hutton, an apologist for that approach, pointed out that:

The white paper goes nowhere near the idea of educational vouchers, which would have meant the permanent stratification of schools along class lines...The increased independence over selection is limited...In reality the white paper democratises the choices that the middle classes already enjoy and the structures they prefer.

(Hutton, 2005)

On the other hand, both of these commentators pointed to the contradictory nature of the White Paper. For Hutton, the contradictions originate beyond the White Paper itself in a British social system which espouses equality but is predicated in fact upon privilege and inequality. "For too long," he argued,

The best – the ideal of universal, non-selective comprehensive education – has been the enemy of the good, a state system that gets as near as possible to equality of opportunity in the world we live in. the white paper breaks the deadlock.

(Hutton, 2005)

For Morris, (2005), the White Paper was marked by contradictions between high-profile measures which, she argued, will make little difference, and more low-profile measures which might potentially make a considerable contribution to the development of the education system. The most interesting parts, she argued, were not the ones to do with choice and diversity, but a less-trumpeted series of proposals designed to encourage schools to collaborate with each other – in line, of course, with the developments we have noted above.

Nor were these the only aspects of the White Paper which strengthened the emerging new directions of policy. It was for instance, suffused with the spirit of localism – albeit of a somewhat ambiguous kind. Although, therefore, the parents who become involved in parent councils or in setting up their own schools may well prove to be a self-selecting, middle-class group, it is not impossible that a more representative cross-section, supported by local authorities, will begin to play a role in governance that traditional school governing bodies have largely failed to undertake. Likewise, although trust schools may attract large corporate partners with few local roots, it is notable that the initial reaction from such organisations was cautious (Shaw et al., 2005) and that other types of organisations with a more local focus - such as housing associations, universities or local businesses – might be equally or more likely to become involved.

These contradictions and ambiguities are perhaps most obvious in the most controversial aspect of the White Paper – its proposals with regard to admissions. For many years, admissions to state schools were controlled by LEAs using a mixture of ‘catchment’ areas and (to a decreasing extent) selection by ‘ability’. The 1988 Education Reform Act replaced that system with one notionally based on parental choice. However, since admissions continued to be managed by LEAs, since many schools continued to operate with local criteria for admission and since popular schools could not easily expand, the effects may have been less dramatic than has commonly been supposed (Gorard et al., 2001, 2002). In many ways – and certainly at the level of rhetoric - the White Paper simply reinforced the now-established principle of choice. However, the prospect of a wide diversity of schools, many responding carefully to local circumstances, able to expand and federate more easily and with greater practical support for families in the process of choosing, potentially, as Hutton argues, creates a very different context within which choice might be exercised. It certainly does not, as critics have pointed out, create a stock of equally good schools in every locality such that choice becomes irrelevant. Neither, however, is it simply a continuation of the situation which New Labour inherited in 1997. Then, most families were faced with a ‘choice’ between schools which did a broadly similar job in broadly similar ways, but with outcomes which were sharply differentiated so that local hierarchies were entrenched and access to schools at the top of those hierarchies was strictly limited. The White Paper, however, may in time create a situation in which choice is exercised between schools – perhaps, groups of schools - trying to achieve very different things in very different ways.

A pivotal moment?

Presenting her considered opinion on the White Paper, Morris drew attention to its contradictions in the following terms:

The schools white paper must be one of the most contradictory documents ever produced by government. Its advance publicity was all about choice, consumer power and freedom. But the content has a strong commitment to social justice and a powerful analysis of how education can help to deliver it.

The big question, of course, is whether one can be used to achieve the other...

(Morris, 2005)

In so doing, she brings us back to the theme of this paper – the relationship between ‘excellence and equity’ in New Labour policy and, specifically, the New Labour project of reconciling essentially Thatcherite policies with a concern for social justice.

We have argued that Government policy in 2005 has, regardless of any successes it might have claimed, also had to respond to the limitations and failures of this project as originally conceptualised. One response, we have suggested, has been to intensify its established approach. It has adhered unflinchingly to its relentless pursuit of the standards and of market-based reforms, whilst surrounding them with measures to ensure that the most vulnerable groups and individuals are not left behind. Indeed, taking the early years and post-14 reforms together with the Schools White Paper, it is arguable that 2005 has witnessed the final pieces in the jigsaw of cradle-to-grave educational provision, characterised throughout by high standards, high degrees of public accountability, and contestability, together with multiple ‘second chances’ and support mechanisms for those at most risk of social and educational exclusion.

However, we have also argued that, at the same time, new policy formations have

begun to emerge or to be clarified: there is an emerging reconfiguration of the relationship between national government, local government, local communities and educational institutions; the role of schools is, potentially at least, beginning to be redefined; and the meaning of ‘choice’ might be quite different in the new landscape which is now beginning to emerge.

Our explanation for these twin developments is hinted at by both Morris and Hutton. The New Labour education project is inherently contradictory (Brehony, 2005). It takes for granted the unequal distribution of personal, family and systemic educational resources and the need to enable those who start with most to achieve most. It is, in other words, predicated on a commitment to ‘excellence’ of a very particular and socially-conservative kind. Yet, at the same time, it is predicated on a commitment to equity which seems to imply a redistribution of resources. Caught in the tension between these two imperatives, it is not surprising that policy is restless and dynamic, that it searches constantly for the next ‘fix’ which will reconcile these opposites, nor that it is continually faced with evidence of its own inadequacies.

In his apology for the White Paper, Will Hutton issues an important challenge. The Government’s proposals, he argues, are the best compromise that can be managed ‘in the world we live in’. “But,” he continues,

...anybody with a better idea of how we can break out of where we actually are, please come forward.

(Hutton, 2005)

In some ways, we wish to suggest, it is Government policy itself which is already coming forward with alternative approaches. The vision of locally-rooted schools,

locked into collaborative networks, and working with a range of providers to deliver services to children, families and communities is very different from the system of fragmented, competitive and narrowly-focused schools which New Labour inherited – and promoted – in 1997. If we add in the schools and 14-19 white papers’ renewed emphasis on ‘personalisation’, implying flexible and responsive provision from early childhood through to adulthood, the differences seem even greater.

It remains to be seen how this potential unfolds. It is far from clear whether the divergence between the old and new policy approaches can be equated with a difference between Blairite and Brownite ideologies – if, indeed, these exist as such – and therefore the effects of any change in leadership remain uncertain. In any case, we see differences in policy approaches as emerging from ongoing, deep-seated contradictions rather than from any smooth succession of one policy approach by another. As if to prove the point, at the time of writing (December 2005) the main item of educational news is the Secretary of State’s endorsement of ‘synthetic phonics’ (DfES, 2005d) – a piece of centralised curriculum-narrowing that would have been absolutely normal during the most vigorous phase of the first New Labour Government’s standards-based reforms.

Neither do we wish to argue that, simply because new policy approaches emerge from the equity-excellence contradiction, they must necessarily be more equitable than their predecessors. It is not difficult to imagine, for instance, schools collaborating on approaches which marginalise vulnerable students, or trust schools being captured by particular local interest groups. What we do wish to suggest, however, is that the apparent certainties of New Labour education policy are much more fragile than they

appear, and that Tony Blair's renewed reforming zeal may open up new and unexpected policy directions. When, therefore, the Prime Minister described the current phase of policy-making as a 'pivotal moment', he may have been thinking in terms of a further push along established directions. when we agree that the current time may indeed be pivotal, we have something else in mind – a wholesale reconfiguration of the policy landscape. That reconfiguration may as yet be more potential than actual. It may be fraught with contradiction and uncertain of outcome. Nonetheless, it may indeed prove to be pivotal.

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