An Education System for the 21st Century

Which Way Forward?


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Preface

Our intention in publishing the NUT’s Education Statement, *Bringing Down the Barriers*, was to stimulate major debates in England and Wales about the future direction of the Education Service over the next five years. We wanted to place social class and educational attainment at centre stage.

We anticipated significant milestones: the first was the 2005 General Election; the second was the predilection of all new governments to publish landmark, direction-indicating White Papers.

The White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, published in 2005, triggered the controversy. Even compared with those of the last 25 years and the reforms of the late 80s and 1990s, this debate has been in a league of its own.

The future of comprehensive education, the role and nature of schools in the community, the best way of tackling the effects of segregation and poverty and the impact of global change on society in England, are just some of the issues arising from the debate on the White Paper and the Education and Inspections Bill.

*Bringing Down the Barriers* enabled the NUT, supported by others, to make positive, optimistic responses to the Prime Minister’s pessimistic assessment of education. It equipped us to put forward an alternative prospectus with a different vision. We were confident that our policy statements were grounded on reliable evidence and research. We said at the launch, however, that a year on from their publication, we would commission an independent evaluation of our statements and of the Government’s policies and proposals.

Professor Peter Mortimore kindly accepted our invitation to conduct such an evaluation. Not only has Peter an impeccable pedigree in initiating groundbreaking studies on school improvement and effectiveness, he has, since his retirement as Director of Education at the University of London’s Institute of Education, been responsible for leading OECD commissioned reviews of the education systems of Denmark and Norway. He was therefore ideally placed to undertake a comparative review of the NUT’s proposals and those of the Government.

Professor Mortimore’s study is enormously valuable. As with all research commissioned by the NUT, the strength of his study lies in the independence of its insights. That the NUT’s proposals in *Bringing Down the Barriers* have survived his thorough scrutiny is particularly welcome given his independence, knowledge and experience.

Despite the concessions, the structural proposals in the Education and Inspections Bill remain profoundly divisive. I believe, however, that we should be positive and proactive. Professor Mortimore’s analysis and recommendations will certainly inform the NUT’s own future policy development and responses to the Bill. Indeed they will contribute to the thinking of all those who believe education to be a fundamental right.

The National Union of Teachers is determined that the barriers to equality of access to high quality education for all young people are removed. I am determined that the NUT should remain at the centre of that battle in order that all our children and young people, whatever their background, benefit from the fantastic commitment, experience and expertise of teachers, communities and support staff and from the positive developments which are taking place in other countries around the world.

The battle of ideas generated by the White Paper has only just started.

Steve Sinnott
General Secretary
National Union of Teachers
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Executive Summary

The statement formulated by the NUT in 2004 – Bringing Down the Barriers (BDB) – and the Government’s 2005 White Paper – Higher Standards, Better Schools For All (HSBS) and its subsequent proposed legislation – offer two contrasting visions of how the English education system might look in the future. This Review compares these two visions, highlights their similarities and differences and, in the light of international evidence, suggests a strategy for improvement.

The aspirations contained in the NUT statement and the White Paper are virtually the same. Both Government and NUT see the value of further investment in education and want to improve the quality of schooling so that English pupils can meet global challenges. Both want the gap between those who perform best and those who perform least well to be reduced.

The strengths of the current system noted by the two parties are also similar. Both see increased investment and enhanced status of education as important. Both recognise the quality of teachers. Both consider that current educational outcomes have never been better.

There is also some agreement about the weaknesses of the system. Neither Government nor Union believe current standards are yet high enough for a globalised age in which international standards are rising. Both believe family disadvantages still maintain too powerful an influence on pupils’ outcomes.

The NUT document draws attention to problems with the National Curriculum, performance tables and the work of Ofsted. It also notes that – despite recent increases – education spending still lags behind the average for OECD countries.

It is with regard to the remedies that there is the most disagreement between the Government and the NUT. Twelve themes about potential improvements on which the Government and the NUT have contrasting views have been distilled from the documents.

• Changing the role of local authorities.

Over the last twenty years the role of the LAs has been severely curtailed by the various actions of successive governments. Despite considerable delegation to individual schools, major constraints now stem from central rather than local government and include controls on curriculum, assessment, teaching methods, teacher training and quality assurance through the work of Ofsted. The Government is now seeking to alter the roles of LAs again – with some new duties but with some drastic reductions of their powers. The NUT maintains that LAs still have an important role to play – especially in connection with school admission arrangements and the creation of new schools – and that their powers should include oversight of all schools including Academies and City Technology Colleges (CTCs).

• Creating a greater diversity of schools

England now has many different types of secondary schools in competition with each other for public resources. Although competition may bring benefits in commercial life, there is no positive evidence that it lifts educational standards and much negative evidence that it reduces equity. In Finland – the country which both reaches the highest standards and achieves the best equity – there is no competition within the education system. In England, the Government now wishes to add to the competition for resources by creating a new kind of foundation school – a “Trust school”. It proposes that these schools should be owned and managed by groups involving parents, universities or commercial companies, despite evidence that many of the biggest companies would rather contribute to the country’s schooling as a whole rather than just to a single school. The Government also wishes to increase the number of ‘Faith schools’ despite the possibility that these may divide and segregate communities. The NUT opposes the creation of such schools, preferring the well-tried model of comprehensive education which has been adopted with such success by the Finns but which has been gradually undermined in this country.

1The White Paper introduced the term Trust school. In the Education and Inspections Bill such schools are referred to as ‘Foundation schools’. However, the Short Guide to the Bill published by the DfES provides a detailed description of Trust schools. In the interest of clarity the term will be used throughout this Review.
• **Providing wider choice**

Choice is seen as an untrammelled good in many different aspects of modern life. In education, parental choice of schools, within limits, is likely to be a good thing. But such limits must be defined as there is evidence that parents with financial, social or cultural advantages tend to choose the schools highest in the pecking order, leaving those without such benefits with only the least attractive choices. ‘Choice advisers’ — paid for at public expense — will be unlikely to halt such a well-established pattern. Furthermore, there is evidence that the choice of pupils by schools — which happens when popular schools are over-subscribed — leads to increased social or ethnic segregation. The NUT’s preferred option is to provide choice through a range of different courses within comprehensive schools.

• **Giving greater power to parents**

Whilst it is accepted that parents should be closely involved with their children’s schooling, there is evidence that advantaged parents find ways in which this involvement is used to reinforce existing patterns of privilege. The Government’s encouragement of parents to determine whether or not schools expand (and whether new schools are opened) is a recipe for — if not chaos — at least a ‘bear market’ in which the strong are likely to benefit to the inevitable detriment of the weak. The NUT recognises that, whilst parents must have a voice at the local level, other considerations also need to be taken into account. The Union regards the Parents’ Councils proposed for Trust schools as an unacceptable substitute for the full powers of governing bodies.

• **Improving teaching in schools**

Both the Government and the Union recognise the crucial role of classroom teachers in any improvement of the education system. But whilst the NUT sees the teacher as a skilled professional — trusted with choice of teaching methods and the assessment of pupils as well as with his or her own further professional development — the Government views the teaching workforce as something which can be upgraded, re-tooled, assessed and rewarded accordingly. Although the Government notes the situation in Sweden in connection with choice, it fails to draw attention to the situation of teachers in Finland (the most successful education system in the OECD). Here, teachers are well-trained (up to masters’ level) and trusted with the curriculum, teaching methods and assessment.

• **Releasing schools from counterproductive pressures**

The NUT believes that many of the current pressures faced by schools are counterproductive. It sees the Government’s emphasis on choice and diversity leading to greater competition and further demands on schools. The Union considers that the constant pressure of external tests and performance tables, the intrusive work of Ofsted and the constraints of the National Curriculum all inhibit spontaneous and creative teaching. Few other countries have such a highly developed inspection system and evidence from PISA shows that over-frequent testing may be counterproductive.

Other international evidence shows that the freedom that schools in England have enjoyed for some years — to appoint and dismiss staff, manage their own budgets and disciplinary procedures — are positively associated with good outcomes. Both the NUT and the Government are concerned with poor pupil behaviour which they see as putting further unhelpful strains on schools.

• **Reforming the curriculum**

The NUT, unlike the Government, believes that the National Curriculum for both pre-and post-14 year-olds needs to be rethought. Whilst it is recognised that the introduction of citizenship has been successful, the dominance of literacy and mathematics restricts the teaching of a broader curriculum for younger pupils. For the older students, the National Curriculum is too cluttered and the division between academic and vocational courses appears — in the light of international practice — to be too rigid.

• **Rethinking assessment**

The NUT questions the way that assessment is currently used and its consequent impact on both pupils and schools. It argues for the establishment of an independent review to reduce the ‘high stakes’ nature of
assessment and to separate the need to provide diagnostic information for the learners and teachers from estimates of national standards and schools’ league tables. Both Scotland and Wales are examining ways in which these differing functions of assessment could be better met. The NUT favours a similar course of action.

- **Targeting resources more effectively**

Whilst the increased spending on education by the Government is impressive, the NUT points out that England still lags below the OECD average of 5.9% of GDP. It considers that the practice of giving different levels of funding for children of the same age attending different kinds of school is difficult to justify. In terms of the effectiveness of educational spending, the NUT notes that Government initiatives need better financial estimates so that cost-benefit analyses can be undertaken. The Union would like to see such an analysis of the total estimated cost of Trust schools.

- **Dealing with disadvantage**

The Government has proposed a number of initiatives to help young people overcome the effects of a disadvantaged background. But the effects of disadvantage in any competitive system are bound to be strong. Here – as in all other countries – pupils from backgrounds with economic, social or cultural disadvantage generally perform worse than their peers. The problem is exacerbated in England in that the key indicator of pupil success (and therefore of national standards at secondary level) has been designed to discriminate across the ability range – unlike the driving test which most people with adequate preparation could expect to pass. Thus the grades awarded for GCSE subjects occur in a normal distribution with the most recent results awarding just over 50% of the age group with 5 high grades.

Yet it has become accepted thinking that this level of performance is attainable by all pupils and that schools which do not produce at least 50% of its pupils with such results are failing. This would only be true if all schools received uniform intakes of pupils.

In what is a highly competitive system it is hardly surprising that more disadvantaged pupils – than their advantaged peers – fail to achieve this standard. Likewise, those schools catering for predominantly disadvantaged students do badly in the league tables even with the Government’s efforts to create indicators of ‘value-added’. The NUT’s remedy is to re-examine the way schools are judged to be effective and at the same time to try to ensure that all secondary schools receive a balanced intake of pupils.

- **Improving ‘failing’ schools**

Although the number of ‘failing’ schools has been falling, the Government is proposing tougher measures, including the time limit of a year in which to improve. The NUT sees this deadline as unrealistic and asserts that extra support, rather than punishment, is a better way to improve schools in difficulties.

- **Personalising learning**

There are a number of different interpretations of personalised learning. The Government uses it as a broad-brush label with which to categorise a host of initiatives to do with ways of teaching and organising pupils, dealing with special needs and developments in ICT. In some ways, the philosophy of personalised learning appears to be moving in a different direction to the other emphases of Government on individual testing and school competition. The NUT, whilst welcoming the concept, is wary of the resource implications of the initiative and proposes a detailed costing and a pilot project of volunteer schools to test whether it is the best vehicle to achieve the Government’s laudable intentions.

These themes are discussed in detail and the differing views analysed alongside the evidence from international surveys.

The discussion of these themes draws attention to the key components of the two documents: BDB’s grounding in the realities of classroom life, its focus on ways to improve schools and its desire to reinstate some of the successful features of the system such as HMI and the APU. With regard to the proposals in the White Paper, attention is drawn to its insistence on market forces as the principal means of improvement, its commitment to the needs of the disadvantaged and its espousal of personalised learning.
The likely impact of these twelve themes on the education system leads to a consideration of what — in my judgement — can be learned from the two sets of contrasting ideas. Influenced by the way countries which achieve better overall pupil outcomes than England organise their schools, eight separate stages have been formulated in the hope that they will bring about such an improvement whilst, at the same time, protecting the positive aspects of the existing system from over-zealous or poorly thought-through reforms.

- **Dismantling the pecking order of schools**
  It is unjustifiable for a modern school system, in which formal selection is mostly banned, to be composed of schools of such different status. Whilst there will always be some variation depending on staff skills and commitment, differences based on methods of governance, funding levels, the quality of buildings or equipment and of permitted flexibilities are anomalous. Fair intakes to all schools of a balance of easy-to-teach and hard-to-teach pupils would ensure a level playing field for pupils, staff and parents.

- **Rescinding the market forces approach to school choice**
  If schools are competing for pupils and resources they are unlikely to welcome cooperation with their neighbours. In a system where choice is recognised to have some limits and admissions are arranged equitably by a local authority, schools would be better placed to cope with the impending effects of falling rolls (caused by declining birth rates) and thus to provide the full range of local opportunities.

- **Reviewing the National Curriculum**
  A review by an independent body could seek to reduce the size of the National Curriculum core to 50% of the available time, in order to allow schools to design their own courses and meet local needs. Different arrangements would be necessary for under-and over-14 year-olds. For older pupils it would be worth emulating some of our European neighbours by removing the unhelpful difference in status between academic and vocational courses.

- **Rethinking the national assessment system**
  Streamlining the complex assessment system currently in use will not be easy. An independent body would need to consider ways in which, as part of the learning process, teachers could assess their students’ work according to national standards; LAs could monitor the progress of groups of pupils and schools; and a reliable picture of national standards of achievement could be drawn. One way to cope with such divergent assessment tasks would be the re-creation of an APU-type body, as is happening elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

- **Creating new pedagogies**
  Given the pace of change in ICT and the burgeoning understanding of brain development, it would be helpful for experiments in new pedagogies to be undertaken, prior to any system-wide change. The opportunity to try out new approaches — free from the constraints of the National Curriculum, existing tests and Ofsted inspections — would be likely to stimulate new ways of learning. If each LA supported one experimental school to which parents had the opportunity to apply — and all such schools were members of a national network — ample opportunity for such development and the systematic evaluation of their outcomes could be created.

- **Enhancing current models of teacher training**
  It is accepted by both the Government and the NUT that the quality of teachers is of paramount importance. The training for teaching — though generally good — could be extended up to the five-year masters’ degree standard of Finland. Given the falling school rolls, this may be a good time to implement such a reform. At least as important is an extension of continuous professional development — partly shaped by individual teachers to suit their own needs — to refresh them and to enable them to keep up with developments in their subjects and to study new approaches to pedagogy.

- **Remodelling the inspection arrangements**
  Inspection in England is slowly changing from its more aggressive recent style. Self-evaluation provides the basis for a future model in which schools regard inspectors as a source of help rather than as some form of...
‘educational police’. Whether the inspection authority should be based on the previous HMI system or on another model distinct from privatised profit-making companies, it is important that its members are mainly recruited from practising teachers, familiar with life in contemporary classrooms.

- **Creating a Standing Body to deliberate on educational changes**

  In a democracy, politicians must take ultimate responsibility for the public education system. There is scope, however, for a Standing Body to keep the education system under constant review and to recommend appropriate changes in a non-party political context. Power would still reside with politicians but much of the work of developing new policies would have been conducted in an educational, rather than political, context.

  These stages are discussed and their rationale explained. They would need much work before they could be adopted but their main purpose is to stimulate debate.

  In the documents which have been reviewed, the Government and the NUT have reported their views of the current system. They agree over many of their aspirations: they both want to adapt the system to current times but they differ radically on the best way to do so. Each has outlined how current weaknesses could be remedied. These issues are vitally important for our society and for those involved with schools as learners, teachers or as parents. Decisions taken today will affect how pupils learn and how teachers teach in the future. It is important, therefore, that all those concerned with education have ample opportunity to join in the debate.
Introduction

There is general agreement that education is one of the keys to future success for both individuals and societies. Education offers individuals, struggling to cope with an increasingly complex world, the knowledge and understanding that give meaning to their lives. It provides the qualifications and skills necessary for worthwhile employment. Education also plays a major role in shaping our future society. It can promote healthy growth in our children, develop both the intellectual and the human skills of our young people and foster social cohesion between disparate communities.

These are difficult tasks for any education system. The evidence from international comparisons (as will be illustrated in this Review) is that the English system performs reasonably well in terms of average attainments but falls below similar countries in the promotion of equity.

Our schools, as the evidence that is reviewed here reveals, function more effectively for those pupils with social, economic or cultural advantages than for those who are, in any way, disadvantaged. No country in the world has completely overcome the effects of the strong relationship between disadvantage and lack of achievement but some, like Finland, have a much smaller gap between the outcomes of the most and the least successful pupils.

This is the challenge that faces our schools. How can their current strengths be preserved whilst their weaknesses are remedied?

This Review offers some suggestions for an answer. It was commissioned by the National Union of Teachers in December 2005. Its purpose is to provide an independent analysis and comparison of two recently published documents concerned with education in England: an Education Statement formulated by the NUT – Bringing Down the Barriers (BDB) – and the White Paper – Higher Standards, Better Schools For All (HSBS). This Review takes into account also the relevant proposals within the subsequent Education and Inspections Bill.

Although this is an independent review, I should state at the outset that I was a member of the NUT in the 1970s and that the Union has funded this study. There has, however, been no attempt to influence my work and all judgements have been based on my own knowledge and experience.

Purpose of the White Paper and Bringing Down the Barriers

In undertaking this brief, I am clearly not comparing ‘like with like’. The White Paper has been designed to set the direction for the next wave of the Government’s education reforms and to spearhead new legislation. It has been compiled by a team of education ministers, advisers – including those from the Prime Minister’s Office – and civil servants working for a government which has been in office for nearly ten years and which bears responsibility for much of the current state of the education system.

The NUT Statement, in contrast, is simply an expression of the views of the Union. It has been produced by officials – whose main loyalty must properly be to their Union – in order to argue for improvements to the education system. This is a role the Union has pursued over the last 130 years. Its members are experts on the education system – teachers who spend every working day in schools and who have to live with the practical outcomes of all policies.

The intention of the Union in publishing BDB – made explicit in the introduction by the General Secretary – is to enable teachers “to contribute to the debate on how education can enhance the lives of children and young people in the global economy” (page 2).

The NUT has produced a document which draws on research and international evidence to argue that, whilst there might be a need to reform the system, there is more than one way in which this might be undertaken. The White Paper is based on one such way – the Government’s vision of a future education service. The NUT sketches out a different route, based on a different vision. The Union believes the country needs to debate the merits of these two sets of ideas and to consider their long-term implications before irreversible change is undertaken.
Methodology

With such disparities between the two documents in mind, I have compared the two visions for the future of the education system that have been presented. I wanted to see how much agreement could be found in how these two groups of players thought about the education system and its purposes, and in how they viewed its strengths and weaknesses. Where appropriate I have drawn on the Union’s official response to the White Paper – ‘A Good Local School for Every Child’,4 which has enabled me to gauge the reaction of the NUT to some of the newer policy initiatives included in the White Paper. I have also drawn on detail from the Education and Inspections Bill presented to Parliament in February 2006 and its Guide (published by the DfES) where these differ significantly from the content of the White Paper4 and the NUT’s response to the Bill.4

I have also compared the policy remedies which each party prescribed and weighed these against the rapidly growing body of international research evidence on the effect of policies on pupil outcomes. I have drawn, therefore, on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)7 and on a survey of learning in later life – the International Adult Learning Study (IALS)8 both conducted by the OECD. I have also occasionally used findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)9 and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS)10, conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IAEEA).

These surveys of different aged learners have been conducted with different samples of countries and, between them, have used a range of methodologies. TIMSS, for example, uses assessments which are related to the curriculum, whilst PISA endeavours to use ‘real world’ contexts designed to be as independent of the curriculum as possible. Whilst considerable care needs to be taken in the interpretation of data from these studies they offer a limited means by which to compare the different policies and approaches to education adopted by other, similar countries.

A recent study by the Danish Technological Institute on behalf of the European Commission has sought to overcome the problems of these differing methodologies and to synthesise their findings in order to identify which policies and practices across the international board are more closely related to successful pupil outcomes (Haahr et al, 2005).11 I will draw on the conclusions of the Danish study at various points in this Review. In particular, I will cite evidence about Finland – the country which has performed best in two successive rounds of PISA but which was not referred to in either Bringing Down the Barriers or the Government’s White Paper and is seldom mentioned in any debate about English educational reforms.

Dealing with a range of educational ideas

As with most documents written for a number of different audiences, BDB contains many different kinds of ideas. Principles (“Education is a fundamental human right”) – can be found alongside suggestions for improvement (“entitlement should be made for high quality, affordable childcare for all working parents”), opinions on the state of the current system (“a generation has fallen through the education net”), positive aspirations (“parents should be entitled to send their children to good local schools”) and statements of Union positions (“NUT has argued consistently for the establishment of an all graduate profession”). Additionally, the document contains a number of proposals for future developments (“teachers judgements need to be at the centre of assessment and evaluation”) and demands for government action (“Government should re-launch the Schools Access Initiative”).

The White Paper also contains a broad range of ideas. Praiseworthy aspirations (“Our aim is to transform our school system so that every child receives an excellent education”) sit alongside frequently repeated claims of success

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4 NUT (2005a) A Good Local School for Every Child NUT: London
5 The Education and Inspections Bill 134 28 February 2006 Stationary Office: London
9 IEA (1996) Third International Mathematics and Science Study Chestnut Hill, MA. TIMMS International Study Centre Boston College: Boston
11 Haahr, J, Nielsen, T, Hansen, M & Jakobsen, S (2005). Explaining Student Performance: evidence from the international PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys Danish Technology Institute: Copenhagen

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(“progress has also been made, significantly accelerated by the spread of specialist schools”), (somewhat incomprehensible) arguments for further reform (“to transform our school system from one focused on the success of institutions into one which is shaped and driven by the success, needs and aspirations of parents and pupils”), concrete advice (“schools should have a range of sanctions to deal with bullying which should be fairly and consistently applied”) and detailed legislative plans (“we will amend existing regulations to allow the ‘Trust’ to appoint the majority of school governors”).

In order to compare such a range of ideas across the two documents, I have selected twelve of – in my view – the most important themes proposed by either the Government or the NUT. I have stated the view of the other party if it can be surmised from its documents. I then present relevant evidence from international data and add a short commentary based on my reading of the various proposals, arguments and research evidence.

This approach means that there are some issues discussed in the documents – such as school leadership, the behaviour of pupils, disability, matters to do with grouping and setting classes and with nutritional standards-which have not been addressed here.

Even with these self-imposed limits, it is impossible to do justice to the range of ideas contained in Bringing Down the Barriers and the White Paper. As will become clear, it is difficult to fit complex ideas easily into discrete general themes. A number of the issues overlap and could equally well have been discussed in different sections of the Report.

Finally, in order to reduce unintentional bias, I have quoted at length from both documents. Even so, I am aware that, at other times, I have had to draw on my interpretation of what the authors of the two documents seem to be arguing. I recognise that I may not always have interpreted their words as they might have wished.
Common factors in the two documents

Aspirations

It is clear from the two documents that both the Government and the NUT share a number of aspirations about how the English education system should develop:

• both want to improve the quality of schooling;
• both want the achievement of English pupils to meet global challenges;
• both want the gap between those who achieve ‘most’ and ‘least’ reduced;
• both want more resources to be invested in the system.

Commentary

There is one crucial difference, however, between the Government and the NUT that needs to be borne in mind when considering the documents. The Union regards comprehensive education as crucial for a modern society whereas the Government’s attitude seems almost hostile. It appears to have gone out of its way to undermine public faith in the ability of ‘bog standard’ comprehensive schools to perform well. By the introduction, and superior funding, of Specialist Schools and Academies — it has — whether intentionally or not — exacerbated many of the problems facing comprehensive schools.

Unlike Finland — and to a certain extent, Scotland — comprehensive schools have seldom received a good press in England. They were often resisted and took a long time to become established as has been so well documented by Benn and Simon12 and, later, by Benn and Chitty13 The general public, who do not study education data and who rely on the media for a view, are likely to have the impression that comprehensives are part of a failing system.

The reality is different – English results have steadily improved over the last 40 years and are now vastly better than before comprehensive schools were introduced. Benn and Millar (2006) provide detailed figures showing the increases in GCSEs and A-levels results from 1964, as well as rises as in the post-16 staying-on rates and greatly increased applications to higher education.14

This apparent bias against comprehensive education raises another difficult issue. Parents who have made the decision to pay for their child’s education in an independent school are generally more likely than others to perceive comprehensive schools in a negative light. Such parents — perhaps even unconsciously — probably do so in order to justify to themselves, and to their families, the high costs of private schooling.

Whilst not excusing this tendency, it is possible to understand it. Given the size of the fees many of them are paying — they would hardly be human if they did not seek justification. But if such parents are also journalists writing about comprehensive schools, then this is a more serious matter.

Journalists for national papers are also more likely to live in London where the percentage of pupils attending independent schools is somewhat higher than in England as a whole.15 Such journalists face a potential conflict of interest in writing about this topic and should declare it. The reader could then bear in mind the possibility of bias, just as happens in cases where the conflict of interest is focused on financial gain.

The negative perception of the record of comprehensive education is one of the major problems faced by those who currently work in the school system. Perhaps the pioneers of the early comprehensives should have boasted more of the successes. Perhaps they should have fought more vigorously the attacks made upon them by those who regretted the demise of selective education. But they did neither of these things; less energy was devoted to ‘PR’ in those days and they believed that the achievements would speak for themselves.

15 According to the Independent Schools Council Statistical survey for 2005 Table 4, approximately 16% of the total pupils in day and boarding provision are in the Greater London Area whereas DfES Statistics of Education Volume 3 shows that Greater London pupils represent approximately 12% of the total.
Thus the myth of the failure of comprehensive education became established and – as Benn and Millar\textsuperscript{16} report – even a Labour Government coming to office in 1997 with a huge majority and a collapsing opposition party chose not to counter it. This is why the attitude towards comprehensive education is one of the most significant differences in the attitude of the Government and the Union towards a future education system.

The next question I wish to ask is how much agreement over the strengths and weaknesses of our current education system is there between the two parties?

**The strengths of the current system according to the Government**

Despite its reservations about comprehensive education, the White Paper makes a number of references to the strengths of the current English system. In the main text, the introduction by the Secretary of State and in the foreword by the Prime Minister, the message is that “we now have an education system that is largely good”. (page1)

**Education outcomes**

The message of improved outcomes is amplified with reference to primary education: “Now 79% achieve basic standards (level 4) in English and 75% in mathematics” (para1.5) in contrast to about 63% in 1997. For secondary education the message is similar: “… a record rate of improvement in GCSE with some 56% of sixteen year-olds achieving 5 or more good GCSEs” (para 1.6) compared to only 45% in 1997.

**Teachers**

The White Paper comments favourably on the quality of teachers – “the best teaching force and the best school leadership ever” (page 1). In terms of ‘failing’ schools, the White Paper notes “very substantial reductions in the numbers … from 515 in the summer of 1998 to 242 at the start of this term” (September 2005) (para 1.7).

**Attendance**

The White Paper records that: “School attendance is at a record high with an average of 51,000 more pupils in school each day in 2004/05 compared with 1996/97”. (para 1.12)

**Buildings**

School buildings are considered to be much improved: “Hundreds of school buildings around the country are either being completely replaced or completely modernised … and throwing off their neglected image”. (para 1.13/114)

**Information, communications & technology (ICT)**

The claim is made that England has become a world leader “with spending on ICT … more than doubled since 1998” (para 1.15).

**Resources**

With regard to resource levels generally, the White Paper notes that “spending on education in England has risen from £35 billion in 1997/98 to £51 billion in 2004/05” (para 1.4) – a 46% increase.

So it is clear that the Government views the English education system as having a substantial number of strengths: “The education system in England is now widely recognised as a success”. (para 1.1) It is also clear, as the White Paper constantly reminds its readers, that the Government believes most of these strengths stem from the policies it has introduced over its period in office rather than from any residual quality existing within the system prior to 1997.

**The strengths of the current system according to the NUT**

In Bringing Down the Barriers (BDB) the NUT also celebrates the current strengths of the English education system:

**Education outcomes**

With regard to pupils’ achievements: “In primary schools, standards in the core subjects have never been higher” (para 36). In secondary schools: “as examination results demonstrate, education has never been more successful for young people than now” (para 36). The Union appears as proud as the Government.

\textsuperscript{16} Benn & Millar (2006) ibid
Teachers

Interestingly, BDB does not in any of its 86 references to teachers boast of their success. Modesty has clearly prevented this claim although it is obvious that the Union sees teachers as central to the success of schools: “at the heart of education are teachers … teachers inspire young people and unlock their potential” (para 1).

Attendance

The NUT does not specifically refer to attendance in either of its documents.

Buildings

As in the White paper, the improvements in buildings are noted (para 32), and in the NUT’s response to the White Paper the General Secretary comments that “Our school buildings no longer resemble slums” (NUT, 2005a, page 2).

Information, communications & technology (ICT)

The Union, like the Government, believe that the early work with computers in schools has paid off: “England is a world leader in the provision of ICT in schools” (NUT, 2005a, page 2).

Resources

The NUT acknowledges that: “there has been a welcome increase in investment in education since 1997” (para 32). In its response to the White Paper, the Union’s General Secretary notes that “massive investment makes its impact” (NUT, 2005a, page 2).

Curriculum

BDB also comments upon the positive impact of Citizenship courses in many schools (para 43) although it also criticises the National Curriculum for not adequately preparing pupils “for adult life in a diverse society and in a global context” (para 42).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Positive reference is made to the Government’s 2001 strategy on Continuing Professional Development “a limited success, but a success nonetheless” (para 53) and to the establishment of resources to support training “NUT has warmly welcomed the Government’s Union Learning Fund” (para 55f). Furthermore, the document also records that a “number of Government initiatives have had a positive impact on professional lives” (para 36).

Commentary on the strengths described in the two documents

There is considerable agreement, therefore, as to the strengths of the current system of schooling in England. Broadly speaking, both the Government and the NUT celebrate the increased investment in, and enhanced public recognition of, education. Both see the role of teachers, and their further professional development, as an essential component of improvement.

Furthermore, both the Government and the Union consider that educational outcomes – in terms of the standards of pupil achievement – have never been higher. Looking at the evidence in terms of recent examination results and test scores – and even Ofsted Reports – these claims are well supported. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority’s investigations have also endorsed the Government’s claims of rising standards. The international PISA tests undertaken in 2000 also showed positive results.7

There is another view, often based on anecdote, that attributes the improved results to less difficult examination questions and more lenient marking, together with teachers being pressured to ‘teach to the test’ in such a ‘high stakes’ system. In a recent newspaper article Professor Shayer of Kings College London argued that, according to his research, children in year 7 are “now on average between two and three years behind where they were 15 years ago.”8 But, so far, not much other firm evidence has been produced in support of this view.

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7 PISA results for 2000 showed UK to be performing well above average in reading, and in mathematics and science literacy. There was, however, a large gap between the performance of the best and the worst. Unfortunately, the English sample in 2003 did not meet the OECD’s criteria and the results were not fully presented although subsequent analysis of the sampling difficulties undertaken on behalf of the DfES suggests that the three scores were each somewhat lower in 2003.
8 Education Guardian 24 January 2006 page 3
So the situation exists in which the Government insists that standards have risen dramatically but some commentators refuse to believe such claims and continue to promote the view that standards are dropping, the system is in crisis and that comprehensive schools are to blame. This situation will be discussed later in this review.

Both Government and the NUT, however, are aware of a number of weaknesses in the system.

**The weaknesses of the current system according to the Government**

It is clear from the White Paper that the Government is still not satisfied with the current system and is convinced that further progress is essential.

**Underachievement**

In analysing the weaknesses, the HSBS stresses that “… there are too many children being let down by schools which are coasting rather than striving for excellence” (para 1.20). It makes the point that “almost a quarter of children leave primary school without the necessary skills in literacy and numeracy to make a success of the secondary curriculum” (para 1.26).

**Low participation post-16**

Furthermore, the HSBS notes that “Our participation rate for 17 year-olds in continued education is ranked 27th out of 30 industrialised countries” (para 1.27).

**Parental background**

The White Paper argues that “parental background still plays too important a role in determining attainment and life chances” … and that … “the attainment gap for pupils has not yet narrowed” (para 1.24).

**Truancy**

HSBS comments that “there remains much more to do in tackling truancy effectively” (para 1.12).

Thus, whilst there is some Government satisfaction with the progress that has been made, there is also considerable concern about the quality of some aspects of the education system and particular disquiet about those who do not do well in it. It is the plight of those who are, in any way, disadvantaged – and who, ironically, have the most to gain from education – that the Government sees as most worrying.

**The weaknesses of the current system according to the NUT**

The NUT recognises that: “a generation of young women and men have fallen through the education net completely” (para 31) – a situation it finds completely unacceptable. Some of its concerns about the weaknesses in the education system are, to a certain extent, similar to those of Government. Bringing Down the Barriers stresses the role of education as a human right which “enables young people to make sense of, and contribute to, society” (para 1). It considers education as “vital to society and the economy” (para 3).

Unlike the White Paper, however, the NUT document does not have to justify existing policies so it can also argue that education policy making in England has too often been dominated by “short-term thinking … and narrow party-political points” (para 8).

**National Curriculum**

Whilst acknowledging that the National Curriculum has had a positive impact on the system, the NUT considers that it is heavily overloaded and that “its assessment arrangements still exert a range of negative pressures on teachers and young people” (para 37).

**Accountability**

A further weakness of the English system, according to the NUT, is the current method of public accountability, based on performance league tables. The Union argues that these “widen the gap between those schools which receive the value-added advantage of parental support for their pupils’ learning and those schools in economically and socially deprived areas” (para 62). This flaw in the system of accountability is exacerbated by
the public opprobrium that is heaped upon schools declared by Ofsted to be in difficulties: “the consequences of schools being placed in ‘special measures’ can be severe” (para 61). To a certain extent this opprobrium can be traced back to the policy of ‘naming and shaming’. Even though this practice has now been discarded, schools formally labelled ‘failing’ – and needing all their energy for improvement – often have to cope simultaneously with parents removing their children and staff resigning.

Resources

The NUT – having welcomed the increased funding over recent years – notes that spending, when expressed as a percentage of GDP, is still below that of many similar countries: “The Government should set an objective, as a minimum, the achievement of the OECD average of 5.9 per cent of the GDP to be spent on education” (para 33k).

Commentary on the weaknesses described in the two documents

There is a shared concern between Government and the Union over current levels of underachievement. Despite the positive progress that both parties acknowledge, their common judgement is that the system is not good enough for a globalised age in which international standards are rising.

Government and the NUT also agree that the education system does not work equally well for all pupils: it leaves some individuals and some groups behind and it does not sufficiently challenge others. They are both concerned that social and economic disadvantages still maintain too powerful an influence over pupils’ achievements.

Each party, therefore, sees weaknesses in both the quality of the system and the lack of equity in the experience of pupils within it.

I now come to the ways in which the two parties are seeking to remedy the weaknesses they have identified.
Twelve themes to do with potential improvement

The issues from the documents which I have selected to highlight as major themes are:

- changing the role of local authorities
- creating a greater diversity of schools
- providing wider choice
- giving greater power to parents
- improving teaching in schools
- releasing schools from counterproductive pressures
- reforming the curriculum
- rethinking assessment
- targeting resources more effectively
- dealing with disadvantage
- improving ‘failing’ schools
- personalising learning.

1. Changing the role of local authorities

The White Paper proposes a radical change for local authorities (LAs): “playing a new commissioning role in relation to a new school system … this is a very different role from acting as a direct provider of school places” (para 9.3). In essence the Government wants LAs to act from now on mainly as “the champions of users” (para 9.1) drawing on their central role in the community. The Government sees this new role as complementing the authorities’ work in relation to other initiatives outside education (such as the Every Child Matters programme which stemmed from the 2004 Children Act).

The proposed change would result in the LAs no longer building new schools. Each authority would still have the duty to plan the local school system but, instead of providing or adapting premises itself, it would have the duty to hold a ‘competition’ in which potential promoters of new schools “who might be parents’ groups, education charities backed by business or community or voluntary sector bodies” (para 9.11) would vie to undertake the task.

LAs would even have to seek the permission of the Secretary of State to present their own proposals for a community or community special school (although the Guide to the Bill states that where the LA has “a good track record … and where such a school … will command the support of parents” this will not normally be opposed)\(^{19}\). Throughout the process the LA would have a duty to work with the office of the Schools Commissioner (discussed in 2. below).

LAs would be given a new duty of “securing diversity … and … increasing the opportunity for parental choice”\(^{20}\) and would be expected to liaise with new and existing schools “to ensure they continue to meet community needs (and to) use their leadership and influence to encourage and support collaborative working among schools … to promote high standards and good behaviour and to ensure a seamless pattern of extended services” (para 9.11).

The duties of the LA include the (impossibly) ambitious “fulfilment of every child’s educational potential”\(^{21}\) and helping “to drive up standards in schools (without) trespassing on school autonomy” (para 9.18). The LAs would be expected to monitor the performance of schools — including how well vulnerable groups of pupils were catered for — and to take early action in collaboration with Ofsted “to ensure improvement in weak schools, or those ‘coasting’ schools failing to do well by all their pupils” (para 9.20).

\(^{19}\) A Short Guide to the Education and Inspections Bill 134 2006 - p4

\(^{20}\) Education and Inspections Bill – 2. (a) and (b)

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 1. (1) (b)
The LAs would continue to be responsible for some aspects of special education, school transport, providing parents with information about secondary provision, providing education for those excluded from schools for more than five days and coordinating school admissions “ensuring that no child is without a school place” (para 9.22).

The NUT views

The NUT document argues in favour of maintaining the current role of local authorities: “Local authorities are not solely commissioners and quality assurers of educational services; they are much more than that” (para 24). And, “it is local authorities that have the capacity to ensure that services support schools effectively. They also have a continuing role in providing services” (para 26).

Bringing Down the Barriers makes the point that LAs are vital partners in the education system, able to play a crucial role overseeing the admissions practices of individual schools. It also argues that selection by aptitude should be made illegal. In the quest for greater equity within the system – pursued by both Government and the Union – the existence of a clear admissions policy is of critical importance if both overt and covert methods of selection are to be avoided.

The NUT argues that if equity is to be attained within the education service “a (national) framework of provision organised by local authorities is essential” (para 20).

The Union also envisages a key role for LAs working with schools to develop extended schools and full service schools in the spirit of the ‘Children’s Trusts’ that emanate from the 2004 Children Act. In these and other tasks the NUT believes that the LA should also have jurisdiction over all schools in its area including the new Trust schools, Academies and CTCs. Furthermore, the Union believes LAs should be required to secure “good race relations, social inclusion and community cohesion … as well as the duty to ensure that all children with special educational needs have access to a full range of special educational needs provision”.

Accountability is also an important feature of the NUT’s document: “Parents have the right to expect fair and accurate systems of accountability” (para 59). Such systems, to succeed, need to operate on a basis of trust – between pupils and teachers, parents and teachers, teachers and heads, heads and LAs. The problem is that the current English system has no place for trust. Yet trust – with appropriate safeguards – forms the very basis of a profession’s approach to its task. In the NUT’s view, self evaluation – in collaboration with the monitoring and support of the LA and informed by a national discussion on “what an effective school is and how its effectiveness can be evaluated” (para 60) – offers a better way towards wide-scale improvement.

International evidence

Many countries have constitutions which prescribe the roles of the different tiers of government with regard to education and other services. In Denmark, for instance, the Minister of Education has a responsibility “to lay down general rules regarding measures to further good order in the schools (and) to request any information that he/she deems necessary” (Danish Ministry of Education, 2003) But the municipalities (akin to local authorities) are responsible for all aspects of the school system. Of course, changes are made – currently the number of Danish municipalities is being reduced – but this process is being undertaken largely by negotiations between the municipalities themselves.

The Republic of Ireland has about the same population as Denmark. It has only just over 3,000 first (primary) schools and 400 second (secondary) schools. The Irish Ministry of Education manages central and local planning with the exception of vocational education which is the responsibility of 22 local boards. However, there have been requests for the creation of intermediate, democratically elected bodies to bridge the gap between the Ministry and the school owners. Although this change has not happened the Ministry does accept the need for a local presence.

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23 An extended school is one that provides a range of services and activities often beyond the school day to help meet the needs of its pupils, their families and the wider community.
24 Full-service schools offer childcare, study support, family and lifelong learning, health and social care services and access to school facilities including ICT, and embodies the principles of integrating children’s services.
25 NUT (2006) ibid
A 2002 policy paper described the situation: “If the general public is not to be left completely bewildered, it is vital … to have a ‘one-stop shop’ of educational services, with the psychologists … the special education organisers, etc., in offices in the same building.”

In Finland, the central Government, whilst maintaining control of national objectives such as a core curriculum, shifted the administration of schools to local authorities (municipalities) in the 1980s and 1990s. In turn, municipalities have delegated decisions on operational activities to their schools.

The evidence from the meta study of international assessments (Haahr et al ibid) shows that schools appear to benefit from a certain amount of autonomy – over budget allocation decisions, the appointment and dismissal of teachers, disciplinary policies and similar matters. These powers have been mainly delegated to individual schools in England since 1988.

**Commentary**

Since the Education Act of 1902 and until the emergence of the White Paper, local authorities had been known as local education authorities (LEAs). The White Paper has changed this title in order, it argues, “to reinforce … integration and the links to the local authority’s wider role in community leadership” (para 9.6). It seems a pity to lose a title which has served the education system well for over 100 years. Although the relationship between education and other aspects of local authority provision is clearly important, is the real reason for the title being dropped the Government’s desire to demonstrate, publicly, a significant lessening of the educational responsibilities of local government?

The situation in England, with over 17,500 primary and nearly 3,500 secondary schools, is of a different order to the situations in Denmark and Ireland. Historically, LAs have been important in creating provision, pioneering new approaches and coordinating local services. Prior to the 1980s, over half the funding for schools was raised through the local ‘rates’ and there were direct and obvious links between the election of the local council, the funding of schools and their outcomes. These links were strengthened by the fact that, with a few exceptions, children living in a local authority attended schools under the jurisdiction of that same authority.

The Greenwich judgement of 1990 gave parents the right to use schools in local authorities other than their own. This legal judgement, which coincided with a reduction in the proportion of local funding from the council charge and the rising pressure to bring educational spending to a common level, has weakened the relationship between schools and their local communities. Since the passing of the 1988 Education Act, and its delegation of many management tasks to schools, there has also been a tendency for the powers of local authorities to be curtailed.

The White Paper (and the Bill) also increases the scope of LAs, giving “new powers to intervene earlier where performance is poor”. Local authorities are also given duties to provide leisure and recreational facilities for children and young people – requiring, in some instances, longer school opening hours. The critical question is whether these new powers compensate sufficiently for the loss of other powers and whether – given the constraints placed upon them – LAs will be strong enough to exercise their duties in relation to schools which are being encouraged to act independently. With such little influence over how schools operate could LAs, for instance, ever be in a position to ensure the fulfilment of every child’s potential? If local authorities are given impossibly ambitious tasks to fulfil, whilst having authority to intervene only in the cases of obvious failure, their standing will be weakened still further and the entire education system irretrievably damaged.

The Government argues that it wishes to empower schools and in order to do this it has to remove the yoke of local authority control. This suggests that LAs impose unnecessary bureaucratic duties on schools or that they insist on particular ideological positions. Such a view is commonly repeated in the media. Whilst interfering LAs might have

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28 See, for instance, the work of The West Riding on Educational Priority Areas; Oxfordshire on primary education and Leicestershire on Middle Schools.
31 A Short Guide to the Education and Inspections Bill 2006 p1
32 Porter, H (2006) Teachers must be allowed to teach: education is a shambles and it is time our schools were freed from local authority interference Observer 12 February
been common twenty years ago, they are certainly less so today. Rather, it could be argued, the most intrusive and constraining influences on English schools today stem from the Government itself. As one commentator has noted: “In under two decades England has acquired one of the most centralised education systems going. True, much has been delegated to schools, but over that which government believes matters most – the curriculum, assessment, teaching methods, teacher training, quality assurance (the real core of education, in other words) control from Sanctuary Buildings and Downing Street is now absolute.” Since 1988 numerous new powers over schools have been created through legislation. Consequently it is more likely to be government power — exerted through the award of specific grants, the publication of performance tables and, indirectly, Ofsted inspections — that is now used to constrict schools, rather than any tentacles of ideologically-driven LAs.

2. Creating a greater diversity of schools

The White Paper makes several proposals for increasing diversity. First, it proposes an increase in the number of academies. No precise target is stipulated but the wording has been changed from the previously stated 200 to “at least 200 by 2010” (para 2.30). The White Paper claims that the combination of extra freedoms, fresh buildings, increased technology and greater independence seen in those academies already established — “can bring fast results” (para 2.3).

A second proposal is to create a new kind of foundation school: an independent self-governing, not-for-profit trust school which controls its own assets, appoints the majority of its governors, employs its own staff and sets its own admissions criteria (provided it acts in accordance with the Admissions Code of Practice). Such a school would “be free to develop a distinctive ethos and to shape its curriculum, organisation and use of resources” (para 2.7). Every existing school would be free to change its status simply through a majority of its governing body voting to create a trust or to establish a link with an existing trust.

A third proposal — related to the Trust schools — is to establish a Schools Commissioner to work with national and local bodies to promote the innovation. The Schools Commissioner would “act as a national champion for the development of Trust schools and work with potential Trusts” (para 2.21). It is envisaged that this person would be empowered “to challenge local authorities that fail to exercise their new duties adequately” (para 2.24) and that he or she would also monitor progress and publish an annual report. School Organisation Committees, currently responsible for the planning of new places, are to be abolished.

A fourth proposal is to ease the entry of already existing independent schools into the public sector. Such schools would be welcomed by Government into the public fold and financed accordingly provided that they give up charging fees and that they meet “the essential requirements of the maintained system … a full curriculum, the assessment and accountability regimes, and a fair admissions policy” (para 2.38).

NUT views

In general the Union is opposed to this set of proposals. In its response to the White Paper the NUT argues that neither choice nor diversity can be seen as unifying concepts and have no collective purpose for improving the education system. The NUT’s desire is for a system of ‘good local schools’ and it argues that “Education must be a public service, inspired by the values and ethos of public service” (para 7). It also stresses that “the terms comprehensive education and equality of opportunity are synonymous” (para 14).

The NUT’s attitude towards academies is generally critical — it considers that they have “the capacity to undermine local communities of schools and the effectiveness of local authorities support” (para 28). The Union’s view on the possible loss of Community School status is unequivocal: “The decision to discontinue Community School status is incomprehensible” (NUT 2005a, para 40).

The NUT is opposed to the proposed Trust schools and to the potential dissipation of public assets that would follow their proliferation. It believes that a Trust school “should not be able to own its assets and land, or be able to dispose of those assets” . The NUT also sees the establishment of a Schools Commissioner as unnecessary since

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34 As noted, the term Trust school does not appear in the Education and Inspections Bill. The term is explained in detail, however, in the Short Guide to the Bill published by the DfES.
35 NUT (2006) ibid
the current Schools Adjudicator has powers “to intervene on admissions and school provision” (NUT, 2005a, para 52) and it interprets the new role of a Commissioner as “chivvying local authorities which do not go down the ‘choice and diversity’ route” (NUT 2005a, para 39).

**International evidence**

The evidence that has been generated by the Danish Research Team from a meta-analysis of the three major international assessments provides varied support for the particular proposals from the White Paper (Haarh et al, ibid). On the one hand, there is encouraging evidence that some educational reforms can make a difference. Using examples from Finland, Latvia and Poland, the research team illustrate that both standards and equity can be improved.

The crucial question, of course, is ‘which’ reforms to implement. There are always alternative avenues to explore (as this Review demonstrates). In the case of Latvia, where the starting point was one of low achievement, the reforms included the adoption of a National Standard of Basic Education, a centralised examinations system and the introduction of the concept of special needs. In Poland there has been a significant move away from vocational towards general education, the creation of a new phase of lower secondary schooling, new teaching methods, improved assessments and developments in teacher training.

There have been reforms taking place in Finland for nearly 30 years to try to secure equal educational opportunities. These have included a mixture of centralising and decentralising strategies — such as the national introduction of comprehensive education with a centralised curriculum and, at the same time, the delegation to individual schools of the choice of optional subjects and assessments. The results demonstrate that the end product is the best overall performance in both quality and equity of any OECD country.

On the crucial question of whether it helps to raise standards by making schools independent, the evidence is mixed: “Policy makers should approach increased privatization of school systems cautiously, as the evidence on student performance is inconclusive” (Haahr et al, 2005, page 4). However, the British Government’s approach is supported by the finding that “There is some evidence from PISA that a combination of private operations and public funding of schools is conducive to student performance” (ibid, page 4).

With regard to the broader question of whether or not to keep a comprehensive system of schooling, the evidence is much clearer: “Less differentiated, more comprehensive school systems are more efficient in adjusting for students’ socio-economic background and thus in providing equal learning opportunities for students” (ibid, page 143). And, again “…the data from PISA suggest that the more and the earlier students are divided into separate groups according to their academic performance, the more the students’ socio-economic background matters for their academic performance” (ibid, page 166).

Further international support for the comprehensive model comes from a German study established after the publication of the results of the first PISA assessments and undertaken under the auspices of the OECD. The study was designed by the German Government to explore how education was organised in those countries which performed better than it had done. One of its conclusions was that: “Strong basic education systems tend to succeed by providing good quality support for students, teachers and schools in the context of an integrated rather than a differentiated school structure.”

**Commentary**

The Government’s case for greater diversity of schools appears to be based mainly on the theory that competition drives up standards. Although this appears to work in many aspects of commercial life, there is little evidence that it works in education. Indeed, in Finland — the country which performs best in PISA — competition plays no part in the education system. The objections by the NUT, therefore, carry substantial weight.

Academies — however good they might be as individual educational institutions — are unlikely to have as a priority the coherence of a community’s provision or to worry too much about their impact on other schools in the neighbourhood — as the NUT comments have illustrated. A further point to bear in mind in considering the seeming success of new types of school is what social scientists term the ‘Hawthorne effect’. This is where a new approach

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appears highly successful but the reason for this is not the approach itself but, rather, the extra attention that has been dedicated to, and aroused by, the initiative.\(^{37}\)

Trust schools are, as yet, completely untested. Businesses and universities which take over schools will have other compelling priorities to meet and — no matter how noble their intentions — the management of the schools they control will be unlikely to take precedence over their normal business. Furthermore, there is evidence from previous attempts to engage the business community with individual schools that many of the country’s major companies would rather contribute to schooling provision as a whole than become identified solely with a single institution.\(^{38}\)

If parents took over schools, they would certainly bring commitment and, hopefully, sufficient administrative skills. But they might be vulnerable to conflicts of interest between the welfare of their own children and the total school population. Moreover, their offspring would not stay in the school forever. Would they be likely to sustain their interest? The question which has to be asked is whether this is a strong enough base on which to invest millions of pounds of public money?

A group of Labour parliamentarians who are critical of some aspects of the White Paper drafted an ‘Alternative’ White Paper. The Group shared such doubts: “No clear evidence has been presented on the advantages of schools acquiring Trust status, and certainly nothing that would justify such an open-ended commitment to the development of Trust schools. The policies set out … represent an experiment from which there can be no return.”\(^{39}\)

Some faith groups already have experience of managing voluntary schools with a long tradition of partnership with local authorities. Yet there are serious questions about whether multicultural England — anxious about its identity and acutely conscious of the difficulties experienced in educationally-segregated Northern Ireland — would benefit from a significant increase in faith schools. There is also, surely, something undemocratic about non-religious parents having to send their children to a faith school because the local community school has been closed or taken over.

Furthermore, the establishment of Trust schools would involve the transfer of substantial public assets to the private sector without such transparent mechanisms for public accountability. Schools buildings and land currently owned by the state, but which are given away to disparate groups in order to allow greater management freedom, may not easily be retrieved in the future. A minister has stated that “Public land will revert to the governing body should the school cease to have a trust.”\(^{40}\) (The Education Bill devotes considerable detail to the constraints affecting the disposal of land by a Trust but the situation is unlikely to be entirely clear until it is tested in reality).\(^{41}\)

If a subsequent government adopted a different policy, potentially extremely valuable buildings and land may prove to be difficult to recover. The new owners may not be content with ‘not-for-profit’ status for long and may well seek the earliest opportunity to press the government of the day for legislation to change this condition. The Prime Minister does, after all, make a virtue of “irreversible change” in his introduction to the White Paper (page 4). The creation of Trust schools, therefore, will be seen by many as the first stage of the creeping privatisation of the education system. The establishment of Academies provides a precedent as a recent newspaper article which highlighted the opportunities open to sponsors to gain a considerable return (with virtually no risk) on their investment, as well as the possibility of public honours, illustrates.\(^{42}\)

One implication of the Government’s drive for greater diversity is that secondary education will have the potential for even greater competition over resources. Back in 1993 the National Commission warned “There is a serious danger of a hierarchy of good, adequate and ‘sink’ schools emerging within the maintained system.”\(^{43}\) And, as another commentator noted, even before the publication of the White Paper: “Instead of cooperation and partnership what is being encouraged is fragmentation and competition – and competition on an unequal playing field.”\(^{44}\)

\(^{40}\) J. Smith, Minister for Schools (2006) Letter to the Guardian 24 February  
\(^{41}\) See Education and Inspections Bill 134, Schedule 4.  
\(^{42}\) Calvert, J & Newell (2006) Champagne, then talk of a knighthood Sunday Times 15 January  
In contrast, the comprehensive principle – championed by the NUT – appears to fit much more easily with equality of opportunity and with the positive aims for the education system expressed by the Union and also, paradoxically, by the Government.

The international evidence, with one exception, also supports the NUT stance. The one exception is Haahr et al’s point about the potential efficacy of independent, publicly-funded schools, although this evidence does not relate to the potential loss of public assets involved in the White Paper’s proposals.

The case against diversity is argued by Benn and Millar in their pamphlet on comprehensive education. The authors point out that the history of comprehensive education – in contrast to many well-publicised opinions – is positive and that, in their judgement, it remains the best vehicle for higher standards and for achieving social justice: “Current high performing comprehensives show that, with sufficient funds, good leadership and a strong ethos, these schools can provide excellent education … by learning with other children of different backgrounds, faiths and abilities young people learn how to operate within society … ” (page 27).

3. Providing wider choice

The White Paper’s proposals, centred on the greater diversity discussed earlier, seek to enhance the opportunities already open to parents. It is clear, however, that the possibility of choice does not guarantee achieving it: “… no form of admissions arrangements can increase the number of places at an oversubscribed school” (para 3.25).

New information, in the form of school profiles for each primary and secondary school, has been available from February 2006. A national website has also been established to enable parents “to run a simple postcode search to identify all the primary and secondary schools near to their home and give them access to key information about the school” (para 3.9). The Government, however, recognises that not all parents will have access to this technology and some may find it difficult to use the available information productively.

The White Paper, therefore, makes a series of related proposals.

- ‘Choice advisers’ would be able to offer independent advice to parents: “We will provide £12 million over the next two years to support this” (para 3.12). The Government also intends to change School Regulations to make it mandatory for schools to provide parents with a report on progress three times each year, as well as the “opportunity for parents to have face-to-face discussion with teachers” (para 5.7).

- It proposes an extension to the age-related free transport which is already offered to children living more than two miles (under eight year-olds) or three miles (over eight year-olds) from school. The proposal entitles children from families eligible for free school meals or in receipt of the maximum level of Working Tax Credit to free transport “to any of the three suitable secondary schools closest to their home, where these schools are between two and six miles away” (para 3.15).

- A third initiative concerns admissions. Currently, non-selective schools which have more applicants than places offer places on the basis of whether applicants already have siblings at the school or how near they live to it. In order to stimulate choice for specialist schools the White Paper reiterates the current powers of schools to select up to 10% of their places on the grounds of ‘aptitude’ for sport, modern foreign languages, performing and visual arts. Furthermore, the White Paper proposes that the new Trust schools construct their own admission policies – provided these conform to the Code of Practice.

- A fourth initiative, already discussed, would ease regulations to enable schools which are currently independent to change their status and to join the public system. Such schools will have to give up charging fees and meet other criteria but, provided that they do so, the Government “will make it easier for such independent schools to enter the maintained sector” (para 2.37).

- The White Paper also promotes the concept of ‘banding’ whereby schools can divide their places into one band for those living within a defined catchment area and one band for those living outside it and use verbal and non-verbal tests to select a balanced intake. The White Paper proposes no new mechanism to oversee admission arrangements but merely requires all schools to act in accordance with the Code of Practice.
• Increased choice is also the intention behind another White Paper proposal — the expansion of popular schools. Up to now, uncoordinated expansion of particular schools has often been opposed by local authorities, fearful that it might make other schools in the locality unviable and so reduce the opportunities for choice. However, the Government is now proposing that popular schools “should have an easy route to expansion” (para 2.43) and is promising support and capital funding to make this possible.

**NUT views**

The NUT’s favoured way of meeting the need for choice is through a range of courses within the comprehensive school: “Choice has real meaning when available to young people within schools” (para 18). Basically, the Union believes that “parents should be entitled to send their children to good local schools” (para 17). Whilst not opposing the idea of choice, the NUT expresses a number of misgivings about its impact: “… the idea of choice can exacerbate social division” (para 18) and “Greater choice … could lead to people exercising their choice in a way which leaves them living separate or parallel lives, where they do not interact with people from different backgrounds” (para 30).

The NUT also contests the information about schools being composed of league tables which it does not believe have much educational value: “The publication of raw test results serves political not educational purposes” (para 60).

The Union’s stance on independent schools is not discussed in BDB but it is probably safe to assume that it would only welcome the entry of formerly independent schools to the public sector provided that this was accompanied by rigorous supervision by the local authority. It is certainly critical of the moves to pass aspects of the education service to the private sector: “Outsourcing has undermined improvement by being expensive, bureaucratic and ineffective” (para 25).

The NUT’s fundamental attitude to the issue of choice is best illustrated by a statement in its formal response to the White Paper: “It would be profoundly pessimistic to assume that the idea of a good local school for every community is a less powerful idea than the concept of the right to choose schools” (NUT 2005a, para 29).

On the question of whether popular schools should be encouraged to expand and take in more pupils without regard to the impact of such expansion on other schools, the view of the NUT is that such a policy would threaten all partnerships and ongoing collaborations between neighbouring schools. In its judgement, it would also be a very blunt instrument for improvement — threatening “the rights of parents least able to choose schools” (NUT, 2005a, para 35).

Furthermore, the Union is alarmed at the proposal to allow individual schools to control their own admission arrangements and to use ‘banding’ as part of the process — leading “to schools operating subtle selection practices” (NUT 2005a, para 45). The NUT favours the continued existence of the independent ‘School Organisation Committees’ and LA ‘School Admission Forums’ which, together with the role of the Office of the Adjudicator, have been in use since 1998. The Union believes that it is essential for local authorities to retain a measure of control over the total provision for an area: “confident and trusted local authorities play an essential role in ensuring all children and young people have equality of access to education” (para 26).

**International evidence**

The White Paper cites international evidence in favour of choice. Developments in Florida and Sweden are noted with the comment that: “There is increasing international evidence that school choice systems can maintain high levels of equity and improve standards” (page 4). The NUT specifically refute this claim pointing out that, in Sweden, the greater use of choice has been accompanied by increasing segregation of pupils according to their ethnic and social groups. The Report School choice and its Effects in Sweden (2003) produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education makes a number of points about the Swedish experience and the negative perceptions of it held by some parents and those working in local authorities.

Giving parents in Sweden the opportunity to select an alternative school — whether from the public or private sector — to the one offered to them by the local authority is initially popular with parents. It has proved less popular
amongst local authority representatives who have had to cope with an increase in the costs of schooling in rural areas. For example, one local authority reported that parents had created another school as soon as the municipality had closed one.\textsuperscript{48} It has also caused Swedish parents to think about independent schools and the impact they have on the system as a whole: “It should be stressed that the results point to increased uncertainty of the effects of school choice. Thus the proportion of parents who are uncertain of whether they approve of independent schools has increased since 1993”.\textsuperscript{49}

Both Swedish parents and local authority representatives agree that the impact of choice has increased segregation: “A majority of parents considered that school choice led to high profile schools attracting certain categories of pupil and that differences in quality between schools was increasing” (Ibid, page 33).

In 2002 the OECD undertook a review of the concept of choice in education. Its conclusion — relevant here — is that: “the evidence on practice shows that wider school choice produces neither automatic benefits nor automatic damage. Much depends on the context in which policies are implemented and on other changes that are taking place simultaneously within an education system” (page 34).\textsuperscript{50}

The same organisation is responsible for the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) work. In 2004, the PISA team reported: “… in countries with a larger number of distinct programme types, socio-economic background tends to have a significantly larger impact on student performance such that equity is much harder to realise” (page 261) and that: “analysis reveals that countries with greater socio-economic inclusion tend to have greater higher overall performance” (page 197).\textsuperscript{51}

Commentary

In many aspects of life today, choice is seen as an untrammelled good. This view has been espoused by the Government – the White Paper is actually subtitled More Choice for Parents and Schools. Certainly it is difficult to argue against the value of choice in most contexts. All other things being equal, it is clearly better to be given choice.

The problem is that, in educational provision, all other things seldom are equal. This is the stance of the NUT which argues for some regulation of choice by the local authority in order that the pattern of provision will not be determined by the most powerful and most vocal groups in society without regard for the rights and interests of the more vulnerable.

One of the conundrums of the White Paper is that Government seems to see choice as more important than locality. As the Prime Minister comments: “You tell me the real parent who wouldn’t like as many good schools as possible to choose for their kids” (Woodward, 2006).\textsuperscript{52} Yet the evidence from a recent Which survey showed that 95% of parents surveyed want access to a high-quality local school.\textsuperscript{53} It seems that they have grown tired of seeing their children making long journeys before and after their day at school (even if the bus is paid for) as well as no longer having school friends living close by.

The stated aim of Ministers (and the NUT) is to help the vulnerable “… we must deliver for all children, but particularly for those whose family background is most challenging” (page 5). No doubt this aim is made in good faith. Moreover, the White Paper acknowledges that “education and privilege have remained inextricably linked over the last few years”. Little progress has occurred – as Tomlinson (2001) puts it “despite the rhetoric of equality and inclusion”.\textsuperscript{54} It is difficult to understand, therefore, how the Government seeks to reconcile the aim of helping the vulnerable with the freedoms being proposed for schools.

How will pupils from disadvantaged families prosper in a system where schools can write their own admission policies and where schools are competing with each other for those pupils likely to bring them credit in the performance tables? Surely, with the best will in the world, heads and governors will tend to avoid pupils who – for whatever reasons – are likely to prove ‘difficult-to-teach’ or are unlikely to do well in tests and examinations.

\textsuperscript{48} Equity in Education Thematic Review: Sweden Country Note (2005a) OECD: Paris
\textsuperscript{49} ibid p32
\textsuperscript{51} OECD (2004) ibid
\textsuperscript{52} Woodward, W (2006) View from on high Education Guardian 14 February p2
\textsuperscript{54} Tomlinson, S ibid
This illustrates a major problem in the discussion of choice: the difference between rhetoric and reality. In the rhetoric used by the Government, it is parents who have choice and schools which are there for the choosing. Hence the proposal in the White Paper for choice advisers — to train those parents who are not used to the system how to choose an appropriate school. The reality, however, is that the schools which are highest in the 'pecking order' have become the most sought after and, in circumstances where there are many more applicants than places, they are virtually able to choose their own intakes. It is only in those schools which are low in the ‘pecking order’ and which have plenty of places available that parents have a real choice and that those pupils who are ‘hard-to-teach’ may be welcomed. This is why — according to one commentator — all the schools in the neighbourhood need to see themselves as part of the system: “all schools in an area need to work together in the interests of optimum provision for all pupils, including being willing to take a fair share of the more challenging pupils”55. The question of who has the real choice — the parent or the school — has become a major issue for the entire school system.

Mechanisms were established in 1998 to try to resolve such problems. The independent School Organisation Committees, the School Admission Forums and the role of the Office of the Adjudicator were created. Their functions were to draw up and publish reorganisation plans, listen to objections and resolve any difficulties in the interests of the whole area so as to determine local provision and to solicit compromise between the ambitions of individual schools and their neighbours.

The School Admission Forum, for example, consists of representatives from the local authority and from all categories of schools in the area according to a prescribed formula. The purpose of a Forum is to provide a "vehicle for admission authorities and other key interested parties to get together to discuss the effectiveness of local admission arrangements, seek agreement on how to deal with difficult admission issues and advise admission authorities on ways in which their arrangements can be improved."56 The White Paper proposes that Admission Forums be abolished.

As noted, the NUT opposes this proposal. Recent research by the London School of Economics (LSE) supports the Union’s position.57 The research shows that schools which control their own admissions tend to recruit the pupils most likely to do well. The authors argue, therefore, for the admission code to be strengthened and “underpinned by regulation”, including, for example, a menu of acceptable criteria for admissions. They also suggest that LAs be given “a statutory role to oversee admission arrangements of all publicly funded schools (including Academies and CTCs) in their area”. Moreover, the research team argues that LAs are “best placed to undertake admissions” and that they or another suitable independent body will need to monitor the applicants to different types of schools. This is also the view expressed in the ‘Alternative White Paper’: “Local authorities should be given additional powers to coordinate the admissions process for all schools.”58

The NUT document provides more detail of the educational developments in Sweden — cited in the White Paper. The Union notes that (as discussed above) a choice policy has proved popular but has caused increased segregation — just the effect it fears would occur if the proposals in the White Paper are enacted. The findings from Sweden illustrate that ‘choice’ — like so many theoretical notions — is unlikely to prove a panacea.

The international evidence illustrates both the positive side of choice and the risks of pursuing it, regardless of all other factors. There is a danger that in pursuing it at all costs, irreversible steps may be taken by Government and the fabric of the current system of education — despite its demonstrable scope for improvement — will be irrevocably damaged.

4. Giving greater powers to parents

The White Paper states the intention “to put parents at the centre of our (the Government’s) thinking — giving them greater choice and active engagement in their child’s learning” (page 5). The last few paragraphs have discussed the proposals to increase choice; this section deals with the other ways of increasing parent-power.

58 Alternative White Paper (2005) ibid p10
One initiative — already practised in some schools — is to encourage “a single point of contact for parents” (para 5.8) and another (which seems to state the obvious) is to require all schools “to have regard to the views of parents” (para 5.19). Other initiatives include “better local complaints procedures”, giving Ofsted new statutory powers to investigate particular issues and, where justified, requiring a school “to call a meeting with parents to discuss their complaints” (para 5.16).

A more substantial proposal is the requirement for some schools (and encouragement for others) to form ‘Parents’ Councils’. These bodies will be a requirement for Trust schools whose regulations would permit the majority of governors to be appointed by the trust: “We will therefore require Trust schools to establish a Parent Council with an advisory and consultative role to enable parents’ views to be taken into account” (para 5.21). How their powers will compare with those of existing parent governors is not yet clear but it seems as though they would have less power than current parent governors.

The most radical proposal for empowering parents is enabling them to demand a new school: “We will give parents the right to ask for a new primary or secondary school” (para 2.32). The White Paper notes that the circumstances for this may be in order “to improve standards of local provision, to meet a lack of faith provision, to tackle entrenched inequalities or to promote innovative teaching methods” (para 2.32).

NUT views

The NUT view stated in BDB is that “An effective education service is one which is able to respond to local needs” (para 30). Parents must be a key part of the education system. However, since they — unlike pupils and teachers — are not present in school each day, they cannot be physically at its heart. The Union sees education as a partnership between parents and teachers, with each party endeavouring to promote the education and well-being of the child. In its response to the White Paper, the Union welcomes “the highlighting of the importance for parents of engagement with schools” (NUT 2005a, para 55). A number of the proposals in the White Paper, such as the establishment of a single point of contact for parents, have also been warmly received.

However, the proposals to establish Parents’ Councils have met with a more cautious response: “the Government’s proposals for Parents’ Councils … seem to be drawn from the need to provide a voice for parents who would be disenfranchised from standing for election to Trust school governing bodies” (NUT 2005a, para 25).

The proposals for schools to have the right to unlimited expansion are seen as undermining: “the promotion, in the White Paper, of partnership and collaboration between schools” (NUT 2005a para 36).

The proposals to give parents the power to demand a new school — perhaps a faith school for a particular group — and to requisition public resources to pay for it — regardless of the consequences for other schools and the overall needs of an area — are seen by the Union as potentially “devastating for schools in the most fragile communities” (NUT 2005a para 34).

The NUT prefers a different balance and suggested in BDB that the School Organisation Committees (which Government wants to abolish) should consider proposals for new schools, and the expansion of existing ones mostly from local authorities but also from local communities — “including parents” (para 33d).

International evidence

The OECD report cited earlier (OECD, 2005a) has pointed out that in Sweden, whilst giving parents freedom to create new schools has proved popular with parents, it has made public planning extremely difficult.

International evidence is also cited in the ‘Alternative White Paper’ noted earlier. Discussions of the Charter Schools set up in Minnesota, California and other States in America, one US academic wrote: “we have enough evidence to conclude that the free market ideals that fuelled this reform movement are at best misguided and at worst harmful to the most disadvantaged students.”

59 Alternative White Paper ibid p8
Commentary

It seems obvious that parents should be involved in their children’s schools. Indeed the parental involvement movement of the 1970/80s stressed the benefits that occurred when teachers and parents worked closely together in the interests of the children. The research literature, at that time, however, warned of the need for safeguards — even in such a positive movement.  

Advantaged parents — for a variety of social and economic reasons — find ways of ensuring that their own children benefit disproportionately from any new scheme. The result of increased parental involvement initiatives has meant that the children of the disadvantaged often end up even further behind their more advantaged peers. As the PISA 2004 report states: “Either because privileged families are better able to reinforce and enhance the effect of schools, or because schools are better able to nurture and develop young people from privileged backgrounds, it has often appeared that schools reproduce existing patterns of privilege, rather than bring about a more equitable distribution of outcomes” (page 192). 

Either such lessons have not been well heeded by Government since a number of the proposals of the White Paper look set to repeat this scenario or they have been so well heeded that capturing the more advantaged middle class parents has been deemed a top priority. According to a BBC Education correspondent “the importance of getting the middle-classes to use the public services … is of enormous importance to the … New Labour Project”. In a news item he argued that “labour is still trying to bury the spectre of the ‘bog standard’ comprehensive and that specialist schools, faith schools, City Academies — and now new Trust schools — are all about buttressing middle-class support for state secondary education”.

Allowing popular schools to determine their own admission systems and to expand without limit, and permitting parents (especially middle-class ones) to demand new schools, regardless of costs or the balance of existing provision, is surely a recipe for — if not chaos — at least a bear market in which the strong are likely to benefit to the inevitable detriment of the weak.

5. Improving teaching in schools

In contrast to the three sets of structural changes proposed by the Government, the NUT document argues that the most effective way to raise standards and increase equity is by improving teaching. It sees teachers as being at the heart of the educational enterprise: “Teachers inspire young people and unlock their potential” (para 1) and “High standards in initial teaching and high quality continuing professional development … provide the bedrock for the future success of the education service” (para 56). Accordingly, the Union (no doubt recalling past shortages — especially of maths and science specialists) argues that the recruitment of sufficient teachers is crucial: “Government should establish an annual target for the total number of teachers and support staff in employment” (para 58e) and, bearing in mind the rapidly aging profile of the work force, should “initiate a major investigation into the future supply of teachers for the next 10-15 years” (para 58f).

The NUT clearly sees the need for an up-to-date analysis of a teacher’s role that can be used in the planning of school staffing structures for it also suggests that: “There is a vital need to define the core characteristics of practising qualified teachers … to provide a benchmark for head teachers and governing bodies to use in decisions about teacher and support staff structures in schools” (para 58a).

Bringing Down the Barriers stakes out the territory that the NUT sees as crucial in the battle to overcome current weaknesses in the education system. One of its major thrusts is on the human capital resource of the existing teaching force and on ways to increase its skills.

At the heart of the document is a series of recommendations about teachers continuing to develop their skills as they pursue their careers. Specifically, the Union recommends that continuing professional development (which should include peer coaching and be focussed on “leading edge developments”) should be guaranteed: “Each teacher should receive a material entitlement to continuing professional development (CPD)” (para 55a) and

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“Local Authorities should be encouraged to establish CPD advisory committees” (para 56f). Whilst the NUT accepts that professional development must include government initiatives and recognise the specific needs of individual schools, it also stresses that CPD: “… which has been identified, chosen and owned by teachers themselves is the key to high morale, motivation and confidence among teachers” (para 52). In other words, the Union sees as crucial the active involvement of teachers in shaping their own development.

In order to foster greater knowledge of how teaching skills can be enhanced, the NUT proposes that national strategies should be formulated (and higher education institutions involved) so that teachers have regular opportunities throughout their careers to conduct research on ‘what works in teaching’: “Each teacher should be entitled to a term’s sabbatical once every seven years … to conduct his or her own research into effective classroom practice” (para 56g).

**Government views**

The White Paper, to some extent, concurs with these arguments. It sees teachers as central to school reform and it states proudly that schools now employ “an extra 32,000 teachers and 130,000 support staff” (page 2). It also claims that “Teaching is now the first choice profession for graduates” (para 8.2) and, presumably on this basis, undertakes to ensure a continuing supply of high quality specialist teachers in the future.

The Government also appears to accept that teachers are crucial in improvement efforts and that CPD is vital: “We need high-quality teachers with access to better professional development and a continuous focus on teaching and learning” (para 8.6). Thus far, the two sides appear to be in general agreement over the crucial role of teachers in the quest for improvement.

Furthermore, Government also wants a review of what teachers do – though its focus is somewhat different to that of the Union. Instead of talk about ‘core characteristics’, the language of the White Paper is about standards – “A thorough reform of all teachers’ professional standards will set out what can be expected of teachers at every stage of their career” (para 8.7). This is a different stance – putting teachers under the spotlight and examining what can be expected of them.

The White Paper also enters territory ignored by BDB – relating pay to classroom performance. It notes the Government’s intention to “make performance management more effective” … thus signalling its intention to ensure that “… the greatest rewards will go to those who make the biggest impact on pupils’ progress.” It also sees the relevance of encouraging CPD because it continues “ … and (those) who show commitment to the development of themselves and their colleagues” (para 8.8).

The Government also proposes the use of what they term ‘Leading Teachers’ “to consolidate and continuously improve the support available to pupils and to make best use of the new resources available” (para 4.14). This appears an attractive, although not a new, idea. The traditional head of department in many comprehensive schools undertook just such a role, as well as mentoring new teachers and seeking to galvanise older ones.

There are thus a good many overlaps between the thinking of the Government and the NUT but also some subtle – and some not so subtle – differences.

**International evidence**

The most powerful evidence probably comes from information about the quality, training and standing of teachers in Finland. In that country teachers are highly prized: competition to enter the profession is tough and training – up to master’s degree level in universities – is thorough. Once trained, teachers are deemed educational experts. They enjoy considerable freedom over what, and how, they teach. They also have responsibility for examining and grading the work of their students. Furthermore, they are not inspected and there are no league tables of schools’ results.65 Finland has topped the OECD international assessment league table in both the PISA 2000 and 2003 phases of testing – yet Finnish educational policies are, in many ways, the opposite of the proposed English policies.

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65 Annex 2 Danish Technological Institute (2005) Explaining Student Performance: Evidence from the International PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS Surveys DTI: Copenhagen
Commentary

As has been noted, both the Government and the NUT see the role of teachers as central to the improvement of the education system. Whatever else is done to enhance the system it appears essential that the quality of classroom teaching is sustained and improved. Where there are differences between the two documents these appear to reflect different psychological approaches as well as their differing perspectives.

The Government, from its perspective, appears to view teachers as a workforce which — although expected to be highly active in class and school work — can be treated as if it is a passive entity: to be upgraded, re-tooled, periodically assessed and rewarded according to the assessment results. This appears to be the absolute opposite of the way teachers are treated in Finland. It must again be asked why the White Paper includes such detailed references to Sweden and its use of choice but is silent on the more successful Finnish policy of trusting teachers?

In contrast, the NUT — not surprisingly given its raison d’etre — sees teachers in a different light. For the Union, teachers are the prime movers in the whole educational endeavour and it knows that without teachers’ enthusiastic support, few reforms are likely to succeed. Therefore the Union sees the professional treatment of teachers — which includes being trusted with the ‘ownership’ of their career development — as absolutely vital. It is this professionalism that the NUT believes will inspire improvements in all aspects of education.

The international evidence — from Finland — certainly suggests that respecting teachers’ professional skills and trusting them to plan their teaching and the assessment of their pupils pays dividends. Such a conclusion, therefore, poses an important question: can the Government learn to trust the teachers?

The school workforce — as described in the White Paper — is clearly intended to be seen as ‘modern’. Yet, in many ways, it strongly resembles the traditional model. In addition to the ‘leading teachers’ there are ‘health and welfare staff’ not too dissimilar to the school nurses and — in those schools lucky enough to have them — school counsellors; trained ‘sports coaches, music tutors and language assistants’ with duties which appear very similar to those undertaken by specialist instructors; ‘trained specialists able to deal with disruptive behaviour, truancy and pastoral issues’ — the traditional mission of the Heads of Year; and ‘trained bursars’ who, like the administratively-trained school secretaries of an earlier era, free teachers from many administrative tasks. (Although the provision of large numbers of trained classroom support staff assisting with mathematics and literacy does reflect a more recent trend.)

The ‘re-branding’ of traditional terms is an interesting modern phenomenon which, nonetheless, should not detract from the benefit of regaining valuable posts lost under previous governments but now deemed affordable.

6. Releasing schools from counterproductive pressures

Throughout BDB there are numerous references to the need to free schools from what the NUT regards as counterproductive pressures. The most far reaching of these is the need to free schools from having continually to compete in the marketplace: “National Curriculum and assessment results are geared uniquely to school performance tables” (para 59). Yet the White Paper seeks to perpetuate the notion that improvement can only be achieved through competition. As the Union states: “Parliament should understand that the increased emphasis on competition between schools could be devastating for schools in the most fragile communities” (NUT 2005a, para 34).

A powerful counterproductive pressure on schools — already noted — is the Government’s lack of trust in the professionalism of teachers “The accountability system in England is permeated … by a lack of trust” (para 59). Learning and teaching in schools are dominated by the publication of the performance tables. There is little scope for teachers to develop independent judgements of quality. BDB urges a different approach built on the professionalism of teachers: “The next Government should abolish both tables and targets” (para 67a).

In order that the average performance of the country’s pupils can be monitored, the NUT proposes the re-establishment of the Assessment and Performance Unit (APU). This small statistical unit, established in 1974 within the Department of Education and Science (as it was then called), was able to commission large-scale surveys in the
key subjects of mathematics, science, English and modern languages. Through a process of ‘light sampling’ (which involved a random sample of pupils being assessed on a proportion of any particular survey) the APU built up an accurate record of average achievement at relatively low cost.

The APU was abolished in 1989 when the much more expensive model of universal testing was adopted. In BDB the Union argue that such a body would be well-placed “to respond to requests for national evidence on standards within schools and colleges” (para 67b).

Another pressure on schools is exerted by Ofsted. At one time a teacher could teach for a lifetime and seldom be observed by an inspector. But over the last fifteen or so years many teachers will have been inspected three or four times. The NUT argues that Ofsted should be replaced by an independent body with responsibility for overseeing the whole process of school evaluation. It should be modelled on the former HM Inspectorate. Such a body would be genuinely independent and present an annual report to Parliament. “HMI evaluations should be flexible enough to cover both individual schools and collaborative arrangements” (para 67h).

A further pressure on teachers is the impact of constant reforms. The NUT argues that the achievements of the education service, so well documented by the Government, may “be put at risk by the structural changes in the White Paper” (NUT 2005a page 2). Furthermore, such changes, in the judgement of the Union, are not designed to deal with the crucially important issue of the long-term underachievement of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Teachers habitually have to cope with the pressure of misbehaving pupils. In BDB, the Union states that “no school should be required to continue to accept on roll pupils with continuing unacceptable behaviour” (para 33m). It accompanies this statement with detailed proposals for a full range of special education provision including Pupil Referral Units and Hospital and Home Services.

**Government views**

With regard to the first issue – having to compete in the marketplace – the proposals in the White Paper, far from lessening pressure on schools, are designed to increase it. Competition between individual schools and between types of schools appears to lie at the very heart of the Government’s educational thinking. As noted earlier, competition is the principal method chosen by the Government to try to raise standards.

It is more difficult to characterise the White Paper’s approach to the second issue – trust. In some of its proposals, the Government appears to offer teachers considerably greater trust than is currently the case: “the new approach to challenge and support for schools … are putting all schools in charge of their development and stripping out bureaucracy and unwarranted interference … ” (para 8.21). At the same time, the ongoing reliance on performance tables and on the Ofsted inspection regime means that ‘trust’ is likely to remain conditional on high performance or on changing the category of the school.

With regard to constant reform itself creating a counterproductive pressure, there appears little sympathy from Government. Indeed, the crop of proposals contained in the White Paper demonstrates that Government plans no pause in its reform programme. The plea by the NUT for a focus on ‘standards not structures’ appears to fall on deaf ears.

There is greater agreement, however, over the issue of pupil behaviour in schools. The White Paper devotes a chapter to this topic. Its proposals include clarifying the law over the right of teachers to discipline pupils and extending parents’ parenting orders.

**International evidence**

There is some international evidence which can be applied to counterproductive pressures in schools. Data on, for instance, the frequency of tests and examinations do not support the Government’s policies: “More frequent use of tests … is often emphasized in public debates … as a quick and simple way to improve. Data from PISA 2003 suggest that this argumentation is not very clearly supported by evidence.”

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66 Speech by Steve Sinnott, General Secretary, at the launch of the Compass pamphlet, A Comprehensive Future, by Millar and Benn 19 January 2006

67 Haahr et al, 2005, p 168
Other evidence from PISA does support the argument advanced in the White Paper for greater autonomy. But, as far as England is concerned, many of the instances of autonomy which are cited — school budgeting, the appointment and dismissal of staff and disciplinary policies (Ibid, p164) — have long been accepted practice and their benefits already experienced.

Denmark presents an interesting example of a less pressured system. Although a national curriculum and attainment targets are prescribed, teachers remain free to plan their methods and — up to now — all examinations have been voluntary for pupils. The results of the PISA assessments of 2000 and 2003 were greeted with disappointment since they were only at the levels of the OECD average. Denmark has since embraced a number of important reforms for pupils up to age 16. However, the proportion of young people voluntarily staying in education up to age 19 is high and Denmark is a world leader in levels of adult literacy — illustrating how young people embrace life-long learning if they have not been made to feel a failure at school. The challenge facing Denmark is how to make the senior years of secondary schooling more challenging for its pupils without spoiling a system which already creates a well-educated adult population.68

Commentary

Both the Government and the NUT want schools to be free to get on with fostering teaching and learning. The White Paper argues strongly for what it labels ‘a new approach’ — offering much greater freedoms to schools. The problem is that this new approach seems to imply two things: freedom to vary the curriculum but only for certain kinds of schools; and freedom for all schools to escape from the clutches of local authorities. However, for community schools, the National Curriculum and its assessment systems and Ofsted (even with its modified methods) will remain the forces of control felt by most teachers in their daily lives. As the late Ted Wragg commented: "Ofsted has been a 'how not to' model — mechanical, formulaic, repressive, inimical to innovation." 69

One consequence of the current inspection regime is the seeming reduction in teachers’ confidence in judging quality. ‘High quality’ has too-often become ‘what is praised by the inspector’.

The Government would do well to consider the different model of school evaluation proposed by the NUT. Whilst there are still a number of HM Inspectors in post, their work can seldom be discerned amidst the better publicised activities of Ofsted. The NUT proposal would locate evaluation within the more respected ambit of HM Inspectorate.

The international evidence about the frequency of testing fits much better with the proposals for less external testing emanating from the NUT than from the White Paper. Again, the Government might do well to heed the lesson of the ‘Macnamara Fallacy’ quoted by the management guru Charles Handy:

“The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can’t easily be measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can’t be measured easily really isn’t important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say that what can’t be easily measured really doesn’t exist. This is suicide.”70

As one commentator tellingly remarks: “We start out with the aim of making the important measurable, and end up making only the measurable important.”71 A reduction in the amount of externally controlled assessments could free schools for a greater concentration on teaching and learning and begin to restore teachers’ confidence in recognising quality. And as a teacher responding to a researcher’s question so succinctly commented: “curriculum overload, central prescription, imposed targets and high stakes testing all work together to diminish opportunities for more spontaneous and creative teaching.”72

7. Reforming the curriculum

The view of the NUT expressed in BDB is that “The concept of a National Curriculum is seen as having had a positive impact … (but still exerts) a range of negative pressures on teachers and young people” (paras 36/37). It argues that: “too little curriculum time is available for creative subjects … (and) to respond to pupils’ own

70 Handy, C (1994) The Empty Raincoat Hutchinson: London
71 William, D (2001) What is wrong with our educational assessments and what can be done about it? Education Review 15, 1, Autumn
interests” (para 38). Citizenship – the latest addition to the National Curriculum – is seen as having “had a positive impact in many schools” … although, again, there is a down side: “… the lack of curriculum space and flexibility means that it is still not integral to an already overcrowded curriculum” (para 43).

The NUT proposes, therefore, an “independent review of the 5-14 curriculum” (para 47b) and suggests a framework based on a common entitlement, including cross-curricular learning, which it believes would help promote equality.

The NUT also comments on the 14-19 curriculum and on the failure by the Government to adopt the main proposal recommended by Sir Mike Tomlinson, the former Chief Inspector of Schools. Recognising the complexity of the 14-19 situation, the Union proposes the establishment of a body made up of representatives from all the relevant bodies to serve as a forum for discussion and to “assist in establishing a social consensus for progressive change” (para 47n).

Government views

The White Paper makes only limited reference to the National Curriculum. In one instance it comments (in similar vein to the NUT) that “Children and young people learn best with a curriculum which enthuses and engages them” (para 4.43) and in another it promises “additional curriculum flexibilities” (para 2.16) for the proposed new Trust schools. It also refers to an ongoing review of the Key Stage 3 Curriculum by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and makes the point that “from age 14, all young people will have the opportunity to study traditional curriculum options or any of the specialised Diplomas … available in 2008” (para 4.46).

International evidence

Curriculum issues are difficult to deal with internationally since they are essentially products of particular national histories and cultures. There is some international evidence that pupil motivation helps learning. “There is a positive relation between interest in and enjoyment of a subject” (Haahr et al, 2005, page 129). However, there is also evidence that: “Interest in, and enjoyment of, a subject are neither a sufficient nor a necessary precondition for high average achievement scores” (ibid, page 129).

Interestingly, there is also evidence – drawn partly from England – in the PIRLS 2001 reading survey that improvement does not always follow if more time is devoted to an activity: “the average score among students who have been subjected to more than 6 hours of instruction a week is slightly lower than among students subjected to fewer hours. This is the case in the Netherlands, Germany and England” (Haahr et al, 2005, page158).

There is also evidence, confirmed in PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, that homework is not always helpful: “… in most countries there is no positive correlation between the amount of homework assigned and the achievements in mathematics among students in the 8th grade” (Haahr et al, 2005, page158). And somewhat ironically, both TIMSS and PIRLS data also confirm: “contrary to expectations, shortages of educational resources (instructional materials, computers etc) do not affect students’ average performance in mathematics, science and reading, to a very great extent” (Haahr et al, 2005, page12).

These findings should give us all food for thought.

Commentary

The lack of significant comment about the curriculum in the White Paper is surprising, given that its aims are to raise standards and to improve learning. Alexander’s warning that: “It would be a mistake, too, to conclude from the initiative deluge of the past few years that primary education is now, as they say, ‘sorted’. The picture remains decidedly mixed.” Alexander (2004) needs to be heeded.

The proposal by the NUT to take forward developments in the curriculum for pre-14 year-olds appears sensible in the light of this comment that the primary curriculum is not ‘sorted’.

With regard to post-14 year-olds, the disquiet following the Government’s rejection of many of the Tomlinson proposals suggests all is not well with the ways in which academic and vocational courses are currently structured.

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After so many enforced changes in the curriculum, introduced in such haste in 1988, it seems wise that a more consensual approach for both age phases be adopted today.

The international evidence serves as warnings to both Government and Union that, whilst, it is clearly better if pupils are interested in their learning, there is still no guarantee that such learning will be effective and that whilst, resources are important, they cannot guarantee higher levels of achievement.

8. Rethinking assessment

The NUT argues strongly that there needs to be a thorough and independent review of “testing and assessment of children” (para 47k). It considers that the review should cover the 5-14 age range and should focus on the ways in which assessment actually aids learning. In particular, the Union argues that “Teachers judgements need to be at the centre of assessment and evaluation” (para 66).

Government’s position

The White Paper does not appear to question the value of the current assessment arrangements.

International evidence

The Scottish education system does not follow the same path as England. It uses a different model which separates the assessment of individual children from the assessment of national standards. The latter is carried out through a light sampling methodology similar to that discussed earlier in connection with the APU.75

The situation is also different in Wales. Whereas, previously, Welsh schools were subject to the same assessment system as England, a recent review has recommended radical change76 including having a greater reliance on teacher assessments and making some of the testing phases voluntary.77

As already noted, the evidence is that frequent testing does not necessarily lead to higher achievement. In Finland, where fifteen-year-olds outperform the rest of the OECD, very little formal assessment takes place.

Data from TIMSS also suggest that: “students are more likely to achieve high outcome scores if they believe in their own capacities and do not feel anxious about the learning process” (Haahr et al, 2005, page 129). This finding emphasises the danger of a system in which a high proportion of pupils are made to feel academic failures – one of the residual dangers in a system based on frequent ‘high stakes’ testing.

Commentary

Given how significant a role tests and examinations play in the English education system – and how much they cost – it is rather surprising that so little reference is made to assessment in the White Paper. Yet concern is constantly voiced about the ‘high stakes’ nature of our assessment system: “Evidence that the frequency of testing and the high stakes nature of the examinations is damaging the educational experience of the children in England is now overwhelming.”78 All pupils who are measured and publicly labelled by the process face these high stakes. This is certainly not very educative for those pupils who are constantly reminded that they are at the bottom of the pile. But nor is it good for those who do well leading, as it can, to a sense of superiority and complacency. And the international evidence provides a reminder of how the testing process inhibits the ability of some pupils to perform.

The tests and examinations are also high stakes for the teachers of the targeted age-groups: their reputations and, to a certain extent, their pay also depends on their pupils doing well. Head teachers, too, are judged by these results, as are LAs. Small wonder that accounts of cheating at every level surface from time to time; when the stakes are pushed so high some people tend to panic and resort to desperate remedies.

Another outcome of the testing regime is that teachers are driven to focus their energy on what will be tested rather than what will not. Ofsted has noted the neglect of other subjects in comparison to literacy and mathematics – an echo of a similar complaint by HMI nearly thirty years ago (1978 Primary Survey)79 and also of a much earlier period.

75 For details of the current Scottish system of formative and summative assessment see http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/
76 For details of the Welsh proposals see http://www.learning.wales.gov.uk/
when teachers were paid by results during the ‘Revised Code’ of 1862.\textsuperscript{80} The poet and schools inspector Matthew Arnold criticised the system, noting: “\textit{all test examinations … must inevitably concentrate the teachers’ attention on producing this minimum and not simply on the good instruction of the school}.”\textsuperscript{81}

Matthew Arnold would have been interested in another outcome of the current testing regime: the reported concentration on the particular band of pupils who may just attain the desired standard (those likely to be at the D/C border in GCSE, for example) if given a lot of extra help and the relative neglect of those who are not in the running for such grades.

Both Scotland and Wales have adopted different models of assessment. In the light of the frequent criticisms of the amount of formal testing undertaken in English schools and of the international evidence – the proposal by the NUT for an independent review seems eminently sensible.

The limitations of the GCSE will be discussed in the section on the effects of disadvantage.

\textbf{9. Targeting resources more effectively}

In BDB the NUT welcomes the increased investment in education since 1997. At the same time, it points out that the country still contributes a smaller proportion of its income than many less wealthy countries: “\textit{Government has yet to achieve the objective of spending 5.9 per cent of the GDP on education which is the OECD average}” (para 32).

The Union argues that the current range of mechanisms used to fund different types of schools need to be merged and a single system established. BDB also includes a proposal that a mechanism be developed: “to examine the role and capacity of local authorities to sustain across all services the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged communities” (para 33j).

A related issue is the provision of child care for working parents. The NUT proposes that the Government should: “\textit{develop a funded strategy for creating an entitlement for high quality and affordable childcare for all working parents}” (para 33p).

Finally, the Union maintains that: “\textit{Each policy introduction should be accompanied by an evaluation of its cost}” (para 33h).

\textbf{Government views}

The White Paper makes numerous references (22 in all) to the ‘investment in education’ made by the Government since 1997. These cover the overall total: “\textit{Spending on education in England has risen from £35 billion in 1997/98 to £51 billion in 2004/05}” (para 1.4), specific references to buildings and other capital costs, teacher’s salaries, books and equipment, including ICT (on which spending has doubled since 1998).

\textbf{International evidence}

As noted by the NUT, despite these dramatic increases, spending on education is still below the average for all OECD countries. In BDB, the Union claims that the Government target of 5.6% of GDP has been postponed from 2006 to 2007. This figure is still below the current average (5.9%) of the OECD countries.

\textbf{Commentary}

The increased investment in education made by the current government over the last eight or nine years is impressive by any standards. The fact that, even with this massive injection of funds, the total expenditure is still below the OECD average illustrates just how little had been invested – in comparison to similar countries – by previous governments.

However, the issue of differential funding mechanisms for schools is important. It is manifestly unfair for different types of schools, whose pupils are being judged on the same national criteria, to receive different allocations of resources – whether of capital or revenue. This is another uneven playing field so abhorred by teachers, governors and parents.

\textsuperscript{80} Lawson, J & Silver, H (1973) \textit{A Social History of Education in England} Methuen & Co: London
\textsuperscript{81} Quoted in Marshall ibid p 70
The provision of child care (raised by the NUT) is also of the utmost importance. Our country relies increasingly on a large proportion of adults being in employment. Yet, in comparison with our continental neighbours, the cost of private child care in England is heavy. Unless they are in highly paid occupations, this can cause considerable problems for the parents of young children. The NUT has rightly recognised this as a problem not only for teachers but for all other workers. The establishment of high quality provision for young children would be likely to benefit many children – especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds – as Government funded research on pre-school provision demonstrates.82

The high cost of reform – the final issue raised by the NUT – also carries weight. New Government initiatives are seldom publicly costed prior to their implementation. Yet their costs have to be borne not only by Government but by the many institutions affected by the initiative. The provision of an evaluation of likely costs would enable better planning to be carried out and would be more likely to provide a due return in terms of value for money. With regard to the White Paper, a full estimate of the costs of the proposal to create Trust schools, for instance, would reveal the potential costs of the loss of significant public assets.

10. Dealing with disadvantage

Both the White Paper and BDB address the subject of disadvantage in some detail. Both clearly recognise its importance and want to change the current pattern of a large average difference between the achievements of children from disadvantaged families and those from more advantaged backgrounds.

**Government views**

The Government appears to have adopted the needs of disadvantaged children as a priority and so the White Paper makes many references to their needs. For instance, it refers to them in relation to: academies; Ofsted inspections; Sure Start provision; health issues; ‘Teach First’ (the special initiative to attract new graduates into teaching) and the role of the proposed School Commissioner.

The White Paper also addresses the needs of disadvantaged children in relation to school choice: “We must be sure that the process for deciding who secures a place is open and fair – and that the less affluent are not disadvantaged” (this explains the thinking behind the proposal for ‘choice advisers’ discussed earlier) and “We will continue to ensure that priority is also given for the most vulnerable groups such as … those with Special Educational Needs” (para 3.2).

A specific reference is made to a particularly disadvantaged group: “‘Looked After Children’ – children in care – remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in our society and need particular support and access to specialist services” (para 6.24).

**The NUT views**

The NUT also considers the needs of disadvantaged children to be crucially important and it salutes the Government’s commitment to remedial action. BDB points out that “… Save the Children has found that close to one in ten children still suffer from severe and persistent poverty, lasting for five years or more”. In the Union’s view “Social class still has a powerful influence on the achievements of young people. To its credit, the Government has recognised this” (para 15).

In order to provide a comprehensive response to the problem of disadvantage, the NUT proposes that: “A separate funding review group should examine the role and capacity of local authorities to sustain across all services the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged communities” (para 33). Furthermore, the Union argues that “… there should be a sustained attack on the root causes of social and economic deprivation” and “there needs to be … proper joined up thinking, to use a familiar phrase, on how initiatives in communities to tackle social and economic deprivation can link up to education locally” (para 15). This point concurs with the White Paper’s stress on the wider community role of the LA.

One area of disagreement between the two documents, already noted, concerns school choice. The White Paper’s emphasis on choice as one of the main spurs to higher standards has already been discussed in detail. For the NUT, the raising of choice as a major issue is dangerous and misleading. According to BDB: “discrimination and economic and social disadvantage make the idea of school choice being equally available to all an illusion” (para 18). What is needed – in the opinion of the NUT – is: “a single, non-diverse, system of well resourced provision within which the needs of all children and young people are targeted and met” (para 14). In other words, what – in its specific response to the White Paper – the NUT describes as “A good local school for every child” (NUT, 2005a).

International evidence

In countries where information on students’ families is collected, a strong relationship is found between socio-economic background and student outcomes: the most advantaged students generally achieve the best – and the least advantaged the worst – outcomes. PISA 2000, like all other major international studies, illustrates this profound effect. The PISA data show that family background is a consistent source of disparity in learning outcomes in many countries “Students whose parents are working in less prestigious jobs and have lower levels of educational attainment, tend to perform less well at school than students whose parent have high levels of educational qualifications and are working in prestigious occupations”.

The 2003 PISA Report also illustrates that home background remains one of the most powerful factors influencing performance: “Parental occupational status, which is often closely interrelated with other attributes of socio-economic status, has a strong association with student performance. The average performance gap in mathematics between students in the top quarter of the PISA index of occupational status (whose parents have occupations in fields such as medicine, university teaching and law) and those in the bottom quarter (with occupations such as small-scale farming, truck-driving and serving in restaurants), amounts to an average of 93 score points, or more than one-and-a-half proficiency levels in mathematics” (OECD 2004, page 165).

Commentary

As noted, both the White Paper and BDB demonstrate concern for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Deciding what defines disadvantage, however, is not always simple: “it is a relative concept, tied to the social context of time and place.” In other words – what might count as disadvantage in an English city today might not have seemed too bad to school pupils of fifty years ago or to those trying to study in a developing country today. The White Paper identifies disadvantaged children as “those eligible for free school meals or whose parents are in receipt of the maximum level of Working Tax Credit, and children in local authority care” (page 114). Sociologists have coined the terms cultural capital, social capital and economic capital to illustrate the ways in which some families benefit from their assets. The ways in which such forms of capital combine to help or hinder life chances is a major concern today and research is being undertaken to explore it.

Disadvantage today, therefore, can be seen as the absence of: educated parents with adequate incomes, a variety of cultural possessions, useful social contacts and – in a multicultural society – adequate command of the country’s main language.

Both the White Paper and BDB accept the premise that – in general – children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to do well in school than their more advantaged peers. This is significant because former governments and their advisers refused to accept that there was any link between home background and achievement and declared it patronising to suggest that one might exist.

The irrationality of such a denial can be demonstrated by a comparison between the different chances of academic success of pupils from two contrasting backgrounds. The pupil with a favourable background may have had, from birth onwards, better diet, healthcare and housing than his or her peer from a disadvantaged family. He or she may have access to more toys, books, outings, holidays and other educational experiences as well as probably having

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better home conditions in which to study. He or she may have a parent who, having succeeded in the education system, can offer assistance, advice and — if things do go wrong — the confidence to negotiate effectively with the school authorities. Is it any wonder that, in general, the pupil from the more advantaged background is more likely to do better than his or her less advantaged peer?

It is important to emphasise, however, that, while the negative effects of disadvantage on children’s achievement appears to occur in all countries, they do not augur an inevitable outcome for all individuals. All societies will have exceptional citizens who emerge from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve great things. There will also be some outstanding individuals where the sheer weight of the disadvantage appears to stimulate their energy even more so that they ‘buck the trend’ and succeed. Such people, however, are exceptional. The more usual pattern is the negative relationship between disadvantage and the lack of achievement illustrated by the PISA data.

In England this problem is exacerbated by the extremely competitive way in which the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is used. The GCSE evolved out of a merger of the former General Certificate of Education (GCE) — an examination used by grammar schools since 1947 — and the former Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) which had been designed specifically for secondary modern schools in 1963. The new examinations were approved (after much soul searching by the then Secretary of State, Sir Keith Joseph) in 1984 and the first papers were taken in schools in 1988.

The grade levels of the new examination were calibrated so that the new GCSE grade C was deemed equivalent to the former grade C in the old GCE87 — in order to enable a standard to be maintained between the old and the new examinations. Since it was common in the GCE to categorise a good all-round performance as being the achievement of grades A-C in at least five separate subjects, this was continued with regard to the new examination. Five high grades in the GCSE has become the generally accepted criterion of real success for individuals.

Since the start of the GCSE, there has been a trend for the proportion of the age group achieving 5 high grades (A-Cs or, in recent years, A*-Cs) to edge up by one or two percentage points each year — as the graph in the White Paper illustrates for 1997 to 2005. Each time this happens, however, there are claims — voiced loudly in the press — that, since there is an improvement, standards must be slipping. This is usually countered by argument that the standards are the same (because the three examination boards and the umbrella organisation, the QCA, strive to keep them constant) and that the improvement is due to better teaching, students working harder or a combination of both.

Because of the way that the results for all subjects are aggregated together, with any subject variation tending to cancel itself out, the reality is that the likely rise in the percentage who achieve 5 high grades will remain small. (In fact, it may even fall since, in the next Achievement and Attainment Tables in 2006, there will be a new indicator in which the 5 subjects have to include both English and maths.) In 2005, the proportion obtaining 5 high grades was 56% though this concealed a sizeable difference between the results for girls and boys.

The key point is that if only just over 50% of the candidates generally gain five high grades and just below 50% do not, is it surprising that a higher proportion of the ‘advantaged’ rather than the ‘disadvantaged’ pupils end up in the more successful half?

If the GCSE was like the driving test, pitched at a standard of ‘safe and reasonable’ — but not necessarily outstanding — competence that most people could reach with adequate teaching, there would be no problem. All pupils — whether or not disadvantaged — could strive to pass and every school could be judged fairly on its outcome.

But the GCSE is a different sort of animal! It is not an examination that has been designed for everyone to pass. This is a point seldom recognised since — formally — there is no bar on high grades. In theory, as the examination boards would probably claim, every candidate in the examination could gain an A grade if they did well enough.

But, in practice — allowing for subject variation cancelling itself out — grades occur along a normal distribution.88 This can be illustrated by looking at the figures for all the most common subjects in the 2004 results.

87 The CSE grade 1 had also been deemed the equivalent of a GCE Grade C.
88 The standard normal distribution is the normal distribution with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.
The figure shows that: A* grades were gained by 5.4% of 16-year-olds in 2004; Grade As were gained by 11.8%; Bs by 17.3%; Cs by 24%; Ds by 17%; Es by 11.5%; Fs by 6.8%; and Grades G, U or X were obtained by just 6%.

Thus, approximately 35% of candidates received the top grades (A*, A or B) whilst 24% obtained the most common grade C (the mode) and approximately 35% were awarded a lower grade (D, E or F) whilst 6% failed to get even an F grade. Thus excluding this small group, there were about as many candidates below C as above it – revealing a fairly normal distribution.

Given this pattern of achievement, one can see how inappropriate it is to expect every candidate to earn the 5 high grades.

Similarly, one can see how impossible it would be for all schools to meet the national rate of 56% of their pupils reaching this level. Given that selective schools are likely to do much better, it is inevitable that others will do much worse.

### Table 1 Number of maintained mainstream schools by percentage of pupils obtaining 5+A*-Cs and equivalents in 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGE of pupils 5 +A*-Cs (and equivalents)</th>
<th>Less 29</th>
<th>30-49</th>
<th>50-59</th>
<th>60-100</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of schools</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>1,082</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>1,093</td>
<td>3,095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of schools</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen, in 2004 46% (11% + 35%) of schools did not get 50% of their pupils up to the level of the national average; 19% of schools had between 50% and 59% of their pupils getting the 5 high grades (around the national average of 56%); and 35% of schools did rather better with, in some cases, the percentage of pupils gaining them reaching up to 100%.

Yet in an interview on the 14 February 2006, the Prime Minister asked: "Would you send your kid to a school that gets fewer than 30%." The answer is that many thousands of parents do send their children to schools that get less than 30% (343 schools in 2004) and if those schools were closed and the parents sent their children to other ‘more successful’ schools, it would not make any difference to the results – unless the current pattern of GCSE results was changed. The impact of such ‘tough (as it would be seen) action’ in closing schools would probably

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*Woodward ibid p1
remove many local school sites, increase road traffic and condemn even more pupils to long daily journeys. It would also drive to despair many good teachers who had been struggling, against the odds, to promote their pupils’ achievement.

The problem is that our society is confused over assessment. As noted, while the GCSE has inherited the function of the old GCE (which had only been designed for the most able 20% of the age group), to discriminate between the performance of examination candidates, with the levels pegged (as tightly as the examination boards could manage) to a fixed standard, it has come to be seen as the hurdle (5 high grades) considered to be the measure of success expected of all individual pupils. The contradiction between these two functions places the examination boards in a difficult position: if grade levels go up more than a percentage point or two they are accused of letting standards slip, by setting easier papers or by marking more leniently. Thus there is very limited headroom for improvements to the GCSE results. However, unless there is year-on-year improvement, the media consider the increased spending on education to be a waste of resources and blame the teachers. The situation, in this respect, is quite different to that of the Key stage tests which were designed at a more inclusive level and have always had scope for improvements.

As if the GCSE did not have enough problems, the aggregation of individual pupils’ results into the defining measure of school effectiveness causes even greater confusion. Currently – as noted – 56% of the pupil age group in all maintained schools achieve 5 high grades. Schools which do not achieve this level are deemed to be – if not actually failing – letting their pupils down. But – again as shown earlier – as many schools do not reach this figure as do reach it (as is the case with normal distributions). Moreover, unless full account is taken of the prior attainment and social background of the pupils entering the school, the GCSE results are likely to reflect more about the quality of that intake than about the effectiveness of the teaching.

Not surprisingly, one examination cannot bear the weight of so many different functions. But, just as there are exceptional individual pupils, so there are exceptional schools. The results from many studies of school effectiveness show that highly effective schools can promote the achievement of their disadvantaged pupils and perform in a better-than-expected way but the scope to do so is obviously limited by the distributions of grades shown earlier.

Exceptional schools buck the trend using a variety of methods – such as finding ways in which disadvantaged pupils can be given extra help, using their more skilled teachers with the weakest students, making available more support for learning, providing extra opportunities for revision and other similar strategies. But maintaining these efforts in a highly competitive environment is expensive and hard to sustain. Sometimes with a change of head or key member of staff or a reduction in the school’s budget they falter. This is why it is unwise to base a “national strategy for change on the efforts of outstanding individuals working in exceptional circumstances.” Furthermore, because of what amounts to a de facto overall limit on the high grades, every school which ‘bucks the trend’ inevitably means that another is going to go down.

In the light of this reality, the White Paper’s message that — “there are some communities – often in our most disadvantaged areas – where school standards are poor” (para 2.50) needs to be questioned. Is this meant to imply that there is no connection between the type of pupil intake to the school and the average standards achieved by pupils at that school? If so, it is misleading for all the reasons that have been cited.

Of course, there undoubtedly are some unacceptably ineffective schools in areas of social disadvantage and elsewhere and they need to be identified by the LA and helped to improve in the fastest possible time. But there will also be some good schools doing their best for disadvantaged pupils in disadvantaged areas — even if the GCSE results fail to do them justice.

This point illustrates a fundamental problem with performance tables. Because schools do not have uniform intakes, it is impossible to judge how well or how badly they are performing in the GCSE. It is necessary to take into account

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92 Mortimore & Whitty ibid p15
the nature of their intake and its prior performance in order to calculate the progress that has been made and thus be able to judge how well – or how badly – they are performing; in other words, to try to create a level playing field on which they can be judged.

Value-added statistical techniques have been developed by researchers to try to take account of "the extent to which a given school has fostered the progress of all students in a range of subjects during a particular time period … in comparison with the effects of other schools in the same sample."93 In some LAs value-added techniques have been used for a number of years to help secondary schools judge their results.94 The most sophisticated models are able to take account of the variation in pupils’ academic performance in primary schools at age 11 and information about home backgrounds in order to provide an estimate of the progress they have made by the time they take their GCSE examinations.

The ‘value-added’ analyses that the Government has been using as part of the performance tables use a different model: “This measure looks at the progress that pupils have made for the whole secondary phase of education … For example, school A might show higher percentages of pupils achieving … five or more GCSE grades A*-C, or equivalent than school B. But school A’s pupils may have done far better in their key stage tests than school B’s. … each school’s pupils are compared individually with other pupils with similar KS2 test results. If they do better than the median – or middle – performance of other pupils in their GCSE (and equivalent) examinations, the value added will be positive; if they do less well than other pupils, it will be negative …

… All the individual pupil scores, positive and negative, are added together and averaged to form the school’s measure. If school A’s pupils generally made less progress than the average for pupils with similar KS2 results, and school B’s pupils generally made more progress than the average for pupils with similar KS2 results, then school B will have higher value added than school A, even though school B’s percentage of pupils achieving Level 2 qualifications is lower.”95

Unfortunately, for various technical reasons, it has proved difficult to undertake such analyses entirely successfully and many statisticians have expressed doubts over their validity.96 This is another reason why the Government should think again about its reliance on performance tables and why the NUT’s alternative proposal needs to be acted upon.

Leaving aside the difficult question of how to measure the performance of schools with different kinds of pupil intakes and returning to the issue of how best to support disadvantaged pupils – it is heartening that the current Government has committed itself to finding new ways to help. However, earlier attempts to raise the achievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, through parental involvement strategies, have shown that the task is not always straightforward.

Studies dating back many years have shown that it is difficult to design ways of helping children learn which will be used exclusively by the disadvantaged group.97 Naturally, other parents, including those from the most advantaged backgrounds, also want to do all they can to help their children. The result is that with any new approach the gap between the two groups – rather than diminishing – can actually increase.98

At the same time, it is encouraging that the Government, as well as the NUT, now recognises the problems faced by children with disadvantaged backgrounds. We have moved a long way from the early 1980s when the efforts of an LA to alert its teachers to this issue – noted in an NUT journal – failed to excite much Government interest.99

In terms of the proposed solutions to underachievement by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, the Government is proceeding down the road of new kinds of institutions: specialist schools, academies and, now, Trust schools. Whilst the new buildings, enhanced equipment and general razzmatazz are undoubtedly helpful to schools as obvious signs of importance, increased resources and even novelty, there appears to be no serious debate within

95 Value Added Technical Information Section on the Achievement and Attainment Tables website at www.dfes.gov.uk/performancetables/schools_05.shtml
98 Mortimore & Whitty ibid
the Government about whether such a divided system may not, itself, create further problems by exacerbating still more the hierarchy of ‘status’ amongst schools.

The existence of a hierarchy of schools is readily understood by parents and the most advantaged use their assets to ensure that their children attend those schools with the highest status. Such parents are not blameworthy. They are doing what they see as the best for their children. The problem is that their actions will have implications for other schools. They might, for instance, lead to the development of a two-or even more – tiers within the education system and so impinge on the opportunities available for all the other children.

The NUT’s remedy of seeking to improve ‘all’ schools by ensuring that as many as possible receive comprehensive intakes and enjoy equal status would avoid this predicament. It would still be open to companies from the business world to contribute resources – including volunteer staff time – but, with the help of the LA, such extra support could be distributed so that all schools received some benefits. And, as noted earlier, some representatives of major companies might prefer to sponsor facilities or projects which would be available to all schools rather than support a single institution.106

Creating a system of as many good schools as possible might be castigated by critics as supporting mediocrity by making everyone the same and thus excluding competition. Such criticism, however, would be wide of the mark. Schools would no longer have to change their identity in order to receive higher levels of resources. Nor would they be forced into a building competition which required them to pander to whatever was the Government’s latest initiative in order to stand any chance of success.

Rather, schools would compete but – and this is the crucial difference to the model presented in the White Paper – they would do so over the energy and skill they invested in their teaching and in the quality of the care they offered to their pupils.

11 Improving ‘failing’ schools

The Government’s proposals

The message of the White Paper, as spelled out in its summary, is severe: “… we will introduce much tougher rules for failing schools”. The rules will include “parents able to urge Ofsted action or request new providers”; schools being assigned to ‘Special Measures’ within a year if, in the view of Ofsted, insufficient progress is made. And, after one year, “a competition for new providers will be held.” According to the White Paper: “competitions will … for the first time provide a straightforward route to bring new providers into the system” and, furthermore, “all new schools will be self-governing Foundation, voluntary aided, Trust schools or Academies” (page 10). (In the Education and Inspections Bill this has been amended so that LAs may – with the permission of the Secretary of State – include a community school in the competition for new provision).

The NUT’s approach

The NUT’s approach is rather different. Rather than punishment for allegedly ‘failing their pupils’, the Union suggests that such schools need extra support. In its view: “There should be no ‘one-size-fits all’ deadline for improvement” (para 67c). The Union draws attention to the consequences for teachers working in ‘failing schools’. It considers that “the judgement that a school is ‘failing’ … can lead to career blight for teachers, excessive workload and, for those in schools in special measures, movement to another school or a change of career” (para 61). It concludes that “The terms, ‘special measures’ and ‘significant weaknesses’ … should be replaced by the term ‘schools in need of additional support’” (para 67c).

International evidence

Since England has been a pioneer of ‘naming and shaming’ and other punitive approaches to school improvement, there are few other examples on which to draw.

Research on ‘turning schools around’ demonstrates the long time that the school improvement process normally takes.101

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106 Ball ibid; Fatchett ibid
Commentary

The tone of the White Paper seems excessively aggressive. It might be suitable in an extreme case – where those responsible for a school could be shown, wilfully, to have set out to fail their pupils. However, the more likely scenario (after years of Government prodding) is that failing schools are simply unable to cope with their adverse conditions. The NUT’s suggestion of additional support “including advisers and seconded teachers based in the school” (para 67c) appears more measured and more appropriate – not only for the sake of all the pupils involved but also for the sake of the school’s community.

A deadline of one year also appears over-rigid and unrealistic, given that schools will differ significantly in both the nature of the problems they face and the best strategies of improvement open to them. In addition, the White Paper provides no justification for the insistence that the institution – if it possesses community school status – may be forced to change its category.

One of the problems inherent in all school improvement work is that there are two ways to produce improvement: the harder route is to make the school more effective by upgrading the teaching, improving behaviour or extending the opportunities for learning. The easier route is to alter the pupil body by attracting more socially advantaged families to the school or by rejecting ‘hard-to-teach’ pupils.

As is clear from the PISA 2000 international comparisons: “in most countries there is a clear advantage in attending a school whose students are from more advantaged family backgrounds.” It is also clear from the earliest work on school effectiveness and also from that of some of its critics – that a balance of pupils, some of whom are good learners, helps achieve greater effectiveness. In order to improve, therefore, some schools need to adopt both strategies: try to attract a more balanced intake so that they have a mix of ‘easy-to-teach’, average and ‘hard-to-teach’ pupils and simultaneously seeking to improve the quality of their teaching and pupil care.

The problem is that if all the ‘easy-to-teach’ pupils have been accounted for by the schools with a higher status in the pecking order with better facilities and more resources, then the school trying to get itself out of difficulties will not achieve the balanced intake it needs. Expecting the staff of schools to ‘turn themselves around’ solely through their teaching and pupil care whilst keeping their intake of predominantly ‘hard-to-teach’ pupils is unrealistic. It would be encouraging if the White Paper demonstrated that the Government understood this dilemma. If it did so, it might influence the media so that such matters were dealt with in more realistic, less sensational terms.

12. Personalising learning

The White Paper devotes a significant amount of space to the concept of ‘personalised learning’. This is a term adopted by the Prime Minister and developed by David Miliband when he was the Schools Minister. In a major speech in January 2004 he said: “This is what I mean by ‘Personalised Learning’. High expectations of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child’s needs. It is not individualised learning where pupils sit alone at a computer. Nor is it pupils left to their own devices – which too often reinforces low aspirations. It can only be developed school by school. It cannot be imposed from above.”

The concept was taken up by education officials and many of the Government agencies have been exploring its meaning. Consequently a number of different interpretations of what personalised learning means have been promulgated. According to the ESRC, a DfES document published in September 2004 suggests that “Personalised Learning is an aspiration or philosophy providing space within which others can operate”. A fuller definition, with a somewhat different slant, can be found on the DfES ‘Standards’ site: “Personalised learning is about tailoring education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to ensure that every pupil achieves and reaches the highest standards possible, notwithstanding their background or circumstances, and right across the spectrum of achievement.”

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102 OECD (2001) ibid p198
107 http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/about/
As one commentator, however, notes: “Despite speeches of clarification, it remains difficult to be certain what the Government means by personalised learning.”  

The ESRC pamphlet maintains that, notwithstanding ongoing work by DfES officials, personalised learning remains ‘a theory’. Despite expressing support for the ‘idea’, the ESRC delicately raises a number of questions about its authenticity (“Is this initiative really about learning?”), the adequacy of its knowledge base (“… the extent to which the present application of personalised learning fully reflects available research on learning”) and its scope (“Are the ambition and rhetoric over-reaching themselves?). It also warns that with its “softer vocabulary than that of targets, performance and delivery” there is a risk of the initiative “being accused of ‘spin’ by a sceptical teaching profession” and notes that it will require “joined up Government between key agencies within and beyond education” (ESRC, ibid).

In many ways, personalised learning resembles the Records of Achievement and Pupil Profile projects of the 1980s. They were designed to give learners a more active role and to develop better ways of recording progress in personal as well as academic matters. The projects came to grief (which should serve as a warning to Government) because they did not fit easily with the rigid demands of the formal assessment system.

The White Paper, curiously, does not contain a definitive interpretation of personalised learning. It notes merely that the concept is not new: “Our best schools provide a tailored education which combines: extra small group or one-to-one tuition … opportunities for all children to get extra support … whole class teaching … setting or grouping … flexible and accessible curriculum … innovative use of ICT” (para 4.2).

The DfES Standards Site sets out a series of principles underpinning personalised learning which can be applied to pupils, parents and carers, teachers, schools, the DfES, LAs and the system as a whole. The principles appear to boil down to three key elements:

- trying to offer each child a chance to fulfil his or her potential
- accepting individual differences
- endeavouring to meet disparate needs.

The White Paper, under the banner of personalised learning, discusses many related issues. These include:

- literacy and numeracy in primary schools – including synthetic phonics;
- difficulties of providing adequate remedial provision and the need for small group work and, where appropriate, individual attention;
- the virtues of whole class teaching “exciting whole-class teaching, which gets the best from everyone” (para 4.2);
- requirements of children with special educational needs – including “sharing of expertise between special and mainstream schools” (para 4.18);
- ‘gifted and talented learners’ – including “a national register of gifted and talented pupils” (para 4.24); (but with no discussion of the difficulties of such a proposal);
- special projects for Black and Minority Ethnic Children – including plans for increased bilingual support (4.30);
- grouping and setting practices in schools (to which there are assorted references throughout the White Paper though none which acknowledge any of the issues raised by research findings);
- what is termed ‘tailored teaching in class’ and which consists of a list of tasks – from planning exciting lessons to providing individual feedback (para 4.38);
- developments in ICT – “By 2008 all schools will be able to offer access to e-learning resources” (para 4.42).

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This section of the White Paper also announces that £335 million is to be invested in the development of small group tuition in secondary schools (para 4.12).

The NUT’s views

The NUT agrees that “Meeting the individual needs of each child and young person is an aspiration which all those involved in education can sign up to” (para 46). The Union argues, however, that first there should be a review of the National Curriculum and its assessment arrangements because “young people need to be able to experience, and teachers need to be able to provide, much more one-to-one teaching” (para 46).

The Union, mindful perhaps of the Scottish experience where trials of similar ideas have been undertaken over the last four years, notes that: “Personalised learning has been described in many different ways. The NUT would propose that as part of the development of personalised learning the Government should fund and pilot, in a group of primary and secondary schools, personal tuition arrangements for pupils which would involve enhancing the number of teaching staff in those schools” (para 47).

International evidence

In the Scottish project noted above, between 2002 and 2004 thirty-two schools were involved in a two year development project on ‘Personal Learning Planning (PLP)’ as part of a programme looking at the relationship of assessment to learning.

The initial results were positive, indicating that both pupils and teachers found the experience helpful and, as a result, they felt able to discuss learning objectives and individual learning needs. Pupils also valued clearer explanations of what they were expected to learn. They found the planning and review sessions helpful although there was danger of them becoming repetitive. Teachers had difficulties combining formal curriculum issues with personal, social and health-related aspects and they suggested special training was needed. They favoured the links between PLP and formative assessment but noted the increased work load. Parents were generally in favour of the project.111

Commentary on personalised learning

In many ways, this section of the White Paper contains some of the most potentially interesting educational ideas. For instance, it relates to the work of researchers (such as Watkins) who are exploring the way pupils – and teachers – think about learning.112 But whether it is wise to stake so much on such an under-developed idea is questionable.

By signalling personalised learning as top priority, the Government has taken a brave step. One doubts if ministers can have costed the proposals. Already the expense of so many DfES and agency officials working on the idea must be significant and that is before it has hit the schools. In Scotland, where a similar but much more modest scheme has been piloted, there has been unrest amongst head teachers because of the resource implications.113

The NUT has identified two key points: the implications of a personalised approach for a National Curriculum with rigid assessment arrangements (a point borne out by the Scottish experience and the earlier work on Records of Achievement) and the implications for school resource levels. Although ministers have been at pains to stress that they are not advocating ‘individual’ learning, the inference must be that a more fluid approach, smaller groups and greater cooperation between institutions will be involved. As one commentator points out “If Government intends to increase option choice through collaboration between institutions, it will have to recognise the costs involved and the inhibitions produced by their autonomous status and the quasi-market” (Johnson, 2005 p14).

Both Government and Union are agreed on the worthiness of the aspiration but, ironically, it appears to be the Union rather than the Government which is being sensibly cautious about both its scope and its funding.

Finally, it is not clear whether the philosophy underpinning personalised learning is closer to the hard-nosed ‘choice, diversity, competition and frequent tests’ emphasis of the other Government themes, or whether its realisation would lead in the opposite direction – towards less competition, greater cooperation between schools and a less rigid approach to assessment.

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113 TES Scotland, 13 May 2005
Discussion of the two documents

Each of the two documents contains many ideas about the English education system – its current condition and how it might look in the future. The production of both documents is helpful since they have stimulated debate about a vitally important question: what sort of education system do we want for our society in the 21st century.

It is regrettable that there was not the opportunity for such a debate when the previous Government inaugurated its programme of educational reform in 1988. Had there been, the last twenty or so years might have subject to less educational chopping and changing and a generation of young people and their schools might have benefited.

Key components of Bringing Down the Barriers

The NUT’s document demonstrates a commendable awareness of current research and understanding of the international evidence. Not surprisingly – given its provenance – it is more obviously grounded in the realities of school and classroom life than the White Paper. It is also more optimistic – stressing the feasibility of system-wide improvement.

In other ways, BDB is more cautious. It looks back to the days of HMI and APU and suggests ways in which these bodies could solve current problems. This might be a wise strategy: the Scottish Executive is investing in a modern test agency which will seek to produce what APU used to provide – accurate estimates of national standards without the costs and the problems of universal testing. Similarly, positioning a reformed inspection service within a framework which, for 150 years, was seen as a guarantee of knowledge, rigour and objective reporting has much to commend it.

There is a risk, however, that such proposals will be seen as simply looking backwards rather than to the future. This is a danger the Union, perhaps, needs to acknowledge and deal with. Change is inevitable in today’s climate: the developments in computer technology and the developing understanding of how the brain enables us to learn (as described, for instance, by McNeill)\(^{114}\) are bound to have significant implications for the way schools operate. Yet, as the Canadian educator Fullan has commented: “successful innovations and reforms are usually clear after they work, not in advance.”\(^{115}\)

An impressive characteristic of the NUT’s Report is that it does not make a case for improvements to teachers’ conditions, pay or status. Rather, it makes a case for a better national education system. Of course, having a better system will benefit teachers – I know of few instances when the interests of teachers and their pupils proceed in opposing directions — but this is not the main purpose of the document and the Union has done well to resist diversion.

The NUT’s goal is to maintain a national system of local schools for all pupils under the framework of local authorities. It would like LAs to oversee all admissions to all schools of whatever type, thus ensuring that each school admits a balanced intake of ‘easy-to-teach’, average and ‘hard-to-teach’ pupils.

Within such schools, well-trained teachers would be treated as professionals and trusted to promote the optimum development of their pupils (and their own continued professional development). The National Curriculum would still guarantee a broad education but there would also be time for other teacher-led activities.

Regular assessment aimed at supporting learning would be undertaken and would provide helpful feedback to pupils, teachers and parents. National standards would be monitored by a newly established APU. Self-evaluation would be undertaken and schools inspected by a new body – based on an HMI model – in a rigorous yet fair way. Parents would judge the quality of the schools from these reports and not, as now, on the basis of what the NUT sees as spurious league tables.

Key components of the White Paper

The White Paper – as has been pointed out by several commentators, not just the NUT – has a number of distinctive elements running through it: an emphasis on the creation of an education market place in which choice and

diversity are meant to flourish; a set of ideas about how best to help pupils from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds; and an interesting — but much less developed — section devoted to what is termed ‘personalised education’. The focus of the White Paper, interestingly, appears to be rather more on parents than on their children: the ratio of references to parents and to pupils is two-to-one (in contrast to the NUT document which has a smaller but equal number of references to both).

With regard to the first component and as has been emphasised in this Review, there are many problems with educational markets. These are four significant factors.

- The schools which make up the market are not of equal value but already exist within a known hierarchy of esteem (a ‘pecking order’). Some may have more advantaged histories, sites and buildings; receive more resources; attract parents of higher socio-economic status; and some, of course, will be more effective than others.

- Despite these differences, English schools — constrained by a largely common curriculum, the public scrutiny of test and examination results and a national inspection regime — tend to offer teaching and learning experiences that are much more alike than different. The current system is not one which will produce many schools like Summerhill or those based on Steiner or Montessori principles.

- Schools flourish in local communities and local communities feel more vibrant when their area includes a school.

- Children, generally, do not like changing their schools. More than one non-essential transfer is difficult to justify and to execute — as many parents have discovered.

Attempts to create a workable, fair market for schools have so far failed. England now has an over-complex, diverse system in which — in general — the advantaged get places in the most desirable schools and the rest have to take what remains. Instead of seeking to increase this diversity — which as Benn & Millar (ibid) point out “really means hierarchy” — the Government should surely be taking positive steps to reduce it. The Deputy Prime Minister’s comment that — “If you set up a school and it becomes a good school, the great danger is that’s the place they [the middle-classes] want to go to.” — often derided as a significant ‘letting-cat-out-of-bag’ slip — illustrates the inevitability that the more intense the competition for places, the greater the disappointment and frustration.

It is the fear that implementing the White Paper will cause further fragmentation of the education system into public and private — leading to a two-or-more-tier service — which many find particularly worrying. A fragmented system may have any number of effective schools but this is surely not good enough for a globalised age when we need all schools to be as good as possible. Moreover, in the climate engendered by a fragmented system — where all schools are competitors — there is too much fear to share expertise, resources or even ideas. So although the White Paper makes reference to co-operation between schools, the existence of a market will work to inhibit such development.

Of course there must be some choice in twenty first century England. The days of strict school allocations by bureaucrats are over. But choice has to be set within some limits. If these limits are defined carefully, so that they are manifestly fair, parents will be more inclined to work within them and schools will be able to recruit the ‘balanced’ intakes that so often are the key to their success. In this way the opportunity for the majority of schools to do well (subject to changes in the assessment system) can be maximised.

The second component of the White Paper, which deals with the ways in which those who are least well served by our school system, makes some excellent suggestions. Having leading teachers develop new pedagogies (some on-line) for underachieving pupils, providing out-of-school-hours support in full-service schools and, where appropriate, giving individual coaching, ‘catch-up classes’ or even providing boarding places are all likely to help increase the likelihood of academic achievement for pupils who — without such extra provision — are unlikely to do well.

The third component — personalised learning — contains some of the most exciting but undeveloped ideas in the White Paper. The question, therefore, arises: is it a revolutionary way forward for a computer-generation of schools or just another gimmick which is being spun to its limit?

116 Reported interview in Daily Telegraph 15 December 2005

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In my judgement, it is too early to tell. The idea of personalised learning has been generated by politicians, rather than by those researchers who have spent years examining how learning takes place. But no one can have a monopoly on good ideas. What is important is that the idea is rigorously tested and its implications – and likely consequences – thoroughly considered prior to any implementation. Furthermore, as the NUT has suggested, the idea needs to be costed – it is unlikely that ‘tailored learning’ will come cheap.

Before the advent of research into school effects, pupils who performed badly in public examinations had to bear total responsibility for their failure. In recent years respective governments have tended to fasten the blame on teachers telling them that they have let down swathes of pupils if their results fall below the national average. Clearly, both these positions are false. Successful learning – as experienced teachers will attest – occurs most frequently when there is a positive meeting of minds between teacher and pupil. Of course, some pupils learn in spite of a poor teacher and some schools perform miracles with unwilling pupils but, in general, education occurs when both parties are committed to the enterprise and work effectively. If personalised learning does become a regular part of school life, it will be crucial that its success or failure is understood and that schools are not unfairly blamed yet again.

Personalised learning might be the new pedagogy that our information-rich society has been seeking or it might prove to be a damp squib. Let us find ways to decide carefully, systematically and without the political rancour that has so often interfered with the exploration of other innovative ideas in education.

In its overall strategy, the Government’s goal appears to be to follow in the ‘direction of travel’ which has been established by this and the previous Government: an anti-comprehensive, pro-diversity, anti-LA, pro-league table direction. The White Paper and the Education Bill will dismantle still further the existing system of local authorities and schools. In its place they seek to create a ‘market’ of competing self-governing, diverse institutions (academies, faith schools, foundation schools, specialist schools, city technology colleges and Trust schools) owned by a variety of businesses, faith and parent groups.

Each school would control its own admissions – subject only to the Admissions Code and (given the continuing use of performance tables) it would be in each school’s interest to attract as many ‘easy-to-teach’ pupils as possible. The National Curriculum would continue as now except for increased vocational courses for 14-19 year-olds. Ofsted inspections – which could be instituted by a parental complaint – would continue to develop as they are now doing.

- Is this a fair summary of the ideas in the two documents or is has it exaggerated the differences between them? Do the NUT goals appear too idealistic? Does the White Paper rely overmuch on the power of competition to lift standards and is it so dangerous that it is likely to wreck a system that has taken years to build up?

- Is it possible to jettison the more questionable elements of these two sets of ideas and combine the best of both in order to create – if not a blue print – at least a rough guide to the kind of system which would serve our country well over the next few years?

This is the aim of the final section of this Review.
An eight-stage strategy for improvement

The following proposals have emerged from the analyses of the two documents, consideration of international evidence and my own experience in the education system. The proposals are put forward as a contribution to the ongoing debate. Each needs further consideration and debate as well as rigorous testing and – as has been argued earlier – cost-effectiveness analysis. Although presented as stages there is no specific order and whilst there would be advantages in thinking of them as a package, this is not essential.

- Dismantling the ‘pecking order of schools’
- Rescinding the market forces approach to school choice
- Reviewing the National Curriculum
- Rethinking the national assessment system
- Creating new pedagogies
- Enhancing current models of teacher training
- Remodelling the inspection arrangements
- Creating a standing body to deliberate on educational changes.

Stage 1. Dismantling the ‘pecking order’ of schools

The perceived status of a school will depend on a number of different factors. Some, like its history, cannot be changed. Others, such as its designation, could possibly be altered but, in my judgement, it is probably not worth the effort. Indeed, the legal problems of unpicking the plethora of types of educational institutions – including independent and faith-based schools – that have been created by successive governments, would be daunting. I propose, instead, that no new types of school be created and that the income of all publicly funded schools should be rationalised according to an agreed common formula. This formula would be constructed so that, following a suggestion by Brighouse, the per capita amount received by the school for each pupil should be differentiated according to the educational progress achieved by that child, with the lowest achievers at the time of their entering the school receiving the most resources. It is important to emphasise that no school should be able to increase its resources by keeping pupils within the lowest band of achievement. The extra resources would only come into play as the pupil moved into a new school. There would thus be an incentive to recruit those who, otherwise, would be seen as hard-to-teach pupils.

In order to reduce the current unfair differences, it will be important to overcome the large-scale variation in the quality of premises, buildings and equipment. This change could be achieved by the creation of agreed ‘quality standards’ (based on the most successful buildings and equipment in use) and a priority order based on the distance each school lies below the agreed standards. Private companies which wished to make a tangible contribution to the education system could contribute to the overall fund or to an individual school. The underlying principle would be that the worst buildings received the most help in the fastest time, thus ensuring that the maximum number of schools were brought up to the standards of the best as quickly as possible.

The governance of all schools would also need to have a common pattern. The obvious model is for an independent governing body to function under the overall regulatory framework of a local authority. It would probably be necessary to make allowances for legally agreed variations with, for example, voluntary schools. Parents should be represented on the governing body as of right, as would teachers, support staff and representatives of the local community. In order to stress the importance of the role of parents, it might be sensible to follow the example of Denmark and stipulate that the chair of the governors would normally be one of the parents.

Thus, through strategies of fair funding, energetic efforts to raise the standards of all schools building to those of the best and adopting a common form of governance, the basis would be laid for a high quality, national network.

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118 OECD is currently working on a project to generate international standards for educational buildings.
119 OECD (2004a) ibid
of local schools in which heads, teachers and support staff would be treated as responsible professionals. Each school would be free both to compete with, and to collaborate with their neighbours. To compete (as schools always have done) in sporting activities as well as in how successfully they can promote the achievement of all their pupils. To collaborate over facilities, specialist teachers and CPD. What would be radically different to the current situation would be that they would be competing and cooperating for the first time on a level playing field.

**Stage 2. Rescinding the market forces approach to school choice**

The impact of schools having to compete for pupils and resources has led to a stifling of cooperation and an unhealthy emphasis on marketing and public relations. The local authority will need to have powers — in conjunction with the local School Organisation Committees and Admission Forums — to allocate pupil numbers to schools, negotiate expansions or reductions and, where necessary, close schools. The roles of the Adjudicators should remain — able to investigate cases, hear appeals and overturn decisions in the event of unfair or improper practice. This is particularly important in view of the decline in births between 1991 and 2001 and the predictions of falling rolls. As the Teachernet – developed by the DfES – reports “Many areas are facing a serious decline in their primary school population. Local authorities and primary schools faced with falling rolls need to take action to ensure they are equipped to deliver the best possible quality of education with the resources available to them.”

In addition, it will be crucially important for the local authority to be in a position to oversee all admission arrangements to schools within its area in order for it to be able to guarantee that these are open and fair. In particular, the authorities will need to have a duty to ensure schools use commonly agreed criteria for admissions and do not select pupils either overtly (through tests or interviews) or covertly (through confidential reports, parents’ meetings or other means). Benn & Millar (ibid) cite West et al on ways in which fair admissions systems could be constructed. West et al suggest giving schools the duty of making the applications by disadvantaged pupils a priority — a sure way to turn benign rhetoric into worthwhile action.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has proposed that LAs should be given a determining role in overseeing all admission arrangements — setting and coordinating policies and considering any changes in the interest of the whole community. The Education Network (TEN) has also proposed a strengthening of the Admissions Code and a similar key role for the LA working with the Admissions Forums, with appeals being passed to the local Adjudicator.

As the White Paper proposes, local authorities will need to monitor the all-round performance of all schools in its area and, if there is cause for concern, intervene as a matter of urgency. It is always easier to resolve problems, whether to do with pedagogy or more general management issues, before they have become embedded in the daily culture of the school. In a system where there would no longer be such punitive outcomes but rather, support for improvement, the LA should feel able to call in Ofsted (or the new body responsible for inspection services — see later section) for expert advice.

Further consideration needs to be given to those areas where selective schools still operate. The current procedures for local reviews established by the Government are so one-sided that change has been made extremely unlikely. As pointed out by Benn & Millar (ibid), in one county alone, the parental ballot “would require the signatures of more people than voted in the last European elections in order to trigger a vote on whether or not to abolish grammar schools.”

In an interview reported in the Education Guardian, the Prime Minister indicated that he had no intention of doing anything about selective grammar schools: “If you go after the existing grammar schools, where they’ve got parental support, you’re just going to end up in limitless arguments.” Yet in the same interview, the Prime Minister noted: “Always expect opposition. There’s never a change we’ve made where there hasn’t been opposition. In the end you make up your mind what is right and then you proceed”. Is not the implication of this statement that action should be taken — as is being done in Northern Ireland — to deal with a situation utterly out of step with so many of the sentiments of the White Paper?

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120 Teachernet: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk factors behind falling rolls.
122 Benn & Millar ibid p13
123 Woodward ibid
124 Woodward ibid
The counterproductive competition by schools for ‘easy-to-teach’ pupils – including that operated by the existing grammar schools – needs to be curtailed and a fairer and more open system of admissions for all pupils, including those considered ‘hard-to-place’, needs to be created.

**Stage 3. Reviewing the National Curriculum**

In the spirit of these proposals, it is important that a review of the National Curriculum should be undertaken by a panel comprised of all the major players in the education system — pupils, parents, teachers and local authority officials. The panel’s brief would be to reduce the National Curriculum to its essential core and to tailor this so that it would occupy a maximum of 50 per cent of the school week.

The entitlement to a common knowledge base and specified level of skills could still be met whilst there would be scope for teachers to design their own school-based curriculum. In order to avoid the situation whereby each teacher simply ‘did their own thing’ — as happened in some primary schools pre-1988 — it would be sensible to build in the need to seek the approval of teachers’ proposals by the school governing body.

As with any curriculum change, special consideration would need to be given to the different phases of education, from pre-school to 19 year-olds. For the older age-group this could provide an opportunity to re-consider the Tomlinson proposals or those of the New Vision Group (which seek to limit the unhelpful current divide between vocational and academic strands) in order to create something of more equal value. There is much to learn from European systems. In Norway, for example, the upper secondary system of schooling offers parallel strands — with the ongoing possibility of transfer and virtually no ‘dead ends’.

**Stage 4. Rethinking the national assessment system**

It would be important for a review of assessment to be undertaken by a panel drawn from those involved with the system, advised by experts in the technical details. The Panel might wish to study the arrangements adopted in Scotland and Wales as well as other international practice.

The challenge will be how best to create a system of formative and summative assessment which

- permits teachers to assess, validly — and with some measure of reliability — students’ work at key points in their school careers
- enables teachers to offer constructive feedback to pupils and their parents
- allows local authorities to monitor the progress of different groups of pupils
- provides a reliable national picture of standards of achievement

whilst avoiding the problems of assessment overload. Pupils are currently expected to sit for “over one hundred public exams, around forty in the last three years.”

The key-stage-testing would benefit from recognition that its main purpose is to aid the process of learning through giving both pupils and teachers accurate feedback on the progress achieved. Currently much development work on formative testing is underway in a number of OECD countries — including in several schools in England. There are therefore a range of different models which could profitably be considered.

Dealing with the GCSE situation discussed earlier will be more difficult. Its current function as the arbiter of standards and as the link with past examination standards inhibits its main task — to be a motivating achievement target for all 16 year-olds at the end of Key Stage four. The cost of the GCSE is high — both in the resources used by examination boards (in setting and marking papers) and in the labour and commitment of pupils and teachers.

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126 Tomlinson, M ibid
129 Marshall ibid p69
Since the majority of young people now choose to remain in some form of further education after 16, the question needs to be asked as to whether such a formal – ‘big bang’ – examination is still necessary.

If the GCSE is deemed necessary, then careful thought will be needed as to how it should be reformed. The difficulty is that – as described earlier – an examination designed to discriminate amongst a broad ability range and to produce a normal distribution of grades is not an appropriate measure of national achievement to which all pupils should aspire. However, no examination would be able to meet all the different tasks noted above – which is why the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are moving towards different models of assessment.

The NUT proposal for an APU-type body which would monitor national standards would deal with one aspect of the assessment issue. This would leave open an opportunity to create an examination to which all pupils could aspire before leaving full-time schooling (the driving licence equivalent) and on which schools could be measured. But this would probably not be sufficient to challenge well-motivated, able pupils and so a different kind of assessment would need to be considered. This might be the time to reconsider some of the pioneering work on Graded Assessments undertaken by the former Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and Kings College Education Department.

Stage 5. Creating new pedagogies

This stage would be about creating opportunities for voluntary, experimental trials of different pedagogical approaches so that new ways of teaching and innovative ways of learning. These would be developed, tested, modified, and refined (or abandoned!) prior to being incorporated in national initiatives. The opportunity to try out new approaches to learning and teaching, free from the constraints of the National Curriculum, existing tests and Ofsted inspections, would enable schemes – such as the personalised learning advocated in the White Paper – to be developed and evaluated appropriately. As the NUT proposes, such a radical change should be piloted carefully by a volunteer group of primary and secondary schools.

One version of such an idea would be to ask each LA to create one experimental school. Parents would have the opportunity of applying for a place in these schools in the full knowledge of their special role. All these schools could then be linked in a network so that each could provide support and help with replications. England would then be provided with ample test beds in which exciting new pedagogical techniques could be developed and evaluated. Such trials could also pave the way for new approaches developing out of increasingly sophisticated educational software and equipment. This could be an opportunity to create different versions of future learning environments, to evaluate them rigorously and to adopt them more widely if they prove successful.

Stage 6. Enhancing current models of teacher training

Most teachers in England have either undertaken a four-year concurrent degree course in a major subject and pedagogical studies or taken a one year post graduate certificate of education (PGCE) following a three-year degree course in a relevant subject. A minority will have trained in one of the various on-the-job courses that recent governments have introduced. All, hopefully, will have studied sufficient educational theory to enable them to see their own classroom work in the context of what is generally known about child development and learning processes as well as the bigger picture of school – and system-wide developments.

This training – good though it is in comparison with many other countries – still falls short of the Finnish model. There, all teachers study for at least five years and qualify with the equivalent of a masters’ degree. The predicted fall in the schools’ population provides a golden opportunity for England to move to a similar pattern of training. As noted earlier, many commentators see the high level of teacher training as one of the crucial reasons for the success of Finnish young people in the PISA tests. Perhaps this is the moment for the Government to invest in a two year PGCE?

Initial training, however impressive, can only provide a basis for high quality teaching. Equally important must be the ‘continuing professional development’ on which the NUT (in BDB) places such emphasis. At a time of such
rapidly changing knowledge – not only in discrete subjects but also in what we are discovering about the way learning takes place – initial training, no matter how thorough, will very soon require regular supplementation.

A far-sighted government would be wise to grasp this opportunity and require all practising teachers to participate in their own CPD programmes and to undertake at least one short course each year. As the NUT has argued, it is imperative that teachers have some scope in determining the shape of their training so that they take ownership in it.

**Stage 7. Remodelling the inspection arrangements**

For over a decade and a half, the education system has been dominated by the work of Ofsted. There have been some positive effects. Inspections have made teachers aware of their own shortcomings and jerked some schools out of a rut of underachievement. The White Paper states that the number of schools declared ‘failing’ has halved over a period of seven years so these painful lessons appear to have been learned. The benefits, however, have been achieved at great cost – for the process has undoubtedly sapped the professional confidence of many teachers.

In theory, since the visiting team is able to study the intake of each school it inspects, the inspection process should be able to give institutions a fairer judgement than the performance tables of the quality of their schooling. However, it is hard to believe that schools in disadvantaged areas have been treated as fairly as those with more advantaged intakes. As the NUT document argues, the inspection process appears to have become less punitive and the new proposals for shorter, more-focused inspections have generally been welcomed by teachers.

With a cultural change towards an evaluation system which supports — rather than punishes — schools and the excellent example from the model used in Finland, there is now an opportunity to move towards an even less punitive and more effective system based on the NUT proposals. Such a system would place self evaluation at the heart of the process and use the LA and — if necessary — inspection to check, confirm or challenge the results.

Whether the body responsible for inspections should be a re-constituted HMI — as proposed by NUT — or something else, its members should be largely made up of practising teachers released for short periods by their schools. Thus the inspectors would understand the issues the schools were confronting and, in the process of inspecting, they would be broadening their own experience and taking this back for the benefit of their own schools.

The aim should be to evolve into a system in which the inspection process would be welcomed as a means of eliciting helpful feedback and advice. Given sufficient change in the prevailing culture, school governing bodies and local authorities would be eager to invite an outside team to help with situations which they had been unable to resolve.

**Stage 8. Creating a standing body to deliberate on educational changes**

The last twenty years have seen many changes to the education system. This is likely to be the pattern for the future if even a fraction of the predictions currently being forecast actually occur. Most of the recent changes have been politically inspired — often (as noted by the NUT) on the basis of short-term thinking. The danger is that political parties will always see the education system as something with which they can legitimately tinker. And, as noted in a recent letter to the press, once a certain ‘direction of travel’ is established this may lead to eventual outcomes which even those politicians involved in the changes will find unacceptable.

In a democracy, it is of course proper for politicians to be the ones to take decisions involving billions of pounds of public money. They are elected by all of us to act on our behalf and in our best interests. But this leaves all those who use or work in the system in too passive a role. Why should we not have a standing body — similar to the Law Commission — whose role would be to keep the system under continual review and to formulate plans for improvement?

The exact composition of such a standing body would need careful consideration but would probably need to include parents, heads, teachers, older pupils, members of the professional associations, lay members (able to bring different experience to the discussions) and — possibly — democratically elected representatives of the LAs.

A standing body could take on the kinds of tasks formerly undertaken by the Schools Council (abolished in 1984), the former Central Advisory Council for Education (which produced so many important Reports from the 1940s to the 1960s) and the – once commonly used – Royal Commissions or, indeed, the National Commission which has already been cited. Unlike a modern quango, it would hold no executive powers. Its purpose would be to think about the education system and advise how it could be improved.

Proposals which were agreed by this body would be submitted to the government of the day or, if appropriate, to the LAs, for consideration. Power would remain with the elected representatives but ideas and much of the groundwork would have been developed by those much closer to the system and removed from party politics.
Conclusions

Successful change in how learning takes place in schools cannot simply be achieved through legislation or by top-down command. Governments can use their powers to alter the designation of schools, or even to hand them over to non-elected groups, but they cannot so easily alter — for the better — classroom practice. Without willing cooperation there is likely to be little change in teaching and learning. The teachers, support staff — and indeed pupils — who spend their lives in schools must first be convinced that such change is possible.

Research findings and professional practice have both demonstrated that reform works best when it is a collaborative venture developed by professionals and governments working in cooperation with pupils and their parents. If this can be achieved, then each school community will find innovative ways to transform their daily practice. But, for that to happen, those proposing the changes have to win the argument; it is not enough simply to marshall the votes.

The eight stage strategy, which has grown out of the ideas contained in Bringing Down the Barriers and the Government’s White Paper, is the start of such an argument. It suggests relatively simple ways in which the English education system could start to be improved. If it were to be adopted, in principle, the strategy would obviously require much more working out. The purpose of discussing it here is to stimulate debate over the nature and the extent of positive change that is needed if the aspirations — shared by the Government and the NUT — are ever to be realised.

Previous periods of change in schools have caused resentment and frustration and there is a danger that this project might repeat the experience. There is a difference, however, in being expected to implement what has been decided by other people and being enabled to contribute to the debate about the nature of possible changes.

The Government and the NUT have reported what they think about the system. They agree on their aspirations for the English education system. They both want to make it more suited to the 21st century. But they differ radically on the best way to do so. Each has made a number of suggestions as to how current weaknesses could be remedied. The visions that they have proposed are very different. The direction of change that is adopted will set the course for many years and thus its choice is vitally important for our society. Decisions taken today will affect how pupils learn — and how teachers are expected to teach — for many years in the future. It is crucial, therefore, that those involved with the education system have an opportunity to join the debate.

Given modern communications and the current interest in education, it should be possible for many of those involved with the education system to play a part in a national conversation about these issues. Pupils, parents, school governors, support staff and, especially, teachers have a great deal to contribute. They understand how schools currently work and will possess many ideas as to how they could be improved. In other words, to quote Edmond Holmes writing in 1911 as the recently retired chief inspector of primary schools, they have an understanding of “what is and what might be.”

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