

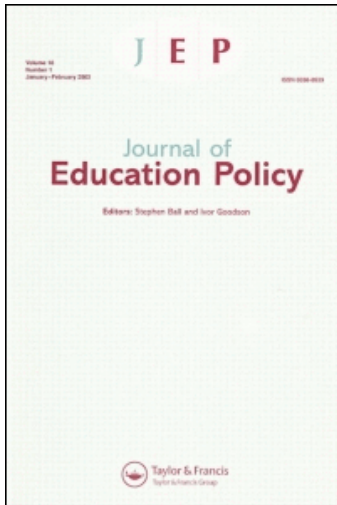
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Publisher Routledge

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## Journal of Education Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713693402>

### School reform policy in England since 1988: relentless pursuit of the unattainable

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Online Publication Date: 01 November 2008

**To cite this Article** Barker, Bernard(2008)'School reform policy in England since 1988: relentless pursuit of the unattainable',Journal of Education Policy,23:6,669 — 683

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/02680930802212887

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930802212887>

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## School reform policy in England since 1988: relentless pursuit of the unattainable

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*(Received 15 August 2007; final version received 15 April 2008)*

There is growing concern that almost 20 years after the 1988 Education Act, top-down, large-scale reform has stalled. The policy mix of choice, competition, markets, regulation, accountability and leadership seems not to have closed the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged areas and individuals, while most variations in school performance can be explained in terms of intake differences. This paper reviews policy and progress since 1988 and assesses the extent to which central government has achieved its educational aims. Unacknowledged tensions and contradictions are identified in structures and practices that are supposed to constitute a reliable framework for sustainable improvement. The conclusion is drawn that since 1988 the national government apparatus has itself become an important obstacle to further progress. An independent review of policy-making and implementation is recommended so that schools and colleges are enabled to contribute more effectively to improvements in the quality of education.

**Keywords:** school reform; social justice; accountability; new public management; national curriculum and testing; choice and markets

### Introduction

The scope and direction of the proposed 1988 education reforms in England was not at first widely understood (Simon 1991). I was the head of a large Cambridgeshire community comprehensive at the time and wrote to my parents that ‘Thatcher is only a turn of the screw, a reversion to the form places and house points of the day before yesterday’ (3 August 1988). In *The Independent* newspaper I adopted a dismissive stance and mocked ‘The foolish hope that the Department of Education can transform educational standards and economic performance by setting all the lessons itself’ (Barker 1988). The Secretary of State was unyielding, however, and told the Conservative Party conference that he would not ‘tolerate a moment longer the smug complacency of too many educationists, which has left our national educational performance limping along behind that of our industrial competitors’ (Baker, quoted in Simon 1991, 540). There was shock as the education world woke up to the full implications of the 1988 Education Act (Simon 1991). The legislation inaugurated an era of energetic, large-scale reform that has lasted for 20 years and continues to pervade every aspect of education.

Although I was acutely aware of the neo-liberal market ideology that inspired local management of schools (LMS), I perceived the National Curriculum as an essentially reactionary device and failed to understand the imperatives that drove an ever more intense

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competition to produce high quality goods and services for international markets. I did not grasp the extent to which education was becoming a major priority around the world, with governments from the USA to Vietnam convinced that skills and knowledge are a primary source of productivity and economic progress (Xiao 1998; Trần Kiêu 2002; Hannaway and Rotherham 2006).

Since then, successive Conservative and Labour governments have embraced the global orthodoxy that market competition and the deregulation of capital and labour markets are the best available route to prosperity (Wilkinson 2000). The Blair administrations have developed a modernising version of New Public Management (NPM) that combines a strong central regime with market mechanisms. Strategically important public services are subject to the same pressure to achieve quality and efficiency as the private sector (Lawson 1993; Bridges and McLaughlin 1994). The complex interactions of competitive markets, new technology and government action combine to produce a state of continuous and unpredictable change to which policy-makers respond with new goals and new regulations (Burch and Holliday 2000; Cutler and Waine 2000).

Education policy across the world is concerned, therefore, to maximise human creativity, skill and effort so that:

- Achievement levels generally rise so that human capital contributes effectively to economic and social success;
- Achievement differentials across deciles and between schools and colleges are reduced by overcoming social disadvantage and organisational failure; and
- Student learning and skills are relevant, add value and anticipate future trends. (Fullan 2003; Hopkins 2007).

Since the early days of the 1988 Act, governments have pursued large-scale education reform on a sustained and systematic basis (Chitty 1989; Chitty and Dunford 1999). The result is that policy, structure and operations are closely aligned to improve productivity and to secure the achievement goals identified above. The main elements in the mix are:

- Choice and competition between schools (open enrolment, published performance tables and the promotion of faith, specialist and academy status);
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) regulation of the education market through the National Curriculum and prescribed tests and examinations for all stages of primary, secondary and tertiary education;
- Rigorous accountability, enforced through Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections, with sanctions for schools that fail to match required performance levels and criteria;
- An emphasis on leadership and human resource management, including training, to increase motivation and organisational effectiveness, implemented specifically through the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Training and Development Agency (TDA);
- An emphasis on research and evidence-based policy. The inspection framework is based on effectiveness research; guidance on leadership and improvement is based on a sustained research programme (e.g. DfES 2001).

Adonis (2005) believes this organised, rational structure has achieved already many of its goals, with real improvements in examination results, better teaching and enhanced student commitment. Others are less sure. Hoyle and Wallace (2007) argue that despite

massively increased expenditure and reform, parents are not satisfied and teachers are not perceived differently. They blame 'an inherent feasibility gap between centrally determined policies and the possibility of their faithful implementation' (2007, 11) for the surprisingly limited progress that has been made.

England provides, therefore, an exceptionally interesting case study in education reform, where the main assumptions of policy-makers, politicians and academic researchers have been tested over a period of almost 20 years. This paper reviews the success and continued challenges of government policy and identifies a variety of tensions, issues and concerns that compromise progress: To what extent has the combination of markets, regulation, leadership and accountability raised achievement levels, overcome social disadvantage and equipped students for future trends? On the evidence so far, can the policy mix deliver continued, sustained improvement in school and student performance? What further reforms are necessary?

### **What has been achieved?**

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), believes that a spirit of optimism about what all children can achieve has been engendered. Everyone's worth and potential is recognised, regardless of class, ability, gender and ethnicity. A long tail of disadvantaged, disaffected young people lacking basic skills has become unacceptable. Investment has increased so that schools and colleges are better built and resourced than before, while Ofsted reports encourage optimism about the quality of leadership and teaching at primary and secondary schools (Dunford 2007).

Although the debate about standards is perennial, participation rates at every level of education (from nursery to university) have improved considerably and the percentage of students achieving at expected levels has increased proportionately. The percentage of pupils achieving five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and equivalent grades A\* to C in English schools increased from 43.5% in 1994/95 to 58.5% in 2005/06 (DfES 2006a). Recent research by PricewaterhouseCoopers confirms that 'there has been no erosion of the graduate premium as the supply of graduates has increased' (2007, 2). Universities have expanded to the point where they occupy a strategic place in the economy and society and provide a constantly renewed source of ideas and energy (Universities UK 2007).

Achievement has risen, therefore, although not sufficiently to meet an apparently inexhaustible demand for higher levels of skill and knowledge (Brown, Green, and Lauder 2001). The performance tables, however, show a widening rather than a narrowing achievement gap between the most and least successful schools, while disadvantaged students continue to lag behind or absent themselves entirely (Frean 2007). Although education now plays a strategic role in the economy, a significant minority of the population has failed to benefit. Government research reports confirm that multiple disadvantages seem to have a cumulatively negative impact in areas that have experienced economic decline, despite inclusive policies and additional investment (DfES 2001, 2003a).

Government agencies also fear that too many schools coast and allow countless students to underachieve by failing to learn from best practice (Hopkins 2007). The latest Ofsted Framework has raised the achievement bar by concentrating on measurable student outcomes and aims to stimulate renewed efforts to increase performance, while City Academies are taking over from failing schools in areas where social disadvantage has spawned cultures resistant to change. Private partners and successful neighbours are invited to share responsibility for improvement across local communities (Ofsted 2005; DfCSF 2007).

The greatest hope, however, is invested in leadership, the most recent addition to the policy matrix developed since 1988. The rhetoric of modernisation and transformation permeates the political discourse of public sector management and is based on the widespread belief that leaders can act as catalysts, able to release human potential and transform the quality and competitiveness of their organisations (Peters and Waterman 1995; Clarke and Newman 1997). Mabey and Ramirez (2004, 9), for example, have found ‘strong statistical evidence that management development leads to superior organizational performance across companies of all sizes, sectors and national location’. In England, policy-makers believe that improvements in leadership will improve competitiveness and productivity (DfES 2002). From the Prime Minister downwards, there is an expectation that headteachers have the ability to create visions of transformed communities, to distribute leadership and to raise their followers to new levels of commitment and achievement (Blair 2001; Miliband 2002).

The NCSL promotes a transformational model that aims to overcome under-achievement and liberate human potential. Based on research by Hay Group, the college suggests that powerful, negative leaders who are unaware of their impact on others can seriously damage their organisations; and that coaching, mentoring and effective teamwork can greatly increase organisational efficiency (NCSL 2003b). A longitudinal study of 20 high-performing specialist schools by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) provides some empirical evidence that strong facilitative leadership can contribute to improved student performance (Judkins and Rudd 2005). Evidence from 10 case studies of ‘outstanding’ school leaders confirms that delegated and facilitative modes of leadership engage people best (Gold et al. 2003).

Adonis (2005) argues that there is further cause for optimism in the growing, advanced professionalism of a new generation of well-qualified teachers who have been inducted into the classroom through a rigorous training regime, inspected by Ofsted. Since 1998 there has been a 54% increase in recruitment to teaching from the Russell Group universities. The TDA and the NCSL provide funds and sustained support for teacher development based on progression through a variety of career paths. Programmes (e.g. National Professional Qualification for Headship [NPQH], Leading from the Middle [Lfm]) engage participants in self-evaluation, reflection and development activities. Kolb’s model of adult learning informs recommended coaching strategies that are designed to improve classroom practice (NCSL 2003a).

### **Limited gains**

Despite this evidence of success, the unceasing flow of government policy initiatives signals a continued dissatisfaction with both school and student performance. Debates about standards suggest the difficulty of knowing whether better results are due to improvements in learning and teaching or arise from variations in the test regime (New Statesman 2002). Mansell (2007) documents in detail how the government’s emphasis on the percentage of students obtaining five A\*–C GCSE grades has prompted many schools to adopt result-enhancing tactics, including switching borderline students to alternative examinations, like General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) (BBC 2003). Smithers (2007) reviews international data that show relative test performance has improved, but there is evidence of regression as well as progress. The early significant gains generated by the national literacy and numeracy strategies have not been sustained (Clare 2006), while one analysis of national data sets reveals that few schools are able to demonstrate a continuous upward trend in performance (Gray, Goldstein, and Thomas 2001). As we have seen, policy-makers

increasingly acknowledge that the effects of social disadvantage have proved stubbornly resistant to central and local action.

A common response to the limited gains achieved so far is to call for even more thorough, even more rigorous reform to transform the classroom and raise standards. Hopkins (2007) argues, for example, that in many countries large-scale reform has stalled. A bottom-up, systemic approach is needed, he believes, to ensure that classroom standards rise. Schools themselves should relentlessly apply the four 'key drivers' of late New Labour policy (personalised learning, informed professionalism, intelligent accountability and networking) to secure sustainable change.

The level of disappointment with what reform has achieved so far suggests, however, that it would be wise to analyse and understand the muddled foundations of the policy mix that has led to the present impasse before embarking on further mandated initiatives, even those that emphasise the need for school leaders themselves to transform the system.

### **Contradictions of reform**

The prevailing policy architecture appears bureaucratically rational, with constituent parts that contribute to the clear aim of better teaching, better schools and better results. Like businesses, schools compete in an education marketplace that is subject to regulation by government agencies. Targets are set and managers are held accountable. Training and support are provided. Britain is seen to be on the right reform track (Caldwell 2001). The trouble is that this apparently logical model has evolved over time and has absorbed within itself the miscellaneous, often contradictory impulses that shaped successive pieces of legislation (Ball 1999). Newman (2001, 27) claims that policy changes are mediated through 'deeply embedded norms and assumptions' so that governments are 'unable to exert much control over the combination of practices which are likely to result'.

At the beginning, the 1988 Education Act was designed around a fundamental tension between centralisation and devolution (Bridges and McLaughlin 1994). LMS gave schools control over their budgets, staffing and resources but the Secretary of State also centralised and nationalised curriculum and testing arrangements. Headteachers were invited to become education entrepreneurs at the same time as they were excluded from their core business. Schools could respond to the market but mainly in areas that related to efficiency and presentation rather than the classroom (Simon 1988; Chitty and Dunford 1999).

The Conservatives created, therefore, a 'command and control' system. The National Curriculum, national tests and examinations, and the inspection framework between them specified a standard template for what schools should be like and what they should produce. As the standardised approach unfolded, and was enforced by regular inspection (Ofsted was established in 1992), teachers tended to comply with imposed rules and regulations (Jeffrey and Woods 1998; Fitz, Lee, and Eke 2000).

After 1997, the literacy, numeracy and secondary strategies imposed even more detailed and prescriptive requirements, while tests, targets and performance were further emphasised. Despite the claims made for improvement, Wyse (2003) has conducted a critical review of the available research and has found little evidence to justify the particular use of objectives made by the National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching. Mass testing regimes seem to produce schools that are reluctant to take risks or innovate and also set up uncomfortable dilemmas for teachers who recognise the limitations of a test-centred approach (McNeil 2000; English, Hargreaves, and Hislam 2002). Hargreaves (2003, 10) believes teachers may become 'casualties of the knowledge society ... where escalating expectations for education are being met with standardized solutions'.



The Conservative reforms, followed by New Labour's determination to identify and transform poor performance, created therefore, a coercive, top-down, compliance-driven system. Heads found themselves in an anxiety-inducing environment, especially if their 'results' were below average. Schools that did not match prevailing expectations could be placed in a 'category' (e.g. special measures); could be 'named and shamed' with unthinkable, personal consequences for those held to be responsible (Chitty and Dunford 1999).

The motivational psychology implicit in this strategy is at variance with other aspects of New Labour's plan. The Leadership Programme for Serving Heads (LPSH, launched in 1998), for example, encouraged leaders to adopt authoritative rather than coercive styles and celebrated the value of flexibility and responsibility. Overtly controlling leaders were seen to have counter-productive consequences, arousing negative thoughts and feelings that could undermine a school's effectiveness. The NCSL has built on these beginnings and now promotes transformational and distributed leadership as essential features of successful schools (NCSL 2003b). The political leadership of the education service has seldom acted on these principles, however, and the current faith in visionary, transformational leaders is at variance with the standardised national requirements policed by Ofsted (Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

Despite the centralising, standardising methodology adopted by many agencies during the New Labour period, the market remains an item of faith for the government. Since 2005 the aim has been to create choice and diversity through a mix of faith and specialist schools, privately sponsored city academies and a remainder of struggling post-comprehensives with less good performance profiles (DfES 2005). Many education services have been outsourced or privatised, revealing continued confidence in a necessary relationship between competition and quality, even in a highly regulated, controlled market where the government itself is often the direct purchaser (NUT 2004).

These tensions and apparent contradictions suggest that government policies and practices are not as aligned and mutually complementary as they appear and that the grand architecture of large-scale reform has become more inconsistent and incoherent with time (Newman 2001). Ministers and officials have been reluctant to acknowledge the potential contradictions and paradoxes designed into the reform agenda, and have failed to question the essential, often incompatible assumptions that have driven top-down change (Gunter 2001). Deem, Hillyard, and Reed (2007) argue that New Labour has intensified the complexity of policy-making and has encouraged the operational fragmentation of public services. The following sections challenge many of the over confident beliefs that have informed policy during the last 20 years and which may continue to limit the extent to which the quality of education may be improved.

### **Markets and competition**

There are reasons for believing that markets are very far from free and much less benign than advocates suggest (Nader 1965; Galbraith 1999). But whatever the long term advantages and disadvantages of markets in general, economic success does not necessarily depend on the remorseless application of market principles to every aspect of life. Blumenthal (2001) reports research in the USA, for example, that shows private medicine driving up the price of health care while excluding a substantial minority from treatment. In most countries, private schools are much less efficient than state schools, mainly because they increase the costs of production by employing more resources than are necessary. The market is willing to pay a premium to reduce class size, though there is no proven link between more teachers and better results (Feinstein and Symons 1997). Iacovou (2001) concludes from her review

of individual level studies in the UK that none of them has found a significant relationship between class size and student outcomes.

A causal connection between competition and quality has not been demonstrated in medicine and education, mainly because learning and health are not products or commodities to be mass-produced but states of being to which patients and students contribute at least as much as the facilities they use. The publication of surgical success indicators or GCSE results, for example, may reveal as much about the neighbourhood in which institutions are based as the schools and hospitals themselves. Goldstein and Spiegelhalter's (1996) research shows that all such data should be handled with care. Studies by Levačić and Woods (2002a, 2002b) and by Lupton (2004) have shown that performance tables create reputations and encourage ambitious, mobile families to move their children from less to more prosperous neighbourhoods and schools. The drive for excellence at a particular school may produce, therefore, a virtuous circle where a better intake attracts more able teachers and results improve. A progressive redistribution of students and teachers within a local hierarchy of schools has uncertain long-term consequences, however, and is unlikely to produce a general benefit for the wider community.

### **Regulation and accountability**

The use of test and examination results as the prime measure of education within a well-defined framework of accountability seems rational and value-neutral, though Boyle (2001, 1) notes that 'the more figures we use, the more the great truths seem to slip through our fingers'. Annual cycles produce a wealth of statistics that enable managers at all levels to set targets, measure progress and judge institutional effectiveness (Twelftree 2007). Policy-makers are convinced they have devised a reliable accountability system to drive up standards. Ball (2003) argues that their emphasis on 'performativity' has intensified school life so that students and teachers have been mobilised in a ceaseless quest for better grades.

The policy success of performance management has masked, nevertheless, the extent to which official curriculum requirements and the selected measures of success (e.g. the five A\*-C GCSE grades threshold) have distorted and changed the nature of education (Husbands 2001). Schools teach to the test, choose examinations with the best chance of a higher grade (e.g. GNVQ), reduce the time devoted to non-examinable activities and concentrate attention on borderline candidates (Gray et al. 1999; McNeil 2000; Mansell 2007). The contested, political origins of the National Curriculum are now forgotten, but the consequences of its distinctive bias are under-estimated (Apple 1989). The standardised model that prevailed in 1988 was not a wise and rational distillation of best practice but a ruthless restoration of the traditional priorities believed to have been threatened by the progressive experiments of the 1960s and 1970s (Simon 1988, 1991). The National Curriculum aimed to control teachers' work and so discouraged local initiative and innovation (Chitty 1989). The regulations prescribed, therefore, an academic diet that fails to meet the needs of many students. Since then, policy has emphasised the managerially 'effective' and has ignored teachers' deeply rooted commitment to the affective aspects of learning and teaching (McNess, Broadfoot, and Osborn 2003).

This curriculum bias is reinforced by level descriptors that characterise the skills and abilities expected of students at each age and key stage (Sainsbury and Sizmur 1998). The eight levels describe an incremental, linear progression through ever more conceptually demanding activities. This rewards intelligent individuals whose families have transmitted the ability to cope with complex language and ideas. Meanwhile, 'the educational mortality rate can only increase as one moves towards the classes most distant from scholarly



language' (Passeron 1990, 73). Put more simply, the curriculum is designed mainly for those with good general intelligence and leaves many unable to improve beyond a well-defined cognitive ceiling. Whatever their breadth of experience, practical skill and personal development, many below average students are stuck permanently, unable to engage with concepts at the next level.

The performance tables promote therefore a distinctive, unacknowledged set of values. Certain abilities and skills are recognised while others are not. The aura of public information legitimises the use of carefully selected statistics to promote aggressively competitive and individualist values. Celebrations of successful schools are supposed to encourage improvement for the disadvantaged but the annual ritual in fact displays the raw incompatibility of excellence and inclusion.

Above all, the performance arrangements, with their strange trust in unadjusted data, are invalid, unreliable and often misleading (Goldstein and Thomas 1996; Goldstein 2001). During 20 years of compulsive reform, key stage tests, GCSE examinations and advanced levels have become chronically unstable. Constant changes have undermined the basis for comparisons over time (West and Pennell 2000; Goldstein 2001). How should reported achievements in language and number be assessed, for example, when we know that progress is measured only in relation to the current government's period in office? Should we trust the claims of ministers who have almost total control over what is learned and assessed (Smithers 2007)? Official statistics no longer command automatic trust and respect.

### **Performing leaders**

Policy-makers have invested heavily in leadership since 1997 and are puzzled by the growing evidence that educational leaders are failing to replicate the productivity gains reported for business and commerce (Bell, Bolam, and Cubillo 2003; Hallinger 2003; Harris 2004). Case studies of individual schools have shown that even where exceptional, highly rated leaders have adopted recommended transformational strategies, student outcomes have been little better than expected on the basis of the school's intake characteristics (Barker 2005, 2007). Disappointed by the large number of empirical studies that find leader effects to be small, mediated and difficult to detect (Hallinger and Heck 1998), the DfES (2006b) has commissioned further research to investigate the links between leadership and student outcomes. Where is the promised transformation?

The problem is that schools, like other non-profit organisations, have several bottom lines. Anheier (2000, 6) argues that this is 'because no price mechanisms are in place that can aggregate the interests of clients, staff, volunteers and other stakeholders' and 'match costs to profits, supply to demand, and goals to actual achievements'. Tests and examinations are designed to compensate for this by concentrating on samples or snapshots of children at work and then subjecting the results to remorseless statistical analysis. As Deale (1975) explains, however, tests measure responses to test items, not children's learning, and concentrate attention on tasks that lend themselves to written assessment. The statistical methods employed to translate writing into grades and to compare populations are especially unreliable when used to draw conclusions about trends over time.

This methodology seems to yield an annual data set strongly conditioned by student background. Gray et al. (1990, 128), for example, examined 11 data sets and conclude that the between-school variance ranges from 'about 1 to 5 per cent in the models incorporating prior attainment measures' and from 'about 4 to 25 per cent in those including just social background measures'. Scheerens (1989) believes that all school factors combined may influence no more than 10% of student achievement. Only small local fluctuations in test

results remain to be explained, therefore, and these are subject to so many influences that a reliable estimate of leader and teacher effects has proved hard to establish. Statistical trends in examination results are, for this reason, a poor measure of quality and improvement in education.

The current emphasis on performance also distracts attention from the leading role that heads and teachers play when they manage the complex tensions and dilemmas generated, for example, by migration, ethnic diversity, religious identity and family dissolution (Day et al. 2000; Shah, Barker, and Dimmock 2007). Successful school leaders who develop inclusive cultures able to withstand the 'disintegration of conventional and traditional authority and morality' may have a transformative impact on their communities but are most unlikely to figure in the performance tables (West 1991, 26).

The government's effectiveness methodology has become, therefore, an important obstacle to understanding and estimating how school leaders contribute to the quality of education. Within the present system, talk of 'transformation' creates unrealistic expectations of improved classroom productivity and engenders the impression that heads and teachers are failing.

### **Evidence-informed practice**

Whatever the stimulus provided by the market and the constraints imposed through the curriculum, the belief that classroom 'best practice' found at a successful location can be transferred and applied in another, less successful context, so that eventually all schools become effective, is a fundamental tenet of school reform. Government agencies have drawn on an extensive literature relating to school effectiveness and improvement to inform their recommendations about 'best practice' (Gray et al. 1999; Luyten, Visscher, and Witziers 2005). Complexity theory discourages confidence in this approach, however. Can teachers be sure that their actions will produce the desired outcome if the connections between variables within a system are irregular and non-linear and if outcomes are context specific (Radford 2006)? Grace (1998) is critical of research that sees effectiveness as the product of separate, individual factors and disregards the complexity and interrelationship of school variables and effects.

The empirical evidence that particular strategies or methods can be applied consistently and reliably to produce better results is relatively limited. Strong claims have been made, for example, about the gains that result when teaching is matched to a student's learning style. But Muijs et al. (2005, 60–2) report research that has found no difference in achievement between students 'whose instruction was matched, partially matched, or not matched to their learning style as measured using a learning styles inventory based on Kolb's work'. Stahl (1999) concludes that children's learning styles cannot be measured reliably. Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences has been promoted widely but the evidence so far is not supportive (Muijs et al. 2005).

Some studies have found that methods that work for one topic are less successful for others. Varied teaching, for example, was less strongly related to gains in achievement in teaching number than in teaching calculation and measures, shape and space. Clear explanations and presentations, using a sufficiently long wait time after questions, using open-ended questions, asking students to explain their answers and guiding students through the material were more strongly related to gains in measures, shape and space than in calculation (Muijs et al. 2005). The application of a general idea, like learning styles, didacticism or constructivism, seems less significant for learning than micro-level variations in context and the latent abilities of the children themselves (Gray et al. 1990). There does not seem

to be a magic formula to unlock great leaps in learning for everyone. The relentless search for patterns of teacher behaviour that increase test scores has become counter-productive because it encourages schools to neglect other improvements that may be beneficial but are not perceived to enhance productivity.

### **Social disadvantage**

The pursuit of excellence and inclusion as if they were complementary policy goals is a further source of unresolved tension. Government agencies demand continuous improvements in educational standards but at the same time have strongly encouraged increased access and participation for the full social and ability range (Naylor 2007). Deer (2004, 204) claims that a rapid increase in the percentage of each age cohort graduating successfully from sixth forms, colleges and universities 'has reinforced a sense of crisis within academia as this evolution has more or less directly called into question its traditional culture and values'. Adonis (2005) claims that better learning and teaching have enabled larger numbers to access higher education but universities have also become increasingly comprehensive and diverse. Naylor (2007) suggests that the old template may be inappropriate for many new students.

Another concern is that inclusion is not working for children from unskilled occupational backgrounds. Thirty per cent of children whose parents are in unskilled occupations achieve five or more GCSE higher grades, compared to 69% of children whose parents are professional or managerial. In some respects the achievement gap is widening, not narrowing. Between 1990 and 2000, despite attempts to promote inclusion, the increase in participation in higher education by people from families with professional and non-manual occupations was up 11 percentage points (from 37% to 48%) compared with an increase of eight percentage points for students from skilled (manual), partly skilled or unskilled backgrounds (from 10% to 18%) (DfES 2003b).

Social and economic variables have a powerful impact on patterns of academic achievement, especially when the curriculum is biased in favour of elite groups. There are relatively few examples of schools that have increased their effectiveness over time, while a high percentage of the variation in student outcomes can be explained by family background (Davies 2000). Deep, historically rooted social and cultural variables influence our chances of success and seem beyond the reach of attempts to fine-tune classrooms and teaching methods (Bernstein 1970; Lowe 1997).

Given these consistent findings, Thrupp (2001) believes it is unrealistic to expect the education system to produce radical change in the relative performance of students from impoverished backgrounds. Even when schools and colleges improve their effectiveness, increased efficiency seems unlikely to produce a disproportionate benefit for those who have already demonstrated a less strong disposition to learn. Schools contribute powerfully to cultural and economic progress but their contribution to social change is likely to remain much smaller than policy-makers believe (Lowe 1997).

### **Conclusion**

As schools and colleges now pursue the system-wide 'transformation' advocated by Fullan (2003) and Hopkins (2007), their imposed mission increasingly resembles a forlorn hunt for an unattainable, holy grail-like solution to our problems (Tosey 2005). The latest developments in NPM seem to have increased the self-defeating contradictions of reform. Central government has been strengthened through an intensified regime of performance targets,

inspection and audit. Meanwhile state functions have been dispersed through a complex network of competing executive agencies, public sector purchasers and private sector providers (Newman 2001). Early improvements in test results have not been sustained, while large-scale, 'top down' change programmes are now perceived in many countries as having 'unsatisfactory or even disastrous' outcomes (Coppieters 2005; Hopkins 2007).

Public service improvements seem frustratingly elusive because the policy signal box that has emerged from years of reform legislation functions like one of those ICT networks that combine several generations of computer. Some national agencies (NCSL, TDA) advocate vision, leadership and teamwork but others (Ofsted, Standards and Effectiveness Unit) create a culture of compliance that discourages initiative and innovation. Choice and markets undermine the drive for equal opportunities and social inclusion. Tests and performance tables encourage schools to teach to the test and frustrate attempts to personalise learning and meet the diverse needs of our students. Productivity is celebrated, quality ignored.

The concepts and assumptions that inform so much of the reform agenda are increasingly seen as unsatisfactory because they explain so little of the complex processes that influence change and development (Coppieters 2005; Fielding 2006). The official effectiveness framework, with its strong emphasis on results and targets, has become a deadening influence on the classroom and depends on measures that are unable to capture the reality of students' progress. Best practice is not easily identified or transferred because every classroom and every lesson contains a unique set of relationships and journeys. The inevitable individuality and diversity of learners and learning are such that the differences between one experience and another are more important for success than the obvious behavioural regularities that make them seem similar (Grace 1998; Muijs et al. 2005). The government's obsession with data and performance has become counter-productive because the enforcing audit apparatus undermines the leadership and partnerships that have the power to transform our schools into learning organisations and so regenerate our social and cultural life (Fielding 2006).

Despite these confusing complications and the irony that results, the policy machine and its agents are tireless and use even their own past failures to justify new interventions (Hopkins 2007; Hoyle and Wallace 2007). During the 20 years since the 1988 Act, however, the central policy-making apparatus and its manifold agencies have themselves become an important obstacle to improvements in the quality of education. There is an urgent case for a full-scale independent review of policy-making and implementation in England, with the aim of developing a more coherent enabling framework for schools and colleges. The principal priorities for early consideration are:

- The extent to which the relentless proliferation of policy goals and initiatives has become self-defeating – can the agenda be reduced so that it can be more effectively pursued?
- The extent to which agencies and units manoeuvre to promote competing and inconsistent messages – how can inter-agency roles and functions be clarified?
- The extent to which current measures of effectiveness distort learning and teaching – can qualitative indicators be devised to reduce our over-reliance on numerical data?
- The extent to which current policies (open enrolment, performance tables based on raw data, interventions to diversify school type) produce excessive intake differentiation, with negative consequences for standards in less prestigious institutions.
- The extent to which a coercive, compliance-based audit system undermines empowerment – does a high-stakes inspection regime really encourage professional leadership and enterprise?

After 20 years of large-scale reform, another wave of policy initiatives designed to energise school performance is unlikely to be successful. Systemic complexity will thwart our best efforts until these important obstacles have been removed or remedied.

### Notes on contributor

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