

FROM STABILITY TO CHAOS

Seven overlapping phases of educational policy making in England since the Second World War

We like to give names to phases but need to remember they are not neat and tidy. The walls that we erect between classifications are often very porous. Nevertheless, the naming of phases can help us make sense of our history. I have concentrated upon England but some of these policies have influenced what took place in other countries at various times.

1. The quiescent autonomous phase

The 1944 Act, although given life by the Attlee government, maintained a stratification of schools that reinforced the stratification of society. This was a selective society of the kind still yearned for by Theresa May who, while wishing to bring back more grammar schools, seemed not to notice that in areas introducing them this would mean roughly 80% of young people attending secondary moderns where, no matter how brilliant the educational experience, the social label shouts 'inferior'.

For professional educators there was little need for innovation in this phase. Children in primary schools were usually streamed and although all would take what we referred to as 'the scholarship' (11-Plus) only 20% would go to grammar schools. There they would be streamed again because only 2-4% would matriculate to go to university. The distribution of resources reflected the selection process. Far less money was spent upon secondary moderns.

The basis for this was the belief of members of the eugenics movement that only the best racial specimens should be encouraged. The research underpinning this belief and the stratification of schools has long been regarded as contrived.

I used the phrase 'quiescent autonomous' because I believe that while little was done to tell teachers what and how to teach they were happy not using their professionalism to rock the social educational boat; as Olive Banks pointed out in *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education* (1955) selection bestowed prestige. I believe it still does, especially when selection includes those attending our private 'public schools'.

2. The proactive autonomous stage

The Newsham Report of 1964 drew attention to the unfairness in the system and one year later the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) was introduced for young people in secondary moderns who wished to stay on and take a public examination at 16. It was a far better

examination than the O-Level of grammar schools. It had coursework and stimulus questions but, of course, had to wear an inferior label. In Mode 3 form teachers could submit for approval their own syllabuses and papers. Outside grammar schools there was the opportunity to be professionally creative. Also in that year we had Tony Crosland's Circular 10/65 encouraging the establishment of comprehensive schools.

1972 gave us a raised leaving age making more equal the distribution of resources and also the James Report that proposed sabbaticals for teachers. That never happened.

We now had a Schools Council encouraging educational innovation. In 1975 Denis Lawton was proposing what we would later think of as a National Curriculum but one that he intended to emerge from the profession thinking critically about its social values. In the same year Lawrence Stenhouse was encouraging teachers to think of themselves as researchers possibly working with Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). That was a very different notion of inspection from the Ofsted model introduced by Kenneth Clarke.

Throughout the 70s the Politics Association was supporting teachers of government and politics and in 1978, one year before Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, the Report on Political Literacy was published.

Olive Banks' point about the powerlessness of educators to change social structures was, however, well made.

3. The civil service led centralising phase

In 1980 Denis Lawton wrote *The Politics of the School Curriculum* to draw attention to the gradual erosion of professional autonomy. If, for example, teachers behaved as researchers they could not be predicted and measured so easily. Experimentation makes it difficult for government to calculate value for money. Norm-referenced testing provides the appearance of reliability. On the other hand, critical reflection upon unexpected learning disturbs the governmental mind.

A major vehicle for civil service led centralization was to have been the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU). The ability of the Schools Council to encourage innovation was now coming under attack.

The next phase, however, brushed to one side the civil service.

4. The party political led centralising phase

An early signal of this phase came in 1976 when James Callaghan made his Ruskin College speech. Here was a prime minister somewhat uncomfortable with professional autonomy. Like a number of people,

seeing the word 'progressive' in front of the word 'education' made him uneasy.

It was in the next decade that the rules all changed and educators worked to the values of party politicians. We were given Kenneth Baker's GERBIL. His Great Educational Reform Bill became the 1988 Act, an enabling act bestowing great power upon the Secretary of State to impose requirements upon schools, teachers and Local Education Authorities. It meant the National Curriculum and lots and lots of tests.

The research being done at the University of Leeds on the tests for Key Stage One (roughly 7 year olds) was ignored by Kenneth Clarke when he became Secretary of State. He plucked some norms out of his hat and imposed his own expectations in terms of performance. They continue to bedevil National Curriculum assessment but are kept in place by another idea that came out of his hat: Ofsted. There is only one F in Ofsted.

A little earlier professional autonomy had one last hurrah. The General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) was introduced with the philosophy that it would provide opportunity for young people to 'demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.' That meant accessible questions and differentiation by outcome. Unfortunately, the old artificial norms came with it. Today, however, politicians have forgotten that GCSE was supposed to be for the 'top' 60%. That is just as well because no research was ever carried out to arrive at such a percentile. We had, for example, been told that Grade 4 CSE represented the average performance of a 16 year old. When that norm was introduced almost 80% of young people left school at 15. There never could have been any research.

In 1991, however, John Major knocked differentiation by outcome on the head. He gave a speech in which he made clear his dislike of coursework and open, single tier papers for which chief examiners took care to construct questions that were accessible for all. As a result all over the country recently printed new syllabuses had to be scrapped and hastily replaced. We had to devise tiered papers of graduated difficulty. GCSE had been integral to learning. Now it was a means of measuring and certain grades became inaccessible to certain students.

5. The routinisation of charisma and performance management phase

And so we come to Tony Blair, the prime minister who told us that his priority was EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION. He ought to have said, SOCIETY, SOCIETY, SOCIETY.

I have used the phrase 'routinisation of charisma' because it sums up the contradiction in Blairite New Labour. On the one hand we had a prime minister constantly interfering in education with more white papers, initiatives and restructuring than the system could digest and on the other

hand we had Michael Barber setting targets and trying to ensure that they were hit. The charisma of one destabilised the system while the routines of the other tried to instrumentalise it.

Blair presented frenetic activity as progress and gave us the cult of leadership and management. Today it is almost impossible to talk even for a few minutes about education without using the words 'leader' and 'leadership'.

Government was no longer accountable to the people. That concept was stood on its head and educators in particular were to be performance managed and held accountable to government.

We saw a further disconnection of schools from local democracy, a highly divisive separation of children on the basis of religion and the introduction of 'specialist' schools and academies. Michael Gove observed all this with pleasure because he was about to give us the next phase.

6. The fracking phase

The competition to be known as the worst ever Secretary of State for Education is stiff. Michael Gove, however, is head and shoulders above all others. In 2010 we elected a government that accelerated social fracture. Nick Boles, a former flat mate of Michael Gove's, publicly advocated chaos. He was put in charge of planning. The list of disruptive actions taken by Gove is very long. Educational structures, conditions of service, public values and systems of assessment lost coherence. What remained to hold things together was inspection, although how comparative judgments can be made when the variables become unpredictable is difficult to understand.

Gove did not like experts, especially when they used the word 'evidence'. He was only interested in civil servants that did what he wanted. He really loved Tony Blair's book. Like all of his New Labour predecessors he ignored the professional voice. He even went further and suppressed it.

Every year between 25 and 35 thousand schoolteachers in England registered for masters and doctorates. Even allowing for dropouts, that is a lot of words critically reflecting upon theory, practice and policy. The programme was intensively evaluated over ten years and had been preceded by a similar programme that underwent very thorough inspection. I am confident that during Phases 5 and 6 not one of those words was read by a single minister, let alone by a Secretary of State. Michael Gove closed the programme.

7. The DIY phase

Now we are back to autonomy: the autonomy of the educational jungle. Instead of Local Education Authorities that had to publicly report to elected

representatives we have clusters of privately owned companies exercising their rights to commercial confidentiality. Overall we have a very weird assortment of schools.

The professional learning of schoolteachers lacks coherent support while the pressure upon them to generate approved results becomes yet heavier. The fracking of society continues.

Quiescence will not do.

My hopes for a fair, fulfilling and coherent future phase of educational policy making rest with Jeremy Corbyn, Angela Rayner and like-minded others.

NOTE

It is 4 years since I attempted to write on this theme. It is almost a personal and professional autobiography. There are many initiatives I could have added. A link to a much longer version, written in 2013 complete with endnotes, is below.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf>

Cliff Jones, 13th, October 2017