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Recent school improvement measures in England

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(Text of a lecture given during the International Week, Insituute of Education, University of Bremen, June, 2003. Please do not quote without the author's permission)

Introduction

This paper addresses issues arising in England only. Scotland has always had its own education system, and Northern Ireland, too, has had its own system for a long time, whilst the recently-formed Welsh Assembly is now responsible for education in Wales. State maintained schools in England are under the overall control of Local Education Authorities ('Schulbehörden') which are, in turn, part of Local Authorities, either shire counties like Lancashire, or unitary authorities like cities and boroughs.

1988 was something of a watershed in the history of state-maintained education in England. In response to popular opinion that state maintained education was under-performing, the then Conservative Government introduced the 1988 Education Reform Act. The main features of this Act were

- a National Curriculum
- Local Management of Schools which gradually devolved more and more financial control to individual headteachers and governors
- the option for schools of opting out of Local Education Authority control and becoming Grant Maintained Schools, something which has since been rescinded by the present New Labour Government
- more power to parents to choose which school their children attend
- a reduction in the power of LEA's, abolished the Inner London Education Authority altogether
- the establishment of **city technology colleges** (CTCs) with funding from private industry.

The Thatcher government saw this as introducing market forces into the education system. Greater parental choice of school would cause competition among schools, especially as funding would partly be based on the number of pupils on the school roll. In turn this would drive up standards.

In the event there is still a perception that state schools are far worse than private, and where parents have the money to make the choice, many of them choose to send their children to private schools, even when those private schools do not achieve particularly good examination results. This is not seen by such parents as important. A recent survey, reported last week (13th June, 2003) states:

**“Parents with children at private schools consider moral guidance and mutual respect more important than a school's academic performance.
The largest-ever survey of fee-paying parents shows they most value schools which encourage good behaviour, firm discipline and individual attention.
By contrast, league-table performance came 33rd on a list of 37 desirable features and a school's religious attitude and social mix were also low priorities.”**

The report goes on to note that less than a fifth of those surveyed would send their child to even a good state school, and there was a general feeling that state education was deteriorating.

Certainly another recent report in *The Times* (11th June 2003) suggests that state education is failing many of our teenagers. Information from the State Inspectorate, Ofsted, shows that ten thousand teenagers have disappeared from the education system and cannot be found by teachers, employers or welfare officers. David Bell, Chief Inspector of Schools for England says this “lost generation” is an indictment of poor quality secondary education. A report in the *Daily Telegraph* (11th June, 2003) shows that in addition to those students who have “gone missing”, another thirty thousand left school with no qualifications at all.

These reports are set against a background of a stream of government initiatives from 1988 onwards trying to raise school standards. Have state schools deteriorated as so many of those fee-paying parents suggest? Have the school improvement initiatives therefore failed?

Before considering measures to improve school performance, it is useful to consider the purposes of education. - something which is often forgotten in the debate in England. Stoll and Fink (1998) cite four models after Brouillette:

Humanist: the principal aim is to prepare students for citizenship “so they understand the values and traditions embodied in their societies’ institutions. Pupils must, therefore, be sufficiently literate to communicate with fellow citizens and have the knowledge necessary to comprehend current issues and act accordingly. In practice, this has tended to be interpreted as emphasising the liberal arts and the ‘basics’ - grammar, spelling, arithmetic - as well as an understanding of western values and traditions.

Social efficiency: “the purpose of schools is to prepare pupils for jobs, and contribute to the society’s economic well-being. The concept of pupils as ‘human capital’ evolves from this point of view. While this view places an emphasis on the basics and sees education as an ‘input-output’ process, it also stresses the need for vocational education.”

Developmentalist: “holds that education should help individual pupils to develop their personal potential ‘so they are prepared to be creative, self-motivated lifelong learners who are effective problem-solvers, able to communicate and collaborate with others, and to meet the varied challenges that they will encounter in their adult lives’”.

Social meliorist: believes the purpose of education is “to bring about a more just society, through using the schools to help those children whose background puts them at risk, ‘to get the resources they need to succeed and through teaching...about diverse cultures and ethnic heritages, thus helping them to grow into open-minded, tolerant adults.’”.

It is particularly the Social meliorist approach which has informed many of the initiatives on school improvement in England, since the majority of these schools are in areas of socio-economic deprivation, while the Social efficiency model has influenced curriculum reform.

What makes an effective school? It might be easier first to examine the characteristics of failing schools. In a literature review on school improvement, Potter, Reynolds and Chapman (2002) have identified common characteristics of less effective schools:

At whole school, including leadership level:

- lack of competencies needed to improve
- unwillingness to accept evidence of failure
- blaming of others: parents, LEA etc
- fear of change
- controlled by rather than controlling change
- presence of dysfunctional relationships
- goals that are not plausible
- lack of academic focus
- passive about recruitment and CPD
- no longitudinal data on pupil progress
- improvement strategies not carried through
- passive governing body

at classroom level:

- timetable does not reflect academic time use
- inconsistent teaching-quality
- low expectations
- emphasis on supervision and routines
- low teacher-pupil interaction about work
- pupils see teachers as not caring, praising
- high noise-levels, much non work-related movement
- negative feedback from teachers

Can it be assumed that what makes an effective school is the exact opposite of the above? Undoubtedly the removal of the above obstacles will bring some improvement, but effective schools have something more as well. Mortimore (1996) sees effectiveness in terms of pupil achievement regardless of the pupil's home background:

“an effective school regularly promotes the highest academic and other achievement for the maximum number of its students regardless of the socio-economic backgrounds of their families.”

MacBeath & Mortimore (2001), drawing from recent international studies, have identified eleven key whole school and classroom processes which indicate effectiveness:

- Professional leadership
- Shared vision and goals
- A learning environment
- Concentration on teaching and learning
- High expectations
- Positive reinforcement
- Purposeful teaching
- A learning organisation
- Monitoring progress
- Pupils rights & responsibilities
- Home-school partnership

Harber (1992), however, cautions against seeking too many universal answers to the question of effectiveness:

“the effectiveness of a school can only really be judged in terms of the extent to which it has achieved its goals that have been set for it and that these goals can vary between individual schools and between societies according to differing ideologies so it is important to recognise that effectiveness is in no sense a technically neutral or factual term.”

The question of how to tackle the improvement of failing schools is one that has exercised successive governments in Britain since the Education Reform Act of 1988. Stark (1998.) writes that failing schools have usually lost their capacity to turn around, which implies that external agencies have to be brought in to aid the renewal process. Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2002) in stating that “It is difficult, therefore, to have a common definition of failure.” echo Harber’s sentiments in stating that the causes of ineffectiveness are different for each school as much as are the causes of effectiveness. Failure, too, is not a “technically neutral or factual term.”

Nonetheless, this has not prevented central Government from putting forward a number of different *national* initiatives in the rush to improve school standards. At the same time as schools being given more autonomy from Local Education Authorities to manage their own finances, national Government has taken power to itself, particularly in the form of a centralised inspection regime, a national curriculum and now national training schemes, to run education more centrally.

Recent initiatives include :

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- **National curriculum**
- **Inspection regimes (LEA and Ofsted)**
- **Fresh Start**
- **City Technology Colleges - City academies**
- **Specialist schools**
- **Faith schools**
- **Beacon schools**
- **Education Action Zones - Excellence in Cities**
- **Study Support**
- **Schools in the community/extended schools**
-

Before considering the success or otherwise of some of the above, it is necessary to consider *what* factors we are going to measure in order to demonstrate success, and *how* we are going to measure them. We need to consider the different constituencies of schools and their differing criteria: parents, pupils and teachers often have very varying views about the purpose of education. We need to decide which educational domains we are going to include. the data in school league tables at present is restricted to three core skills until age 14, and GCSE results after that. Do we wish to go beyond this and try to measure other benefits which schools try to convey to their pupils, such as teaching social skills? What will be the level at which we do the analysis: individual, group, whole-school? and what is our purpose for considering it? Are we trying to ‘name and shame’ failing schools in a punitive way, or are we offering formative feedback with suggestions for improvement? Are we measuring over a realistic time-frame? Are schools being given sufficient (although not too long) time in which to improve? What type of data will we collect: quantitative, qualitative, or both? And finally, but most importantly, what criteria of effectiveness are we using? These will largely be determined by our notion of the purpose of education.

Research on school effectiveness has tended to concentrate on quantitative indicators, particularly examination results. Examination results and test scores have been the Government's main indicator of school success, producing annual league tables showing how each school has performed in these areas. Those league tables do not take into account the number of students with special educational needs, including specific learning difficulties, which can cause great variation in performance from year to year. There is much criticism of the amount of testing being carried out, with pupils at age 7, 11 and 14 undertaking Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) in English, Mathematics and Science. These results, as well as those of public examinations, are put into league tables. Targets are set along government guidelines, by the local education authority for each of its schools. It is little wonder then, that teachers are often predisposed to cheat in order to meet these targets. Chrisafis (2002) writing in *The Guardian* found that cheating is widespread:

“Parents fear the Sats results are worthless because pupils across England are being "helped" to gain the government's required level 4. And teachers have confessed to us that, in some cases at least, the fears of parents are justified.”

Gray (1995) suggests that it is not necessary to rely solely on crude quantitative data to assess school performance. Other important factors of school success are also capable of measurement. He puts forward three basic performance indicators, two of which can only be measured through qualitative research involving the interviewing of pupils. These are:

Academic progress

Pupil satisfaction

Pupil-teacher relationships

I would suggest that other qualitative evidence can also be used, for instance: observations, focus groups, attitudinal surveys, collections of 'thank you' cards, pupils' voluntary participation in school events. Whilst further quantitative evidence such as a fall in fixed-term exclusions, would also attest to improvement. Until schools produce more comprehensive performance data, we are somewhat restricted in our judgment of effectiveness to the limited examination and test data which show nothing of the affect of a successful school on pupil motivation, confidence, social skills, and many other attributes which fall into the affective domain. It is interesting to recall here the attitudes of those fee-paying parents who put performance in such league tables very low on their list of priorities.

The National Curriculum

England did not have a national curriculum until the Education Reform Act of 1988. The aims were laudable, that is to produce a curriculum for pupils which:

- * is balanced and broadly based;
- * promotes their spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development;
- * prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life;
- * includes, in addition to the national curriculum core subjects of English Maths and Science, the compulsory foundation subjects of Geography, History, Design and Technology, Information Technology, Art, Music, physical education, religious education, and for secondary pupils, sex education. citizenship has recently been added to this group.

For the first time all pupils were, in theory at least, entitled to receive the same provision in schools regardless of social class, gender or special educational need.

One success claimed for the National Curriculum is that it has encouraged more girls to study science, however it has more generally run into the criticism of leading to a restriction of pupil experience by emphasising the core curriculum areas of literacy, numeracy and science. Although the QCA state that the National Curriculum is only part of the school curriculum and that schools are free to choose what else they teach their pupils, there is, in fact, very little time to do much else. Since league tables are produced from the results and targets set in the three core areas, it is not surprising that schools concentrate heavily on these. The National Curriculum is said to be a success in raising standards in the core areas, but this is measured in self-referential terms, therefore it is hard to judge whether there really has been a rise in literacy and numeracy compared to previous generations. The Government has failed to meet its own, somewhat unrealistic targets. Though results have improved rapidly since 1997, it missed by 5% its 2002 targets for Key Stage 2 tests for 11-year-olds, which required 80% to reach level four in English and 75% in maths. Nevertheless it is pressing on with its target of 85% for level four English by 2004, still maintaining the pressure on schools which is not conducive to broadening the curriculum.

No less a figure than David Bell, Chief Inspector of Schools has commented on the narrowing of pupils' experience, especially in the creative arts and humanities. Subjects like Geography are an endangered species. Although the emphasis on the core skills is not unworthy in itself, we are in danger of stifling imagination, love of learning, pupil motivation. Indeed, as they reach the age of rebellion, more pupils are voting with their feet. National truancy rates are rising, and as was stated earlier, ten thousand fifteen year olds have simply walked out of school for ever. The Government's answer to this is not to make the curriculum more interesting, and motivating, but instead to threaten to imprison the parents of persistent truants.

A chink of light may be seen in the White Paper on the 14-19 curriculum, where it is at last recognised that there needs to be provision for students who are not interested in narrowly academic study. The attitude in the UK to 'vocational' i.e. trade, subjects, has been to regard them as second-class, something reinforced by the narrowness of the National Curriculum. Now we have a desperate shortage of plumbers, plasterers, etc. Unfortunately the curriculum for pupils before the age of 14 can still be desperately limited, depending on the boldness of the headteacher and school governors in daring to push at the boundaries and to risk not meeting the targets for SATs tests.

Inspection regimes

Of course maintained and registered independent schools have always been subject to external audit. However, in a move to increase pressure by central Government on local education provision the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was set up on 1 September 1992. The website declares that:

“Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department whose main aim is to help improve the quality and standards of education and childcare through independent inspection and regulation, and provide advice to the Secretary of State.”

The role of Ofsted has been enlarged to include inspection of local education authorities as well as schools, plus providers of initial teacher-training courses, pre-school (early years) provision, and now the post-compulsory sector. This one organisation is, therefore, extremely powerful. Inspections of schools are carried out by teams of inspectors registered by Ofsted. There is concern about the variability in quality of inspection teams. They often run consultancies for school improvement, which could lead to a conflict of interest between the impartiality which inspectors are supposed to show and their desire to seek out new business.

How does Ofsted operate? Under the new framework, a team of inspectors spends a few, usually about four, days in the school observing lessons, talking to teachers and pupils; to gather evidence on how well the school is performing. The inspection is designed to answer the following questions:

- * What sort of school is it?
- * What does the school do well?
- * How high are the standards?
- * How well are pupils taught?
- * How well is the school led and managed?
- * How much has the school improved since the last inspection?
- * What should the school do to improve further?

There are two outcomes depending on the results of the inspection., one being **satisfactory** where the school has to prepare an action plan to implement the inspectors' recommendations for improvement, or **unsatisfactory** where the school will be considered to have '**Serious Weaknesses**' or, if particularly poorly performing, be required to be put into '**Special Measures**'. These two categories require a much more detailed action plan showing how the school and the local authority will address the problems outlined. If a school in special measures fails to turn around, then it could be closed by the Secretary of State.

There has been much recent debate about whether Ofsted is a force for school improvement. As yet, little evidence exists to show its impact. The question of value for money has been raised. In the ten years of its existence, Ofsted inspections have cost £200 million. A top civil servant, the Director General of Schools, was overheard suggesting that regular school inspections were a waste of time and money. (BBC News, 12th June, 2003). The Chief Inspector for Schools, David Bell replied that Ofsted had identified over 1,000 failing schools over the past ten years. Ofsted does not directly make suggestions about how improvement should be achieved; that is left up to the school and the local authority who must draw up a plan for Ofsted's approval. It could be argued that most local people already know which schools are failing, and that £200 million divided by 1,000 does not show much economic value. £200 million could have provided many other educational benefits. Whilst market forces are applied to schools to some extent, Ofsted remains a monopoly. It is interesting to speculate whether inspection standards would be raised if schools had a wider choice of whom to consult. It could indeed lead to more value for money.

Fresh-Start

Fresh Start was a policy devised to cope with some schools in the Special Measures category where it was felt that a complete change was needed to effect improvement. The idea originated, as so many recent initiatives in England, in the United States where it was called 'Reconstitution'. In a major evaluation study, Doherty and Abernathy (1998) point out that

“... the term 'reconstitution' lacks a precise common meaning. It has been used to describe intervention strategies that range from the restructuring of school leadership, mandated redesign of a school's program and instructional practices, to state takeover of school governance. In its most extreme form, reconstitution involves the disbanding of the existing Faculty and replacing nearly all the school's staff. This approach to reconstitution has garnered the most attention and engendered the greatest controversy. (p.45)

These different degrees of reconstitution are presumably designed to address different causes and levels of severity of failure. The "fresh start" scheme in England, however, relies heavily on the “most extreme form” of School Reconstitution from the US. The school is 'closed' - and when subsequently 'reopened' under a new name but on the same site, many former staff including the headteacher, will find themselves replaced by recruits drafted in to increase the potential for a completely new start. Even its proponents concede that it can be a wrenching process that can take years to yield positive results. Orfield (1996) has pointed out that Reconstitution is major surgery, drastic intervention, it's like trying to rebuild a rapidly deteriorating train as you're running down the tracks". Clearly then, it should not be the first option to be considered; rather it should be seen as an alternative when all else has failed. & Abernathy, 1998; Borman et al, 2000).

Despite these reservations, little cognisance appears to have been taken of the studies that had already taken place in the United States when Fresh Start was introduced. Had this happened, it might have had more success. *The Guardian* (2000) put it more strongly: “The Fresh Start scheme is based on the idea of ‘reconstitution’ developed in San Francisco in 1984. By 1997 - just when the DfEE grasped the idea - it was thoroughly discredited.” Matters were made worse by the high degree of publicity surrounding the first ‘fresh start’ schools: two were the subjects of lengthy television documentaries. during which the headteachers of both resigned. The national press was caught up with sensational headlines of further resignations by headteachers of other ‘fresh start’ schools soon after.

It is also not clear whether other school support systems would have been just as, or more, successful as reconstitution, and as Doherty and Abernathy (1998) report . “To date, there are no conclusive data demonstrating that the threat of reconstitution is an effective motivator for change.” Hardy (1999) writes that test scores are often used as the principle measure of successful improvement, having been used to identify the failing school in the first place. Rozmus’ two headteachers remarked that they would have liked more recognition given to the positive affective gains to balance out the emphasis on test scores.

Peterson (1998) pinpoints a number of ‘lessons’ to be learnt from reconstitution, amongst which are:

- - Reconstitution is a complex process
- - There are several, varied approaches across districts and states
- - The improvements in student learning have been varied
- - Reconstitution requires an “enormous reservoir of resources, skills, knowledge, and leadership”
- - Care and attention is needed at each stage if reconstitution is to succeed
- - Skilled leadership is crucial to success
- - Districts need to consider the ‘fall-out’ from such reform, including, conflict, low teacher morale, loss of experienced staff to inexperienced staff.

Further lessons are outlined by Doherty and Abernathy (1998 pp 47-8):

- - To successfully reconstitute [literally "to rebuild"] a failed school requires overcoming a legacy of failure developed over a long period and that may persist after reconstitution.
- - Strong leadership at the school site is essential.
- - Successful rebuilding of a new performing school appears to require a very clear break with past practices at that site.
- - High expectations and collective responsibility for student learning must be at the heart of the rebuilding effort.
- - Professional development and capacity building are the key to success.
- - Beware of the unintended consequences.
- - The role of the district and state leadership is pivotal in determining the success of reconstituted schools

In a study conducted jointly with Dr Marie Brown of Manchester University, we examined and analysed extensive documentation about two high schools, schools A and B, as revealed through official reports, Internet accounts, TV and press coverage, to determine what practices were used to turn the school around, whether these succeeded, whether they were likely to lead to sustainable success in the light of what we already knew about schools that were failing or in difficult circumstances. We also analysed data from two primary schools, schools C and D, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with the headteachers and other stakeholders. In three of the four cases, there were particular problems surrounding the Fresh Start process. One of the high schools, school A, closed after only two years; in School B the headteacher resigned after difficult discipline problems in the school. In one of the primary schools, school C, the headteacher became distracted by the building of the new school, spending more time on the building-site than on teaching and learning. As a result, pupils performance suffered, and the head went of ill, since resigning, and an acting head has been put in. In the other primary school School, D, pupil performance has been variable and numbers continue to fall. The school, with only 129 pupils, is no longer of a viable size given that there are other schools in the locality.

If we examine the Government's measure of examination results and test scores, the problems for these schools will be clearly seen. given very little time to show improvement, and judged solely on these factors, it is little wonder that they either did not improve, or had a very rocky ride to improvement.

High school As results were as follows:

Year	GCSE A*-C grades
pre fresh start: 1999	9%
post fresh start: 2000	4%
Acting head in place 2001	12%

Table 1: GCSE (age 16 national examinations) results for School A

High School B

Year	GCSE A*-C grades
Pre-fresh start:	
1997	17%
Post fresh start:	
1999	5%
2000	6%
New head in place:	
2001	22%
2002	23%

Table 2: GCSE (age 16 national examinations) results for School B

These results do not show the improvements that may have been achieved in other domains important to students' development. A reason for the drop in performance is that it is not only experienced staff who refuse to come to a school stigmatised as poorly performing; students who are able to make the choice also go elsewhere, often leaving the failing school with a significant majority of those less able, or with less supportive parents.

Looking at the standard test scores at age 11 in the two primary schools, we can see that the scores in primary school one do not show a great deal of improvement:

Year	English	Mathematics	Science
*1999i	32%	10%	26%
*1999ii	41%	18%	41%
2000		(not given)	
2001	39%	33%	50%
2002	30%	23%	53%

Table 3: Primary School C results in Standard Assessment Tests for Key Stage 2 (age 11). (Percentages show the number of pupils attaining the expected level for this age group. *1999i = school i before merger, 1999ii - school ii before merger)

To set Primary School C in a more representative context for the above figures, the test results of a neighbouring school (School N) which has the same catchment area, are as follows:

Year	English	Mathematics	Science
1999	28%	28%	48%
2000	56%	48%	56%
2001	59%	44%	56%
2002	50%	58%	73%

Table 4: School N results in Standard Assessment Tests for Key Stage 2

The pattern for Primary School D is less open to explanation. Before the Fresh Start intervention, the school was felt to be under-performing for a school of its type:

Year	English	Mathematics	Science
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1998	70%	65%	90%
1999	63%	69%	88%

Table 5: Primary School D's SATs results before Fresh Start

An Ofsted Inspection in 2001 found the Fresh Start school to be achieving well, and the headteacher's leadership to be effective in providing a clear vision for staff to follow. Interestingly however, the SATs results do not show a sustained improvement:

Year	English	Mathematics	Science
2000	62%	71%	86%
2001	88%	75%	96%
2002	55%	54%	92%

Table 6: Primary School D's SATs results after Fresh Start

Both primary headteachers stated that there were problems with the fresh start initiative. Firstly the Government agency did not demonstrate an understanding of the needs of primary schools and secondly, they did not at that time appear to consider the importance of sustainability of the improvement measures. Many further lessons could have been learnt from the United States experience before importing it into England. With the benefit of hindsight, what went wrong in three of the four schools was that the headteachers were immediately confronted by three problems: the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils, the competence and morale of the staff, and limitations and inadequacies of the school buildings set against a background of the school being singled out as failing. It would appear from the cases outlined above that there was too much concentration on aspects of leadership and financial resources. By investing so much in the figure of the headteacher perhaps not enough attention was paid to teaching and learning. In at least two cases the headteachers allowed themselves to be distracted by the extensive rebuilding works. The National Curriculum provided a further problem by limiting the innovatory approaches necessary to provide a more radical review of pupil needs and interests which may have resulted in a different curriculum pattern, and done much to reduce pupil disaffection especially at high school level.

The DfES still produces guidelines for fresh start, although there is little emphasis on this policy because of the disastrous publicity which surrounded it at the start. The new DfES (2003) guidelines suggest that lessons have been learnt from the earlier experience. These are:

- the local authority and the school must identify ways of sustaining improvements once the extra funding has been withdrawn.
- the focus on teaching and learning has also been learnt with the requirement now to have a 'Raising Attainment Plan'.
- the concern raised by the primary headteachers that the DfES did not understand the special requirements of this sector has also been addressed in the separate advice on these plans for both primary and secondary sectors.
- the necessity to consult widely with all stakeholders and the wider community. .

The reasons why the US evaluations should have been taken into account at the start are clear. The first is that already-damaged students underwent further negative school experiences because of the hasty implementation of fresh start in many schools The second is that much

public money could have been spent on school improvement measures which have been proved to be more successful in raising attainment.

City Technology Colleges were set up under the Thatcher Government in an attempt to reduce the control of local authorities over education and to drive up standards in inner-city areas where it was felt that local education authorities had failed. Great emphasis was placed on the school, rather than any other agency, as a force for change. It was Thatcher who famously said that there is no such thing as society. Clearly therefore, there was an implication that schools could influence individuals to achieve because the effects of society were not felt to be important. It was expected that there would be a considerable move towards city technology colleges which were to be set up with the aid of private finance. In the event only 15 colleges were set up between 1989 and 1993. The flood of private money was not forthcoming and much government money had to be added. These schools are overseen by the City Technology Trust which is a registered charity working closely with the Department for Education. According to the Trust

“CTCs are innovative schools which have proved to be extremely popular, with five times as many applications as there are places. ...The 15 original City Technology Colleges are independent schools which charge no fees, since their recurrent costs are paid by the Department for Education. Technology Colleges specialise in teaching science, maths and technology, and demonstrate their commitment to close links with business and industry by the appointment of sponsor governors.”

Have CTCs led to higher standards? It is true to say that they do produce examination results which are better than the national average. To take an example, most CTCs achieved a pass rate of 5 A*-C grades at GCSE (age 16) in the mid 70% range, where the national average was 51%. However CTCs are allowed to select their intake. Although they would argue that they do not select on ability, they do select on ‘aptitude’ of the child to benefit from the specialist nature of the school. The difference between ‘ability’ and ‘aptitude’ could be seen as hair-splitting. They certainly do not have to take the demotivated pupils that many ordinary (or ‘bog standard’ as Tony Blair once called them) comprehensive schools must enrol. In these circumstances, the best that can be said is that CTCs have performed well on behalf of their students, which is an important consideration.

Despite the lack of take up of CTC status, the Conservative Government decided to press on with the programme, setting up further ‘technology colleges’ using largely government funding. The New Labour Government has developed the programme even further changing the name to Specialist Schools. There are now over a thousand such schools.

Specialist schools

Specialist schools are schools which are allowed to emphasise a particular subject area, such as: technology, languages, sport, performing arts. Schools have to put in a bid for specialist status, for which they will receive extra Government funding, up to 75%, as long as they can match this with sponsorship usually from local businesses. The Government thinks that specialist schools will achieve higher standards. There is little real evidence to support this. Since these schools get considerable extra funding, it is possible to provide far better ICT equipment for instance, or supernumerary teachers. They do not operate on the same playing-field as the ‘bog standard’ comprehensive therefore. They may also be: **Faith schools** since it has been observed that faith schools, usually those operated by the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of England, often achieve higher results than ‘bog standard’ comprehensives. Therefore the Government has decided to create many more faith schools, including Muslim,

Sikh and others. Unlike 'bog standard' comprehensives, and like CTCs, however, faith schools can select a proportion of their pupils, which again means that they have an advantage.

There is still much debate about whether CTCs and specialist schools have raised standards. The Technology College's Trust (2002) reports the results of an evaluation conducted by Professor David Jesson of York University, which finds that specialist schools add more value than ordinary comprehensives to pupils between KS2 (age 11) and GCSEs (age 16). However Curtis (2003) reports that the Education Select Committee of the House of Commons finds that the Government has no evidence to support the specialist school policy,

"nor has it examined the detrimental impact these schools could be having on their neighbours, MPs concluded today.

The Labour-dominated House of Commons education select committee said, therefore, drawing any conclusions on the worth of specialist schools - one of the government's flagship education policies - was "potentially unsound".

In a report, Secondary Education: Diversity of Provision, MPs said they could not determine whether it was the programme for specialist schools, or the extra money given to them, that led to any improvements."

Yet another form of CTC, the **City Academy**, has recently evolved. According to the Standards website (2003) academies are:

"all ability schools established by sponsors from business, faith or voluntary groups working with partners from the local community. Sponsors and the Department for Education and Skills provide the capital costs for the Academy. Running costs are met in full by the Department.

All Academies are located in areas of disadvantage. They either replace one or more existing schools facing challenging circumstances or are established where there is a need for additional school places. The Department expects Academies to form part of the Local Education Authority's strategic plans to increase diversity in secondary provision."

Such academies have only just been set up, so it is too early to judge their effectiveness. They have, however, received funding-levels considerably more than that received by standard comprehensives.

Education Action Zones - Excellence in Cities

The Prime Minister writing on the Standards website states:

"Education Action Zones allow local partnerships - schools, parents, the community, businesses and local authorities - to find radical and innovative solutions to their problems. We are committed to seeing them work, and each gets up to £1 million a year for at least three years, a quarter of this from business partners.

The important point is not the extra money but how they spend it to improve. They will need to change attitudes and approaches in order to seek solutions to long standing problems, working with businesses and other partners. They must set themselves demanding targets for improvement."

These zones were set up largely in areas of socio-economic deprivation, with the objective of raising standards in schools in these areas. By 2005 all statutory zones will have become either an Excellence Cluster (which serve smaller areas of deprivation) or an EiC Action Zone.

The zones have received considerable Government funding plus about 25% private funding. Zones have been given considerable legislative power to innovate, for example, their governing bodies opt to disapply the teachers pay and conditions document so that new contracts can be set and applications from EAZ schools to disapply elements of the national

curriculum have been looked at sympathetically. Schools in these zones, therefore, have far more discretion than ordinary comprehensives in finding imaginative curricula which to motivate their students better. For example, a Fresh Start high school in Birmingham, which is also in an EAZ, is introducing the RSA “Open Minds” curriculum for the first three years.

Excellence in Cities

Excellence in Cities (EiC) is a programme set up to tackle the particular problems facing children in inner-city areas. The EAZs are now being subsumed into this programme. It is implemented by local partnerships consisting of all the local secondary schools and the Education Authority. **Excellence Clusters** are designed to spread the concept of EiC to smaller areas of deprivation,

EiC has four core values:

- high expectations of every individual pupil and all young people;
- diversity of provision;
- networks of schools;
- extension of opportunity to bring success to every school.

There are 7 key strands to the EiC programme: Learning Mentors; Learning Support Units; City Learning Centres; more Beacon and Specialist schools; EiC Action Zones; extended opportunities for gifted and talented pupils.

Has EiC raised standards? The Standards website claims that:

“Indications from the first 25 areas where EiC has been running for nearly 2 years are encouraging; the increase in those getting five good GCSEs or their equivalent was 2.3 percentage points compared with an increase 1.3 for other areas of the country.”

The performance of Education Action Zones (EAZs) has been varied. Even the Standards website can sound only lukewarm, pointing to no more than ‘some’ improvement:

“[EAZs] have seen some improvements in 2001 GCSE results. Initial analysis shows particularly good scores have been achieved in the 5* A-G category in the Round 1 zones which started in 1998. The rate of improvement in some EAZs and some zone schools is now at least matching, and in some cases outpacing, national trends.”

On the other hand results at primary level are more promising::

“At Key Stages 1 and 2 in 2001, EAZ Schools were considerably outpacing the national improvement rates in all subjects. Furthermore, comparing the primary results of Round 1 and 2 zones provides evidence that the longer a school remains in a zone, the greater its rate of improvement compared to national trends”.

Beacon schools

Beacon schools are those which are deemed, often after Ofsted inspections, to be performing particularly well. They receive extra funding to offer advice and training to schools which are less fortunate, and have played a large part in working with poorer performing schools in EAZs and Excellence Clusters.

Study support

Study support is a somewhat misleading name for the provision of out-of-school activities which may mean an extension of in-school subjects, but also may involve non-curriculum subjects and activities. It may involve parents, and other members of the community as well. A large-scale research project conducted by the National Foundation for Research in Education ((1999) concluded that;

“It is possible to state that the research evidence has established a link between young people’s participation in a range of activities outside school hours and a number of desirable outcomes including attitudes to school, attendance and academic achievement.” (p./15)

A study undertaken in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets noted a considerable improvement in GCSE scores - ten times that of schools without study support. Further evaluations have led to similar conclusions. With such improvements it might be asked why not all schools offer study support. There are several reasons, lack of leadership, lack of funding., lack of training and suitably qualified personnel and lack of publicity. Perhaps the most successful form of study support has come from the *Playing for Excellence* scheme which started with professional football. Football was seen as a good way of encouraging young boys, in particular, to engage in education. Study centres were set up in most professional soccer clubs in England, where extra tuition was offered in settings more glamorous to youngsters. Now professional rugby and cricket clubs are also setting up study centres, and recently in Stockport the local soccer club has opened an extension centre within a primary school. Now in its fourth year, evaluations carried out by the National Foundation for Research in Education show that this programme is highly successful in raising the achievement of previously under-performing students. The report of the evaluation of the fourth year states that:

“The initiative has contributed to improved achievement:

- Pupils made substantial and significant progress in numeracy. On average, primary pupils improved their numeracy scores by about 17 months and secondary pupils by about 24 months.
- Gains in numeracy brought the performance of these under-achieving young people much closer to the level expected for their age-group, especially at KS2.
- Performance in reading comprehension improved during the pupils’ time at the Centres, although the progress of primary pupils did not quite reach statistical significance when compared with last year’s control group. Secondary pupils’ reading comprehension scores improved significantly, by the equivalent of about eight months.
- Pupils’ ICT skills improved significantly during their time at the Centres. Their ability to operate a computer, carry out word processing tasks, use e-mail and navigate the Internet improved markedly.
- Pupils’ attitudes showed evidence of significant improvement in several respects. Compared with the control group, the changes of greatest educational significance were evident in pupils’ independent study skills (for both key stages) and self-image (KS2 pupils only).
- Teachers and parents noticed particular improvements in pupils’ self-confidence and ICT skills.”

Here is an initiative which has demonstrated real improvement, by relating to the pupils’ interests, thereby motivating them , and creating a real sense of enjoyment in education

Extended schools

Extended schools are another, very recent, US import, but this time a more fruitful one than Reconstitution, firstly designed to involve parents, especially in economically disadvantaged areas, to become more engaged in their children's' education and secondly to provide specialist intervention at the point where it is often first perceived to be needed, i.e. at school level. Such schools offer a range of community services - social workers, health professional, debt councillors, police and community safety officers. The idea is still in its infancy and still has to be extensively evaluated. The Local Government Association is at present conducting an assessment of its pathfinder scheme in this area, but has not yet reported. I visited a primary school in Sefton, a particularly deprived area of Merseyside (just outside Liverpool) where the headteacher and his staff have worked particularly hard to build up a good relationship with parents. Training in structured play activity was offered to parents of young children's from year 1 to 3. This has helped forge good relationships and build up the confidence of parents who were often failed by their own school education. There has been a huge rise in school test results but within the context of a broad curriculum and a caring environment. However, this school is a faith school which attracts its pupils from an already close-knit and supportive environment.

Why have schemes like Study Support and Extended Schools appeared more successful than some of the other initiatives? The answer may be found in Systems Thinking where answers to progress are sought from the client group and the front-line workers rather than from top-down solutions which are often remote and not founded in local research and analysis. Both Study Support and Extended Schools work closely with the community, capacity building where necessary, and starting with activities which are founded in children's needs, motivation and interests. However, capacity building is easier in close-knit communities with existing support mechanisms. There still remains the problem of what can be done for those children from families who simply do not care about them.

And indeed, that is the heart of the problem. Where there is good parental support, this can be built upon. But for too long, education has not been valued by large sections of the community especially in the poorer housing estates and inner-city areas where there is a history of unemployment and a feeling of hopelessness. The very strong private sector has also tended to weaken the maintained sector. It has certainly robbed the state sector of many of its best pupils. Until all those in Government are prepared to send their children to the local state school, the public will not have real confidence in that system or its professionals.

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