

Up for Grabs?

Comment on

An Education System For the 21st Century

- **Professor Peter Mortimore's independent review of the NUT
Education Statement: *Bringing Down the Barriers*
&
The Education White Paper
*Higher Standards Better Schools for All***

Gus John

5 May 2006

Up for Grabs?

Comment on

An Education System For the 21st Century

Preamble

The NUT are to be commended for commissioning this review. I agree with Professor Mortimore that such an incisive and evidence-based discourse on the relationship between teaching and learning and how schooling should be regulated and managed should have preceded the enactment of the Education Reform Act 1988.

The review helpfully underscores the often forgotten point that, however much governments might legislate and tinker with schooling as an institution, it is ultimately the product of the relationship between teacher and student that is measured and assessed as far as the quality of educational outcomes and school effectiveness are concerned.

At the heart of this debate, it seems to me is the fundamental question as to what the function of education and schooling is in building a society that is fair and just and, in the words of Federico Mayor (1995): 'promote(s) the self-fulfilment of human beings and guarantee(s) their dignity'... It raises further questions about:

- shared values in a liberal democracy
- equity
- entitlement,
- equality of access

- equality of ability to exercise 'choice'
- capacity to influence decision making and effect desired outcomes,
- a commitment to combating educational disadvantage and the social exclusion that is a concomitant of it, and among other things
- the role of elected government in guaranteeing the defence of the individual against invidious forces that do not necessarily respect the rights and entitlements of those who cannot fend for themselves or who constitute the excluded in society

I believe that 'Breaking Down the Barriers' places these considerations at the core of its proposals in a genuine attempt to steer the debate away from a market driven, individualistic and self serving approach to accessing quality education, i.e., the direction of the White Paper, and in the direction of the state provision of quality education for all as a fundamental entitlement of all.

Professor Mortimore's review not only highlights the philosophical and ideological differences in the two approaches, it also points to the means by which the core objectives and improvements that both the Government and the NUT agree upon might be realised.

Parental 'choice' and the pecking order of schools

I have long maintained that in many parts of this country parental 'choice' is a myth because for too many parents there is nothing left to choose from after certain schools have pre-selected the intake they most desire, or a certain category of parents have matched themselves to those schools. The new models of schools the Government is proposing, thus adding to the difference in status of schools in any one area, is destined to have parents scrambling for places in the schools at the top of the pecking order in a manner that builds in competition not only amongst schools but amongst communities. In the latter case that competition could divide communities along ethnic and faith lines, and exacerbate class divisions.

Faith schools

The Government is being very choosy about what it wishes to be radical about. Given how much of a deviation from the core principles of comprehensive schooling provision its proposals represent, one would have thought that, it would have wanted both in to tackle the existing grammar schools and to bite the bullet and review the current arrangements with respect to denominational schools, rather than adding to the confusion. I take the view that rather than creating space for an increase in 'Faith schools', the government should abolish all schooling provision based on religion and faith. It is simply not good enough to say that the present system allows Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Jews and Seventh Day Adventists to have their schools, therefore Sikhs, Hindus, Zoroastrians and Muslims should all have their schools too.

Curriculum

The National Curriculum remains deficient and dysfunctional in a number of important respects. Despite various reviews, it remains silent on some key issues and underscores the 'structured omission' of considerations of the role of education in combating racism and xenophobia, and building an inclusive non-racist society everywhere in Britain. It nods in the direction of the interface between culture and politics and the impact of globalisation on notions of Britishness. Above all, it loads much too much on to the 'Citizenship' curriculum while denying teachers the space and scope to develop and deliver a more meaningful curriculum across the piece, a curriculum that encompasses a wider range of issues to do with global education as well as one that meets local needs.

The National Curriculum does need to be slimmed down considerably, to at least the 50% recommended by the NUT. Only thus could it properly sit in a triangular relationship with the Local Authority curriculum that reflects the LA's vision of what schooling and education should be doing in respect of its

specific characteristics as well as its place in the region, the country and the world, and the School Curriculum that relates even more specifically to the needs of its intake and of the particular locality in which it is situated. This has a great deal to do with the issue of curriculum relevance and the degree of engagement students could be expected to have with curriculum planning, delivery and content.

Needless to say, I am in total agreement with the call for the removal of the difference in status between academic and vocational courses.

Inspection arrangements and 'failing schools'

I had the experience on joining Hackney LEA in March 1989, one year before the transfer of the education function from the ILEA of being presented by HMI with a list of 13 failing schools. I was required to submit to the then Secretary of State an action plan for the recovery of those schools and to report on the recovery process every term. We turned all of those schools around within 3 years by taking a series of measures. Although in about 3 cases it was kinder to the incumbent headteacher to encourage them to go and find something else to do, the strategies we employed were not dissimilar to those recommended by the NUT and supported by the evidence from other sources provided by Professor Mortimore.

Local Authority

Perhaps the most troubling development in the organisation of schooling provision in the last twenty years has been the steady erosion of local authorities' powers as far as schooling is concerned. I have argued elsewhere repeatedly, most recently in my critique of the 'White Paper' in this book 'Taking A Stand', that LAs must retain some key functions, not least among them being:

- the regulation of admissions across all schools in the state sector, including having the power to make schools take ‘ a fair share of the more challenging pupils’ and those excluded from other schools who nevertheless retain their entitlement to education
- protection of parental rights with regard to school exclusions and appeals against such
- guaranteed access to education for students with special educational needs
- education quality across the schools in their area

Pedagogy and helping disadvantaged children

The discourse on ‘personalised learning’ in Professor Mortimore’s review is illuminating. I would make just a couple observations. When working for the Council of Europe a while back on ‘Education for Democratic Citizenship’ on the theme of democratising schooling, I visited schools in Norway where the ‘Pupil Teacher Conversation’ was being implemented. That ‘tutorial’ system was geared towards exploring not only the teaching/learning interface, but the range of issues which either teacher or student identified as a possible hindrance to pupils working at their ability level. It was resource intensive and led in some cases to adjustments and remedial measures which were in themselves even more demanding of resources. The system only worked where there was the flexibility to make it work, both in terms of teacher time, counselling support, and resources for whatever further inputs the teachers and pupils determined would be necessary to give pupils their entitlement.

I welcome the fact that the NUT raises the class size issue yet again and links it to resources. It seems to me that if we are serious about giving children their entitlement, whether they are gifted and talented or disadvantaged, whether we wrap it up in the ‘personalised learning’ package or not, space must be made for the teacher and student to engage around the issue of how learning is taking place and what learning is taking place.

On page 55 in his report, Professor Mortimore states:

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

A study I am currently conducting on the Supplementary/Saturday School Movement in African-Caribbean communities is already providing similar evidence. Whereas prior to SATs, etc., those schools supported the learning of children who were largely under performing in mainstream schools or whose level of application was causing concern, in a large number of schools presently, especially in Inner London, they perform the function of supporting highly motivated learners – from 5 to 18- to higher levels of achievement. In some cases, that is reflected in a change in the profile of the students, from the mainly African-Caribbean group to a predominantly West African group (Ghanaians and Nigerians). For many of those parents, the Saturday school and week day evening classes run by the Supplementary Schools are a cheaper option than the –one-to-one tuition at £25-£30 per hour they might otherwise pay. They nevertheless want the outcomes to be the same.

Teacher training

I welcome the proposal that the Government should introduce the 5 year Masters and the 2 year PGCE. When it does so, I would want to see a stipulation as to the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and behaviours all teachers would be expected to demonstrate as far as their preparedness for teaching in a multi-ethnic society and promoting equality and social justice through education are concerned. It would be arrant nonsense for schools to be required to implement the RRAA 2000, the SENDA, etc., and not prepare teachers and headteachers for that task,

wherever they might be from and wherever in the country they might receive their training and teacher education.

Similarly, one would wish to see a better framework for Continuous Professional Development, including sabbaticals for teachers.

In conclusion, let me say, again, how much I welcome this sober and informed debate about how we should structure schooling and education in 21st century Britain, having regard to the deficiencies of the past and current arrangements, the lost generations that they have produced, the current state and profile of Britain and its place in world affairs.