

BOOK REVIEWS

Education and the Labour Government: an evaluation of two terms

Geoffrey Walford (Ed.), 2006

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This is a reprint of a special issue of a 2005 *Oxford review of education* summarizing the New Labour Governments' record prior to the last election. It presents a useful summary divided by the different sectors of education, excepting FE which falls uneasily between higher and lifelong. Valuable though this summary is, the weakness of this characteristically educational approach is also apparent.

Following an editorial outline delimiting coverage to England to exclude Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, Kathy Sylva and Gillian Pugh see the two terms to 2005 'Transforming early years' with 'an explosion of initiatives, programmes and funding streams' (p. 9) but also describe 'tensions remaining' (p. 20), particularly in relation to the variable quality provided by the mixed market in provision.

Kevin Brehony also perceives an 'irresolvable contradiction' between 'enjoyment' and 'excellence' (p. 28) in the first term focus on primary schooling, the latter defined, 'unusually in the history of primary schooling', as preparation for employment (p. 29). Like other contributors, Kevin measures Government achievement against its own targets—for class size, for instance, which fell in primary but rose in infants. Similarly literacy and numeracy, stressing whole-class teaching, setting and phonics, resulted in a two-tier curriculum, successful at first but which subsequently 'skewed teaching and narrowed the curriculum' (p. 35), leading to resistance and accommodation, including a partial 'reappropriation of progressivism' (p. 38).

For the second-term concentration on secondary education, Chris Taylor, John Fitz and Stephen Gorard limit themselves to establishing that the autonomy of specialist schools is also leading to 'a two-tier education system' with 'a mosaic of education markets, each one offering different choice and constraints for parents' (p. 50). Like other contributors, they conclude that this is a result of Third Way 'market socialism' or 'new social democracy', as distinct from 'mere neo-Thatcherism' (p. 63).

The anticipated third-term concentration on the new age of selection at 14+, as opposed to 11+ or (briefly with GCSEs in 1986) 16+, was disconcerted by Blair's 2005 rejection of Tomlinson's proposals. Richard Pring could have updated his account of 14–19 to accommodate this. Also the 'rolling in' of Connexions—now seemingly lost in local authority reorganizations following *Every child matters*. Similarly, an editorial postscript might have been added on the 2006 Education and Inspections Act. Nevertheless, Richard

rightly sees the new vocational diplomas ‘reinforcing the dubious distinction between the academic and the vocational’ (p. 82) with two tiers once again.

From his eminence of *A view from Oxford’s city wall*, Alan Ryan writes that ‘it was never true that a lower second from a polytechnic represented a striking intellectual achievement’ (p. 96). Now he discerns not two tiers but one as HE is ‘dumbed into the middle’ by ‘teaching through course delivery’ (p. 96) reinforced by the QCA. His perverse defence of academicism sees this as New Labour’s ‘betrayal of the ambitions of the Labour movement’ (p. 97), rather than their ending of free public service HE and the imminent raising of fees to full costs in a market in which ‘the magic five’ (Oxbridge, Imperial, UCL and LSE) will take themselves out of the state system while many other universities and colleges close or merge through the usual process of market-managed consolidation.

This is where the weakness of this educational approach becomes clear. It divides the system into sectors to compare Government achievement with targets and diagnoses the results in terms of an ideological mix of market with state. As with Richard Taylor who describes Lifelong Learning under New Labour (from which mention of ‘the developing NHS university’ (p. 105) should also have been excised!) as ‘not merely Thatcherism with a new spin’ but ‘a modest advance’ (p. 111) such as characterized previous (Old) Labour administrations. This is to miss what social policy analysts have described as a decisive break to introduce a new state form. Represented in education by the 1988 Education and 1992 F&HE Acts, this replaced national welfare locally administered with a new market state controlled by contractual funding from the centre.

This is nowhere clearer than in teacher education, where John Furlong describes ‘the end of an era’ (p. 118). Starting in teacher training trade colleges, teacher education had professionalized itself through association with HE, but is now administered by diktat from the Teacher Training (sic) now Development Agency—a real case of FE in HE with competence-based training, just like the foundation ‘degrees’ to which teaching assistants may be limited in a ‘remodeled’ ‘teaching workforce’ (sic again!). However, Furlong finds in the TDA ‘the very model of “third way” public management’ (p. 126).

By contrast, Derrick Armstrong, writing from Australia, where the new market state is much more developed (in education at least), penetrates ‘the inclusive “third way” philosophy of New Labour’ to recognize the reconstruction of inclusion since 1997 ‘within the traditional framework of special education ... to reinforce its traditional purposes’ (p. 134). He connects this to the ubiquitous ‘personalization’ agenda where paradoxically nothing is personal. Madeleine Arnot and Philip Miles’ chapter on gender also ranges across sectors to argue that ‘neo-liberal reforms of schooling encourage a “laddish” culture of resistance amongst a large group of boys’ (p. 177).

Sally Tomlinson’s chapter on ‘Race, ethnicity and education under New Labour’ (pp. 152–169) also crosses sectors. She is the only contributor to mention the private schools whose 7% of all pupils constitute 26% of all those taking A levels. Moreover, Sally sets her account in the context of *Education in a post-welfare society*, as her recent Open University book is called. She thus relates education, where private sector involvement is accelerating now that schools are following FE and HE into the market, to other public services, such as health, where the internal market is being reintroduced into hospitals, while others, like the Post Office, are being ‘set free’ to compete for Government funds

alongside private sponsors and investors to meet the timetable for the European Union offer on service liberalization tabled at the World Trade Organization—not mentioned by any of the contributors. Also omitted is the persistence of 1.63 million officially unemployed (at the last count) who underpinned New Labour's 'economic miracle', combining high productivity growth with low wage inflation through continuous downsizing and relentless *learning unto death*.

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Pedagogy and the university

Monica Mclean, 2006

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It is good to see that critical theory is alive and well as a useful lens through which university practices—particularly the behaviours of teachers and learners—can be viewed. In an era when postmodern discourses are often thought to have displaced the hopelessly modernist project of critical theory, a book that places itself unabashedly in the critical tradition is welcome indeed. The focus of that tradition - to use reason to replace the exchange dynamic of capitalism with a system that allows people to exercise creativity in their work—is needed more than ever as global capitalism reconfigures itself to wreck lives across the world. In *Pedagogy and the university* Monica McLean aims to address the question 'How can university teachers practise pedagogy which is attentive to how their students might as citizens of the future influence politics, culture and society in the direction of justice and reason' (p. 1). A big question indeed and one that (as McLean's use of the terms 'attentive to' students and 'might' being able to influence them indicates) carries no guarantee of success. In her application of critical theory to university activities McLean relies almost exclusively on the work of Jurgen Habermas.

In the choice of one critical theorist as the source of the book's chief arguments lies both a strength and potential weakness. The strength is the consistency allowed by relying on only one theorist. Given the corpus of thinkers who could be encompassed by the term critical theory it will be a relief to some readers to know that they are not going to have to negotiate in and around the tributaries, whirlpools and eddies branching from its main stream. Hence, the book's reference section contains no Marcuse, Adorno, Fromm, Benjamin, Althusser or even Marx. However, connections McLean makes between Habermas and contemporary thinkers are woven throughout the text, with Freire, Giroux, Apple, Bernstein and Barnett well represented in the final bibliography. Given