

Educational social policy: part 5- New Labour 1997-2010: The Blair/Brown years

In 1997, **New Labour** re-gained power. However, it did not entirely revert back to a **social democratic approach to education**. Instead Labour's educational policies in the period 1997-2010 were a strange mixture of social democratic policies aimed at reducing inequality and **New Right ideas** focused on **marketisation**, especially the notion of increasing choice for parents.

Eight Labour educational policies can be seen to be promoting equality of opportunity and the reduction of inequality:

1. Labour made **free nursery provision** available so that mothers could go back to work.
2. **Primary school class sizes were reduced** in poorer areas.
3. Some disadvantaged communities were identified and designated as **'Education Action Zones (EAZ)** (note the similarity to EPAs – see guide 2. In the EAZs, Labour opened **Sure Start children's centres** which aimed to give young children a better start in life. Sure Start brought together a range of educational and other services to support poorer parents in order to tackle **cultural and material deprivation** which placed working-class children at a disadvantage before they had even started school.
4. The **New Deal for Young People** aimed to help the young unemployed gain qualifications to improve their chances of finding work.
5. The **Aim-Higher** initiative aimed to widen participation in higher education particularly among students from working-class and ethnic-minority backgrounds.
6. The **Gifted and Talented initiative** was introduced in 2002 to identify the top 5 per cent of students aged 11-18 in inner city secondary schools and to provide them with free extra study supports.
7. The **Apprenticeship scheme and vocational educational qualifications** were expanded.
8. The **Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)** aimed to increase the number of young people, especially working-class and ethnic minority students studying A-levels and applying to university.

The influence of the New Right on Labour's educational policy

The New Right influence on Labour's educational policies can be seen in their focus on the following;

1. **Choice and selection** -Labour continued the Conservative educational policy of **education diversification**, by creating **specialist secondary schools**. In

1998, it became possible for such schools to **select up to 10 per cent of their new intake based on aptitude in specialisms** such as sport, the arts, modern languages and technology. New specialisms were added in 2001, and by 2002 **nearly one-third of all secondary schools were specialist schools or colleges**. The aim was to extend the specialist programme to 50 per cent of schools by 2005. **The 2006 Education and Inspections Act** gave schools greater freedom to be selective by setting their own admission requirements and arrangements.

2. The 2006 Act also invited religions, other than Christianity, to set up **faith schools**, therefore increasing the educational choice of non-Christian parents with regard to their children's schooling.
3. Labour initiated the **Private Finance Initiative (PFI)** – a partnership between private building contractors and the government to build new schools and colleges across the UK. Moreover Exam Boards and SATs testing as well as some OFSTED were **sold or outsourced to private profit-making companies**. This has led to some critics complaining that **state education is becoming increasingly privatised**.
4. **Labour retained school performance league tables**. In addition, all schools were **set targets to raise performance in national examinations**.
5. **Failing schools, especially those found in low-income communities were closed if they failed to meet targets**. As part of the 'Fresh Start' programme, such schools were re-opened as '**city academies**' often in partnership with local employers. Such academies were often given new headteachers and new staff as well as new names, uniforms and sometimes buildings. The key objective of Fresh Start was to improve educational standards, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Evaluating New Labour's educational policies

- **Chitty (2014)** criticises New Labour for opening up state education to private enterprise. In particular **PFI proved particularly costly** and led to some local educational authorities suffering severe financial difficulties which meant they had less money to invest in schools.
- PFI also failed to deliver new schools and colleges on time or at a lower cost than local authorities.
- **Ball (2007)** observes that a significant '**Educational Services Industry**' (ESI) has appeared in the UK which competes with the state sector to provide services in schools and colleges. **Ball argues that education consequently has become increasingly commodified and profit-orientated**. He predicts that in the future **education will be treated as a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder rather than a free and fundamental human right**.

However on a more positive note, Labour's emphasis on equality of opportunity was welcomed by most sociologists. For example, Ball observed that **under New Labour there were overall increases in the proportion of students achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, and improvements in the achievement levels of ethnic minority children and youth.** However, boys' achievement continued to lag behind that of girls' during Labour's term of office. **The class divide between middle-class and working-class children continued to persist too.**

Tomlinson (2005) observed that Labour increased the number of working-class teenagers entering university although the number of middle-class students increased at a faster rate. However New Labour also introduced **tuition fees for university and replaced means-tested maintenance grants with loans that had to be paid back with interest after graduation.** There is evidence that this system is more likely to deter students from poorer backgrounds from applying for higher education.