

Educational social policy: part 4- 1979-1997

1979 was a crucial year for educational policy because **Mrs. Thatcher's Conservative government** took power. Her attitude to education was primarily shaped by **New Right** ideas which believed **education was a consumer good or resource** which **could be sold in the marketplace in much the same way as any other consumer item**. Mrs. Thatcher was uninterested in education as a means of ensuring equality of opportunity or social mobility for the working-class. Consequently social democratic ideas about education go into decline until Tony Blair's Labour government take power in 1997.

Thatcher's conservative had **two** major effects on educational policy in the UK.

1. In the 1980s, a range of schemes known as the '**new vocationalism**' were introduced. New Right politicians argued that youth unemployment (which was high) was primarily caused by a '**skills crisis**', that is, young people lacked the 'right' skills and attitudes required by employers. In other words, unemployment was not caused by government policies – the Conservative government claimed it was actually self-inflicted. It was heavily implied that unemployed **young people were too dependent on welfare benefits** and consequently **chose not to take on paid work** (despite a lack of evidence). A **collection of educational schemes**, known collectively as the 'new vocationalism' was introduced which **aimed to equip teenagers and young people with the 'appropriate' skills, work habits and positive attitudes towards paid work and which aimed to wean them off welfare-dependency**. These included;

- **YTS – The Youth Training Scheme** -this much criticised scheme placed unemployed youth in jobs (for which they were not paid. Employers, on the other hand, received government money for agreeing to take on this 'free' labour) to gain **work experience**. Employers were encouraged to take on YTS trainees full-time once the work experience period had ended. Those who refused to take part in the scheme often found that their benefits were stopped. Marxist critics such as **Dan Finn (1987)** were very critical of YTS which he argued had a hidden function which was to produce **a pool of low-skilled, cheap and docile young workers**. He also points out that many employers abused the scheme in that only a fraction of trainees were offered jobs afterwards. It was much more profitable for employers to take on a succession of YTS placements.
- New vocational courses and qualifications were introduced into the school curriculum such as the **General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ)** aimed at those of low ability to prepare them

for work by **teaching job-specific skills in the classroom and placing them with employers in order that they gain some work experience.** These courses were often taught as an alternative to the more academic GCSEs and A-levels. Again, Marxists were unimpressed. Finn argued that such courses inevitably produced a form of **educational segregation and inequality in that middle-class pupils and students received an academic education which opened doors to university degrees whereas working-class pupils and students were 'trained' to accept without question whatever low-skilled and low-paid factory or manual jobs that were available.**

2. In 1988, the Conservative government brought in **The Education Reform Act (ERA)** which had a **transformative effect on British education** in that it brought about seven key changes in the way education was organised in the UK;
 - (i) It set out a **'national curriculum'** – the Department of Education took responsibility for deciding what knowledge should be taught in subjects such as Maths, English, History etc. This initiated a debate about the **ideological nature of knowledge.** It was argued, for example, that the 'kings and queens' approach to History which focuses on key dates should take precedence over a more empathetic approach to History which focuses on how groups like the poor or women experience key historical events. **QUESTION FOR DEBATE – why is the 'kings and queens' approach to history more acceptable to those who dominate British society than either the 'empathetic' or a 'people's history' approach?**
 - (ii) The Act introduced **Standard Assessment Tests (SATs)** to regularly test children especially with regard to literacy and numeracy at the age of 7, 11 and 14.
 - (iii) This SAT data would be published, along with data on GCSE and A-level results, attendance, exclusion and truancy in the form of **hierarchical league tables** of schools that would be made publicly available to parents.
 - (iv) The Act set up **The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)** which was given the authority to **formally inspect** schools and to **grade** them on the quality of the teaching and learning experience. These reports were published and made available to parents via the OFSTED website.

- (v) Schools that were at the top end of these league tables were allowed to **select** a proportion of their students so that they could expand to the limit of their physical capacity. This was known as **'open enrolment'**. New rules with regard to **funding** also benefited schools at the top of the league tables. **Formula funding** meant that money was given to top schools and sixth form colleges on the basis of the number of pupils and students they attracted.
- (vi) A new type of educational institution – **City Technology Colleges** - were introduced into some deprived urban areas in order to improve educational standards and **provide a greater degree of choice**. These were funded by a combination of public funding by the government and private funding by local businessmen.
- (vii) In order to give parents more choice of schools (and to reduce local authority control of schooling), the Act encouraged a greater diversity of schools by **encouraging existing schools to 'opt out' of local authority control and to be directly funded by central government**. These schools which became known as **'grant-maintained schools'** were **given the freedom to make their own decisions about marketing, enrolment and whether they wanted to use selective practices to recruit new pupils**.

Evaluating the impact of the 1988 Act

It is important to understand that the Act was underpinned by **New Right ideology**, in particular, **'marketisation'** – **the idea that education could be run like a business, and that schools, like businesses, should compete with one another for customers in the form of parents and pupils**. New Right educationalists argued that **the more competition that schools faced, the more incentive there would be for them to improve**. It was believed that **such competition would lead to the expansion of successful schools measured by high enrolment, the ability to hire the best teachers, and, of course, exam results**. In contrast, **unsuccessful schools, like unsuccessful businesses would either be forced to improve or eventually close**.

The 1988 Act also **symbolised a significant power shift**. Before the ERA, pupils were allocated to schools by local authorities. However, the ERA transformed **parents of pupils into consumers**. The concept of **'parentocracy'** was made important by the 1988 ERA – it means that parents had the power to shape their children's educational future by giving them the right to choose the school they wanted their children to attend.

However criticism of the 1988 ERA was extensive in that

- Concerns were expressed over the **damaging effects of frequently testing children.**
- The **validity** of such tests was undermined by many schools **'teaching to the tests'**.
- The educational marketplace was not truly a competitive arena or marketplace because **parents were not paying for their children's education and were not selecting schools on the basis of price.**
- Some schools were accused of **excluding pupils** to improve their 'sales image' and/or **off-rolling low-ability or under-performing pupils in order to improve exam results.**
- Popular schools, at the top of the league tables, quickly filled up at enrolment which restricted parental choice, i.e., not all parents could choose to send their children to these schools because they were **over-subscribed**. Such schools often used **forms of selection to ensure that the ability of their pupil population was kept high.**
- There is some evidence that the ERA created a **two-tier state education system** in which schools at the top ends of the league table were able to select the best students and recruit the best teachers leaving schools at the lower-end of the league tables with students not wanted by the top schools. For example, such schools were only likely to achieve moderate exam results and consequently were more likely to be under-subscribed because parents preferred to send their children to schools higher in the league table. Such schools were likely to experience a **self-fulfilling prophecy** in that their exam results deteriorated from year-to-year. **Stephen Ball (1994)** argued that **marketisation actually reproduced and even increased social class inequalities** because the high-achieving top-of-the-league-table schools were (i) often located in the middle-class suburbs and (ii) able to select the **'cream'** of middle-class academic pupils. **Such schools were less likely to admit pupils with discipline problems or 'learning difficulties'**.
- **Gewirtz (1995)** studied 14 London schools and found that **the notion of a 'parentocracy' was a myth** because parental power is not equally distributed across all parents. **She found that middle-class parents exercise more power than working-class parents because they are able to use their economic, social and cultural capital to ensure their children enter the 'best' schools. Parents who fail to get their children into the school of their choice actually have limited choices in practice. Many working-class parents had no choice but to accept a place for their child in either 'failing' or 'average' schools.** Gewirtz agreed with Ball that this system created and reinforced inequalities between schools in middle-class and working-class areas especially in funding, facilities available and the recruitment of teachers.

