REFORMING EDUCATION AND CHANGING SCHOOLS
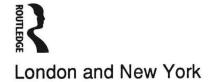
Case studies in policy sociology

RICHARD BOWE
and STEPHEN J. BALL,
with ANNE GOLD

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The Education Reform Act introduced in England and Wales in 1988 is bringing about enormous changes in schools, both in management and as educational terms. This book is the first to look at the effects of the Act in all its aspects on the basis of empirical evidence gathered from schools over the first three years of the Act's implementation. It concentrates on three major aspects of change arising from the ERA: the local management of schools, the National Curriculum (particularly Maths, Science and English) and special educational needs. These are areas which have hitherto been treated in isolation by researchers. In fact, as each develops it has ramifications in other areas. Bowe, Ball and Gold preserve a sense of the complexity of this change process, and use their detailed research on the effects of the education reform act to examine more generally the processes of the implementation of reform and the management of change in schools. Throughout, their concern is with the *effects* of policy rather than with the *implementation* of the Act in any simple sense. Indeed they show that to regard policy as a fixed text is a fallacy. Instead it is a constantly changing series of texts whose expression and interpretation vary according to the context in which they are being put into practice.

This provocatively written and subtly argued book will be essential reading not only for all who want to know about educational reform in Britain, but also for anyone interested in the processes of educational change.

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Abbreviations

CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
DES	Department of Education and Science
ERA	Education Reform Act 1988
ESG	Educational Support Grant
GASP	Graded Assesment in Science Project
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GERBIL	Great Education Reform Bill
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
HOD	Head of department
INSET	In-Service Education and Training
LEA	Local education authority
LFM	Local financial management
LMS	Local Management of Schools
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NC	National Curriculum
NCC	National Curriculum Council
SAT	Standard Attainment Tasks
SEAC	Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SMC	Senior Management Committee
SMP	Schools Mathematics Project
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative

Preface

Several pieces of the text have appeared in other places in other forms. The National Curriculum material in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, the LMS material in the BERA Dialogues series, the SEN material in a collection of papers edited by Roger Slee, an early draft of the management material was presented to a meeting of the ERA Research Network.

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Introduction

After more than a decade of furious debate over educational policies and ideas, major institutional changes are being imposed. Under the 1988 Education Act, the powers and procedures of local education authorities (LEAs) are being reordered. Balances between 'partners' (the Department of Education and Science [DES], LEAs, teachers) tilted powerfully towards the State. New types of school are artificially implanted (invented? restored) by 'philanthropic' alliances, where there is little desire for them. In existing institutions we face layer after layer of imposed tasks, novel drudgeries and imperative demands to account for ourselves. Whatever the outcome of the first election of the 1990s, the 1988 Act and the National Curriculum have set many conditions for the new phase, rather as the 1944 Act constrained the postwar reforms, though in a different direction. The 1944 Act could be turned into a charter for 'universal' public provision and local experimentation; the 1988 Act, though complex and ambiguous, as we shall see, sets the scene for split provision and central curriculum control. If 1944 was informed by a heavily qualified universalism, 1988 is animated by the spirit of Education Ltd, Education-as-a-Business-Corporation: commercial in outlook, hierarchical in organisation, 'limited' in liberality or extent – unless you pay for more.

(Cultural Studies, Birmingham 1991, p.ix)

This is the terrain of our research; the changes in purpose, values, structure, control, relationships and organization brought about in schools by the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). (See Maclure 1989 for a detailed account of and commentary on the full

provisions of the Act.) We are also concerned with the ways in which change is being achieved. The ERA requires a whole variety of substantive changes; it also brings into being new ways of bringing about change. The case studies reported here are of two kinds. The primary data are drawn from case study research in four secondary comprehensive schools and two LEAs (although little of the LEA data are reported here). These also provide the basis for the second sort of case study; a focus upon two specific but major aspects of the ERA as it relates to schools – the National Curriculum (NC) and the Local Management of Schools (LMS). Our concern here is not to judge or evaluate the schools we studied, rather we aim to analyse and evaluate the *policies* and the impact of those policies. The book is about the 'effects' of policy rather than with policy 'implementation' in any simple sense. Indeed we are uncomfortable with the political and epistemological assumptions of 'implementation' research and attempt to establish an alternative, rival framework for our analysis of change (in Chapter 1). As you read this book some of the requirements and ramifications of these policies will still be in train. Thus, our account and our analyses cannot be definitive or final. This is a 'first look' at the ERA in practice and some of its effects, there will be many other views appearing in the coming months and years. But we would reject any argument which suggested that the data reported here merely identify some teething troubles or transitional difficulties. It is our contention that many of the problems and conflicts that we present here are inherent in the ERA itself. They will not go away. They derive from incoherence, contradictions and inconsistencies within the ERA policies themselves – 'the quality and practicality of the change project' (Fullan 1991, p.72). As Fullan goes on to say: 'Ambitious projects are nearly always politically driven. As a result the time line between the initiation decision and startup is typically too short to attend to matters of quality' (p.72). Unfortunately, both politicians and many researchers and commentators ignore this and take a narrow view and assume that any problems arising from change are indications of the weaknesses or resistance of those burdened with the tasks of changing. This is convenient but it is also sloppy and misguided. However, as we shall see, it is not unusual to find schools struggling to come to grips with multiple, disparate and incoherent reforms and blaming themselves for 'not getting things right'. We are not

suggesting that schools never make mistakes and neither are we trying to defend some kind of golden age of education which the ERA is destroying. Indeed there are significant elements of good-will towards some aspects of reform in the schools studied (as well as grave suspicion about other aspects). But we do contend that there are political expectations and ideological projects embedded in the ERA which are destructive of values and relationships which are fundamental to the 'qualified univer-salism' of the 1944 Act and which impose on schools 'drudgeries and demands' which both undermine and divert from their ability and capacity to cope. In important respects the ERA fails to pass 'the test of the "practicality ethic" of teachers' (Doyle and Ponder 1977–78). Fullan argues: 'Good change is hard work; on the other hand, engaging in a bad change or avoiding needed changes may be even harder on us' (1991, p.73). We also argue that some of the intended and unintended consequences of the ERA policies actually have deleterious effects on educational provision and 'standards'. And that while some students and parents may truly benefit from these policies others certainly lose out.

The school and LEA case studies reported here were begun in the spring of 1989 and in a slightly different form are still con-tinuing. All of the schools were LMS pilots in 1989–90 and took on the full responsibilities of LMS in April 1990. All the extracts from data quoted in the text are dated so that they can be located back into the change process. Data collection in the schools con-centrated on senior teachers and school governors and those teachers (and advisers) involved in introducing National Curriculum mathematics, science, English and technology (we are grateful for Robin Murray's help with interviewing tech-nology teachers) as well as those teachers involved in Special Educational Needs work in two of the schools (this was Anne Gold's main responsibility) and some teacher 'bystanders' who we asked to comment on the general process and effects of change in their school. Several department heads and senior teachers were interviewed on more than one occasion, some on several occasions. This provides a sense of change over time and allows us to comment on the dynamics, the pace and the increasing complexity of change (Chapter 6). In the LEAs we interviewed directors, subject advisers and inspectors, and LMS officers. In all 90 interviews were recorded. In addition some

governors' meetings were observed, as well as some senior management team meetings, some in-service activities and some department meetings. We aimed to get to know the schools well. We were given free access to all staff, meetings and to the documents we requested, although the degree of our involvement is uneven across the four schools. This is because we became particularly interested in particular things at certain points in time. The research strategy was regularly reviewed and like good ethnographers we tried to feed analysis back into data collection. Interviews and observations were analysed by coding and constant comparison (Strauss 1987).

The two LEAs in the study are referred to as Westway and Riverway. Both are small; Westway has 14 secondary schools, Riverway eight and a tertiary college. Westway is controlled by a Labour council and Riverway by a Liberal Democrat council. The two case-study schools in Westway – Flightpath and Parkside – are mixed 11–18 comprehensives. The Riverway schools are both 11–16, Overbury is mixed and Pankhurst is single-sex girls, it is the only single sex school in the LEA. The headteachers of Flightpath and Parkside are male, those of Overbury and Pankhurst female.

The chapters in this volume can be read as a set of interrelated essays. Each chapter has a different focus but Chapter 1 provides a conceptual basis for the whole analysis. The range of data employed in each chapter varies; the management, National Curriculum and market chapters (Chapters 6, 4 and 2) use material from all four schools, the LMS chapter (Chapter 3) concentrates on one school and the SEN chapter (Chapter 5) on two. We were unable to present all the themes and issues to arise from the data nor can we present all the data relevant to those which are covered. But we do err on the side of more data rather than less. This is because of the complexity of the issues and the immediacy which can be conveyed by direct speech. We have tried to avoid major overlaps but there are some points where bits of data or points of analysis are repeated. This we think is inevitable because of the interrelated and inter-affecting nature of the policies examined. LMS has implications for the curriculum, management is closely related to the market, SEN decisions have implications for the budget etc., etc. Thus, in a way, this should not be read as a neat, single narrative, it is rather a set of overlaid and overlapping analyses. The themes in each chapter are one set

of cuts through the data, and ways of seeing the ERA. To reiterate, the themes are not exhaustive.

If we can anticipate and underline two messages that emerge strongly in our data and therefore in our commentary and analysis (and there are several others) they are; first the immense complexity of the changes facing schools in the wake of the Education Reform Act of 1988; and second, what is being lost or jeopardized by these changes – trust, commitment, co-operation and common purpose.

Chapter 1

The policy process and the processes of policy

INTRODUCTION

In the field of educational policy studies the 'placing' of schools, teachers and students in the policy process, has been largely achieved by theoretical fiat. On the one hand there has been extensive work on the generation of policy. This has remained, for the most part, within the province of macro-based theoretical analyses of policy documents and the activities and organization of groups of policy makers. Concern here has been with the representation or exclusion of interests in the political process and the struggles of activists, pressure groups and social classes within that arena (Kogan 1975, Ball 1990a). In these conceptualizations schools remain either marginal to the policy process or they are 'represented' via the teaching unions. The voices of the heads, senior managers, classroom teachers or the students remain, for the most part, strangely silent. On the other hand, there has been a growing body of literature investigating the 'implementation' of policy. This has often taken the form of detailed analyses (micro-based ethnographies for example) of how the 'intentions' behind policy texts become embedded in schooling or, more frequently, of how aspects of the schooling situation 'reflect' wider developments in the political and economic arena. There has also been a somewhat smaller body of literature that has celebrated the potential power of teachers and/or students to subvert the heavy hands of the economy or the State. Here the silent voices are heard, but they speak either as theoretically overdetermined mouthpieces of a world beyond their control or as potentially free and autonomous resisters or subverters of the status quo.

This separation between investigations of the *generation* and the *implementation* of policy, has tended to reinforce the 'managerial perspective' on the policy process, in the sense that the two are seen as distinctive and separate 'moments'; generation followed by implementation (Alford and Friedland 1988). This distortion produces accounts of the policy process as linear in form; whether top-down, bottom-up or allowing for a 'relative autonomy' of the bottom from the top. Thus, state control theories (Dale 1989) portray policy generation as remote and detached from implementation. Policy then 'gets done' to people by a chain of implementors whose roles are clearly defined by legislation. In policy studies generally this sort of 'linear' conception of policy has been further encouraged, post-1979, by what has been increasingly referred to as the Thatcher 'style' of government and its avowed intention to break down the corporatism of the 'social democratic' consensus (CCCS 1981). The lack of wide consultation prior to legislation on the trade unions, the health service and in education was seen as evidence of a new, non-corporatist style in action. Thus, for example, Lawton has talked of the pulling apart of the old 'partnership' between the DES (Department of Education and Science), the LEAs (local education authorities) and the teachers and its substitution by a fragmented policy process in which the new policy makers appear remote from the educational scene; a scene which, nonetheless, the policy makers are trying to control more tightly (Lawton 1984). Thus, he considers the politicos (ministers, political advisers, etc.), the bureaucrats (DES officials) and the professionals, HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) to have become increasingly 'disconnected' from the policy receivers (LEAs, schools and teachers) (Lawton 1984). If we take this 'tightening grip' (Lawton 1984) thesis further then the shift appears to have been taking place for some time. The growth of centrally administered policies, TVEI (the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative) run by the MSC (Manpower Services Commission, later to become the Training Agency), ESGs (Educational Support Grants) run by the DES, both on a 'bid and deliver' basis, would be examples of the State's growing control of education. The culmination being the Educational Reform Act 1988 with its centrally 'determined' policy prescription that gives the DES and the Secretary of State extensive new powers to direct the work of LEAs and schools. In this analysis the changing language of the

policy process would be illustrative of deeper structural changes in the relationship of the State to educational institutions. Thus from the TVEI and ESGs, which introduced the 'delivery' of educational change, external 'monitoring', 'management' and 'evaluation' (Dale *et al.* 1990), we go through to NCC (National Curriculum Council) documents which pick up that language and also talk about the 'implementation by headteachers . . . of the National Curriculum', 'absorption by individual teachers of the National Curriculum', 'delivery of his or her (student's) entitlement' etc., etc. (See for example, *National Curriculum: From Policy to Practice*, DES, 1989a.)

There seems little doubt that there has been a State control element in the Government's approach to policy construction and a strong desire to exclude practitioners (or their 'representatives', the trade unions) (see Ball 1990a). Furthermore, we would accept that in the legislation the Government's promotion of parents and the market over the claims of the 'educational lobby', and its language of 'implementation' are all attempts to continue to exclude certain voices from the policy process. Nonetheless we want to suggest that it would be politically naive and analytically suspect to begin from the assumption that it has been possible to make that exclusion total; either in terms of policy generation or in terms of implementation. The example of TVEI is itself particularly telling in this respect.

POLICY ANALYSIS AND THE STATE-CONTROL MODEL

As a policy externally imposed upon schools TVEI was initially seen as a classic example of a 'top-down' model of curriculum reform, however, the actual experiences of researchers and teachers told a somewhat different tale. TVEI reached the statute books as an initiative of Margaret Thatcher, Lord Young and Sir Keith Joseph. It was well financed and required schools and LEAs to submit projects for scrutiny prior to finance being made available. Yet many have pointed out that the MSC's need to secure the co-operation of the 'educational lobby' actually produced curriculum development in schools that was far closer to the educationalist (mostly school-based) than the occupationalist (mostly MSC-based) model of the curriculum (Dale *et al.* 1990). The point is that the transformations that may come about as legislative texts are recontextualized may, in some cases, be